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Editorial

Inclusive Leadership: Developing Capacity in Teachers

Educational leadership helps shape the conditions through which teaching, professional learning and student learning occur (Hopkins & Spillane, 2014; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). Generally, discussions of inclusive education focus on how school leadership supports the diverse student body (Adams et al., 2023; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2026). The concern however is that the organisational, professional and relational conditions that enable teachers themselves to thrive as a diverse and included body have received comparatively less consideration (Edwards & Edwards, 2026; Rehal & van Nieuwerburgh, 2022). This special issue of *Leading & Managing* addresses that gap by examining how inclusive leadership can develop teacher capacity, strengthen professional agency, and create cultural environments in which both teachers and students thrive.

The motivation for this special issue emerged from the editors' shared reflection and concern that inclusion is frequently conceptualised as something leadership does predominantly for students, particularly those from historically marginalised groups (Khalifa et al., 2016; Miškolci et al., 2016), but less so for educators. The student focus is both important and justified, given children's rights to equitable access, participation, and inclusion in education (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; United Nations, 1989). However, the articles assembled in this issue remind us that inclusive schooling needs to consider the voices and experiences of teachers also (Miškolci et al., 2016). Across diverse educational contexts, both nationally and internationally, the authors in this issue highlight that inclusive leadership matters for students' equitable access, participation, and belonging. Equally important, it shapes the professional conditions through which teachers develop expertise, exercise professional judgement, and sustain their commitment to inclusive practice (Scanlan & Theoharis, 2026).

We begin with Chailland's (2026) review of bilingual education research across five international settings. She challenges the persistence of English-only approaches in many educational systems, highlighting that school leadership plays a critical, although frequently overlooked, role in either maintaining or disrupting dominant assumptions regarding language and learning. Chailland also draws attention to the need for leaders to reconsider the persistence of English-only programming as well as the importance of developing teacher capacity and recruiting bilingual educators. Her contribution is a timely reminder that inclusion requires leadership to critically examine longstanding educational norms and consider whose knowledge, language, expertise and experiences are valued within schools.

Questions of whose knowledge counts are explored further in Schmidt's (2026) article examining inclusive education in South Africa. Schmidt identifies an epistemological gap in which leadership models imported from Western contexts often fail to align with local realities and specific conditions in South African schools. Drawing on decolonial epistemology, culturally responsive leadership, and Ubuntu philosophy, she offers an alternative framework that foregrounds relationality, situated knowing, and collective accountability for structural conditions. Together, these articles challenge dominant assumptions about inclusion and reinforce the

importance, particularly in leadership preparation programs, of considering not only the availability of material resources, but also the underlying assumptions and relational conditions that shape inclusive leadership practice.

Alomair and Fernandes (2026) examine how national and international policy constructs for inclusive education in Saudi Arabia privilege administrative forms of leadership, while limiting opportunities for meaningful pedagogical leadership to include learners with disabilities. Their analysis reveals that while policy instruments provide school leadership with administrative authority, structures, and accountability processes, but give less attention to positioning inclusion as an ongoing, whole-school responsibility. They also identified a disconnect between rights-based commitments and the operational policy instruments that guide leaders in their everyday work, including their support of teachers. This article reminds us that inclusive leadership cannot be understood solely as an individual or school-level endeavour. It is also shaped by the broader policy conditions that influence how leaders are trained, and how school-wide inclusion is conceptualised, prioritised, and thus enacted.

Expanding on this discussion, McCartan's (2026) ethnographic study reveals how relational trust and shared leadership contribute to cultural change within a secondary school context. Her findings highlight the importance of combining clear inclusive values with a strong vision and a strategic approach to improvement. These findings also reinforce the positive influence of leaders to foster inclusive ways of working when purposefully addressing the interplay of challenge alongside support. Furthermore, Scott et al. (2026) confront conventional approaches to professional learning through their innovative school–university partnership. Their work illustrates how leaders can create inclusive workplaces by trusting and recognising staff expertise, encouraging collaboration, and supporting teachers as active contributors to professional learning. Rather than relying on a whole staff one-size-fits-all approach to professional development, the initiative described demonstrates the power of personalised, interest-driven professional learning. It supports both individual growth—particularly among teachers interested in higher degree study—and collective learning across the school community, especially in relation to the ethical and responsible use of AI within the school context.

