

LEADING & MANAGING

JOURNAL OF THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS



Volume 32
Number 1

2026



Leading & Managing

Journal of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders

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Editorial

Educational Leaders Facing Unparalleled Complexities: Challenge, Context, and Courage

This special issue of *Leading & Managing* emerges from a call to examine how educational leaders are navigating a landscape defined by unprecedented complexity—marked by shifting societal expectations, intensifying accountability structures, and evolving demands. Central to this issue is the interplay among challenges, context, and courage, as well as a critical distinction between reactive and proactive leadership. The diverse international contributions assembled here collectively illuminate how leaders are not only responding to complexity but also reimagining leadership practice in ways that build resilience, readiness, and hope.

The opening article by McPhillips and Carlyon highlights the lived experiences of primary school principals in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Four themes emerged, capturing the challenges and complexities principals face: balancing the roles of instructional leader and CEO; developing leadership capacity in others; caring for the wellbeing of students, staff, and self; and meeting the various needs of the school community. This research study shows leadership as a complex intermingling of organisational management and leadership, relational demands, and community support.

Expanding the focus on leadership strain, Kudlats, Glynn, Blaydes, and McCarthy examined the human dimension of leadership complexity post COVID-19, finding that relationships are a “double-edged sword”, simultaneously a source of stress and a resource for coping and school improvement. Positive interpersonal relationships lay the foundation for a positive school culture, build trust, collaboration, and support successful conflict resolution. This article highlights the importance of relational trust and social capital in sustaining school communities during periods of disruption.

The article by Richard shifts the conversation to proactive leadership. Drawing on complexity theory, the author advances a model of leadership that builds organisational readiness—embedding equity into structures, routines, and relationships so that schools are better equipped to withstand future crises. This article speaks directly to the call’s emphasis on proactive leadership, offering a forward-looking framework that positions courage as the capacity to design for resilience rather than merely respond to disruption.

Owen and Fischetti bring the theme of courage to the forefront through interviews with innovative secondary principals. These leaders, often self-described as “mavericks”, demonstrate how courage enables risk-taking, creativity, and the pursuit of equity within highly accountable systems. Their work illustrates that innovation in schooling is not merely technical but deeply moral, requiring leaders to challenge the status quo. This article reinforces the idea that courage is a practiced trait, where one must “walk the talk”.

In the final article, Pogrow challenges assumptions about evidence-based practices, arguing that the reliance on rigorous causal methods has produced findings with minimal practical impact

and reinforced inequities. The prevalence of small effect sizes, coupled with weak replication in real-world settings, undermines the usefulness of this research for practitioners and showcases a disconnect between what counts as “evidence” and what actually increases student achievement. Critiquing the field’s emphasis on internal validity over external and ecological validity, the article calls for a rethinking of “evidence” and a stronger role for leaders in shaping research agendas that generate meaningful, practice-relevant improvements.

In the commentary, *Procedural complexity is leadership complexity: How hidden systems shape school leadership* by Spudvilas-Powell, the author argues that the complexity faced by educational leaders is the nature of the procedural systems in which they work, including legal, compliance timelines, and documentation requirements, and less on interpersonal relational complexities. The author distinguishes between reactive leadership and proactive leadership, which involves mapping, simplifying, and redesigning systems. In doing so, the commentary reframes courage as procedural: the willingness to make systems visible and advocate for their improvement.

This special issue concludes with Desmore and Ungarean’s review of a book titled *Improving your college courses: A guide for engaging in digital learning* by Carol A. Mullen and Daniel W. Eadens (Eds.) (2026).

As educational systems continue to confront volatility and uncertainty, the insights offered in this issue point toward a hopeful direction. By embracing complexity, attending to context, and enacting courageous, proactive leadership, educational leaders can move toward creating more resilient, equitable, and future-oriented schools.

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The Role and Challenges of Primary School Principals in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT: Over 30 years ago the introduction of “Tomorrow’s Schools” in Aotearoa New Zealand marked a significant shift to local governance by decentralising resourcing and resulting in the role of the school principal becoming even more pivotal. In 2023, a small-scale qualitative study was undertaken to contribute to the growing body of research on educational leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study focused on the gaining of a deeper understanding of the role and challenges faced by primary principals across various school settings. Using semi-structured interviews with nine current principals, the research explored the role of the principal, including leadership responsibilities, community engagement, cultural responsiveness, and the emotional demands of the role. Analysis revealed that principals often navigate complex and competing expectations, balancing administrative duties with being the leader of learning. Principals also consider important aspects of their role to include developing leadership capacity in others; caring for students, staff, and personal wellbeing; and meeting the diverse needs of the school community. This study offers insight into the experiences of principals and contributes to a deeper understanding of the realities of school leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand. Implications are discussed for those seeking to strengthen and support leadership in primary education.

Key words: Principal, CEO, leader of learning, New Zealand, leadership, wellbeing

Introduction

Since the landmark introduction of Tomorrow’s Schools in 1989 (Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce [TSIT], 2018), subsequent research has consistently highlighted the pivotal role of primary school principals in shaping the educational landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand. Tomorrow’s Schools marked a significant shift in local governance, through the decentralising of

resourcing and giving schools greater autonomy. In this changed landscape, the role of the school principal has become even more crucial with some arguing they are the leading instrument in the success of the school and the welfare of the teachers, staff, students, and school families (Cherkowski, 2018). Robinson and Gray (2019) claim school principals have a significant influence on student learning, therefore it would seem essential to understand their role and how they effectively navigate all aspects in their current context. To contribute to the body of research, a small-scale study was undertaken in 2023 to gain a greater understanding of the role and challenges of a primary school principal in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The next section reviews the literature focused on the role of a primary school principal in Aotearoa New Zealand, the support systems that have been available, and despite good intentions, how concerns about the role remain.

The Role

The role of primary school principals has been demonstrated to change over time to become much larger and complex (Wylie, 2020). For principals, this role has been shown to be challenging and often requires working long hours to manage workload (Li et al., 2024; TSIT, 2018). Unlike some other countries, Aotearoa New Zealand has a system of self-managing schools, which requires school principals to work as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), in addition to leading the learning (Ministry of Education, 2008). This is reflected in the *Educational Leadership Model* (ELM), which outlines the knowledge and skills of systems, partnerships and networks, culture and pedagogy expected of school principals (Ministry of Education, 2008).

School principals are responsible for balancing a wide range of demands in the everyday management of their schools (Jones, 2022) including responding to multiple demands from various stakeholders, communities, organisations, and governing bodies. To effectively manage the day-to-day functions and lead learning, principals must therefore develop strong relational trust with all stakeholders (Branson et al., 2024; Le Fevre, 2010; McPhillips & Carlyon, 2024). Building positive and trusting relationships with staff is particularly important for fostering a healthy school culture (Carlyon, 2016). Others also argue recognising and developing leadership capability in others is an essential part of the school principals role (Fisher & Carlyon, 2014; Fullan, 2003). Consequently, school principals should recognise and promote leadership potential in those staff who display strong relational skills (Meyer et al., 2024). Notman (2020) suggests that leadership capability in others can be nurtured by taking a collaborative leadership approach.

Effective school principals also work purposefully with their communities to establish and communicate a clear school vision (Day et al., 2020; Notman & Henry, 2011). Meeting the needs of their communities requires school principals to build relationships and engage in regular consultation (Constantinides, 2023). This is particularly relevant for Māori communities, within the unique context of Aotearoa New Zealand, where community consultation is both a cultural expectation and formal requirement. As Berryman et al. (2015) point out, Māori communities value school principals listening to their concerns with care and responding respectfully. Integrity, honesty, and openness are therefore essential for developing relational trust with stakeholders (Anaru, 2018; Branson et al., 2024). Nonetheless, Starr (2022) points out it can be a challenge for school principals to consistently meet the needs of their diverse communities. Within the unique

context of Aotearoa New Zealand, school principals are also required to provide equal opportunity to raise the achievement of groups of students, such as Māori, Pacific, and students with additional needs, who have historically been undersupported in schools (Li et al., 2024). Given these obligations, it is essential school principals are provided with ongoing guidance and support.

Support

There have been a number of different initiatives specifically designed to support primary school principals in their role, such as the *Best Evidence Synthesis (BES)* (Robinson et al., 2009) and *Tū Rangatira—Māori Medium Educational Leadership* (Ministry of Education, 2010). These publications both remain relevant and continue to inform school principals in the present day. More recent publications include *Our Schooling Futures: Stronger Together* (TSIT, 2018) and the *Leadership Capability Framework* (Educational Council, 2018). The intention of these publications was to support and advance educational leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand. The implementation of the First-time Principal Package, postgraduate leadership programmes, and principal appraisal process, along with the development of Kāhui Ako (Communities of Learning) have also provided additional supports for school principals. To further support school principals, the MoE (Ministry of Education) and the Education Review Office for all English- and Māori-medium schools in Aotearoa New Zealand provide advice and guidance.

Despite Good Intentions

Despite good intentions by various organisations to support school principals in Aotearoa New Zealand, there remains concerns about the lack of ongoing support and for the wellbeing of principals (McPhillips & Carlyon, 2024; Wylie, 2020). Disappointingly, little has changed in the last 20 years since Upsall (2004) argued school principals would need to be “superhuman” to cope with the demands of the role. Following this, Notman and Henry (2009) highlighted that school principals are expected to deal with issues immediately and successfully, while also continuing to address the needs of all learners. Others agree that societal shifts and changing expectations pose challenges to those leading schools (Ranjan, 2024; Stoll, 2000; Thrupp, 2023) that likely further exacerbate the points noted earlier by Upsall and Notman and Henry.

Primary school principals still have overall responsibility for finances, property, health and safety, strategic direction, reporting, and human resources of the school. Many of these tasks are compliance driven and frequently take principals away from their role as leaders of learning (Barker, 2023). Research from Australia by Branson et al. (2024) has highlighted similar concerns for school principals, noting a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning due to their high workload. Findings from another study in Australia indicate school principals “must balance engagement with parents alongside extensive administrative and compliance responsibilities, often without additional structural support” (Wade & Thackwell, 2025, p. 14). The wellbeing of students and staff has also been identified as an essential aspect of school leadership (Cann et al., 2021; Day et al., 2020), as is principals caring for their own wellbeing (Constantinides, 2023; Notman & Henry, 2011). Further to this since the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of support for student and staff wellbeing has increased (Dharan et al., 2022) which has impacted on school principals.

Alongside this, initiatives which have provided support for school principals in Aotearoa New Zealand, such as Kāhui Ako (Communities of Learning), are being discontinued. As Le Fevre et al. (2024) suggest, the increasingly complex contexts in which educational leaders work requires adaptive and open-minded leadership in which they are willing to explore different viewpoints.

Research Design

Interpretive case study methodology was considered suitable for the research as this approach allows the researchers to gain a better understanding of participants' (primary school principals) lived experiences (Cohen et al., 2011). The case was defined as "the role of a primary school principal" and was bound by "Aotearoa New Zealand". Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews held with nine current practising school principals from a range of different primary school contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand. Purposive sampling was used to select principals who were diverse in gender, age, ethnicity, time served as a principal, school roll size, and the geographical location of school (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Details

Participant Code	Gender	Ethnicity	Time as a Principal	Current Roll Size	Region of Aotearoa New Zealand
P1	Male	NZ European	10–15 years	100–150	Waikato
P2	Female	Māori/NZ European	5–10 years	100–150	Taranaki
P3	Female	Māori	0–5 years	150–200	Hawkes Bay
P4	Male	NZ European	10–15 years	200–250	Canterbury
P5	Male	NZ European	20 plus years	300–400	Canterbury
P6	Female	Pasifika	5–10 years	300–400	Auckland
P7	Male	NZ European	20 plus years	300–400	Wellington
P8	Male	Māori/NZ European	0–5 years	100–150	Wellington
P9	Female	Other	5–10 years	250–300	Northland

The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio recorded for later transcription and analysis. To protect the anonymity of the principals, each was allocated an identification number and referred to in this article with the preface *Pn*. The following questions provided prompts for the principals to draw on their own leadership experiences and guided the study:

1. What are the key responsibilities and functions of a primary school principal?
2. What are the challenges primary school principals face in their role?

After transcribing each of the nine semi-structured interviews, a regime involving open, axial, and selective coding was applied for thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding involved breaking down data into commonly used words and ideas, followed by axial coding to closely examine these for similarities and differences and label with initial ideas. As the researchers further immersed themselves in the data, they asked questions and made comparisons, combinations, and connections between the initial ideas which resulted in highlighting four key themes. These themes which were common to all the principals included: balancing two roles, that of being a leader of learning and a CEO; developing leadership capability in others; caring for students, staff, and personal wellbeing; and meeting the diverse needs of the school community. Findings are presented next under each of these themes.

Balancing Two Roles: Leader of Learning and CEO

All the participants noted the challenges inherent in balancing their role as a leader of learning within their school context, alongside also being the CEO of the school. The following statement by P4 was reflective of how all the principals were committed to being leaders of learning: “Every day I finish each day with a mantra, what have I done for children today? What have I done for our learners today?” In addition, both P3 and P6 pointed out it was important for them, as the leader of learning, to be in touch with both staff and students on a daily basis. Importantly, P4 noted that to do this successfully they had to be nimble and physically present in the school.

As P1 highlighted, there was a genuine desire to “to see these kids succeed” in each of the principal’s schools. At the time of the research, the principals were all well aware of the refresh of the New Zealand curriculum for mainstream schools (Curriculum Refresh) that was underway and the impact it would have for their schools. Despite this, as P3 stated, as a leader of learning you want “teachers who understand not just one side, but the whole picture of each child”. They continued to explain that in their role it is more than “just focusing on the fundamentals of good teaching ... trying to be relevant whilst trying to fulfil your principal’s duty is hard”.

The responses from the principals brought to light they were acutely aware of getting the right balance in their role to also ensure their school operated efficiently and safely, however this was challenging at times to achieve. For example, P2 pointed out they saw the role as “meeting the expectations in terms of the National Education Learning Priorities, our strategic plan, and then delivering so that it’s at the coalface with our students”. While the principals all understood this was also an essential part of their role, the reality of achieving this was repeatedly brought to light. For instance, P2 explained: “You easily get lost in all the paperwork and not actually lead the school”.

Complying with reporting requirements, often within unrealistic timeframes, was raised as being challenging for the principals. As P6 explained: “You feel like you are always behind the 8-ball ... something comes out and you’ve got to implement it ... there’s just so much on your plate now” and P5 identified the biggest challenge was “dealing with the MoE, just for a start all the changes, constant changes... trying to keep up”. Similarly, P1 talked at length about the “relentless expectations and the MoE that really should be the body to support. But it seems to be

working against us”. P2 explained: “If you step away from your office space and come back, there’ll be another 30 emails” and P9 agreed, sharing that:

The emails are just a nightmare. It’s nonstop. And I try to answer all my emails. I can’t. I try to, but I inevitably miss out on something, and I feel bad, but there’s just so many emails coming in, that’s relentless.

All of the principals also drew attention to the work required to adhere to all health and safety requirements. As P9 explained: “You’ve got to know everything about safety. Safety is huge. The evacuations, you’ve got to know about police vetting, you’ve got to know about EOTC [education outside the classroom]”. Alongside this, P4 pointed out the “phenomenal amount of paperwork” required to meet health and safety requirements for school camps. P9 also said: “Property is a huge barrier. And we’ve got a property manager ... That’s a huge part of our board meeting is property, every month, more than talking about learning or anything. It’s property”. This viewpoint was further supported by P3, who stated: “The job description isn’t accurate to what you actually do” and went on to explain they found support by “building critical relationships with people who are in the finance or property or governance, and have the experience so that you don’t have to start from the beginning with all of it, is really critical”.

Developing Leadership Capability in Others

Developing leadership capability among their staff was identified as a priority for all the principals. For example, P8 explained: “I’m building leadership capacity in my place, so that I don’t have to be the fount of all knowledge and expertise, because I’m not”. P5 explained at length how they ensured this could occur:

It’s looking at identifying leaders and growing people. We’ve just got a new teacher that’s come into the school, and I can see some leadership in her. So, I’ve had a quick chat to her about maybe leading a bit more of the Year 7 and 8s next year, so we have a bit more structure in the year, and she’s really keen.

Additionally, P6 attributed their own career development to having mentors, stating: “They constantly took me under their wing until I got my principalship”. Interestingly, P2 noted they had noticed that teachers were stepping into school principal roles after a short period and as a result, they were often unprepared for their new role. Therefore, P2 reiterated the importance of school principals developing leadership capability in others. Similarly, P8 felt it was important for others to be taking on leadership roles, while P7 considered developing the leadership capabilities of others as being integral to principals’ “moral purpose”.

The principals considered it to be their responsibility to provide an environment where leadership capability could be developed and nurtured. P2 explained it was their responsibility to “create a culture where you feel you can all contribute, and your contributions are valued”. This was achieved by sharing opportunities for leadership amongst staff and working in collaborative ways. Findings showed some of the principals’ leadership teams comprised a traditional structure (deputy and assistant principals and/or team leaders), with others being less traditional, which both provided opportunities for developing leadership capacity. Examples of this were noted through comments such as “even though there is that [formal] structure that we have a lot of others within

the school who hold leadership positions” (P4); and, “Leadership is all of us ... it isn’t one person at the top” (P9). Similarly, P6 explained: “The buck might stop with me, yeah, because I’m the principal, but all our decisions are made collectively and collaboratively. And sometimes we might not agree, but we will get to an outcome”.

Caring For Students, Staff, and Personal Wellbeing

Ensuring the wellbeing of both students and staff as well as themselves was considered by all the principals to be an important part of their role. P2 highlighted this, saying: “Hauora, wellbeing of our students, wellbeing with our staff ... if you’ve got those things sorted then you can get on with the teaching”, and P4 reiterated the importance of caring for their staff as they “are your greatest asset at the end of the day, and you want them to be doing well”. As P5 reflected: “Five years ago [staff] tended to take a bit more responsibility for [their] own wellbeing”. The principals all noted there had been an increased expectation that school leaders will take care of staff wellbeing.

The principals were aware of the demands teachers face, including delivering the curriculum and dealing with societal issues that impact students. P2 pointed out the increase in demands from “excessive-worry parents”. Further to this, they were mindful of the impact these demands had on the wellbeing of their staff and in turn they felt a responsibility to minimise pressures where possible, particularly on teachers, to support their wellbeing. This was articulated by P4, who stated:

We don’t burden them [teachers] with a lot of that ... we can take that stuff off them, do the heavy lifting as it were, to let them bring the energy and vibe and excitement and drive and be the very best that they can be in the classroom.

P7 spoke strongly about this when interviewed and suggested: “[It’s] about building trust, and that takes time ... and acting with integrity. Without this type of trust within the school environment the optimal environment for learning won’t happen”. All the other principals reiterated the importance of making a deliberate effort to be visible to students and staff to help maintain trusting relationships.

Those principals who had held school leadership roles for more than 20 years had a better understanding about the importance of paying attention to their own wellbeing to support them to continue in their current positions. For example, they talked about the importance of physical and mental health and taking regular time out of school for activities such as sabbaticals, holidays, travel, family, sport, and hobbies. The following example was provided by P7: “Principals themselves, they need to make sure that they do keep themselves physically fit ... as a way of managing stress levels”.

Meeting the Diverse Needs of the School Community

From the interviews with the principals, it was evident they believed school communities had become more diverse due to working families, poverty, crime, trauma, tragedy, addictions, COVID-19 pandemic, social media, and the digital world. The following response by P4 was

indicative of the views of other principals, noting: “The complexity of [children’s] needs coming into schools these days is much greater than it was”. In response to this diversity, the principals were all deliberate in establishing positive connections and creating visions for their school. For example, P3, P5, and P6 all placed particular focus on breaking down barriers by encouraging their Māori and Pacific communities to increase their engagement with the schools. P7 noted the importance of “listening to the people in the community about their vision for what their kids would need in the future, and what part of their community-togetherness they’d like to retain and how we do that on the site”. Similarly, P8 explained:

I have worked really hard to create the vision for our school, which involves the community and the teachers and everyone ... Our school vision revolves around what we do now for our tamariki that makes them positive contributors to a community.

This was evident in other findings, with P5 stating that meeting these expectations “creates a lot of challenges and barriers for you, trying to get that right”. Furthermore, they suggested that meeting community needs often required school leaders to play the role of a peacemaker.