Finally, two articles by Adams et al. (2026) and Thackwell and Wade (2026) bring attention to the ways inclusive leadership can empower early career teachers (ECTs). Adams et al. explore distributed leadership as a means of supporting early career teachers and fostering inclusive practice. Their discussion highlights the importance of teacher voice, shared decision making, mentoring, and trusting professional relationships and opportunities for ECTs to contribute their expertise. Furthermore, their findings reinforce the importance of a strengths-based approach in enhancing the professional knowledge, skills and capacity of ECTs. Similarly, Thackwell and Wade extend this discussion as they explore inclusive leadership from the perspective of ECTs. Their study affirms the value of supportive professional cultures, while illustrating how sustaining such support can be difficult amid the competing demands of contemporary school life. While leaders play a vital role in providing guidance, emotional support, and opportunities for professional growth, the availability of these forms of support is influenced by broader organisational conditions, including workload and leadership structures.

We conclude this special issue with a commentary that challenges leaders to reconsider dominant assumptions about professionalism, teacher identity, and belonging. The accompanying book review of *Leadership for Increasingly Diverse Schools* further extends this stance by providing insights into contemporary approaches to leading diversity and inclusion within educational settings.

In addition, this issue includes an article by Pogrow (2026) unrelated to the theme of this special issue. This article represents part two of a broader contribution, with part one appearing in the previous issue of *Leading & Managing*.

As editors, we hope readers find value not only in the individual contributions presented in this issue, but also in the collective body of work they create. Together, these contributions highlight that inclusive leadership begins first and foremost with people. By cultivating trust, professional growth, belonging, and meaningful participation, leaders promote the conditions for inclusive schools and equitable learning environments. The articles in this special issue highlight that authentic inclusive leadership is reflected in a commitment to ensuring both educators and students are recognised, supported, and empowered to contribute meaningfully within diverse school communities.

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Special Edition Editors

International Implications for School Leaders on the English-Only Default in Bilingual Education

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***ABSTRACT:** This integrative review examines peer-reviewed research on bilingual education outcomes across five national and regional contexts (Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the United States) and analyses the implications of this evidence base for school leadership practice. Despite decades of research demonstrating the academic and linguistic benefits of bilingual instructional approaches for students learning English as an additional language, English-only instruction remains the default programming model in most English-majority nations. This review synthesises findings from longitudinal studies, national assessments, and comparative analyses to identify a recurring pattern across many studies. Bilingual and dual language programs are associated with equal or greater academic outcomes compared to English-only models, particularly in the early years of schooling and over sustained periods of implementation. Drawing on the Leadership for Learning (LfL) framework, the review argues that school leaders play a pivotal but underexamined role in perpetuating or disrupting the English-only default through their programming decisions. The review identifies three shared barriers to evidence-informed language programming across national context (insufficient leadership preparation in language education, teacher workforce limitations and policy-practice gaps), and proposes a set of principles for language-informed school leadership. Implications for leadership preparation programs, international collaboration, and future research are discussed.*

Key words: School leadership, bilingual education, English learners, international comparison, teacher capacity, dual language programs

Introduction

The global population of students learning English as an additional language continues to grow across English-majority nations. In the United States, the English Learner (EL) population rose from 3.8 million in 2000 to 5.1 million by 2019, representing 10.4% of public school enrolment (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024). In Australia, several hundred

thousand students receive English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) support across a school system where over 300 languages are spoken (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2022). In England, around 19.5% of pupils aged 5–16 speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), a figure that has risen steadily over the past two decades (Department for Education, 2023). In Canada, immigration-driven linguistic shifts have placed growing demands on provincial education systems, with about one-quarter of residents reporting a non-official mother-tongue and roughly one-in-eight reporting a non-official language spoken predominantly at home (Statistics Canada, 2022). Across the European Union, the proportion of students with immigrant backgrounds has grown substantially, and the Barcelona Objectives commit all member states to multilingual education beginning in primary school (Eurostat, n.d.).