A challenge raised by most principals was the increase in students’ and parents’ engagement with social media and digital technology. For example, P5 felt the responsibility to ensure there was a good balance between digital and traditional learning methods in their school and P1 discussed the challenges associated with social media use by students and parents. A further challenge raised was the impact of trauma, tragedy, and addictions on students and how this flowed onto the school and principals. P5 explained: “Every weekend I’m dealing with family harm, notifications from the police, it’s all those things”. This was reiterated by P9 who shared: “It’s not like we have kids that just sort of are easy to teach. They’re way behind. They’ve had trauma, they’ve got poor social skills”.

As discussed previously, it was evident that the principal’s role grew and changed during COVID-19. As P7 explained: “COVID-19 really made it a community leadership role”. The ongoing impacts of COVID-19 were raised and the anxiety levels of both students and parents were noted as having increased. P6 commented on the impacts of COVID-19 stating:

We’ve got a whole new generation of kids coming through. We’ve got a whole new generation of parents coming through. There’s still anxiety in the community. There are still kids that don’t come to school every day. COVID families still suffering from issues, people with more anxiety, kids that seem to be more anxious.

Alongside the challenges of meeting the diverse needs of their school communities, there was a common perception among the principals that they were expected to adhere to everyone’s requests. P1 described these expectations as “relentless ... they just blame the schools for everything”. In addition, P7 attributed much of this to “parents not building resilience in their own kids, and maybe they’re lacking resilience themselves”.

Discussion

Despite the principals in the study all showing their strong commitment to being a leader of learning, the findings highlighted much of their time was spent on compliance and ensuring

their schools operated efficiently and safely. Notwithstanding this, the principals were deliberate in the way they established trusting relationships with their stakeholders to support them to effectively balance the two roles. As supported by Branson et al. (2024), it is essential for principals to develop strong relational trust with all stakeholders in order to be the leader of learning and manage the school effectively. Confirming previous research undertaken by Barker (2023) and TSIT (2018), the time spent on compliance by school principals takes them away from their role as leaders of learning. Furthermore, as the extant research highlighted, insufficient support for schools from the MoE puts extra pressure on school principals in what is already a demanding role (TSIT, 2018; Wylie, 2020). It became apparent that while balancing different roles can be challenging for primary school principals; to be successful, they are required to be adaptive to different contexts and able to consider the needs of the whole school (Constantinides, 2023). The role of a primary school principal is indeed complex and requires careful navigation to ensure there is a good balance between two roles—the leader of learning and CEO (Jones, 2022).

The principals in the current study all considered it their responsibility to provide opportunities for others to develop leadership capability. Others agree that school principals have a responsibility to identify and nurture leadership capability within their staff (Fisher & Carlyon, 2014). The commitment shown by the principals to this aspect of their role was reflective of Fullan's (2003) claim that developing leadership capability in others is considered a moral imperative of school leadership. The study showed opportunities to develop leadership capability were deliberately created by the principals by establishing environments where staff had opportunities to experience leadership and work collaboratively. As the research highlighted, the practice of collaborative leadership is often part of a broader aim by school principals to develop leadership capability in others (Constantinides, 2023; Meyer et al., 2024).

Caring for students and staff wellbeing was shown in the study to be considered by the principals to be an important part of their role although, in agreement with others (Dharan et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024), the level of support needed since the COVID19 pandemic seemed to have increased. Notwithstanding this, the principals all demonstrated genuine concern for the wellbeing of both students and staff and were all cognisant of the demands their teaching staff faced as they actively tried to alleviate any negative impacts from these. In order for school leaders to care for their students and staff wellbeing, it is important they develop and model trusting relationships and behaviours expected within the school (Le Fevre, 2010). As Constantinides (2023, p. 7) suggests, effective school principals demonstrate the ability to “build a sense of care into their practice”.

While the more experienced principals made specific reference to caring for their own wellbeing, this was not to say the others were not aware of this. Research has highlighted when school leaders pay specific attention to their own physical and mental wellbeing, this contributes to their sustained success (Constantinides, 2023). Similarly, when school principals fail to prioritise their own wellbeing over competing school demands, this can impact on their families and personal lives (Notman & Henry, 2011). This suggests that the role of a primary school principal can become unmanageable for those who do not develop a plan to look after their own wellbeing.

Meeting the diverse needs of the school community was considered by the principals to be an important aspect of their role. This finding was reflective of the 2024 National survey of primary school principals' perspectives (Li et al., 2024) whereby interactions between principals with local hapū and/or iwi have significantly increased. However, like other research (Wade & Thackwell,

2025), the principals explained how the demands and expectations from parents had increased in volume and become much more difficult to manage. In addition, the findings highlighted the diverse range of cultural and ethnic groups included in each school community made it challenging at times for school principals to meet their communities' expectations (Starr, 2022). Ranjan's (2024) research aligned with findings from this study which showed the expectations from parents and caregivers have changed and at times become unrealistic for school principals to meet. Furthermore, the principals in the study described many difficult challenges and crises they faced on a daily basis. In order to adapt and respond effectively to challenges such as these, it is important that school principals are open-minded and skilled at considering the validity of other viewpoints (Le Fevre et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This article has reported on findings from research which aimed to gain a greater understanding of the role and challenges of primary school principals in Aotearoa New Zealand. Data gathered from semi-structured interviews with nine primary school principals provided a rich understanding of what they considered to be important aspects of their role and the challenges they faced. While there were differences in the principals' gender, age, ethnicity, length of term served as principal, roll size, and the school's geographical area, the study highlighted similarities across how they saw their role and how they managed the many challenges they faced.

The role of a primary school principal requires a delicate and ongoing balance between being a leader of learning and managing operational responsibilities. While it is evident principals have a clear understanding of what is important in their role, the challenges they face are significant. Despite this, the study here has brought to light how principals demonstrate adaptive leadership and collaborative practices in order to foster relational trust, develop leadership capability within staff, and prioritise wellbeing for both students and staff. Therefore, it is critical to hear principals' voices, acknowledge their concerns, and ensure support for them to meet their priorities is adequate, targeted, and timely. Furthermore, it is essential that initiatives, such as Kāhui Ako, are not discontinued, as they offer school principals opportunities to develop a collaborative and collegial voice. The role of a primary school principal has been shown to be complex, however the commitment shown to their staff, students, and diverse school communities is reflective of a deep moral imperative.

Competing Interests and Funding

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. This research received no external funding.

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A Double-Edged Sword: The Promise and Peril of Principal Relationships Navigating Stress in Schools After COVID

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ABSTRACT: Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, stress has a significant effect on school culture, climate, educator and student wellbeing, educator attrition, and student success. Principals, who are under significant stress themselves due to the ever-increasing and complex demands of the job, must often confront and attempt to mitigate school stress. An initial qualitative study focused generally on principals' perceptions of their own stress and the stress in their schools. Interviews with 14 principals revealed that their interpersonal relationships played a critical role in their understanding of stress and their ability to manage their own and their schools' stress. This emergent theme is central to the present study and illuminates the importance, intensity, variety, and complexity of interpersonal relationships, and their ability to both contribute to and mitigate stress. With school stress being a major contributor to educator burnout and attrition,

worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings from this study reinforce the critical role that principals' interpersonal relationships play in managing stress and highlight the need for more scholarly and practical attention to supporting school leaders as they navigate complex relationships and stressors in their schools.

Key words: School stress, relationships, the principalship, school leadership, principal relationships, wellbeing in schools, COVID-19

Introduction

In the United States, as it has internationally, the principalship has evolved, becoming more complex, burdening principals with a growing set of responsibilities and leading to increased stress (Beusaert et al., 2016; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Elomaa et al., 2021). Beyond the principalship, stress in schools is arguably at an all-time high (Charles Butt Foundation, 2023). As principals' focus on interpersonal relationships across all stakeholder groups is critical to principal success and school/student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021a; Johnson et al., 2023; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019), it is important to consider how principals perceive these relationships in general terms, with particular attention to the ever-present school stress context.

This qualitative study emerged from a long-standing research-practice partnership between two American universities and a large school district in the southwest United States. The ongoing partnership, established in 2019, explores various aspects of stress and coping in schools through annual school climate surveys and other quantitative and qualitative measures. The study presented herein developed out of a broader qualitative examination of principals' perceptions of stress in schools. As interviews with 14 principals revealed a significant focus on interpersonal relationships, researchers concluded that a separate qualitative study was warranted; one focused specifically on principals' broad, cross-constituent interpersonal relationships and how they factor into their stress experiences.

Literature Review

This literature review explores previous research on the role and impact of the principal, principal stress and wellbeing in the context of transactional theory, and principal relationships, paying particular attention to the stress and stressors that have emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Role and Impact of the School Principal

The school principal is critical to the success of the school. Evidence suggests a substantial relationship exists between leadership and student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003), with Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) noting that a principal's impact on student learning is second only to classroom instruction. While much of this evidence indicates that a principal's impact is largely mediated through different mechanisms and pathways (Hallinger & Heck, 1998;

Leithwood et al., 2010), their potential impact is significant. Principals are responsible for building and maintaining school culture and climate (Fink & Resnick, 2001; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997; MacNeil et al., 2009), and in addition to the efficient operations of the school, school principals in recent decades have been ultimately responsible for a multitude of outcomes spurred by increasing reforms, mandates, and various measures of accountability. The demands on principals are abundant, often unpredictable, highly variable (major crises commingled with trivial events), and can differ from site to site (Lunenburg, 2010).

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (2002) and subsequent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015) reinforced standards-based reform efforts and increased accountability, tying funding and other incentives (or consequences) to student success. As such, much of the scholarly work on educational leadership has focused on “raising course rigor, implementing higher standards, monitoring and evaluating teaching, student testing, and ending social promotion”, which Louis et al. (2016, p. 311) refer to as “academic press”. Far less scholarly attention has been paid to creating supportive school communities that encourage student development.

While attending to issues of academic press is a top priority for many principals—often a tremendous undertaking on its own—they are responsible for a multitude of other concerns as well. Today’s principals are required to be “leaders of personnel, students, government and public relations, finance, instruction, academic performance, cultural and strategic planning” (Lynch, 2012, p. 40). Given these varied responsibilities to numerous stakeholders, a principal’s social relationships are critical to maintaining the overall learning climate in and effective operations of a school (Price & Moolenaar, 2015). Of those relationships, “one-to-one relationships between a principal (leader) and individual teachers” are considered essential for effective leadership (Barnett & McCormick, 2004, p. 427). The deeply interpersonal nature of these numerous and complex demands has significant implications, including on principal wellbeing and burnout, as well as having other school-wide consequences.

Implications of Principal Stress and Wellbeing

Stress is nothing new for school principals (Chichon & Koff, 1980; Hiebert & Mendaglio, 1988). With principals admitting high degrees of stress, long work hours, and ever-increasing—and too often conflicting—demands, it is no surprise that principal attrition and turnover are only increasing (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Rousmaniere, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic only increased these adverse working conditions. Maslach and Leiter (2016) describe burnout as a multi-dimensional response to chronic stressors in the workplace. This prolonged response includes overwhelming emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and detachment, and a sense of ineffectiveness. Novice principals, and especially those who work in underprivileged schools, may be most susceptible to burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Furthermore, high levels of stress and burnout can eventually lead to principal turnover (Yan, 2020). In fact, according to data from the NASSP, nearly one in five principals turn over each year (Levin et al., 2020). Repeated principal turnover can have detrimental effects on school working conditions, teacher turnover, and student achievement (Bartanen et al., 2019; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). These negative effects are even more prominent for low-performing and minority-

student dominant schools, which contribute to continued inequity in the education system (Béteille et al., 2012; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019).

Theoretical Lens

Researchers employed Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory, which is dominant in the field of stress and coping in general (Dewe et al., 2012) and in education in particular (Collie & Mansfield, 2022; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977; Lambert et al., 2009). Not to be confused with "transactional leadership", which focuses on exchanges between leaders and followers, the transactional model of stress centres the appraisals of the individual who interprets the demands and resources they experience as a primary determinant of whether they are at risk for stress (Chang, 2013). Lazarus (2003) suggested we first make primary appraisals of demands (i.e., life events and requirements that are important for our wellbeing), which are then followed by secondary appraisals of our resources for coping. When resources are appraised as insufficient vis-à-vis demands, one is at risk for stress (Lambert et al., 2009), which can, but does not always, result in the emotional and physiological stress response (Persson & Zakrisson, 2016).

The current study utilises this model to conceptualise principals' interpersonal relationships in terms of their appraisals of demands and resources. In the next two sections, we present sources of demands and resources, paying particular attention to interpersonal relationships.

Sources of Demands for Principals

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, principals reported increasing amounts of job-related demands, including increased workloads, legislative and accountability pressures, and more localised school and district factors. The pandemic introduced new stressors and exacerbated existing ones. Woven throughout these stressors are the relational and emotional demands on principals.

Principal Workload

A principal's workload has been reported as a significant stressor (Wang et al., 2018), with some principals reporting working an average of 60 hours per week (Yan, 2020). Principal workload involves adhering to increased instructional leadership expectations (Klocko & Wells, 2015; Seashore Louis et al., 2010), managing student behaviour, and a multitude of administrative tasks, including managing budgets, transportation, attendance, building maintenance, and attending meetings at school and district levels (Wang et al., 2018).

Legislative Demands on Principals

The school achievement and accountability movement over the last few decades has fuelled numerous legislative demands at both state and national levels, directly tying principal evaluations and success to student achievement on standardised tests (McGhee & Nelson, 2005; West et al., 2010). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and other legislative sanctions have been associated with higher levels of principal stress (Klocko & Wells, 2015; Mitani, 2018).

School and District Demands on Principals

More localised school- and district-level factors also affect principal stress and wellbeing. Principals who work in diverse schools with higher proportions of low-SES students and in schools that are not meeting accountability standards often report higher levels of stress and burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Goldring & Taie, 2018). Additionally, principals in rural school districts can face unique stressors related to financial constraints, resource shortages, and playing a more active role in the community (Klocko & Justis, 2019). Principals in urban schools face unique challenges of their own, generally related to addressing diverse needs and a lack of control (West et al., 2010). Furthermore, principals who lack autonomy in staffing, budgets, and instructional practices report higher levels of stress and lower job satisfaction (Liu & Bellibas, 2018; West et al., 2010).

COVID-19 Pandemic Demands on Principals

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many existing stressors and created new challenges for principals. For example, principals were tasked with making decisions about school closures while also ensuring that students had access to food, devices, and internet (DeMatthews et al., 2022). Principals felt responsible for the safety and wellbeing of students, families, teachers, and staff—an overwhelming sense of responsibility as “caregiver of all” that contributed to heightened principal stress (Anderson et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2022). Additionally, principals reported receiving little to no guidance in navigating these new challenges (Anderson et al., 2020). Increased demands led to longer work hours, less time for self-care, and for those working from home, difficulty disconnecting, contributing to greater work–life imbalance (Hayes et al., 2022). In a poll conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), roughly 45% of principals reported that pandemic-related stressors contributed to accelerated plans to leave the profession (Levin et al., 2020).

Relational and Emotional Demands

Compared with the general population, principals report significantly higher levels of workplace emotional demand (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). As the public face of the school, principals interact daily with multiple stakeholder groups in often emotionally charged contexts, requiring them to manage others’ emotions while simultaneously managing their own (Crawford, 2007). This act of suppressing or inducing emotional reactions to match expectations and norms, referred to as emotional labour (Grandey, 2000), is a specific type of emotional demand that principals regularly experience as they navigate interpersonal interactions and relationships with students, teachers, families, and district leaders. The dissonance that occurs when inner and expressed emotions are misaligned has been linked to increased risk of stress, job dissatisfaction, and burnout in school leadership (Grandey, 2003; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Silbaugh et al., 2021). Furthermore, principals are key players in maintaining positive relationships and resolving conflicts among staff, students, and families. Principals report that positive social interactions and mutual respect among staff are among the most important factors in maintaining job satisfaction (Liu & Bellibas, 2018).

Another source of emotional and relational demand is secondary traumatic stress, or compassion fatigue, a phenomenon in which educators committed to their students' wellbeing experience vicarious stress and trauma as a result of that sense of responsibility. Principals are often exposed to student and family trauma and injustices that incite intense emotional reactions (Mahfouz, 2020). When student and family experiences are out of immediate control by the principal (e.g., abuse, housing concerns, deportation), it can lead to feelings of powerlessness and distress (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Additionally, there is an association between principal experiences with secondary traumatic stress and burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Secondary traumatic stress can remain largely hidden and can result in "adult disengagement, depression, mood swings, sleep deprivation, substance abuse, divorce, and problematic educator workforce turnover" (Lawson et al., 2019, p. 423).

While we have documented the myriad demands that principals face, we now turn to the resources that can mitigate their impact and potentially reduce stress.

Principal Relationships as a Resource for Principal Wellbeing

Perhaps the greatest potential resource for principals is relationships, as good social relationships in the school community promote the implementation of changes that improve student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), and school improvement efforts overall (Thapa et al., 2013). Price and Moolenaar (2015) credited the principal's social relationships as being a deep influence on the learning environment. In a meta-analysis exploring the principal behaviours that contribute to student, teacher, and school outcomes, Liebowitz and Porter (2019) found a principal's focus on internal relationships within the school to be a key behaviour contributing to student achievement, teacher wellbeing, teacher instructional practices, and school organisational health.

Fullan (2001) stated that effective leadership is driven by cultivating meaningful relationships with all stakeholders for whom one is responsible. Though emerging research reveals that even direct principal–student relationships are meaningful and important (Kudlats & Brown, 2021), most research unsurprisingly identifies the principal–teacher relationship as one of the most significant ways a principal can impact the school environment (Barnett & McCormick, 2004; Price & Moolenaar, 2015). Hoy et al. (2002) stated that specific aspects of organisational climate, like openness, can be measured in part "by exploring open and authentic relationships between teachers and principals" (p. 39). In light of the increasing stress on both teachers and principals (Anderson et al., 2020; Pressley, 2021) and the reliance upon principals' interpersonal relationships as critical to student, teacher, and school outcomes, it is important to explore principals' experiences with and understandings of their complex school relationships.

Interpersonal relationships are conceptualised in a variety of ways, and often broadly. Some relationships can meet emotional, relational, and instrumental needs though intimate, close, and interdependent bonds, and others may lack closeness and interdependency while still meeting some of those needs (VanLear et al., 2006). Communication and interpersonal connections and interactions, however, are widely believed to be vital to the building and maintenance of relationships (Solomon & Vangelisti, 2010). In this study, we conceptualise relationships broadly, focusing on communications and interpersonal connections and interactions that form the crucial

foundations of relationships. Rather than attempting to acknowledge and categorise relationships based on constituent group (and the likely differing type of relationships associated with various groups in terms of quality, depth, length, or other relationship characteristic), we preferred to examine relationships in a more general way. Since Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory views relationships as both a demand and resource, we, therefore, focused on how relationships served this function for principals.

Goals of the Study

The preceding literature illustrates the nature of school principalship according to its associated responsibilities, contextualised by accountability measures and academic press-related issues, and its impact on school success. A multitude of demands are placed on principals, contributing to stress, and interpersonal relationships offer a resource for coping. Considering the implications of principal burnout and attrition on school outcomes, understanding leaders' demand and resource appraisals within the framework of transactional theory is important in exploring practical solutions to combating stress. Furthermore, issues of academic press have dominated school leadership research and occupied a considerable amount of school leaders' attention, implying a need for balancing toward more humanistic approaches.

This study, conducted in August 2022 following two years of upheaval due to COVID, asked participants primarily about their stress experience, perceptions of stress in their schools, and their efforts to address stress. The critical role of relationships in this process was embedded throughout their responses, presenting as both demands and resources in their stress experience.

Methodology

This project emerged from a collaboration with a large, suburban school district in the southwest United States. Previous research within the partnership examined teachers' experiences of demands, resources, and impacts of COVID-19 (Blaydes et al., 2024; Kelton et al., 2024; Lambert et al., 2023). Data for this study focused on principals' experiences and were collected in Summer 2022. The researchers worked with the district research and evaluation office to advertise the study to principals, and every principal who expressed interest was included in the study. This resulted in semi-structured interviews with 14 elementary and middle school principals. Participants' experience as principals ranged from first-year principals to those with 16 years in the role ($M = 3.9$ years). Most participants were women ($N = 12, 85.7\%$), and most principals identified as White, non-Hispanic ($N = 8, 57.1\%$). Three principals worked in middle schools, while 11 served in elementary schools.

The interviews were 45 minutes to 1 hour and explored topics of stress, coping, and relationships as schools emerged from COVID-19. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and transcribed. Participants were compensated with a \$50 gift card for their participation in the study.

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen to allow themes to emerge directly from the data. Our goal was to explore

how principals perceive interpersonal relationships in relation to their stress and leadership experiences.