Despite this shared demographic reality, a persistent achievement gap exists between students learning English as an additional language and their English-proficient peers. This gap has been documented in national assessment data across multiple countries (Creagh, 2016; Demie, 2018; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013; Strand et al., 2015). A substantial body of peer-reviewed research suggests that the instructional programming students receive plays a significant role in shaping these outcomes, and specifically whether they are educated through bilingual or English-only models (August & Shanahan, 2006; Collier & Thomas, 2017; Genesee et al., 2006). Yet English-only instruction remains the dominant approach in most English-majority nations, persisting not because of evidentiary support but through what I call the “English-only default”, which is in part due to a combination of historical precedent, resource constraints, policy inertia, and insufficient leadership attention to language programming as a strategic priority. The term names a pattern I treat throughout this article as an analytic construct rather than as an established concept in the literature.

This raises a fundamental question for educational leadership research: What role do school leaders play in perpetuating or disrupting the English-only default, and what does the international evidence base suggest about more effective approaches? I argue that inclusive leaders who engage this evidence and create bilingual programming structures simultaneously build the conditions that develop teacher capacity and strengthen academic outcomes for linguistically varied students, making programming decisions and teacher growth mutually reinforcing rather than sequential. The purpose of this review is to synthesise peer-reviewed research on bilingual education outcomes across five national and regional contexts (Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the United States) and to analyse the implications of this evidence for school leadership practice. The review contributes to an underdeveloped intersection in the scholarly literature, which is the convergence of international bilingual education research and educational leadership theory. While substantial bodies of scholarship exist in each domain independently, few studies have examined them together through a comparative international lens.

Throughout this review, school leader refers to principals and, where the empirical literature specifies it, assistant principals and instructional leaders with positional authority over language programming and teacher development decisions at the school level. This usage follows the Leadership for Learning (LfL) framework’s understanding of leadership as purposefully creating conditions for effective teaching and learning (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009). The empirical evidence synthesised here spans multiple levels, from national policy to program outcomes to

classroom practice. The LfL framework provides the lens for examining how school-based leaders engage with that evidence in their own programming decisions.

In framing this contribution, two conceptual tensions warrant explicit acknowledgement at the outset. First, the term language-informed school leadership proposed in this article adds another adjective to an already crowded vocabulary of leadership labels. The proliferation of such labels has been criticised for producing conceptual inflation without proportionate empirical or theoretical gain (transformational, instructional, distributed, adaptive, culturally responsive, etc.). I introduce the term to name a specific and identifiable gap: the absence in current leadership preparation and scholarship, of substantive engagement with the bilingual education evidence base. Whether the naming move is conceptually productive or whether it repeats the patterns of label proliferation that have constrained educational leadership scholarship is a question this article invites readers to weigh, and one I return to in the discussion.

Second, the LfL framework (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009) on which this review draws was developed primarily within Anglophone educational systems and carries assumptions about evidence, accountability, and instructional leadership that may not travel intact across the five contexts examined. I apply the framework comparatively while remaining alert to the risk of unreflective cross-cultural transfer of leadership constructs. The Basque Country and Italian cases, in particular, raise questions about whether a framework grounded in Anglophone educational politics adequately captures leadership work in multilingual systems with different sociolinguistic histories. The deeper conceptual stake of this review, however, is neither the proposed label nor the framework itself but the question of why an evidentially weak default (English-only programming) has remained dominant in educational systems whose leadership scholarship claims to be evidence-informed. That question is fundamentally about power, equity, and the conditions under which leadership scholarship attends or fails to attend to the language practices through which schooling proceeds.

This review is organised as follows: First, the methodology describes the integrative review approach and inclusion criteria. Second, the findings section synthesises peer-reviewed research on bilingual education outcomes in each of the five national contexts, identifying both the evidence for bilingual programming and the barriers to its implementation. Third, drawing on the LfL framework (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009), the review analyses the role of school leadership in language programming decisions across these contexts and identifies three shared barriers. Fourth, the discussion proposes principles for language-informed school leadership grounded in the international evidence. The review concludes with implications for leadership preparation, international collaboration, and future research.

Methodology

This study employed an integrative literature review methodology (Torraco, 2005, 2016; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) which is appropriate for synthesising diverse forms of evidence to generate new frameworks and perspectives on a topic (e.g., empirical studies, theoretical analyses, and policy documents). Literature was identified through systematic searches of ERIC, Education Source, Scopus, and Google Scholar using combinations of terms including bilingual education,

dual language, immersion, English Learner, EAL, EAL/D, language education policy, school leadership, and the names of individual countries and regions. Reference list mining and citation tracking were used to identify additional relevant sources.