We began by familiarising ourselves with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and team discussions (Moustakas, 1994). Initial codes were generated by multiple team members independently, guided by close reading and margin notes. These preliminary codes were compiled and refined into a codebook through collaborative discussion (Quinn & Clare, 2008). The coding team included six researchers (three doctoral students and three undergraduate research assistants), and all coders applied the codebook to each transcript.

Codes were then grouped into themes based on shared meaning and relevance to the research questions. These themes were reviewed for coherence, adjusted as necessary, and defined through recursive discussion. Representative excerpts were selected to illustrate key findings. The research team paid particular attention to internal consistency within themes and conceptual distinctions between them.

Although this study was part of a larger research-practice partnership, the thematic analysis presented here focuses specifically on principals' perceptions of interpersonal relationships during and after COVID-19, as shared during semi-structured interviews.

Findings

In this section, we present themes that emerged across interviews with 14 principals, reflecting shared perspectives on relationships and their influence on stress and leadership experiences. Principals in this study were primarily asked to speak about their perceptions of stress, both their own stress and the stress within their schools. Threaded throughout almost every principal's response was a deep and critical focus on relationships. To these principals, building and maintaining those relationships was integral to their ability to carry out their many responsibilities. But while principals described the many benefits that resulted from their relational efforts, they also emphasised the significant challenges that relationships produce. It was also very clear that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced principals' relationships. In analysing principals' accounts of their leadership experiences, we identified three overarching themes with several associated subthemes that reflect shared perceptions about the role, stress, and the evolution of interpersonal relationships in their schools. Although we present the themes separately for clarity, they are deeply interconnected in the experiences of the principals in this study.

Relationships Are Central to the Role

Principals acknowledged the multifaceted nature of their role, emphasising the critical importance of building and maintaining relationships to effectively meet their diverse responsibilities as instructional leaders and curators of school culture. Principal 14 noted:

Sometimes I feel like a CEO, right? Like, I'm a therapist. I'm a social worker. I do my own budgeting. I do my own HR. My own hiring. My own firing. But none of that works if we don't have relationships with each other.

Relationships are not merely a component of the principal's role; they are the foundation upon which all other key responsibilities rest, particularly in their efforts to cultivate a positive and supportive school culture, which ultimately enables student success. Principal 1 reflected that "relationships and that safe environment for students . . . was important for the learning to happen" and Principal 13 mentioned how "relationship building [and] trust building . . . allow us to focus on student success". Principal 17 warned of the consequences of lacking relationships: "When there's not that clear enough understanding of each other, that can lead to stress and uncertainty, and that just permeates throughout the building".

Personal Benefits of Relationships: Satisfaction, Fulfilment, Purpose, and Affirmation

Many principals highlighted the intrinsic satisfaction they gain from fostering relationships within their schools. Principal 1 articulated the personal significance of these connections, stating:

Well, I think [what I enjoy] most is the relationships and the ability to impact a student's life and plenty of adult lives in a positive way. . . . I look forward to coming to school, to seeing my colleagues, and to seeing the students and interacting with them. That is by far the best part of my job.

This sentiment was echoed by Principals 12 and 13, who underscored the rewarding nature of nurturing relationships with students and teachers, which, in turn, fosters student-teacher relationships and enhances academic success.

These relationships with and among their school communities served as a reminder to principals of their reasons for entering the profession. Principal 5 reflected on this, sharing:

My favourite part of the entire day is when I'm in the hallway in the morning . . . because I have students that walk down the hallway hand in hand and I have students that go to specific teachers' classrooms down the hall just to say hello. And it's just that time of day that you—you just remember your "why" —like they have the connections with people and they'll come running down the hallway just to give you a hug.

The rewards associated with student relationships often overshadow the accompanying stressors, as illustrated by Principal 2: "We see growth in them . . . and it gives us purpose and at the same time, while it is stressful to do some of that work . . . the benefits outweigh the negatives". Moreover, these relationships proved to be restorative. For instance, Principal 9 noted that spending time with students is revitalising, especially on difficult days, and Principal 12 shared that a genuine love for being with students helps them navigate day-to-day challenges.

The relationships that principals cultivate within their schools are not only critical to the wellbeing and academic success of students but also serve as significant sources of personal fulfilment and motivation for the principals themselves. Despite the challenges inherent in leadership, these connections offer a restorative counterbalance, reinforcing principals' commitment to their roles and sustaining their engagement in the educational process.

Professional Benefits of Relationships: Culture of Enabling Support, Trust-Building, Collaboration, and Conflict Resolution

Prioritising relationships facilitates principals' ability to support their school community, enables trust-building and collaboration, and encourages constructive conflict resolution, each contributing to effective school leadership by positively impacting school culture. The quality of principals' relationship-building efforts is crucial in their ability to support their communities. Principal 9 explained that while their school culture is not perfect, it is grounded in a commitment to listening to teachers and adapting to their needs, which helps them feel supported and effective in their roles. Principal 17 highlighted the consequences of ineffective support: "Once this load gets too heavy ... that can undermine your mission ... faster than anything". Other principals echoed similar sentiments, including students and families in their relationship-building and supportive efforts.

Trust is developed through consistency and integrity, and Principal 9 emphasised the need to prove their commitment through consistent actions and an approachable demeanour. Establishing this trust encourages staff and families to seek support, which in turn empowers principals to provide it effectively and reduce stress. Principal 13 encapsulated this process, stating: "The most important part of [my] role is to have those relationships in place first; then you build that trust, and people learn to trust you and turn to you ... then you can really jump into the work".

Principals highlighted collaboration as a key element of fostering a positive and supportive school culture. Principal 10 underscored the importance of valuing contributions from all stakeholders, stating: "There's true value in what the kids bring, what the families bring, and that we're doing things in collaboration". Relationships and trust emerged as a crucial enabling factor for collaboration. As Principal 11 observed: "If people are able to become closer, we'll collaborate more. The trust is huge. ... People are going to work better for people that they trust". Principal 8 echoed this sentiment, highlighting the importance of a cohesive, supportive staff, especially during personal crises, and the necessity of mutual support.

Principals also acknowledged the significance of valuing connection as a pathway to fostering collaboration with families, as Principal 14 described: "When you value connection, you're putting the opportunity to build relationships first, allowing them to grow and develop. ... but then the next level of connectivity would be like getting them to be active participants in the educational process". Similarly, Principal 4 emphasised leveraging family engagement to support school initiatives. They noted that increased parental involvement could alleviate teacher burnout and enhance community connections through management of extracurricular activities. Community outreach and transparent communication are also critical in facilitating collaboration. Principal 9 stressed the importance of this intentional engagement with families in order "to strengthen the connection between what goes on at school and what goes on at home".

Conflict among staff members is an unavoidable aspect of school environments and unresolved conflict can detrimentally affect school culture, explicating another element of principals' roles impacted by relationships. Conflict resolution effectiveness can even be indicative of relationship quality, as Principal 14 noted: "I think our relationships are good because we can work through those things and we can acknowledge it. ... We genuinely like and care about each other even though we don't always agree". Principals employ various strategies to humanise

conflicts and foster effective resolution, including “treatment agreements”. These agreements help to depersonalise conflicts by focusing on expectations rather than personal grievances and promote “very honest conversations with each other”.

A school’s culture has widespread implications on outcomes and principals are responsible for its maintenance. They must build trust with stakeholders by showing up consistently and intentionally in order to support their communities effectively. Facilitating collaboration and constructive conflict resolution contributes to school community cohesion and mutual support among its members. Relationships emerged as a key enabler in leaders’ abilities to leverage these professional benefits in maintaining a positive school culture.

The Challenge and Stress of Relationships

While relationships are essential to a principal’s role and offer numerous benefits, they also pose significant challenges. Principals are tasked with supporting various stakeholders, mediating conflicts, and navigating the scrutiny and accountability that accompany their decisions. These responsibilities can sometimes hinder their ability to fulfil other duties and generate considerable stress.

Perpetually Available: Open-Door Policies

Availability, although essential for fostering relationships and offering support, can contribute to a principal’s stress and sense of overwhelm. Principal 5 acknowledged its dual nature: “I make myself unbelievably available to my staff . . . I think it heightens my stress . . . but I think it helps them”. Similarly, Principal 9 described the overwhelming responsibility of being the go-to person for everyone’s problems: “I feel like I have a big burden on my shoulders. I have to be everything for everybody”. This sentiment was echoed by several principals who also noted how their open-door policies often interfere with other important duties.

The Weight of Responsibility

The expectation that principals mitigate campus stress and support their communities also weighs heavily on them. Feelings of hopelessness in addressing staff stress are particularly troubling, as “there’s a lot of things that I can’t do”. These feelings are compounded by principals’ investment in the wellbeing of their community, questioning whether they are doing enough: “These are the things that kind of keep me up at night”. Compassion fatigue is another significant issue, as Principal 4 noted: “When teachers are stressed and stressful things happen for them, as an empathetic person, I feel like I do carry that stress”. These challenges are further exacerbated when staff seek support after their stress has grown beyond leaders’ abilities to intervene, contributing to a toxic work environment.

The Politics of Perception: Mediation and Accountability

Mediating relationships between staff and families presents its own set of challenges. Principal 3 described this aspect of their job as particularly stressful: “Trying to mediate

conversations between students and teachers, and parents and teachers, or parents and myself when they're ... upset and they totally disagree with anything you have to say. It can be very stressful". This can also damage their relationships with staff when principals are perceived as taking the side of families during conflict.

As the public face of their schools, principals are often held accountable for decisions they may not have had a hand in. Principal 13 shared: "Things can get stressful [when] we have to be the face and ... provide explanation ... for decisions that we didn't make". Decisions they did make also cause stress, as principals feel the weight of how school stakeholders are impacted. Principal 13 later explained:

People are invested in that little part that affects them individually and they may not realise that there's a really big picture. ... having to handle that even though you know that you made the right decision. It still causes stress knowing that somebody is upset or bothered or feels inconvenienced.

Relationships present significant challenges that contribute to principals' stress. The demands of being available to stakeholders, mediating conflicts, decision making, and managing community expectations can overwhelm principals and hinder their ability to fulfil other responsibilities. The emotional toll of supporting others, coupled with feelings of inadequacy in addressing staff stress and external pressures, intensifies the strain on principals. These challenges underscore the complexity of balancing relational leadership with the administrative and emotional demands of the role.

How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Principals' Relationships

Amplified Strain in a Time of Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated stress and burnout among staff, requiring principals to respond to the increased challenges. Principal 9 discussed how, even with supportive structures like the PTA, managing the significant stress and negotiating the overly demanding nature of some was a complex task. She said: "Teachers just feeling burnt out from [the pandemic challenges] is huge. We have a great PTA here ... but unfortunately, the resistant voices are the loudest voices". The increased workload and emotional strain of adapting to new teaching methods and supporting students during the pandemic took a toll on teachers' wellbeing. The constant need to navigate changing guidelines and policies, along with the added responsibility of ensuring student safety, led to significant burnout among teachers and staff.

During the heart of the pandemic—the remote instruction and social distancing, Principal 5 described the emotional toll that the lack of traditional relationships had on staff morale and wellbeing: "It has definitely taken its toll at a time [when] there hasn't been a lot of connection". The lack of in-person interactions and the increased stress of managing both personal and professional responsibilities during the pandemic contributed to heightened emotional strain and burnout.

These difficulties in maintaining relationships during the pandemic heightened principals' own emotional strain, causing some to turn to professional networks for support. Principal 17 said:

I had a little small group of principals, and while I said there were times I had to, you know, pull away from that [support group], . . . also having that place to vent for people who are actually living . . . and understanding [the same job] was super helpful.

The shift to virtual interactions made it harder to build and sustain strong relationships, leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection.

Principal 1 emphasised the importance of maintaining a positive and supportive environment, even during the challenges of the pandemic: “You can’t have success in academics in a negative uninspiring environment and so that was really important to me”. The need to maintain a supportive environment despite the challenges posed by the pandemic underscores the importance of strong relationships and connections within the school community.

Restoring Community in a Time of Disconnection

The pandemic altered how principals engaged with their communities. Principal 14 pointed out that “COVID kind of brought out the worst in everybody” and emphasised the importance of rebuilding community unity post-pandemic by focusing on kindness and connection. The disruption of traditional engagement methods, such as in-person meetings and events, made it challenging to maintain a sense of community. The shift to virtual platforms for communication and engagement created new challenges in building and sustaining strong community relationships.

Principal 13 highlighted the increased difficulty in building relationships due to the pandemic’s impact on traditional in-person interactions: “We have a pretty active community, so we have neighbours who are invested in what goes on in the school even if they don’t have kids that go here”, but went on to discuss how the lack of interaction was a significant challenge for that active community.

In response to these challenges, principals had to work hard to rebuild a sense of community and connection. Principal 13 highlighted the efforts to promote kindness and unity within the school coming out of the pandemic, stating: “We are going to be really bringing back and focusing our importance on kindness. So we’ve already talked about ways that we want to highlight the kindness and others and talk about unity promoting kindness”. Similarly, Principal 14 emphasised the importance of rebuilding relationships and connections, saying: “Moving forward we are going to be trying to move past [the pandemic-induced disconnection] and rebuild our community”.

Principals had to adapt to new ways of working and supporting their communities during the pandemic. Principal 17 reflected on the necessity of being flexible and creative in addressing the needs of teachers and students: “Here’s your parameters, here’s what you can control, what can you do within this very finite, sometimes very small box”. This adaptability was crucial in maintaining some semblance of normalcy and support despite the unprecedented challenges. The need to quickly adapt to new guidelines and policies required principals to be innovative and flexible in their approach to school leadership.

Principal 10 also highlighted the importance of adaptability and flexibility in their role, along with the need to have supportive relationships yourself, saying: “Just trying to manage everything can be stressful . . . But having a support system, having other principals to turn to and talk to, and kind of talking things out sometimes helps”. This underscores the importance of having

a strong support system and being able to adapt to changing circumstances in order to effectively manage stress and support the school community.

The ability to be flexible and creative in problem solving has been essential in navigating the challenges of the pandemic. Principal 1's sense of purpose as a unifier was central to their approach: "That's how I see my role—is to create a safe place for the adults and the kids that walk through the doors so that we can be academically and socially successful". This flexibility has helped principals address the diverse and evolving needs of their school communities.

Discussion

With issues of stress in schools at all-time highs, relationships play a critical role in navigating these high-stress, complex environments. While these relationships are essential and often helpful in many ways, they are also complex and challenging, requiring deliberate effort to cultivate and manage effectively. This study explored the role of relationships in principals' stress experiences, highlighting how interpersonal dynamics serve as both sources of support and stress. The analysis of the principal interviews revealed the multifaceted nature of relationships within the school setting. Principals derived personal fulfilment and motivation from the intrinsic satisfaction of relational work with students and staff. Their prioritisation of collaboration and support also fostered more inclusive and supportive school cultures. However, complex conflicts, competing demands, elements beyond a principal's locus of control, and high expectations from various stakeholders present significant challenges and stressors for principals, complicating their efforts to maintain productive, healthy relationships.

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated these already complex dynamics. Increased stress and burnout among staff, and the disruption of traditional engagement methods and opportunities for meaningful human connection were significant additional burdens on principals, requiring additional effort to restore a sense of community, support, and care within their schools. Despite these challenges, principals continued to demonstrate resilience and commitment to their role as leaders and unifiers.

The theoretical lens for this study, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory, is an important way to understand stress in general (Dewe et al., 2012) and in education (Collie & Mansfield, 2022), primarily because it clarifies what we mean by "stress", which can be an amorphous and ill-defined construct. The findings emphasise the centrality of relationships in shaping principals' effectiveness, wellbeing, and ability to manage stress, aligning with the growing body of literature on the emotional demands of school leadership (Grissom et al., 2021b; Johnson et al., 2023). Principals consistently identified relationships as foundational to their role, echoing the work of Price and Moolenaar (2015), who noted that strong social ties significantly influence school culture and student outcomes. However, the study also revealed the dual nature of relationships, as principals frequently reported stress from managing emotional labour and mediating conflicts, a theme consistent with research on emotional labour in leadership (Crawford, 2007; Grandey, 2000). Thus, aligning with transactional theory, we found support for the notion that principals' relationships can serve as both a resource and a demand.

Historically, research on school leadership has focused on academic press-related factors, but the findings contained herein underscore the importance of balancing these with a focus on the humanistic elements of leadership to improve broader school outcomes. Theories like Positive School Leadership Theory (Murphy & Louis, 2018) advocate for a care-centred approach, a shift increasingly reflected in the empirical literature (Bryk et al., 2010; Grissom et al., 2021b; Leithwood et al., 2010). This emphasis is also reflected in the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015), which many U.S. states use to develop their leadership standards, highlighting various relationship-based goals.

While previous literature does indeed emphasise the impact of relationships on positive school outcomes (Barnett & McCormick, 2004), this study sheds new light on the relational demands of leadership, particularly in the post-COVID-19 context. Participants described how the pandemic exacerbated stress by disrupting traditional methods of relationship-building and increasing demands for emotional support (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). This finding aligns with recent research on the pandemic's toll on school leadership (DeMatthews et al., 2022) but offers a more nuanced understanding of how relationships became even more critical during this period.

Implications for School Leadership and Preparation Programs

The findings of this study suggest several important implications for school leadership and leadership preparation programs. First, leadership preparation programs should ensure that relationship-building skills, including conflict resolution and emotional intelligence, are emphasised. As the study demonstrates, principals' ability to foster supportive, trusting relationships is critical not only for effective school management but also for their own personal wellbeing. Leadership programs must, therefore, prioritise training that equips future leaders to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics.

Second, the study underscores the need for systemic support to mitigate principal stress, particularly in emotionally demanding contexts like schools. School districts and policymakers should consider providing mental health resources and professional networks for principals to help them cope with their role's relational and emotional demands. This recommendation is supported by existing research suggesting that support systems are crucial for preventing burnout and promoting principal retention (Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Yan, 2020).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations of this study include its focus on a specific geographic region and school district, along with its qualitative approach, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Further, we collected the data in August 2022, a unique time in education as schools made a full return to in-person teaching. Future research could broaden the scope to include individual principal factors (e.g., personality, emotional intelligence, experience) and contextual factors (e.g., district policies, geographic location, school size, school performance data), and how these factors may influence principals' appraisals of their interpersonal relationships. Along those lines, while principals discussed their relationships and interactions in broad and often general terms, the study did not explore how principal or community demographics (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.)

shaped those relational experiences. Future research could explore how identity and structural factors influence relationships with respect to stress and wellbeing.

Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data from principals, which could introduce bias. Future studies might triangulate these findings with observations or perspectives from other stakeholders, such as teachers or district administrators, and provide a more complete understanding of school community wellbeing.

Another area for future research is the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school leadership. While this study provides insights into the immediate effects of the pandemic, longitudinal research could explore how these relational dynamics evolve as schools transition back to more stable operational environments.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex and critical role that relationships play in both mitigating and contributing to principal stress. While relationships are essential to fostering a positive school culture and enhancing school outcomes, they also place significant emotional and managerial demands on principals, especially in the heightened stress context following the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings call for leadership preparation programs to focus on relational leadership and for school districts to provide ongoing support for principals' emotional wellbeing. Moreover, the findings suggest a need for a deeper exploration of these dynamics and their impact on school outcomes. Addressing these needs will be key to promoting sustainable leadership practices and ensuring the long-term success of school leaders. Ultimately, sustaining school leadership in the current complex and demanding climate requires greater awareness of and attention to the emotional and relational labour inherent in the principalship. By recognising the dual nature of relationships as both sources of strength and strain, we may better support principals in leading schools that are academically successful and relationally healthy.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the generous support of the administrators in the studied district, whose years-long partnership has generated rich data to support ongoing efforts for school improvement locally and beyond. The authors also acknowledge the support of Dr. Richard Lambert and graduate students Camryn Trevino, Trisha Miller, Teresa Tian, and Francesca Di Rienzo, whose assistance in this project was greatly appreciated.

Ethical Considerations

The University of Texas at Austin Ethics Review Committee approved our interviews (approval: STUDY00000059-MOD06). Respondents gave written consent for review and signature before starting interviews.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding Statement

Funding from the *Partners in Education Foundation* was used to provide incentive gift cards to study participants.

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From Remedy to Readiness: Reframing Justice-Centred Leadership as Socially-Just Systems Design

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ABSTRACT: Educational leaders today face “unparalleled complexities” marked by political hostility, widening inequities, and intensifying social disruptions. Research has advanced justice-centred leadership approaches as one remedy to these complexities in that these leaders work to disrupt and contest injustice within schools and communities. Yet, this body of scholarship has largely emphasised the reactive function justice-centred leadership can play. In complex and challenging environments, we must also consider how such leadership can play a proactive role. This article advances a proactive conceptualisation of justice-centred leadership as a form of system readiness: leadership that anticipates challenges and prepares organisational infrastructures in ways that can sustain equity before and during crises. I draw upon a complexity theory lens to examine how five domains of justice-centred practice identified in a previously-published article create conditions that build adaptive capacity and resilience within complex school systems. I conclude with implications for leadership preparation, policy, and research.

Key words: Social justice leadership, complexity, proactive leadership

Introduction

Across the United States, educational leaders are confronting an unparalleled combination of complex challenging political, social, economic, and ecological conditions. State and federal lawmakers have advanced sweeping anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion policies that effectively undo decades of civil rights work (Alexander et al., 2023). Schools have been sites for rising hostility and attacks toward students of colour, refugee and immigrant students, and transgender students (ACLU, 2024; Villavicencio et al., 2022). Many schools face severe resource deprivation and even potential closure within marketised systems that force them to compete for student enrolment (Lipman, 2021). Compounding these pressures, schools have been affected by campaigns of misinformation that distort public understanding of the role schools play and elevate

public distrust in schools (Deane, 2024; Graham, 2021). In the backdrop of these challenges, schools are also facing the profound residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to school capacity and student mental health, ongoing natural disasters and climate change-related disruptions, and the ever-present spectre of looming gun violence (Grissom & Condon, 2021; Werner & Woessmann, 2023; Zamorro et al., 2022). Globally, many of these problems persist as well. Leaders committed to doing right by students must possess courage, moral purpose, and a proactive orientation that can anticipate challenges and sustain equity over time.

Justice-centred leaders exemplify one such group of leaders who are committed to advancing socially-just opportunities and outcomes for all students—particularly historically and contemporarily marginalised students. The literature describes these leaders as individuals who are morally-grounded responders that confront, contest, and replace harmful, oppressive structures within their schools and communities (Auerbach, 2009; Shields, 2018; Theoharis, 2010). Examinations of justice-centred leadership approaches illuminate how school leaders can act as advocates who resist such structures by building inclusive environments, redesigning inequitable systems, developing staff for equity, and forging meaningful partnerships with families and communities (e.g., DeMatthews, 2021; Green, 2018; Khalifa, 2020; Richard, 2024; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015; Shields, 2018; Theoharis, 2007a; Wang, 2018). Yet, this body of work tends to frame justice-centred leadership practices as responses or reactions to injustice rather than actions that can prepare schools to weather future injustice.

With this in mind, the *Leading & Managing* special issue editors' invitation to explore "the contrast between proactive and reactive leadership" highlights a need within the justice-centred leadership scholarship, particularly given the current political, social, and economic climate. While reactive practices can address emergent inequity and injustice, proactive practices can, per this special issue's call, "anticipate challenges, prepare systems, and shape future possibilities before crises escalate". This distinction represents an important paradigm shift in the way that we envision and discuss justice-centred leadership. Where reactive leadership practice can serve as an (important) remedy to injustice, proactive leadership practice can support schools' readiness to address and prevent against future injustice. Reframing how we understand justice-centred leadership approaches toward a lens of more proactive leadership is an important contribution to the field, broadening the field's understanding of how leaders can build more resilient, equity-oriented systems. This reframing matters now more than ever, as schools must navigate intensifying political hostilities, widening inequities, and escalating social distrust.

To this end, within this conceptual article I advance a framework of proactive justice-centred school leadership. I draw on an existing, empirically-derived framework of five key justice-centred leadership practice domains (Richard, 2024) developed via interviews with 24 leaders across seven U.S. districts. I reinterpret this framework through a proactive lens, examining how leaders can engage in key areas of justice-centred practice in ways that embed equity into organisational routines and build school readiness. My hope is that this reinterpreted framework provides insights into more resilient and proactive leadership practices that can ultimately cultivate conditions through which schools can withstand and adapt to complex future challenges.

Conceptual Background

Over the past two decades, scholars have increasingly examined approaches to school leadership that centre issues of equity and social justice. Key approaches surfaced within the literature include social justice (Theoharis, 2007a; Wang, 2018), transformative (Shields, 2018), anti-racist (Brooks & Witherspoon-Arnold, 2013; Diem & Welton, 2020; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015), inclusive (DeMatthews, 2021; Ryan, 2006), culturally-responsive (Khalifa 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016), activist (Berkovich, 2014; Green, 2018; Khalifa, 2012), and indigenous, decolonising (Cummins & Chang, 2020; Khalifa et al., 2018) leadership. Across this body of scholarship, scholars have illustrated how school principals can disrupt injustice within their schools and communities using several mutually-reinforcing strategies. For example, leaders can challenge deficit narratives taken up by school stakeholders (Khalifa, 2020; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015; Wasonga, 2009), eliminate segregated academic programs (Theoharis, 2010), develop more authentic and affirming relationships with families (Khalifa, 2020; Khalifa et al., 2018; Theoharis, 2010; Wang, 2018), and advocate for community causes (Khalifa, 2020; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Within this article, I use the term *justice-centred leadership* to capture these collective leadership approaches that at their core share a moral commitment to advancing equitable opportunities and outcomes for historically marginalised students and their communities.

The leadership frameworks noted above each centre specific injustices or leadership modalities, yet they draw from one another and are not separated by distinct boundaries (Furman, 2012); justice-centred leadership merges them into a comprehensive, integrative conceptualisation that reflects the intersectional, multifaceted nature of this work. Indeed, Capper and colleagues (2006) note that “public school leaders oriented toward social justice cannot pick and choose among areas of difference with their students, staff, and community members” (p. 142). Because justice demands in schools are overlapping, contextual, and shift over time, leaders must work holistically across areas of difference, drawing on whichever approaches are most salient at any given time. In this way, conceptualising justice-centred leadership as an integrative umbrella offers greater analytical flexibility for examining how leaders draw on a range of justice-oriented strategies in response to the specific, localised conditions of their schools and communities. Additionally, this broad conceptualisation holds greater significance for practitioners, whose work requires a flexible, holistic orientation capable of responding to and anticipating varied and ever-shifting contextual demands.

The body of scholarship undergirding this integrative framework is substantial and has done critical work toward identifying key strategies intrinsic to school leadership for justice. However, much of the research has tended to centre the reactive orientation of these actions, in that scholars focus on how these actions can serve as a remedy for injustice and inequity. Typically, these actions are presented as occurring after inequity has surfaced—either as responses to entrenched systemic disparities or to more immediate incidents of injustice. Yet, as noted within this special issue: “While reactive responses may address immediate disruptions, proactive approaches anticipate challenges, prepare systems, and shape future possibilities before crises escalate” (ACEL, 2025, n.p.). This creates an important opportunity for the field to expand its understanding of justice-centred leadership beyond reactive intervention toward proactive system design.

Although the literature examining justice-centred leadership tends to centre the more reactive role such leadership plays, it does not negate the proactive potential embedded in these practices. Instead, the scholarship has given less explicit attention to how justice-oriented strategies can be enacted in ways that anticipate social justice challenges and build resilient infrastructures. For example, leaders' strategies commonly align with one or more of the three aspects of a tripartite model of social justice: redistribution, recognition, and representation (Dahl et al., 2004; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002). Consider one of those—redistribution, which is concerned with ensuring the equitable distribution of resources. One typical justice-centred leadership action aligned with redistribution is that leaders seek to eliminate segregated programs such as by detracking or eliminating pull-out programs (Khalifa, 2020; Ryan, 2006; Theoharis, 2010) which is clearly reactive to existing injustice. However, we can also consider such an action to be proactive, in that it creates school structures that should prevent future disparities from occurring. To provide a second example, typical justice-centred leadership actions related to recognition—which emphasises the importance of acknowledging and valuing the cultural contributions of historically and contemporarily marginalised groups—include creating more culturally responsive school environments such as by strengthening cultural representation in learning and other materials (e.g., wall hangings, library books). These actions often respond to the dominance of whiteness as a normative default in schools (Diamond & Lewis, 2022). However, these culturally responsive practices can also be understood as proactive efforts that embed belonging, visibility, and affirmation into daily school routines, ensuring that marginalisation does not have the conditions to take root. In this way, justice-centred leadership can serve as a forward-looking approach to designing systems capable of sustaining justice under changing conditions.

To advance this framing, I draw on complexity leadership theory, which reconceptualises schools as complex adaptive systems operating within dynamic and unpredictable environments (Morrison, 2010; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Complex systems consist of many interconnected elements whose nonlinear relationships and interactions generate behaviours that cannot be understood or predicted by examining individual elements (Byrne, 1999; Pycroft, 2010). According to Andersson and Törnberg (2018), complex systems typically include: (a) numerous interacting components situated across a small set of role-types, (b) redundancy that allows other components to step in when disruptions occur, (c) loosely structured yet dynamic interaction patterns shaped partly by environmental forces, and (d) emergent properties that arise from these interactions over time. Schools are one example of complex systems. Within schools, there are many individuals occupying a limited set of formal roles (e.g., student, teacher, leader, other staff). This relates to the high redundancy within schools—particularly amongst staff—in which there are overlapping layers of support and expertise. Each day in the life of a school is marked by thousands of daily interactions that occur amongst students, educators, staff, and families, and may be shaped by environmental factors such as policies and politics. And over time, these interactions produce emergent patterns such as school norms, shared expectations, and the school climate that shape future interactions.

For complex organisations like schools to be resilient in the face of change and volatility, they must be able to absorb disruptions without fracturing, such as by creating redundancies in relationships, resources, and roles that help to maintain stability (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018).

They must also be able to adapt, such as by modifying practices and routines as conditions shift (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018). Resilient systems are marked by distribution of leadership across many actors who can identify needs and respond to these needs, rather than relying upon a singular leader (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018). And resilient complex systems are able to self-organise, or develop new patterns of collaboration and leadership as conditions change. Considering justice-centred leadership through this resiliency lens, we can see more clearly how justice-centred leadership serves a proactive function that strengthens a school's capacity to anticipate and withstand the "unparalleled complexities" that lie ahead (ACEEL, 2025). This work suggests that leadership for resilient schools requires infrastructures such as shared routines and distributed relationships that allow equity to emerge, endure, and transform as contexts change (Morrison, 2010; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Here, justice-centred leadership becomes a form of system design that cultivates the relational, structural, and cultural conditions through which equity can be sustained even amidst instability, crises, and hostility. In line with the special issue call, complexity theory highlights how justice-centred leadership must operate not only as an urgent response to existing inequities, but as a proactive form of systems design that can anticipate challenges and prepare infrastructures before crises escalate.

To illustrate how this proactive orientation materialises in practice, I return to an empirically grounded framework of justice-centred leadership practice derived from interviews with 24 principals working across seven urban U.S. school districts (Richard, 2024). When analysed using a proactive and complexity-oriented lens, the framework reveals how integral justice-centred practices may serve the role of building schools' readiness and resilience in the face of complexity and challenge.

A Justice-Centred Leadership Framework

The framework revisited in this article—shown in Figure 1—emerged from a multi-district qualitative study designed to explore justice-centred leadership practice across seven unique district contexts (Richard, 2024). Within the study, justice-centred leadership was (and remains, within this study) conceptualised as a contextually-enacted set of practices that exist along a spectrum rather than as a binary condition in which a leader is or is not "justice-centred". Indeed, what justice-centred practice looks like in one school may differ substantially from another, and even within one school, the relevant justice-centred practices may shift over time in response to changing local conditions (Berkovich, 2014). Given this, the study centred justice-centred "practice" rather than seeking to define justice-centred "leaders". This informed how I recruited participants and engaged in data collection; I sought out evidence of justice-centred practices, specifically, as they emerged within each participant's specific context.

To do so, the study drew on semi-structured interviews with 24 public school leaders working in elementary, middle, and high schools across seven large, urban U.S. districts. To enhance the likelihood that participants would provide rich insights about justice-centred leadership practice (Merriam, 1998), the recruitment email described the study as an exploration of equity-oriented leadership and included a screener question asking participants to briefly describe the equity work they engage in as school leaders. As I reviewed screener responses, I compared them against the justice-centred leadership literature cited above to assess whether other

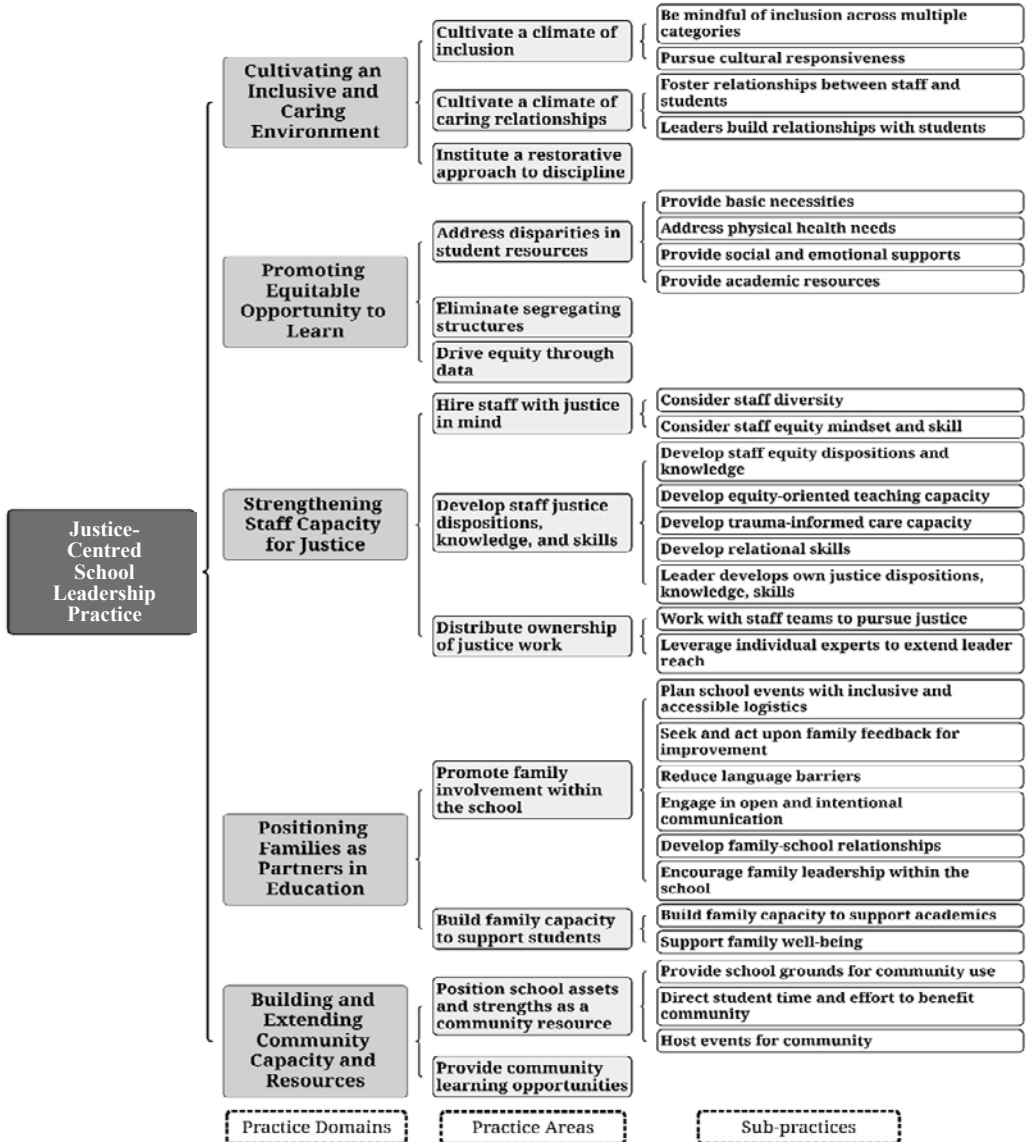
scholars in this field would recognise potential participants' described practices as justice-centred, looking specifically for asset-based, culturally responsive, and inclusion-oriented approaches. For example, one participant's (Sofia) response referenced practices such as establishing affinity groups for students of colour and drawing upon disaggregated data to drive equity; both of these practices are consistent with the justice-centred leadership literature. My aim was that the screener question would help to identify participants whose stated practices reflected justice-oriented commitments and who expressed interest in a study explicitly framed around equity and justice.

Leaders whose responses aligned with the literature were invited to participate in interviews. Each participant engaged in one semi-structured interview, conducted over Zoom and lasting approximately one hour, that explored leaders' strategies for promoting equity, the challenges they faced, and how they overcame those challenges. I coded all transcripts deductively using literature-derived codes and inductively to identify practices not found within the literature. As I identified new codes, I went back to previously-coded transcripts in a back-and-forth process until I identified no new codes or excerpts. I then looked across codes and engaged in thematic analysis to create the organising categories of the framework (Creswell, 2013).

This analysis produced a comprehensive framework of justice-centred leadership practice that delineates five interrelated domains of practice: (1) Cultivating an inclusive and caring environment, (2) Promoting equitable opportunity to learn, (3) Strengthening staff capacity for justice, (4) Positioning families as partners in education, and (5) Building and extending community capacity and resources. These domains function synergistically; for example, a leader's ability to cultivate an inclusive school climate is likely to be dependent upon the school staff's social justice mindset around inclusion. While these domains and the distinct practices do not represent an exhaustive list of all possible justice-centred leadership practices, the framework is meant to provide a strong foundational understanding of potential practices for school principals struggling to engage in such work. Additionally, given the discussion above about the contextualised nature of justice-centred practice, the framework captures a range of approaches leaders might draw upon within their specific temporal and spatial contexts. It does not represent a requisite list of actions that allow one to be deemed a justice-centred leader. Taken together, these five categories of practice portray justice-centred leadership as a multidimensional, ecological, and relational endeavour.

Figure 1

A Framework of Justice-Centred Leadership Practice



Much of the data that eventually formed these categories was centred around practices that can confront injustice within and outside the school. Yet, re-examining this framework through the lens of proactive leadership elevated within this special issue reveals that these domains can accomplish more than remedy. Indeed, these domains also bring to light how leaders can cultivate

“readiness”. For example, building inclusive school climates can create a trusting school environment that serves as a relational anchor in turbulent times. Strengthening staff capacity can create justice-centred organisational routines that can withstand leadership turnover. When considered from this lens, the framework can illuminate how justice-centred leadership practice serves a proactive role in creating stronger and more resilient schools.

Illustrating The Five Domains as Proactive Conditions

In the following sections, I reinterpret each domain to consider how leaders can cultivate anticipatory systems of justice that can adapt and endure amidst volatility. Each practice domain represents a specific approach leaders can use to cultivate relational and organisational infrastructures supportive of school resilience.

Domain 1: Cultivating an Inclusive and Caring Environment

This domain captures leaders’ efforts to build school environments where all students feel included, valued, culturally affirmed, and supported through strong relational connections and restorative approaches to discipline. The justice-centred leadership literature often frames these types of practices as remedies to marginalisation, such as cultural exclusion or deficit-thinking. While these actions are crucial to dismantling oppressive conditions, such actions centred around cultivating care and belonging can also serve as proactive system design. By cultivating school environments where students felt seen, affirmed, and valued, leaders can construct more robust and authentic relational networks or infrastructures that are likely to strengthen the school’s adaptive capacity, or ability to adapt and respond to change without abandoning core commitments (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018; Morrison, 2010). These relational infrastructures can help schools respond to disruptive changes because they can anchor school stakeholders within trusting and caring relationships, and structures of open communication (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018). Through this lens, this domain of work can serve as creating a relational shield against instability, disengagement, and fragmentation that can happen in challenging situations of crisis (Byrne, 1999).

In the original study, leaders intentionally embedded inclusion into school routines, structures, and relationships in ways that built this relational shield. For example, Mary instructed teachers to “check in with students every day”. This routine was meant to ensure that students felt seen and wanted, giving them at least one adult they could potentially turn to should a challenging situation arise. It also ensured that teachers had basic knowledge about how individual students were feeling and doing, allowing teachers to notice and intervene when challenges arose. Leaders also built collective ownership of the school by positioning students (particularly historically marginalised students) as co-decision makers within the school. For example, Keisha transformed Black History Month into a celebration of African nations represented by the diverse students at her school who collectively represented each of the five regions of Africa. Rather than designing this celebration herself, Keisha asked the students to decide how they wanted their heritage honoured. This served a dual role of affirming students’ cultural backgrounds while also embedding student choice and voice as a school routine. Creating a more culturally responsive and

student-centred school served as a proactive strategy in that this allowed students to both feel enhanced cultural belonging but also continually produce such belonging themselves. This belongingness may strengthen relational trust and the extent to which students feel like part of the school community, increasing students' capacity to contribute to school resilience in times of change. Along similar lines, Marisol used a distributed leadership approach in which she convened several student groups to gather and then integrate their perspectives into school events and decision making. By creating these ongoing feedback loops Marisol created opportunities for early detection of concerns and collective adaptation when difficult situations arose.