Studies were included if they (a) reported empirical findings on bilingual or dual language education outcomes; (b) examined language education policy or practice in one or more of the target national contexts; or (c) analysed school leadership in relation to language programming. Conceptual and theoretical articles were included where they provided frameworks substantively used in the synthesis. Pre-2000 foundational sources (e.g., Cummins, 1979; Genesee, 1987; Lo Bianco, 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 1982) were retained because they are widely cited as theoretical and empirical anchors by contemporary sources within the review's primary search window. Government and intergovernmental statistical releases (e.g., NCES, Eurostat, ACARA, Statistics Canada, Department for Education) were included to establish demographic and policy context, and selected commissioned policy reports and government policy documents (e.g., Eurydice, Kohler, Welsh Government, Scottish Government) were included where they provided context for specific national policy initiatives examined in the review. These non-peer-reviewed sources are cited descriptively rather than as evidentiary anchors. A total of 57 sources met the inclusion criteria across these categories. Sources in the reference list are those that met the formal inclusion criteria for this integrative review.

The review is informed by two complementary theoretical perspectives. The first is Cummins's (1979, 2000, 2021) linguistic interdependence hypothesis, which posits that academic proficiency in one language supports and facilitates the development of proficiency in a second language, provided that sufficient motivation and exposure exist. This theoretical lens is important because it provides a research-based rationale for bilingual education that directly challenges the common-sense assumption, often implicit in leaders' programming decisions, that English proficiency is best developed through maximal exposure to English-only instruction. The second is the LfL framework (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009) which positions student learning as the central purpose of school leadership and emphasises evidence-informed decision

making as a core leadership responsibility. Together, these perspectives frame the review's central argument: School leaders' language programming decisions are both consequential and currently underinformed by the available evidence base.

Findings: International Research on Bilingual Education Outcomes

Canada: Five Decades of Immersion Research

Canada offers the most extensive longitudinal evidence base on bilingual education of any English-majority nation. French immersion programs, introduced in Montreal in 1965 and expanded nationally over subsequent decades, have been the subject of sustained empirical investigation. Genesee's (1987, 2004) foundational research demonstrated that students in French immersion programs develop high levels of functional proficiency in French without any long-term cost to their English language development or academic achievement in other subjects. Swain

and Lapkin (1982) confirmed these findings, showing that early total immersion students performed at or above grade level on English-language standardised assessments by the end of elementary school, despite receiving the majority of their instruction in French.

More recent Canadian research has extended these findings. Turnbull et al. (2001) found that French immersion students in Ontario achieved comparable or greater results to their English-only peers on provincial assessments in mathematics and English literacy. These results held across socioeconomic backgrounds, suggesting that the benefits of immersive bilingual education are not limited to socioeconomically advantaged populations. Cummins (2000, 2021) has argued that these outcomes reflect the linguistic interdependence hypothesis. Academic skills and literacy competencies transfer across languages, such that instruction in one language supports development in another. Cummins (2021) further argues that schools should treat students' home languages as cognitive and academic resources, a perspective that has shaped bilingual programming policy internationally.

Critically, Canadian research has also documented challenges. Canada's 2003 Action Plan for Official Languages set a target of doubling the proportion of bilingual high-school graduates to 50% by 2013 (Conrick & Donovan, 2010). Subsequent Statistics Canada analyses, however, documented a decline in English-French bilingualism among Canadian youth over the following decade, with roughly half of teenagers who were bilingual in 2006 no longer able to converse in their second official language by 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2019). Despite constitutional protections for minority language education under Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the majority of language programs remain limited-exposure models of 20 to 50 minutes daily rather than immersive bilingual education (Early et al., 2017; Kohler, 2017). This gap between evidence and practice is directly relevant to school leadership. Even in a nation with strong constitutional protections and evidence supporting bilingual education, implementation depends on the decisions that school and district leaders make about programming.

Australia: EAL/D Outcomes and the Monolingual Mindset

Australia's linguistic landscape is among the most varied in the English-speaking world, with over 300 languages spoken in schools and several hundred thousand students are identified as receiving EAL/D support (ACARA, 2022). Despite this remarkable linguistic range, research consistently indicates that the predominant instructional model for EAL/D students is English-only instruction with supplementary language support, rather than bilingual programming (Lo Bianco, 2009).