Domain 2: Promoting Equitable Opportunity to Learn

This domain reflects leaders' efforts to ensure that all students can access high-level academic opportunities, particularly by opening access to advanced academic programs and meeting student resource needs to support their capacity to flourish within these programs. Justice-centred leadership scholarship often frames these efforts as interventions that confront existing inequities produced by practices such as tracking or segregated support programs. While this responsive work is critical, efforts to redistribute resources and expand opportunity can also serve as proactive system design. By embedding equitable resource flows and academic pathways into the core structures and routines of the school, leaders cultivate adaptive capacity (Morrison, 2010). Equitable opportunity structures can also generate redundancy in that overlapping supports or structures preserve continuity when pressures and disruptions arise (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018; Byrne, 1999). In this way, redistributive action is not only a response to injustice but a foundational strategy that builds resilience into school organisational structures.

Leaders in the original study created more equitable academic opportunity while also supporting student resilience to engage in high-level opportunities. Many of the leaders restructured access to advanced coursework by shifting school policy. Anna, for example, eliminated prerequisites for Advanced Placement courses, and Sofia instituted routines of examining disaggregated data to identify and respond to emerging disparities in advanced course participation. Through these shifts, leaders created structural resilience, ensuring that the school's pathways to advanced learning opportunities would be solidified as school routines. And these actions also served as anticipatory mechanisms that were designed to prevent future inequity in academic opportunity from occurring. Additionally, to support student resilience, Carlos organised "mega drives" through which students could access free clothing, medical care, vaccinations, and school supplies before the year began. By ensuring that students' basic needs were met from day one, Carlos reduced the likelihood that poverty-related challenges would affect students' academic flourishing.

Domain 3: Strengthening Staff Capacity for Justice

This domain encompasses leaders' efforts to hire, develop, and collaborate with school staff members who are motivated and prepared to advance equity through their everyday practice. The justice-centred leadership literature frequently positions such staff-centred efforts as reactive training mechanism in which leaders confront staff members' deficit mindsets or address

weaknesses in equity-oriented teaching. These actions can also create stronger structural and organisational conditions for preserving school-wide commitments to social justice in contentious and shifting times. When justice knowledge and responsibility are distributed across the staff body, a school is less dependent on an individual heroic leader and more capable of sustaining core equity priorities amid challenges (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018). This approach reflects adaptive principle of systemic redundancy and diversification, enabling adaptation without compromising ethical coherence (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018; Byrne, 1999; Morrison, 2010). In complex systems, organisations are more resilient when multiple actors share similar goals and visions, communicate effectively, and coordinate collective responses (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018; Pycroft, 2010).

Leaders in the original study strengthened staff capacity for justice in ways that created systemic redundancy and resiliency within the school. For example, Beatriz intentionally hired educators who demonstrated a commitment to culturally responsive practices and high expectations for all students. By hiring staff who were aligned with the school's social justice principles, Beatriz was embedding these principles at entry and increasing the coherence and capacity of the staff to work toward justice even during future organisational shocks. Leaders also reinforced these expectations through daily professional interactions. For example, when Shanice overheard teachers refer to students dismissively, she intervened to reinforce shared expectations for how every student must be treated. These corrections can function as proactive, ongoing calibration of the school culture toward cultivating shared expectations and norms. Leaders also engaged in more formal staff development efforts around issues such as equity-focused data analysis and culturally-sustaining pedagogy. These types of actions support collaborative learning and embedded justice mindsets and skills across the school that can increase staff capacity to respond to student needs. As a result of this embeddedness, the school's justice commitment is likely less vulnerable to turnover or other volatility, and more likely to endure despite challenges.

Domain 4: Positioning Families as Partners in Education

This domain reflects leaders' efforts to build authentic and reciprocal partnerships with families in which schools foster stronger family engagement and build family capacity to support students. While these efforts can be more reactive, such as responding to inequitable and uneven participation of Black and Latinx families, it also can serve a more proactive function toward school resilience. By embedding more inclusive communication and culturally-affirming engagement strategies into school routines, leaders can deepen families' trust in the school and encourage families to more consistently communicate with the family. This expands the school's adaptive capacity by ensuring that family needs and challenges are surfaced early and can be addressed collaboratively (Morrison, 2010). This family-centred work can also strengthen relational redundancy in that it can deepen relationships between and across families and the school, creating a more stable relational foundation upon which the school can operate (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018; Byrne, 1999).

The leaders I interviewed engaged in family-centred work that built this stronger, more stable relational foundation. For example, Keisha moved a major family meeting to a local mosque and partnered with the Imam to ensure interpretation supports were provided. This shift addressed

common barriers to family access while simultaneously affirming the cultural identities and community assets of Muslim families. Related to the relational foundation of the school, Keisha's decision could enhance trusting and more reciprocal relationships with families, which could in turn foster school resilience in the face of challenges. Leaders also positioned families as partners in school decision making by regularly soliciting their perspectives and adjusting school practices accordingly, expanding opportunities for early detection of emerging family needs and allowing families to co-design solutions. These actions enhanced communication pathways across the school community, increasing redundancy and adaptability in the face of volatility and political or social pressure.

Domain 5: Building and Extending Community Capacity and Resources

This domain relates to leaders' efforts to strengthen the school–community ecosystem by leveraging school resources to meet community needs, offering learning and social opportunities for the community, and advocating for community causes. While community engagement is typically conceptualised as a response to emergent or long-standing needs such as wider resource deprivation, such work can also serve a proactive and future-forward purpose. Leaders' actions within this domain can create more open, networked, and diverse school–community ecologies, strengthening the school's resilience in the face of challenge (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018; Morrison, 2010; Pycroft, 2010). For example, developing the community's capacity and meeting resource gaps can create systems of redundancy that expand the school's network and allows for adaptation in the face of volatility and shocks (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018; Byrne, 1999). In other words, community-facing work can create a multi-layered safety net for students, their families, and the school more broadly that can absorb and withstand shocks.

Leaders who participated in the original study engaged in community-centred work that built these open, networked, and mutually supportive ecosystems. For example, Anna hosted a drive-in movie event for the community during the pandemic to sustain social connection when social distancing threatened to erode community ties. Linda partnered with local nonprofits to host workshops for newly arrived immigrant families, proactively building community knowledge and stability before resource gaps and political tailwinds could escalate into more severe crises. Other leaders opened school facilities such as pools and auditoriums as shared community spaces, positioning the school as a hub of distributed support that could meet gaps in community capacity. By strengthening community capacity and relationships, leaders simultaneously expanded the school's own adaptive options and created a distributed support system that could better sustain students and their families even when school resources were strained.

Toward a Theory of Proactive Justice-Centred Leadership

This exploration of the five domains of justice-centred leadership practice through a complexity theory lens highlights the inherently proactive and future-oriented nature of justice-centred leadership. Schools are complex adaptive systems comprised of many interacting elements

whose complex, nonlinear relationships produce unpredictable and emergent patterns of behaviour (Byrne, 1999; Pycroft, 2010). Even small disruptions can create cascading effects, destabilising routines and shared work (Morrison, 2010). Given this, in addition to addressing emergent injustice, justice-centred leadership practice must actively strengthen the relational and structural infrastructures of their schools in ways that will sustain equity when conditions shift (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

The reactive and proactive orientations of justice-centred leadership are complementary. The more reactive orientation centres the present and emerges after inequities surface, focusing on repairing harm through targeted actions. In reactive justice-centred leadership, the leader themselves is likely to be the primary locus of action, relying on personal courage, advocacy, and decision making. On the other hand, when we consider the more proactive orientation of justice-centred leadership, we can see how such leadership serves a more anticipatory and protective purpose. Justice-centred leaders create more resilient school organisations as they embed justice into everyday practice as organisational structures and routines, cultivate strong relational ties, and strengthen the broader school ecology. Importantly, justice-centred leaders also strengthen collective capacity to support justice work across networks of staff, students, families, and community members, expanding the system’s ability to adapt and absorb change. The proactive nature of justice-centred leadership reduces fragility of the school by ensuring that justice commitments will endure even when conditions change. Table 1 further illustrates these complementary orientations within justice-centred leadership.

Table 1

Contrasting the Reactive and Proactive Orientations of Justice-Centred Leadership

Justice-Centred Domain	Reactive Orientation	Proactive Orientation
1. Inclusive & Caring Environment	Responding to exclusionary incidents; repairing harm through restorative action	Embedding belonging into daily routines; strengthening relational trust and communication pathways
2. Equitable Opportunity to Learn	Correcting disparities in access to advanced learning or support services	Institutionalising equitable pathways and resource flows into school structures
3. Staff Capacity for Justice	Targeted PD or corrective conversations to address deficit beliefs or harmful practices	Hiring and developing a critical mass of staff who share justice commitments and skills
4. Families as Partners in Education	Addressing uneven participation or cultural misalignment when it surfaces	Creating ongoing, culturally-sustaining engagement channels and co-decision routines

Justice-Centred Domain	Reactive Orientation	Proactive Orientation
5. Community Capacity & Resources	Filling immediate resource gaps or responding to urgent community crises	Building reciprocal networks of support that broaden the school's safety net

Across the five domains, leaders built overlapping capacities that are likely to make the school more resilient in sustaining social justice amidst challenging and volatile changes. By cultivating inclusive and caring environments, leaders stabilised relationships and communication pathways that reduced fragmentation. By creating more equitable opportunities to learn, they embedded fair access into school structures so that access to equitable opportunity could remain intact even when resources or policies shifted. By strengthening staff capacity for justice, leaders distributed expertise and responsibility across staff, reducing vulnerability to leadership turnover. By positioning families as partners, they expanded trust and feedback loops in ways that surface families' emergent needs for leaders to address. And by building community capacity and resources, leaders strengthened resources available to students when school capacity was strained. Through these collective actions across domains, social justice work became a more routinised, embedded, and shared function of the school rather than a more fragile aspiration of a single individual (Andersson & Törnberg, 2018; Byrne, 1999;). I delineate the resilience functions of justice-centred leadership within Table 2.

Table 2*Exploring the Resilience Mechanisms of Justice-centred Practice*

Justice-Centred Practice Domain	Practice Examples	Resilience Mechanism	Effect
1. Inclusive & Caring Environment	Daily check-ins; student voice in decisions	Strengthens trust networks and open communication pathways	Maintains cohesion and belonging under stress
2. Equitable Opportunity to Learn	Open access to advanced courses; need-based supports	Embeds just resource flows and overlapping supports	Ensures continuity of access when resources shift
3. Staff Capacity for Justice	Strategic hiring; ongoing equity-focused PD	Redundancy (shared expertise, shared norms)	Equity lasts beyond individual leaders
4. Families as Partners	Culturally-sustaining family engagement	Early detection of emerging needs; reciprocal feedback loops	Faster, more accurate adaptation to changing conditions

Justice-Centred Practice Domain	Practice Examples	Resilience Mechanism	Effect
5. Community Capacity & Resources	Resource partnerships; shared facilities	Expanded network of support and mutual aid	Ability to absorb shocks when internal capacity is strained

Discussion and Conclusion

Taken together, this reconceptualisation positions justice-centred leadership as intentionally embedding justice work into the organisational life of schools. By foregrounding the proactive role justice-centred leadership plays toward readiness, this article extends existing scholarship to show how such leadership creates more adaptive and resilient schools. This reframing advances scholarship about the nature and enactment of justice-centred leadership. Much of the existing literature has emphasised the importance of courageous, equity-minded leaders who intervene when inequities surface and advocate for marginalised students in the face of resistance (e.g., Khalifa, 2020; Shields, 2018; Theoharis, 2007a, 2010; Wang, 2018). This work makes quite clear the importance of leaders’ moral purpose and direct actions to confront injustice. Yet, by shifting our attention toward proactive and resilience-building orientations, this article broadens the focus of justice-centred leadership scholarship and illuminates how such leadership fosters organisational conditions through which equity becomes more durable.

This reconceptualisation also deepens our theoretical understanding of justice-centred leadership within complex school systems. Scholars have acknowledged the challenges and dilemmas justice-centred leaders face navigating complexity, uncertainty, and competing pressures (Berkovich, 2014; DeMatthews, 2021; Sarid, 2021; Theoharis, 2007b). However, scholars have less often highlighted how leaders’ work contributes to more resilient organisational systems capable of maintaining justice amidst those complexities. Bringing complexity leadership theory into direct conversation with justice-centred leadership helps to illustrate the ways in which leadership practice can enhance redundancy in relationships and expertise, distribute capacities across school stakeholders, establish adaptive routines, and foster stronger community networks. In this way, this reconceptualisation extends existing literature by clarifying how justice-centred leadership can spur processes and conditions that allow justice to remain as an embedded property of resilient school organisations.

The insights from this article point to several implications for the field. Related to practice, school leaders and district decision makers might institutionalise dimensions of justice-centred leadership that strengthen resiliency and adaptive capacity. For example, they might enact policies that distribute leadership and decision making, embed inclusive and restorative routines into everyday practice to build trust, and ensure protected equity resources so that justice commitments persist even when contexts shift. Preparation programs, coursework and field experiences must foreground justice-centred practices as core leadership strategies rather than extras or add-ons. And

research should continue to explore with this topic—how can justice-centred leadership serve as a proactive strategy that prepares schools to face unprecedented, challenging times?

Competing Interests and Funding

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

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Courage, Accountability, and Equity: Leading the Future of Schooling

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we explore the lived experiences of 12 innovative secondary school principals in New South Wales, Australia. We focus the research on courageous leadership in the context of complex systemic accountability and rapidly changing political, social, and economic contexts. We used a qualitative design, drawing on three rounds of semi-structured interviews with selected participants across one school year. Our analysis of the findings showed that courage is a critical attribute for principals leading innovation within public education systems and individual school contexts. It highlights how courageous leadership, driven by an equity orientation, enables principals to challenge traditional schooling paradigms and lead innovation in schooling. Our participant leaders self-identified as “mavericks” among their colleagues. They employed strategies such as intelligent risk-taking and embraced creativity to provide a relevant and equitable schooling experience for all. This research is a subset of data from a larger study on secondary principals leading innovation in the New South Wales public education system. In it, we foreground the importance of courage and offer insights for policymakers and educational leaders responsible for the future of schooling.

Key words: Courage, principal leadership, leading innovation, future schooling

Introduction

The evolution of secondary schooling globally depends on school leaders with the courage, the imperative, and the skills to innovate. According to Leadbeater (2022), school leaders are emerging as changemakers in many parts of the world. He stated that innovation rarely comes from the mainstream: “Most often it comes from renegades, mavericks, and outsiders working in the

margins” (p. 4). This aligns with the seminal research of Dewey (2009), which espoused a theory of educational reform through experimentation, led by individuals who demonstrated “courageous imagination” (p. 3). He posited that schools serve both as agents of social change (1916) and as responsible for responding to unprecedented social, economic, and intellectual change (1938b). Although there has been some system-led innovation, there is increased awareness that innovation is happening “predominantly at the regional and local level” (OECD, 2017, p. 9). Fullan and Langworthy (2014) described a grass-roots level shift in response to schooling experiences that are increasingly perceived as irrelevant. Complex and often contradictory reasons for change are now considered the norm (Louis et al., 2010); therefore, leaders can respond most effectively by engaging in innovation that is “systemic, consistent, and scalable” (Serdyukov, 2017, p. 4). This study explored the lived experiences of 12 principals in New South Wales secondary schools as they led innovation within established system boundaries.

School leaders’ imperative for change includes maintaining relevance within the global transformation of economic, political, technological, social, and environmental contexts. The U.S. Army War College (Horney et al., 2010) described modern society as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA), as exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, education systems are grappling with rapid development in automation, and “new frontiers in artificial intelligence (AI)” (NSW Department of Education, 2019, p. 2). The educational challenges have highlighted the fragility of status-quo leadership approaches (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). As stated by Drucker (1980), the danger lies not in the turbulence itself but in leading with yesterday’s logic. How then do principals use courageous leadership to navigate the complexities and lead innovation? This article reports on findings from one aspect of a larger study on secondary principals across one Australian public education system (Owen, 2024). It used a three-phase semi-structured interview design to study the characteristics of innovative principals in New South Wales, Australia. In this article, we include a literature review that reveals the dynamic interplay of courageous leadership and the pursuit of equity within a framework of accountability. We used a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews with 12 secondary school principals noted for their innovative practices. Our analysis of the data evolved the themes of bravery, maverick leadership, and intelligent risk-taking. Recommendations include opportunities for current school leaders, system level leaders, and policymakers to encourage and support courageous leadership to support equity and student success.

Background

To successfully lead for innovation, the findings suggested that a secondary principal in the contemporary public system in New South Wales must navigate a complex and pervasive international, national, and state policy context and associated accountabilities (Knapp, 2012; Pollock & Winton, 2016). The New South Wales Department of Education includes more than 2200 schools, primary and secondary, each of which has a principal leader. The greatest shift in the role of the educational leader is school reform initiatives and associated compliance requirements (Lambert, 2018; Zegarac, 2012). For the context of this study, these requirements included global accountabilities such as the Programme for International Student Assessment

(PISA), national accountabilities like the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and state accountabilities that include 192 New South Wales Department of Education policies and regular educational reforms (Cerna, 2014; Fullan, 2011; Lambert, 2018; Sahlberg, 2023). This article reports on findings from research conducted within the context of the 2021 to 2023 NSW public education system. The study explored and considered how principals drew on courage to lead innovation within a complex role and highly accountable system.

The leaders in this study proactively lead innovation in schooling amidst complexity. The timing of this study coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, when school leaders across the globe, including secondary principals in New South Wales, experienced unprecedented challenges. The immediate, large-scale, and ongoing nature of the pandemic required strong crisis leadership (Harris & Jones, 2025; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). New South Wales education system developed an education response that, while comprehensive, still required school leaders to innovate and to consider new ways of operating to meet the needs of their students and school communities. Participants in this study had already been challenged to rethink schooling in new ways, so they were able to engage their courage, conviction, and creativity to continue serving students during COVID-19 lockdowns. Although the lockdowns are over, the learning about innovative leadership is a roadmap not to be forgotten by the next generation of secondary principals. Having provided an overview of the context and the broader study, the next section will provide a deeper exploration of the literature on courage as a leadership trait in schooling innovation, driven by an equity orientation and within a complex landscape of contextual constraints.

Courage, Accountability and the Pursuit of Equity: Literature Review

The focus of this study was on the courageous leadership of principals as central figures in their schools' change journeys. This included examining how principals leading successful school innovation efforts balanced contextual autonomy and systemic accountability. Barber (2007) claimed it is possible to “mandate the move from awful to adequate and fair to good, but we unleash greatness” (p. 337). Hannon and Mackay (2021) stated that improvement planning was necessary; however, the linear nature of this activity enabled clear solutions to well-understood problems, but it was not conducive to complex problems or environments. Similarly, Barber and Klein (2016) claimed “Innovation is not prescriptive” (p. 4). Pont et al. (2008) acknowledged the enormous challenge of the principal's role in navigating the internal and external complexities of school leadership. Although they described the principal as the “bridge between internal school improvement processes and externally initiated reform [they also noted that] school autonomy alone does not guarantee improvement” (p. 16) as school leaders require the “capacity, motivation and support” (p. 64). This study explored the capabilities, the imperative, and the guidance.

Leading innovation through the equity orientation (Leithwood, 2021) required great courage, according to the existing body of knowledge. This included a foundational body of literature that the purpose of schooling was success for all (Dewey, 1938a) and that schools must provide equity of learning opportunity (Edmonds, 1979). Globally, there have been calls to action

including “a laser-sharp focus on those who are excluded again and again from education: persons with disabilities; children in rural areas; those from poorer backgrounds; displaced persons” (United Nations, 2022, para. 15). Unsurprisingly, socioeconomic background has consistently been found to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes, with students excluded from educational opportunities (United Nations, 2022). This includes Australia, where National Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results indicated significant achievement gaps for those with lower socio-economic status, Indigenous students, and students in remote and very remote regions (Lamb et al., 2020). The 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration acknowledged inequity and committed federal and state governments to provide “all young Australians” with the opportunity to “reach their full potential” as “successful lifelong learners”, “confident and creative individuals, and active and informed community members” (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2019, p. 2). While this key document briefly mentions innovation, a key gap in the literature is the lack of guidance on how to lead it in schooling. The literature calls for innovation to address inequity (Barber et al., 2012; United Nations, 2022), and there is some indication of the elements of schooling that would need to evolve to address inequity, including a shift in curriculum, the grammar of schooling, and assessment (Barber et al., 2012). However, current literature neglects the theme of how innovation can advance equity.

Innovative leaders were found to possess common attributes, with courage and calculated risk-taking at the fore, according to key studies. Rogers (1963) defined innovators as the first 2.5% to introduce new initiatives and noted described innovators as “venturesome individuals” who “desire the hazardous, the rash, the avant-garde, and the risky” (p. 253). Leadbeater (n.d.) suggested that in the public service, they are “thoughtful, experienced, self-confident and skilled practitioners trying to find new and more effective solutions to intractable problems” (p. 2). In the broader societal context, the most successful innovative leaders exhibited the characteristics of the “Innovator’s DNA” as identified by Dyer et al. (2011) which included the key behaviours of questioning, observing, networking, and experimenting. In a contextually relevant study by Tonkin (2016), whereby she followed five innovative principals (three primary and two secondary) in Victoria, Australia, highlighting the leadership practices that contributed to their success, she found a series of perspectives and associated key behaviours. These included a “change activist perspective: takes responsibility for change, takes calculated risks, embraces failure as learning, [driven by the] moral purpose perspective: student centred values, intensely personal drivers, strong belief in the capacity of others, optimistic and passionate” (p. 206).

Furthermore, Hannon and Mackay (2021) identified an emerging set of leadership capabilities that were required for principals leading innovation, including exemplifying both leadership and learning, use of distributed and co-creative leadership, and exhibiting strong social-emotional competencies. They found that principals with these capabilities facilitated ecosystems of innovation in schooling. A profile of critical capabilities for leaders of innovation began to emerge in the literature (Bills et al., 2017; Dimmock & O’Donoghue, 1996; Dyer et al., 2011; Tonkin, 2016), but it was unclear how individual principals develop and utilise the appropriate skill set.

This study sought to add to the literature a further understanding related to critical capabilities for leaders of innovation by investigating principals' innovation journeys and in so doing provide clarity in how they balanced autonomy and accountability when solving complex contextual challenges. In addition, the study also examined how they confronted inequity through innovative practice and activated the leadership capacities required to drive meaningful, equity-focused change.

Methodology

Research Design

This research was designed to capture the lived experiences of secondary principals identified as innovators by their peers, the system leaders, and the literature. Scholars (Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Hargreaves & Harris, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2020) have examined the journey of school change leadership, however, this study was intended to specifically explore leading innovation as both a journey and a process. The theoretical frame of Dewey's argument that schools should stay ahead of social shifts to maintain relevance (Dewey, 1902, 1934) and that it would be courageous individuals, led by a moral imperative, who were willing to experiment (Dewey, 2009) informed the design of this research. It was determined that a qualitative study focusing on the school principal, as the core enabler of innovation within a school, would address the identified gaps in the literature and add a contemporary lens to Dewey's charting of progressive education. His belief that school was the chief agency to accomplish a better future for society (Dewey, 1934) provided a foundation for exploring school leaders' courage to lead innovation. The research included the complexities of leading innovative practice within the opportunities, resources, and restrictions of a large, state-wide public education system. Ethics approval was provided by the University of Newcastle to conduct the research (Reference No. H-2020-0268).

Participants

Study participants were selected using the qualitative approach for participant selection developed by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) which suggested a comprehensive list of potential candidates to be later refined. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was undertaken by contacting associations that represented principals and requesting that they identify experienced leaders of innovation based on key criteria, including citation in the literature on school innovation, leadership in a professional support organisation, or initiation and development of innovative educational models/practices that have resulted in pedagogical and structural change. This approach aimed to assemble a comprehensive list of potential candidates from varied school contexts, which would later be refined. We asked system leaders and principal association leaders, and consulted the literature, to develop the pool of potential innovators for the study. The final list of participants was comprised of 12 secondary principals from across the state of New South Wales, Australia. They varied in context, including geographical location in New South Wales, socio-economic background, and the percentage of Aboriginal students and the numbers of students with a non-English-speaking background.

Data Collection

The study design comprised a series of three in-depth interviews (Grinyer & Thomas, 2012) with each participant at three intervals over one school year. This approach allowed the investigation of the change journey in real-time and provided opportunities for deep insight into the lived experiences of these leaders (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Through this extended process, participants were able to reflect upon, elaborate, and build on their stories as they unfolded, as well as respond to and change what had been reported (Grinyer & Thomas, 2012). In line with the overarching study framework, the sequence of three interviews included questions that addressed the principals' future schooling vision and the "why" that drives it, driving vision through innovative practice and coherence, and sustained change resulting from the innovation.

Data Analysis

In preparing for the "data analysis" phase of the study (Kvale, 2007), modes of coding and categorising were most appropriate, given the nature of the interview questions. Guided by the work of Merriam and Tisdell (2015), an iterative process was used to help refine techniques and build emergent themes. This included a slow coding approach of each transcription, followed by a collaborative effort to aggregate the cases, synthesise them, and create key terms. Merriam's (1998) guide to category construction was then used to maintain a targeted, comparative approach of initial themes derived from the clustered terms, which could be readily interpreted. A "Participant Data Analysis" spreadsheet included one page per principal with all the data coded from each interview, providing the vehicle for levels of analysis, layering, and interconnections between the emergent codes. Decontextualised commonalities emerged, which directly aligned with the research questions. After agreeing on the themes, the data were revisited to ensure that they represented the original codes. This final step enabled deeper analysis, linking the emergent themes to accuracy, coherence, and transferability, as referred to by Kvale (2007) as the verifying phase. The analysis maintained a focus on the data findings as we moved to the discussion and implications phases of the research.

Findings

Leading with Courage

If you don't start somewhere, you never start because there is always resistance ... one of the big things is having the courage to jump because I see a lot of leaders who don't have the courage. And I think courageous leadership, if we don't have very much more of it, nothing's going to change. (P1)

A finding of the research was that courage is a key element in leading innovation in secondary schooling. It was a trait common across participants' lived experiences. More specifically, it addressed gaps in the literature, such as how leaders were courageous in venturing into creative territory that entailed risk. It demonstrated how they prioritised innovation within a highly complex role and high-level system accountabilities to address complex contextual

problems. It also found that leaders of innovation in secondary schooling in New South Wales considered themselves “mavericks” amongst their peers, and in a system where support for leading innovation was not available. The research charted the ways they navigated internal and external constraints to effectively lead innovation.

Courage and moral bravery were identified as critical attributes for leaders of innovation. P1 referenced many sleepless nights but maintained that leaders must push forward with “conviction when you’re in the middle of something, and everyone is against it”. Her approach was to build and foster a sense of courage in her team, noting that principals must drive innovation to achieve a true shift in secondary schooling. Three participants described the courage required to lead innovation as it is a “lonely space” (P1, P6, P9), suggesting you must “walk the talk”, but that was “really quite hard sometimes” (P9). All participants referenced courageous colleagues, with P1 sharing: “There is a lot of courage to be found in the collective”. The research findings demonstrated the application of courage as a leadership trait in the context of New South Wales secondary schooling.

Three participants raised the issue of a lack of principal preparation in leading with courage. P9 was one of several participants who referenced the mandatory “leadership credential modules” required of new principals. She noted that “13 of the 19 modules were about management” rather than leadership, and there was “nothing in there about being brave”. The most critical attributes that “we can give new principals are courage and resilience”, she said, adding that principals “need to be courageous every day”. P6 referred to the New South Wales Leadership Institute framework, which included the attributes of “courage, persistence, consistency, integrity” but suggested there was little support for it in principal preparation. P6 claimed that a new principal must be “clear in your vision but also brave enough not to tolerate it [resistance]”.

Participants universally associated a level of professional risk with innovating in secondary schooling in New South Wales. P2 said the challenge was to undertake “risk-taking within limits. Safe risk-taking”. Principals agreed that they did not take risks in areas of compliance, such as policies or the “code of conduct, in terms of financial mismanagement or child protection” (P9). Instead, they saw themselves as taking risks within the bounds of policy by “trying to be particularly creative and different in how we approach our interaction with our young people and their learning” (P3). The level of risk could be tempered by being “informed” through deep knowledge of policy (P4). Principals could engage in “intelligent risk-taking” to support innovation, according to P4. He advocated for principals to “really open their eyes” and “properly” read documents such as the New South Wales syllabus, the Australian Education Act, and the Assessment Certification Examination (ACE) Manual and be willing to interpret for context. These leaders of innovation in schooling were willing to take responsibility for the risk involved. P9 believed that it is the principal’s job to “own the risk” and was firm when they stated: “I held the risk, and I always say that it all comes back to me. So, anything you’re doing is with my blessing. I’ll carry that”.

Participants reflected on their capacity to encourage others to engage in a level of risk-taking. While reflecting on their success to garner support from those around them, P2 stated: “Innovative principals [do] tend to be entrepreneurial”. Similarly, P12 said she led others through “belief without proof” and P1 felt staff were more likely to engage when given permission to fail.

“I’m the person who says you are allowed to fail because it’s through failure that you know success” (P1). She encouraged staff to say, “this isn’t working”, so that we can “look for a solution”. She reflected that had she been entirely compliant, she would have removed her major “Hub” innovation because “it wasn’t working” in the early stages. This support for staff to take intelligent risks and value failure as part of the learning process was one of the traits that set the participants apart from their peers.

Interpretation of the data illustrated that the principal participants saw themselves as “mavericks” leading innovation in New South Wales secondary schooling. P8 said that principals must be “a little bit maverick. You’ve got to be brave enough to get courage” but also possess the “humility to know what’s not going right and to look at how to change it”. P10 believed there would be an “innovation culture right across the state” if principals received greater system support. He believed that “you get more innovation in rural communities because they have to because of that adversity”, but in metropolitan areas, there was less evidence of innovation and an “adherence to the 19th century or 20th century form of education”.

Discussion

Courage

So how might we embed courage as a trait of innovation in secondary schooling? P1 identified courage as a critical attribute for innovation leadership, noting that “one of the big things is having the courage to jump ... I see a lot of leaders who don’t have the courage ... if we don’t have very much more of it, nothing’s going to change”. This lived experience of participants aligned with key descriptions of courageous leaders of innovation in the literature. This included “venturesome individuals” by Rogers (1963), and as exemplifying “courage to innovate” in *The Innovator’s DNA*, by Dyer et al. (2011, p. 26). Tonkin (2016) identified leaders of innovation as having a “change activist perspective: takes responsibility for change, takes calculated risks, manages pace of change, persistent and persuasive, embraces failure as learning” (p. 206). Participant experience was consistent with such characteristics; however, it provided greater depth in terms of strategic approaches used by leaders.

An equity imperative is a key driver for courageous leaders of innovation in secondary schooling in New South Wales. All participants demonstrated an equity orientation as foundational to their courageous challenge to the status quo of schooling, as defined by traditional paradigms and national and state system expectations. P10 described a system that “doesn’t fail those with high social capital. It doesn’t fail white middle-class males and increasingly white middle-class females. But it does fail marginal groups. It fails low SES [students]”. Equity data in the literature support this argument (Australian Council of Educational Research, 2023; Lamb et al., 2020). Furthermore, global bodies have called for innovation to address inequity (Barber et al., 2012; United Nations, 2022), recognising that the “grass roots” leaders are critical to this, but cannot do it alone (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Leadbeater, n.d.).

Participants were aware that taking risks was inherent in innovation leadership, however, they took “safe risks” (P2), “intelligent risks” (P4), and “positive risks” (P7). They employed strategic approaches such as piloting or prototyping with most participants describing some pilot

initiatives, including “short, sharp prototypes, quick evaluations, fail early” (P2) as a “safeguard” (P2). The principals also acknowledged that they owned the responsibility. “I held the risk, and I always say that it all comes back to me. So, anything you’re doing is with my blessing. It comes back on me. I’ll carry that [for the team]” (P9). Our findings supported the literature, including exemplifying the definition of innovation by Brewer and Tierney (2011), who stated that risk is a key element and that of Rogers (1963) as innovators being those who are open to risk. Findings built on the literature by demonstrating how school leaders navigate risk through strategic approaches such as piloting and deep knowledge of policy to innovate.

Leading with courage was closely aligned with participants’ lived experiences regarding trust in leading innovation. They acknowledged that the level of risk in innovation decreased with increased trust among staff and the community, but the two elements had a dynamic relationship. As experienced principals, participants had spent time building trust to get the “preconditions” right. P10 described innovation as a “risky thing to do” and believed leaders must be “established and trusted and known and valued within your context” before launching into major innovations. The literature included the connection between schooling innovation and leader experience (Leadbeater, n.d.), however it lacked studies that established a connection between leading innovation in schooling and trust. Studies of “effective” or “successful” principals (Gurr, 2015) did refer to the importance of trust as one of many contributing factors. Our analysis of the data contributed to the field by demonstrating that leading innovation takes courage, risk is inherent, and trust is foundational to leading innovation in schooling.

Those leading innovation in schooling are the pioneers in a highly complex role operating in a high-accountability system. Participant leaders of innovation in New South Wales secondary schooling considered themselves “mavericks” (P6, P8) in their field. They were willing to push boundaries and take creative risks to evolve schooling for the benefit of their students, staff, and community. One principal said of innovation: “It’s about being confident that you don’t want to sit in the box all the time” (P3). Many had proactively supported colleagues by joining the New South Wales Secondary Principals Council “Learning Now for The Future” reference group. This is an example of a professional association taking the lead in supporting thought leaders in innovation. The United States public education “lighthouse” system model of “learning labs for K–12 transformation” was also led by a professional association; however, it was led by superintendents, and therefore was a system-supported approach (Zalaznick, 2022). The lived experience of the participants in this study built on the literature, such as Rogers’ (1963) definition of the first 2.5%. It provided insight into how such individuals operate within a highly accountable schooling system.

The courage to lead innovation in secondary schooling requires facing constraints of the internal and external variety. The interview questions investigated the nature of these constraints and how leaders navigated them, with our findings contributing to the literature. Principals encountered internal constraints, including staff resistance and a strong awareness of “change fatigue” (P4), as well as the need to invest in “educating” and building trust with the community (P4). Leaders stated they were most challenged by the external constraints of system-based accountabilities and expectations, or “field constraints” (Medeiros et al., 2017). The “age of being compliant” (P1) impacted their capacity to lead the innovations designed by school teams to benefit their students. Although academics challenged the global and national prioritisation of standardised testing regimes (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008; Lucas, 2021; Sahlberg, 2016), the

literature offered little exploration of the effect of compliance and accountability on leading innovation in secondary schooling. How school leaders navigate constraints was missing in the literature, and this research contributed to the body of knowledge through participants' experiences of employing an equity focus, courage, intelligent risk-taking, and building trust. In this study, courage was not simply a personal leadership trait but a moral commitment to confronting inequities embedded in traditional schooling structures.

Implications and Future Research

We propose implications from this research, including policy and practical shifts. Firstly, governments and systems can acknowledge the equity imperative as a case for change. They can claim accountability for the growing gaps between the “haves” and the “have-nots” and be willing to support the courageous leaders of innovation (United Nations, 2022). The practical implications lie in principal preparation and professional learning for current system middle-level leaders. Embedding courage in leadership frameworks and building capacity in intelligent risk-taking through principal preparation programs would greatly strengthen school leadership. Providing experienced leaders with system support mechanisms to engage in workplace research is essential to empowering principals to lead sustainable, meaningful change vital to the future of schooling. In this study, we focused on the lived experience of secondary principals in New South Wales, to deepen the body of knowledge. Researchers in the future could go beyond the perspectives of the principals themselves and consider other key stakeholders' perceptions of courageous leadership. In addition, global studies would provide a comparison of leading with courage across a range of educational systems and consider its effect on school success.

Conclusion

Secondary school leaders of innovation are courageous in their drive for the success of all learners. The pressures of system accountabilities, complex societal needs, and a lack of support for “doing schooling differently” (Bills et al., 2017) make school leadership one of the most stressful professions globally (Tahir et al., 2025). We found that courageous leaders who viewed constraints as opportunities thrived within this challenging landscape. Acting as “mavericks”, these principals balance calculated risk-taking with responsibility to challenge established norms and address inequities. In this study, we got to know 12 innovation pioneers who spent each day negotiating between the status quo and the needs of children, their staff teams, and society. Their innovation offers the opportunity to rethink the pivotal role of principals in large school systems and in a complex, changing society. Their success is our success.

Acknowledgments

Dr Kylee Owen wishes to acknowledge the support of the New South Wales Department of Education. She was awarded a Higher Degree Study for Principals scholarship from the NSW School Leadership Institute (SLI). She is tremendously grateful for this scholarship, as it has

enabled her to access resources to enhance her research practices. Her gratitude extends to the opportunities afforded to her as a member of public education and being part of the collective contribution to a better future world. She hopes this research contributes to strengthening this sector.

Competing Interests and Funding

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The first author received an NSW Department of Education scholarship to assist with this research.

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How U.S. Rigorous Research Evidence Misled Practice and Reinforced Existing Inequities: Beware!

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ABSTRACT: The U.S. has made a major investment in funding applied education research to generate scientific evidence that is useful for practitioners to improve their schools and increase equity, and to ensure that schools use their federal funds to implement such evidence-based practices. This first of a two-article series shows how the good intentions were not realised when the education research community assumed that the best scientific way to identify effective interventions was to use causal methods—especially randomised controlled trials (RCT). However, the overwhelming majority of causal research evidence on the impact of interventions found very small effect sizes. The research community rationalised the importance of small effects and exaggerated their educational importance. However, there is growing evidence that small effects do not replicate into noticeable benefits in subsequent research or practice—i.e., interventions deemed to be effective via causal research are not likely to improve student outcomes. The small effects do not seem to be an anomaly but to result from the inherent characteristics of causal methods. This means that the Institute of Education Sciences (IES's) emphasis on causal models, and its legislative mandate to generate evidence that improves student outcomes and increases equity, are not reconcilable.

The second article in this series will present ideas for reforming the evidentiary infrastructure to better fulfil the potential of applied research evidence to improve education and increase equity.

Key words: Effect size, replication, intervention effectiveness, evidence-based practice

Introduction

Research can and should be a valuable tool for improving education and increasing equity. For the past 23 years the U.S. made a major investment in funding scientific research to inform

practice, disseminate the findings to practitioners, and encourage, and even require, practitioners to use their federal funds to implement evidence-based practices. The research community ensured that the most rigorous scientific methods were employed. However, an analysis of national assessment data shows that learning gaps have widened since 1988, and 8th grade reading and math scores have declined between 2003 and 2024. Nor does this decline appear to be a statistical anomaly. This article will show how the rigorous evidence was not useful for improving practice, and actually served to maintain inequity, and why.

U.S. Federal Initiatives to Identify and Promote Evidence-Based Interventions

In order to make education a more scientifically evidence-based profession akin to medicine, the U.S. Congress established the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in 2002. The National Academies of Sciences' (2022) report on the future of the IES notes that the mission of the IES was to conduct education research that generates useful evidence for practitioners for improving student outcomes and increasing equity. Conceptions of the best methodology was institutionalised at IES in its 2003 position statement that "Randomized trials are the only sure method for determining the effectiveness of education programs and practices" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2022, p. 33).

In order to help practitioners identify the best available scientific evidence, Congress established the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) in 2002 to serve education the way the FDA functions in approving medicines. The WWC established scientifically rigorous evidentiary criteria for identifying effective interventions and provided a list of the interventions whose evidence met its criteria. WWC prioritised evidence of effectiveness generated by causal methods, RCT (preferred) and high quality quasi experimental. A list of interventions that met WWC's criteria as having evidence of effectiveness was made available to practitioners. In order to overcome what was thought to be practitioners' resistance to using research evidence, an extensive literature evolved on how to increase practitioners' use of available evidence (Coburn et al., 2009; DuMont & Smeeding, 2016; Gitomer & Crouse, 2019; Haut et al., 2016; Penuel et al., 2017).

The WWC's scientific criteria formed the base of an education evidentiary infrastructure. They were increasingly used by other federal programs to decide which research proposals to fund. When the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required that federal improvement monies be used for interventions that have evidence of effectiveness, the law's definition of evidence emulated that of the WWC. Clearly, the intent was for schools to prioritise selecting interventions approved by the WWC as having evidence of causal effects (though there were also other options).

Clearly, establishing causal effects is a primary goal of science, and RCT methods have been proven invaluable in conducting basic research across a wide variety of disciplines in controlled settings. In addition, RCT research is valuable in education for testing theories in laboratory conditions that can help develop better applied interventions. However, this article examines its appropriateness for applied research around studies of "intensive interventions" in school settings. An intensive intervention is viewed as one that is implemented for much, or all, of

at least one school year. Such interventions are the ones most likely to produce desired improvements in practice and the most costly.

This institutionalisation of causal evidence and the use of legislation to force practitioners to adopt evidence-based interventions assumes that evidence from such research is able to predict which interventions will produce noticeable benefits in actual practice. What if it does not? What if, when practitioners adopt an evidence-based intervention and implement it with fidelity, they generally do not experience, noticeable, benefits for their schools?

Indeed, if the predicted benefits from the current evidentiary standards do not manifest themselves in actual practice, the current policies to pressure, and/or require, practitioners to adopt evidence-based interventions could backfire and ultimately hamper efforts to improve student outcomes and increase equity. It would also call into question the assumption that practitioners' reluctance to apply the current generation of research findings is irrational "resistance"—and that it may be rational pragmatism.

At first glance, these concerns seem incredulous. However, there is increasing empirical evidence to support them.

Findings From Applied RCT and Quasi-Experimental Research

There is now an extensive literature of studies using RCT and quasi-experimental methods to evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions. However, recent meta-analyses of such studies have overwhelmingly found small effects. Lortie-Forgeus and Inglis (2019) found that among all the 141 large-scale RCTs aimed at improving educational outcomes in grades K–12 funded by the UK and the U.S. National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, the average Effect Size (ES) was .06. Evans and Yuan (2022) found median ESs of either .07 or .1 for international RCT studies, and similar results for the quasi-experimental studies. Kraft (2020) concluded that Median effects in math cluster tightly between 0.04 and 0.09 SD across all grades.

Such small ES results are problematic in relation to Cohen's (1988) classical minimum standard for a useful ES which he set at .2, which he characterised as a "small" effect. (He characterised an ES of .5 as "medium", and .8 as "large".) The above results from the applied research use of rigorous evaluations of interventions have generally fallen far short of .2, let alone the other cutoffs.

Rationalising the Importance of Small Effects

The response of the research community to the results from RCT and quasi-experimental results on intervention effectiveness has been to promote and validate the importance of these small effect outcomes via several strategies. Lipsey et al. (2012) argued that education, or any discipline, should not be bound by a single, universal set of cutoffs such as Cohen's. In their view, since education experimental research generates such small effect sizes, that is what the profession should accept as evidence of intervention effectiveness. Most recently, Kraft (2020) has argued

that Cohen's standards were outdated because they were set based on small samples of psychology experiments in the 60s, and do not reflect the realities of today's real world education settings.

Such arguments have led education researchers to advocate using ever smaller ES results as indicators of intervention effectiveness. For example, Deke et al. (2017) recommend using an ES as low as .03, and Kraft (2020) as low as .05. While Evans and Yuan (2022) did call the small ES results disappointing, they suggested that the existing studies set a useful baseline for future research.

Others have created equivalencies that project these small effects into seemingly impressive gains in outcomes with no real evidence. For example, the CREDO (2013) study at Stanford University concluded that its finding of an ES of .02 was equivalent to Black and Hispanic students making 14 days of additional learning per year in charter schools as compared to traditional public schools.

Reliance on small ESs to identify effective interventions have been reinforced by WWC's original minimum evidentiary threshold standard as being an ES of just .25 which it considered to be "substantively important". However, the WWC recently backed away from even supporting this low minimum value of ES as a threshold to identify evidence of effectiveness. Version 4.1 of the WWC Procedures Handbook (WWC, 2020) did away with seeking a minimum ES and decided to judge ESs "...only by their statistical significance and sign" (p. 2). Version 5 of the WWC (2022) handbook went even further and eliminated any reference to ES, and now requires evidence to merely demonstrate statistical significance. So, the WWC dealt with the problem of low ES results by ignoring them and reverting back to statistical significance. Similarly, ESSA evidentiary standards only require evidence of statistical significance. As will be seen, this reversion is contrary to best scientific practice.

Problems With Relying on Small ES Results as Evidence

Clearly, rationalising the value of small ES findings and statistical significance makes it easier for the research community to claim discoveries of effective interventions. However, efforts to validate the importance of such small effect sizes do not stand up to scrutiny—either conceptually or empirically.

Conceptual Problems With Relying on Small ES Results as Evidence

Conceptually, the discussion about the meaning of Cohen's (1988) suggested standard ignores the fact that he defined .2 as a difference between groups that is "difficult to detect" (p. 25). It is only at .5 that the differences become noticeable. This is a more intuitive way of defining what Cohen meant his cutoffs to convey, and in this definition, an ES of .1 is "half of difficult to detect", and .02 is a "tenth of difficult to detect". I do not know of any practitioner who will go before a school board and argue for the adoption of an intervention on the basis that the schools will probably experience a benefit that is half of difficult to detect. This suggests that if practitioners knew the practical significance of the magnitude of experimental outcomes

researchers typically used to validate experimental conclusions of effectiveness, they would likely judge most such interventions to not be effective—even in the original research.

In addition, if Cohen found the differences indicated by an ES of .2 to be difficult to detect in a lab experiment, common sense suggests that the effect would be even more difficult to detect in the chaotic environment of school systems. Indeed, using Cohen's expanded description of the meaning of ESs, CREDO'S projection that a microscopic impact of .02—i.e., a tenth of difficult to detect—translates into 14 days of extra learning does not make conceptual sense. Furthermore, CREDO's equivalence was presented merely as a heuristic finding with no mathematical justification. Nor was any evidence provided that there were actually any additional days of learning. Similarly, equivalency claims that an ES of .2 translates into the experimental students moving on average from the 50th percentile to the 58th percentile on a standardised test does not indicate whether they actually scored at the 58th or, for example, at the 18th percentile.

The establishment of such unvalidated equivalencies invites the creation of self-serving results. Indeed, Baird and Pane (2019) concluded that converting effects sizes into amounts of extra learning is the worst way to interpret ES results because they can produce “implausible results”. These equivalencies are usually mathematical hypotheses without evidence of any actual outcomes or real benefit. Such conclusions are not evidence, but, at best, hypotheses and at worst, self-serving.

Similarly, claims that an intervention that has an ES of .2 is twice as effective as another that has a .1 is equally misleading. The correct conclusion is that neither produced noticeable benefits.

Finally, even if small ES results did reflect a real benefit, it would be insignificant related to the size of the achievement gaps. Vanneman et al. (2009) found that the ES of the fourth-grade black-white National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) gap was .68. While the argument that small benefits maintained over a 5-year period could substantially narrow that gap, there is no evidence that such accumulated benefit occurs. Indeed, Pogrow (2000) noted that the small relative benefit for the Success for All students in the first year did not increase over the subsequent 4–5 years in the Baltimore experiments.

If practitioners and policymakers knew how small the potential benefits are in the typical evidence being produced, even if it did replicate, would they consider it sufficient to warrant adopting the intervention? Should they be encouraged/forced to do so?

Indeed, there is increasing empirical evidence that weak causal signals—i.e., small ES results—do not replicate to the extent that it has become known as the “replication crisis”.

The Replication Crisis

The replication crisis in applied research emerged from studies demonstrating that the most respected clinical research findings in the most prestigious journals in a wide variety of disciplines did not replicate—even in follow-up lab experiments. Open Science Collaboration (2015) found that more than 60% of the key research findings that form the basis of many of psychology's practices could not be replicated in subsequent lab experiments. Begley and Ellis (2012) found that of the 53 landmark studies in oncology they could replicate only six (11%). Kraemer (2016) found

a lack of replicability in psychiatry. Ziliak and McCloskey (2004) found that 82% of the findings in the *American Economic Review* were not valid.

The Replication Crisis in Education

There is also a replication crisis in education. Boulay et al.'s (2018) evaluation of 13 funded programs was essentially a replication study as the funded programs had all previously passed rigorous scientific screening of the WWC. Alas, Boulay and colleagues found that only nine of the 67 interventions produced positive statistically significant impacts on student achievement. Only four of the 67 produced effect sizes that even approached .5. In other words, the overwhelming majority of schools that adopted one of these supposedly evidence-based interventions did not experience any noticeable benefit—i.e., the predicted benefits did not replicate in practice.

The issue of whether practitioners experience noticeable improvements in practice when they adopt an intervention validated by RCT or quality quasi-experimental research is not a theoretical issue. Either expected benefits from causal research consistently show up in practice or they do not. The limited available research to date indicates that it generally does not—i.e., there is a practice-based replication crisis in education. This is particularly critical given the IES's mandate is to produce scientific research that leads to improvements in student outcomes.

Indeed, causal research evidence can even fail to replicate in actual practice for those interventions designated by WWC as having the highest Tier 1 level of “strong” evidence of effectiveness. Consider the following case study of replication failure for what is probably the most widely adopted reading interventions in high poverty schools over the past two decades, “Success for All”.

The Replication Failure of “Success for All”

Belying the theory of practitioner resistance, the “Success for All” reading program was widely adopted in high-poverty urban schools because of the extensive body of research, including research published in AERA journals, documenting its effectiveness. Between 1990 and 2008 there were eight articles in the AERA journals, AERJ, EEPA, and ER documenting the success of “Success for All” in Baltimore (mostly) and elsewhere (Borman & Hewes, 2002; Borman et al., 2005a, 2005b, 2007; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Madden et al., 1993; Ross et al., 1995; Slavin et al., 1990). WWC listed it as one of four programs with Strong Evidence of Effectiveness.

However, there is also an extensive literature of independent evaluations of its actual effectiveness in practice. Pogrow (2002) examined approximately 260 “Success for All” schools across the country that included those where claims of success in national demonstration projects and published research had been made. Instead of success, he found that the program had actually failed to produce gains or acceptable progress. In addition, despite the tremendous expenditures of money and effort, the “Success for All” schools were not even doing as well as the other Title I schools using locally developed interventions. As a result, virtually all the districts were dropping the program.

This finding of the program's actual failure was subsequently replicated in other independent studies. The first gold-standard independent study to evaluate “Success for All” was

James-Burdumy et al. (2009). This study analysed whether four reading programs selected by experts, including Success for All, would produce greater gains on the reading comprehension of fifth graders than what schools were already doing. (This was the first study that controlled for the instructional time allocated to reading.) The experimental schools were randomly assigned one of the four programs. Not only did Success for All perform worse on reading comprehension than all the others, including practice as usual in the control schools, it was dropped from the second year of the experiment because half the schools refused to continue using it.

The next, and largest scale, independent evaluation of Success for All occurred almost a decade later when the program received a US\$50 million dollar scaling-up grant from the federal *i3* initiative to expand the program to an additional 1,100 randomly selected schools. Boulay et al.'s (2018) rigorous evaluation of Success for All's *i3* performance found that, despite the additional \$50 million, the program had yet again produced no impact on student achievement and that a surprising number of schools had dropped the program shortly after adopting it.

How could there be such a dichotomy between researchers' claims of effectiveness published in top research journals, and practitioners' experiencing no noticeable benefit from its use? The dichotomy partly resulted from the fact that the above AERA published research on Baltimore never revealed how the Success for All students actually ended up reading at the end of the experiment. How did the students perform? Building on Venezky's (1998) analysis of the raw data for the Baltimore experiment, Pogrow (2000) concluded that the sample of Success for All students in the research were reading about three years below grade level by the time they reached sixth grade. Even more troubling, this result is probably an overestimate of the actual achievement of all the students in the Success for All program since the final sample excluded all the students who had been in the program—i.e., the school—for less than 5 years and the special education students who had previously been in the program. Had all students in the program been included, chances are that the final results would have been even worse. Should such a result be considered a success or evidence of effectiveness?

However, the disconnect between published research and reality continued. The WWC continues to view Success for All as having strong evidence of effectiveness.

Such a dichotomy between applied research evidence published by AERA and the real-world experience of practitioners inevitably generates scepticism in the thousands of practitioners in schools that adopted the Success for All program about the trustworthiness of research evidence and the WWC's recommendations. This dichotomy also raises questions about the validity of the practitioner resistance perspective. Why should those practitioners trust research evidence in the future?

This case also leads to the following question: How widespread is such a disconnect between the conclusions of researchers about the effectiveness of interventions and the actual experience of practitioners?

Is the Replication Crisis the Fault of Practitioners?

When practitioners do not experience expected benefits from “evidence-based” practices, researchers blame them for poor implementation—rather than consider the possibility that the

research findings and methodology were problematic. For example, Kraft (2020) blamed problematic outcomes on “implementation challenges”.

However, there is now sufficient evidence that the replication crisis is not a result of poor implementation. The failure of the vast majority of “evidence-based” educational interventions to replicate into noticeable benefits in Boulay et al.’s (2018) study was not the result of poor implementation. This study also collected data on the quality of implementation and concluded that the vast majority of the 67 programs had been implemented with fidelity, and that “for most of the interventions, poor implementation was not an obstacle” (p. 43). This suggests that the problem was that the vast majority of these evidence-based programs had not actually been effective—and that the “rigorous” evidence was misleading.

Similarly, the research cited earlier documenting the replication crisis in other disciplines was not a result of poor implementation. Researchers or highly credible clinicians attempted to replicate the original findings of highly controlled laboratory research experiments with as much fidelity as humanly possible. In addition, if research using causal scientific methods failed to replicate in independent laboratory experiments, there is even less reason to expect such findings to replicate in real world settings—regardless of how well practitioners implement it.

Why Does the Replication Crisis Exist?

But, if the replication crisis does not result from poor implementation, why does research supported by IES and WWC to improve student outcomes have such a poor replication record? The problems appear to be (a) accepting any causal signal as an evidentiary end unto itself, (b) focusing only on internal validity, and (c) lack of focus on independent replication. “Independent replication” will refer to research conducted by those unaffiliated with those who conducted the original research.

Accepting Weak Causal Signals as Evidence of Effectiveness

One problem is that the WWC’s evidentiary standards—i.e., thresholds—accept weak causal signals as evidence of effectiveness.

Traditionally, the strength of a causal signal was measured by its statistical significance. However, there is longstanding criticism of using statistical significance as the statistical criterion for reaching applied decisions (Kirk, 1996; Meehl, 1978; Mulaik et al., 1997; Schmidt & Hunter, 1997). One key problem is that small differences would become statistically significant with a large sample. As a result, small differences ending up as statistically significant tended to produce false positive claims of effectiveness, which incentivises researchers to tweak analyses to get the results over the hump to show significance—a practice referred to as “p-hacking” (Ioannidis, 2005).

As a result of these problems, in 2019 the American Statistical Association called for researchers to stop using statistical significance to determine the effectiveness of interventions across all disciplines (Wasserstein et al., 2019). The preferred applied statistical criterion was to use a measure such as ES that indicates the size of the benefit provided by the intervention.

However, small ES results appear to be equally problematic. Open Science Collaboration (2015) found that the smaller the effect size the less likely the findings replicated. Ioannidis (2005), co-director of the Meta-Research Innovation Center at Stanford (METRICS), similarly concluded that the smaller the effect sizes in any scientific research the less likely it is that the research findings are true. Devezer et al. (2019) also found that replication is problematic to establish where there is a weak signal—i.e., small effect sizes.

Glass (2016), the developer of meta-analysis, concluded that meta-analysis had not produced useful policy guidance for education because of small effect sizes relative to the degree of statistical error. Small effect sizes relative to statistical error was also part of the reason that Ginsburg and Smith (2016) concluded that none of the RCT research evidence used by the WWC to certify math programs as effective provided useful results for practitioners. Similarly, Pogrow (2019) warned that accepting such small ES results had led to the phenomenon of “ES-hacking” which made it easy to make claims of findings of effective practices which had not actually generated any noticeable benefits. He concluded that small ES results should not be used as evidence of effectiveness.

Mark Scheider (2024), the former director of IES, went a step further. He introduced the importance of setting outcome thresholds that are “educationally meaningful” as opposed to statistically significant. He also introduced the general notion of “threshold hacking” and defined it as a process wherein “different stakeholders argue for different thresholds that suit their interests” (para. 13). Indeed, WWC’s moving away from ES measures and reverting back to relying on statistical significance appears to be a form of threshold hacking designed to make it easier for researchers and the WWC to claim evidentiary findings of effective practices.

Clearly, the most rigorous designs for conducting research to produce causal signals is of little value for achieving the stated policy goal of improving student outcomes if the WWC uses threshold measures that are not educationally meaningful for certifying an intervention as being effective.

And while we can reasonably debate what an educationally meaningful threshold would be, the earlier discussion of Cohen’s definition would suggest using an ES of .5 as a starting point. This would be similar to Hattie’s (2009) notion of an ES of .4 being a hinge point which represents simply having a teacher in front of the class, and that this should be a minimum threshold for considering any intervention. Alas, D’Agostino and Pogrow (2023) found that of the 828 interventions listed in the WWC database, only 28 (or 3%) had an average ES of at least .5, with a reasonable confidence interval across at least two studies with $n > 80$.

At the same time, there is currently no evidence that even this stringent ES threshold of .5 would lead to greater levels of replication of noticeable benefits in actual practice. Perhaps an even more stringent level of ES, e.g., .8, would be needed. Conversely, accepting any size causal signal as evidence of intervention effectiveness essentially makes the use of causal methods an end in and of itself—as opposed to the stated policy goals for this research which is to improve student outcomes and increase equity. Alas, the National Academies of Sciences (2022) report did not discuss the issue of thresholds, and simply refers to “effectiveness” without defining what it is.

Sole Focus on Internal Validity

The National Academies of Sciences report (2022) noted that “... while IES focuses strongly on internal validity, new research suggests that policy makers appear mainly concerned with external validity when accessing and using research” (p. 82). This conclusion is based on a 2021 study, which leads to the obvious question: Why did it take until 2021 for someone to realise that the users of applied research geared to improving student outcomes would care about external validity? (This illustrates the fundamental problem of a research community producing research that is funded for the purpose of being useful to practitioners without knowing what the needs and interests of school leaders are.) Nor did the National Academies of Sciences (2022) report have an adequate proposal to address external validity.

Nor is there any mention in the National Academies of Sciences (2022) report of the importance of ecological validity—i.e., evidence that a research conclusion that an intervention is effective translates into noticeable benefits when practitioners adopt it. Indeed, the limited evidence to date cited earlier suggests that it usually does not.

Failure to understand or address external and ecological validity shows a complete lack of understanding, or even interest, as to what research evidence practitioners would find useful. A sensitivity to ecological validity could start by asking: What type of outcome data do users want to see? What kinds of real-world outcomes should be expected when practitioners adopt an evidence-based intervention? For example, an obvious result desired by users would be to know how the experimental students (only) actually ended up achieving—without any adjustments—given that schools are not allowed to adjust their outcomes.

For example, if AERA journals had required researchers to report the unadjusted outcomes for the experimental group in the Success for All research it published, it would have alerted researchers and users from the very beginning that this was not an effective program. The same problem exists with another widely used intervention in high-poverty schools, Reading Recovery. In a personal conversation with the researcher who conducted an evaluation of that intervention which showed large effect sizes, I was told that the outcome Means were not reported because the experimental students were actually doing terribly.

This type of research evidence clearly misdirects practice and serves to prevent high-poverty schools from improving—thus serving to maintain structural inequities. Unfortunately, disclosing unadjusted outcome Means is not currently required by AERA, IES, or WWC guidelines. That seems to benefit researchers at the expense of users—which is the opposite of the intent behind the creation of the evidentiary infrastructure.

Lack of Independent Replications

Without strong evidence of external and ecological validity, there is little reason to expect replication of research findings. Nor is there really any way for leaders to assess whether interventions with WWC validated evidence of effectiveness are likely to translate into noticeable benefits for their students.

The WWC and ESSA standards for evidence of replication are inadequate. The WWC will give a rating of strong evidence based only on a single study, and ESSA only requires that there

be evidence from a single experimental or quasi-experimental study. However, even when multiple replication studies exist, such as for *Success for All*, Pogrow (2000, 2002) noted that all the authors of these papers were either the developer or associates. Such misdirection illustrates the dangers of not requiring “independent” replication evidence. So, while IES does fund replication studies, there is no requirement that they be independent evaluations.

Why Do RCT’s and Quasi Experimental Studies Produce Small ES Results?

Why have the results from causal research consistently found small effects? Some argue that the disappointing results from applied RCT and quasi-experimental research reflect methodological problems with how this research was typically conducted. For example, Evans and Yuan’s (2022) called for experimental studies with better statistical power. However, increasing statistical power will only serve to increase the cost and time required to conduct causal research, which reduces the likelihood that independent replication research will be conducted.

A stronger conceptual case can be made that the problem with current RCT research is not insufficient power—but with the causal research paradigm itself. Any method that relies on controlling for the effects of variables is of necessity an artificial representation of the realities of real-world practice. Schools are not static, stable environments where you can control anything for more than a few minutes. Schools are complex organisations with dynamic, complex, constantly shifting social dynamics. As such, seeking to determine causation in complex organisations, whether through randomisation or sophisticated mathematical modelling is describing a hypothetical mathematical world—not school-based practice. As a result, the supposed causal effects are quickly overwhelmed by changes in the environment.

An alternative explanation for the small ES results is that the rigorous efforts to control for confounding variables limit the kinds of interventions that can be tested. Lortie-Forgues and Inglis (2019) accept that the results to date from causal experiments have been disappointing and suggest the possibility that:

The insights from basic research on which the trials are based were not adequately translated into an effective intervention ... the skills required to successfully translate insights from laboratory research into effective interventions that are possible to implement successfully are relatively rare. (p. 164)

In other words, an insight from laboratory research is not an intervention. Pogrow (2024) describes how the design of an intervention requires testing the interactions of a wide variety of parameters at the same time, variations of which need to be tested—something that static causal methods such as RCT’s cannot realistically do.

Others have also expressed the idea that the structure of causal research limits the types of interventions that can be studied. Randomisation is not always feasible, and the types of interventions that are easily studied within rigorously controlled experiments are probably too simplistic to solve complex problems (Gopal & Schorr, 2016). Bryk et al. (2015) have noted that “the on-average difference documented in an RCT tells us nothing about the conditions necessary

for better outcomes to occur. Yet this is precisely what practitioners need to know as they seek to implement an intervention in their local schools” (pp. 207–208).

Furthermore, the high cost and logistical complexity of establishing causal research in schools limits opportunities for creating the large samples necessary for external validity and for replication research. The longer the duration of the intervention and the experiment, the greater these problems become given the complex, constantly changing nature of schools where it is hard to control anything for more than a short period of time.

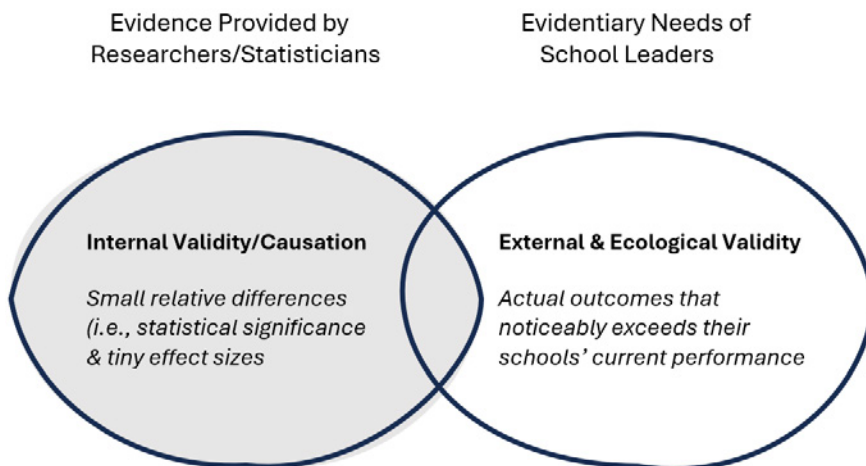
So, the fundamental reason for the small ES results appears to result from limitations inherent in deterministic causal methods. The restrictive nature of causal methods is not the best suited scientific method for describing the chaotic complex nature of schools, which makes them problematic for determining the effectiveness of intense interventions in school settings.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that the dominant research paradigm imposed on applied research in the U.S. has not met the legislative mandate to provide useful research evidence to practitioners for improving schools and increasing equity. The prioritisation of causal methodology has led to an irreconcilable divergence between the evidence provided by the research community and the evidentiary needs of school leaders. This is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Evidentiary Divergence



The primary emphasis on internal validity does not provide the type of evidence that practitioners seek when making decisions—i.e., external and ecological validity evidence of big effects. This article also examined the proposals for improving the flexibility of causal methods in the National Academies of Sciences (2022) report and found them wanting. It has also shown that

the best conceptual and empirical evidence indicate that small ES results do not replicate in subsequent research or produce noticeable improvements in student outcomes.

So, it now appears that IES's emphasis on causal methods, and its legislative mandate to produce useful evidence that can improve students outcomes and increase equity—are not reconcilable. It also appears that regardless of how much evidence is marshalled to support this reality, key elites within the research community will continue to defend, and seek to impose, the use of RCT methods—no matter what.

However, that does not mean that we should give up on the important ideal of using research evidence to improve practice. Rather, it suggests that if research is to generate evidence of big effects that are likely to improve student outcomes, we need different research methods, and we need leaders and policymakers to be more assertive in constructing the research agenda. However, transitioning from the current dominant research methodology leads to the following questions: Where do we go from here—and how can we get there? What is the role of leaders in facilitating such a transition?

These questions will be addressed in the follow-up article in the next issue.

Competing Interests and Funding

The author has no competing interests to declare. No funding was received for this work.

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Procedural Complexity is Leadership Complexity: How Hidden Systems Shape School Leadership

JAYDEN SPUDVILAS-POWELL¹

Most accounts of leadership complexity in schools begin with people: students whose needs shift daily, families seeking reassurance, and staff carrying their own pressures. Yet when you sit beside a principal on a day when the inbox will not settle, another kind of complexity shows itself. Before morning tea, they have responded to an occupational health and safety (OHS) matter, signed off on a disability adjustment plan, approved payroll variations, prepared a brief for a parent complaint, checked a compliance calendar for a funding deadline, and chased a missing incident report because an external reviewer is asking for it. None of these tasks are dramatic. None are pedagogical. All sit inside procedural structures that have rules, timelines, and documentation requirements. By the end of the day, the leader has faced more system behaviour than human behaviour, even if the two are bound together.

This commentary argues that the “unparalleled complexities” described in this special issue can be more accurately understood as procedural complexities. The work of leading a school is shaped less by generic “complexity” and more by the behaviour of the systems that leaders must navigate, including statutory frameworks, compliance cycles, data collections, review rights, and documentation practices. What we call leadership complexity is often the downstream effect of layered procedural design.

I come to this argument through 12 years in Victorian public education. I have worked in four government schools in roles ranging from classroom teacher to learning specialist and acting assistant principal. Most of that time was spent inside the machinery of the system rather than above it, putting the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* into practice, checking our obligations under the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, and trying to keep evidence systems tidy enough that anyone could follow the trail. I built data dashboards, handled incident registers, and rebuilt audit files more than once. After a while, a pattern became hard to ignore. Many leadership problems were not interpersonal at all; they were procedural in disguise.

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The Procedural Layers Behind Complexity

Schools sit inside dense procedural ecosystems. Leaders operate within compliance calendars that move whether they keep up or not. OHS inspections fall due. Disability adjustment reviews require updated evidence. Policy revisions arrive with staggered transition dates. Each procedure carries timelines and record-keeping expectations. When several collide, the leader is managing system behaviour as much as human relationships.

Three dynamics are common. First, layering. New procedures sit on top of old ones without retiring redundant steps. A school might complete an incident record in one platform, an OHS hazard report in another, and a wellbeing note in a third. Each has a different audience and timeline. None talk to each other. I have seen schools where a single playground incident generates entries across five separate systems, each with its own logic and none aware of the others.

Second, opacity. Workflows are not always visible to those executing them. A principal may not know where a complaint sits once it leaves the school. Staff respond reactively because the underlying pathway is hidden. When I have asked colleagues to map how a routine decision travels from classroom to region, most can sketch only part of the path. The rest disappears into processes they have heard about but never seen.

Third, timing. Procedures behave according to their own rules. A hazard notification lodged at 4:29 p.m. generates tasks for the next morning, even if the original issue has been resolved. Leaders speak of being “hit by” a compliance requirement as if it were weather rather than process. In a sense, they are right. The system moves on its own schedule, indifferent to report-writing deadlines, staffing gaps, or the rhythms of the school week.

A related pressure is the gap between responsibility and control. Principals carry responsibility for compliance yet control only parts of the process. A school may receive an urgent safety alert but depend on external contractors to resolve the hazard. A funding timeline might shift without notice, forcing a cascade of adjustments to school planning. Leaders carry the downstream pressure without having shaped the upstream design.

Challenge, Context, and Courage

This special issue invites contributions that address challenge, context, and courage. Procedural complexity speaks to all three.

The challenge is that leaders inherit systems they did not design. When a decision goes wrong, it is often because a procedural step behaved differently than expected. A missed consultation makes an expulsion review vulnerable. An incomplete record weakens an OHS investigation. A funding acquittal submitted at 4:05 p.m. instead of 3:59 p.m. rolls into the next cycle. None of this is about leadership capability. It is about procedural design and the way systems reward or punish timing and documentation.

The context is Australian public education governance: layered statutory obligations, multiple compliance regimes, and evidence expectations that have grown steadily over the past decade. A wellbeing plan might now require a meeting log, a consent record, allied health updates, and a staff summary written in plain English but audit-ready. None of this is unreasonable, but the

accumulation turns leaders into curators of evidence rather than actors with discretion. Schools can act reasonably and still be exposed procedurally if the paperwork trails are thin.

The courage required is not heroic individualism. It is the willingness to name procedural complexity honestly, to map it visibly, and to advocate for its redesign. Most leaders do not resist procedure. They resist its unpredictability. The harder form of courage is procedural: reading the system clearly, naming its limits publicly, and redesigning the parts that keep tripping people up.

Reactive and Proactive Leadership

This special issue also invites reflection on the contrast between reactive and proactive leadership. Procedural complexity shapes both.

Reactive leadership means constantly responding to compliance shocks: an audit request, a late-term complaint, a data collection window that clashes with report-writing. The leader is always catching up because the procedural trigger has already fired. In one school I supported, a parent enquiry about a playground accident triggered three separate processes: an OHS investigation, a network incident review, and a wellbeing follow-up, none of which were coordinated. The family did not escalate. The system did. That is reactive leadership by default, responding to procedural architecture rather than shaping it.

Proactive leadership looks different. It means mapping decision pathways before crises occur. It means building clean documentation habits so that evidence is already organised when a reviewer asks for it. It means clarifying, at the start of the year, which staff member owns which procedural step and what records are expected. Proactive leaders treat procedures as designable structures. They simplify where they can, make expectations visible, and ensure that one action generates multiple outputs rather than multiple actions feeding one output. This does not eliminate complexity, but it reduces the chaos that complexity otherwise produces.

Connections to Administrative Law

School leaders rarely use the language of administrative law, but they work inside it every day. The ideas that shape freedom of information requests and tribunal reviews—such as procedural fairness, clear reasons, timelines, discretion, and record-keeping integrity—also shape school decisions.

Procedural fairness is a simple idea at heart. People should have a chance to be heard before a decision that affects them is made. These dynamics show up constantly in schools: a student excluded without a parent conversation or a teacher placed on a performance plan without seeing the concerns in writing. The decision might be defensible, but the pathway was not. And when the pathway is not defensible, the decision often unravels regardless of its merits.

Timelines matter because administrative systems expect responses within set periods. A deadline missed by five minutes can shift an entire funding cycle. Discretion matters because policies often promise flexibility, but escalation pathways can remove it once certain thresholds are triggered. And record-keeping matters because decisions are only as sound as the

documentation that supports them. A poorly kept record can distort how a decision is reconstructed months later, whether it surfaces in a complaint process, an audit, or an external review.

Leaders do not need to become lawyers, but they benefit from understanding that they already operate in an administrative law environment and that the habits of procedural fairness, clear reasons, and traceable records serve them whether or not a matter ever reaches external review.

Design Principles for Procedural Clarity

If procedural complexity is a design problem, then leaders and systems can respond with better design. Several principles follow.

The first is to map the decision path. Leaders should be able to sketch the steps a decision takes, who decides what, and where records are kept. If the pathway cannot be drawn, it cannot be managed. The second is to make discretion visible. Where professional judgement is expected, say so explicitly and clarify how that judgement will be documented. The third is to build for review. Assume that any significant decision may be questioned later, internally or externally, and structure processes and records accordingly. This is not about defensiveness; it is about integrity.

The fourth is to flatten duplicate processes. Where the same information is entered into multiple systems, ask whether one entry can feed many outputs. Every redundant step drains attention. The fifth is to teach procedural literacy. Induction and professional learning should include explicit guidance on how procedures work, who owns each step, and what documentation is expected. Staff cannot navigate a system they only see in fragments. These principles do not call for more bureaucracy. They call for cleaner bureaucracy, with systems built so that compliance supports good work rather than competing with it.

It is worth naming one more reality. Procedural complexity does not land evenly across schools. Larger schools can absorb administrative drift because they have more people to carry it. Small schools feel every extra form and every extra deadline because the same two or three leaders handle most of the load. The system often treats all schools as procedurally identical when their capacity to manage that complexity varies sharply. Leaders know this. Systems rarely acknowledge it.

Conclusion

Leadership complexity is real, but its roots are often structural rather than mysterious. When we name procedural dynamics directly, we give leaders a better way to describe their work and we give systems a clearer target for reform.

The argument here is not that leaders must become bureaucrats. It is that they already are, and pretending otherwise obscures the real demands of the job. School leadership sits inside public administration, whether leaders use that language or not. Once we recognise that, we can design supports that match the reality.

Leaders are often told to be instructional experts and culture builders. They also need to be procedural architects: people who see the machinery, understand its behaviour, and have the

courage to redesign the parts that no longer serve. This is the quiet work that lets leaders teach, lead, and protect their communities without being consumed by the systems built to support them.

Competing Interests and Funding

The author declares no conflicts of interest. The author received no financial support for the preparation of this commentary.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks colleagues and mentors across Victorian public education for the many conversations about procedure, documentation, and system behaviour that shaped the ideas in this commentary.

AI Use Disclosure (APA-compliant)

Portions of this manuscript were drafted with the assistance of AI writing tools under full human direction and revision. All conceptual framing, examples, and final editorial decisions were made by the author.

A review of Mullen, C. A., & Eadens, D. W. (Eds.). (2026). *Improving your college courses: A guide for engaging in digital learning*. Myers Education Press. (175 pp.) ISBN: 978-1975509354

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In the rapidly shifting landscape of higher education, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) has moved from a futuristic possibility to an immediate pedagogical necessity. *Improving your college courses: A guide for engaging in digital learning*, edited by Mullen and Eadens, arrives as a timely and essential compass for faculty navigating this transition. This volume offers more than just technical guidance; it provides a global, transformative framework for reimagining college courses as dynamic, AI-enhanced ecosystems designed to foster deeply meaningful student engagement. This book is a comprehensive, research-informed guidebook designed to help higher-education faculty strengthen course quality, engagement, and ethical digital learning practices. The book also responds to the rapidly evolving landscape of AI, online learning, and hybrid instruction, offering frameworks, strategies, and examples from faculty experts across education disciplines.

At its core, the book posits a compelling thesis: AI should not be viewed as a replacement for the educator, but rather as a “problem-solving partner”. This collaborative approach shifts the narrative from one of automation to one of augmentation. By viewing digital learning through this lens, the editors provide structured methodologies for course improvement that remain rooted in ethical considerations. As Banoglu and Mullen (2025) aptly state: “Educational systems must evolve to equip individuals with digital and information literacy, among other 21st-century skills, and an ethical mindset to navigate their lives” (p. xvi).

The editors successfully argue that to harness the full potential of AI, pedagogy must be reimagined with an ethical foundation. This requires a holistic view accounting for legislation, funding, cultural contexts, and political implications. The result is a resource both simultaneously forward-looking and inspirational, while remaining grounded in the practicalities of reflection and application.

A Structured Toolkit for Transformation

The book is thoughtfully organised into three parts across six chapters, each addressing a critical pillar of modern digital instruction: quality, simulation, and cognition. The intended

audience includes the following: higher-education faculty, administrators, instructional designers, graduate students, and preservice educators.

Part 1: Quality in Courses focuses on enhancing the architecture of learning. The contributors explore how quality assurance measures combined with blended and active learning strategies can impact executive-level student learning outcomes. A 3-year quantitative study of a doctoral research course redesigned to meet quality and high-quality standards at a university was presented. It concluded with recommendations for institutions, instructors, and researchers, such as adopting quality frameworks, providing faculty support, and conducting longitudinal studies to enhance course design. A noteworthy discussion in this section involved “Artful Digital Learning”. The authors explore the use of song parodies as a qualitative tool to boost student engagement. By leveraging music as an intrinsic motivator, parodies allow for interactive learning experiences that embed complex content into lecture time through student performance. This creative approach exemplifies the book’s commitment to diverse, multi-modal instructional strategies. In this section, the author argues that music reduces stress, increases belonging, and enhances memory by making it a powerful tool for digital and hybrid classrooms.

Part 2: Simulation in Courses dives into the practical application of emerging technologies. The text highlights how Mixed Reality Experiences (MREs) can bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing students with real-life applications of content in a controlled, responsive environment. MREs are particularly powerful because they allow for immediate, actionable feedback in simulated work settings. Furthermore, the book examines how computer simulations are transforming educational leadership. By preparing future administrators for real-world challenges through AI, the text demonstrates how technology can align with human experience and pedagogy to cultivate “future-ready” leaders who think creatively, lead ethically, and act decisively.

Part 3: Cognition in Courses addresses the psychological and social dimensions of digital learning. A poignant chapter on “Cognitive Vulnerability and AI” applies the “Zone of Proximal Knowledge” to help students navigate AI-enhanced environments in a developmentally appropriate way. This section also explores the necessity of creating virtual spaces for critical dialogue. By promoting social interaction and cognitive engagement, these virtual spaces become communities of transformation, offering both efficiency for the institution and meaningful supervision for the student.

Practicality Rooted in Research

What distinguishes this work from other pedagogical guides is its balance of theory and practice. The editors provide a wealth of practical tools and real-world examples supported by empirical data, arts-based evidence, and theory-informed research. This multifaceted evidence base ensures that the recommendations are not merely anecdotal but are scalable and academically rigorous.

For the modern professor, the book serves as a “structured toolkit”. It acknowledges the anxieties many faculty feel regarding the rise of AI—such as the fear of being replaced or the loss of academic integrity—and addresses them by empowering the educator. It challenges professors

to move beyond traditional instructional boundaries and equips them with the skills to collaborate with AI to improve learning outcomes.

Conclusion: A Catalyst for Growth

Improving your college courses is more than a manual; it is an invitation to innovate. It recognises that the digital shift in higher education is not just about adopting new software, but about evolving our mindset toward teaching and learning. The book supports faculty in becoming designers of experiences rather than just deliverers of information. The editors conclude that improving digital learning requires quality design, ethical AI integration, simulation-based practice, and cognitive scaffolding. They emphasise that “every reader has a vital role to play in shaping the digital landscape” (p. xxvi).

For us, as faculty members at Florida Gulf Coast University, this book has been a genuine catalyst for growth. It provides the necessary scaffolding to build courses that are resilient, engaging, and ethically sound in an AI-driven era. We wholeheartedly recommend this text to any educator, administrator, or researcher committed to using digital tools to elevate student learning. It is an essential addition to the library of anyone dedicated to the future of higher education.

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Banoğlu, K., & Mullen, C. A. (2025). Calling for AI-informed student activism in K–12 schools beyond learnification. *EERA Blog*. European Educational Research Association. <https://blog.eera-ecer.de/ai-informed-student-activism>

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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Abstract: 150–200 word – this is entered on a separate page.

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Please provide 4 to 6 keywords which can be used for indexing purposes.

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Any contributors who do not meet the criteria for authorship should be listed in the acknowledgment section.

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

Funding

During the submission process, the Journal requires all authors to acknowledge any funding associated with their submission, including the funder details and grant/award number.

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

An Acknowledgment section may be included to acknowledge, for example, people who have assisted with aspects of the work (but who do not qualify as authors), disclaimers, collaborations, etc.

Statements and Declarations

Under the heading “Statements and Declarations” for inclusion in the published paper: Declarations include Funding, Competing interests, Ethics approval, Consent, Data, Materials and/or Code availability and Authors’ contribution statements. Please use the title page for providing the statements.

Please note that submissions that do not include relevant declarations will be returned as incomplete.

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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.

Commentaries are expected to be highly readable, factual expositions of an informed, highly developed perspective presented in a concise, straight forward manner.

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.

ACEL Leading & Managing

Volume 32 Number 1

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