Creagh (2016) analysed National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data for students classified as "Language Background Other Than English" (LBOTE) and found that this broad classification category masked significant variation in outcomes, with students from refugee backgrounds facing particular disadvantage. Cruickshank (2004) documented how multilingual teenagers' literacy practices in Sydney were shaped by an educational system oriented primarily towards English, illustrating the tension between students' multilingual realities and the monolingual default. Lo Bianco (1987, 2009), whose National Policy on Languages was a landmark in Australian language education, has argued that the gap between Australia's

multilingual reality and its monolingual educational practice represents a significant policy failure that school leaders are positioned to address.

The international literature consistently documents that school leaders' own knowledge of bilingualism and language acquisition shapes programming decisions. Leaders equipped with this knowledge are more likely to adopt asset-based approaches that draw on students' home languages, while those without such preparation tend to default to English-only supplementary models (Baecher et al., 2016; Brooks et al., 2010). In Australia, as in other national contexts, the preparation gap translates directly into programming gaps.

United Kingdom: EAL Achievement and the Role of School-Level Factors

Research on EAL students in the United Kingdom has produced findings that complicate the narrative of linguistic disadvantage. Strand et al. (2015) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the National Pupil Database in England and found that while EAL students initially performed below their monolingual peers, many EAL subgroups closed this gap or surpassed their English-only peers by secondary school, with the trajectory varying significantly by first language, socioeconomic status, and school context. Demie (2018) analysed national EAL assessment data and found that students who reached full English fluency outperformed their English-only peers on General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations (85% vs. 71%), while students at earlier proficiency stages performed substantially below. The pattern points to the language-support structures schools provide as a key mediator of outcomes. This suggests that school-level factors play a mediating role in shaping outcomes, including leadership, teaching quality, and language support structures.

Murphy's (2014) synthesis of research on second language learning in the early school years draws together evidence on bilingualism, vocabulary, and literacy development in young EAL learners that illustrated both the academic potential of multilingual children and the variability of provision they encounter across school contexts. Conteh (2012) identified effective classroom practices in schools serving bilingual and EAL learners, including working with bilingual teaching assistants and drawing on students' home languages as resources for learning across the curriculum. Where leaders committed to bilingual approaches and created strong language support structures, EAL students closed the achievement gap and in some cases surpassed their monolingual English-speaking peers (Demie, 2018; Strand et al., 2015).

Introduced in 2012, Scotland's 1+2 Language Policy represents one of the most ambitious language education initiatives in any English-majority nation. It aims for every child to learn two languages in addition to their mother tongue beginning from the first year of primary school (Scottish Government, 2012). An interim implementation study found that progress was uneven and dependent heavily on school-level leadership and teacher capacity (Christie et al., 2016). Wales similarly invested in language education through its Global Futures plan (Welsh Government, 2015) in response to a sustained decline in secondary modern foreign language study, with GCSE entries dropping 42% between 2002 and 2014 (Tinsley & Board, 2016).

Across the UK, the research suggests that while national policy can create conditions for bilingual education, school-level leadership is the mechanism through which policy translates, or fails to translate, into practice.

European Union: The CLIL Movement and Multilingual Education Research

The European Union's commitment to multilingual education, formalised in the 2002 Barcelona Objectives, has generated a substantial body of research on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and other bilingual education models. The Barcelona Objectives call for all EU citizens to learn two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue, and by 2015, 98.6% of junior secondary students in the EU were studying at least one foreign language (Eurostat, n.d.).

Cenoz (2009) synthesised European research on multilingual education and concluded that instructional approaches that integrate content and language learning produce stronger outcomes than traditional foreign language instruction. This was particularly evident when implemented from early primary years (Cenoz, 2009). Dalton-Puffer (2011) reviewed CLIL research across European contexts and found that students in CLIL programs typically develop stronger receptive language skills and comparable or superior content knowledge relative to peers in monolingual programs, though productive language skills showed more variable results. Pérez-Cañado (2012) conducted a meta-analytic review of CLIL studies and found positive effects on target language proficiency with no detrimental effects on first language development or content learning.

Research from the Basque Country provides additional evidence for the effectiveness of sustained multilingual education within the European context. Cenoz (2009) also documented that students educated through Basque-medium programs achieved strong outcomes in both Basque and Spanish while also developing proficiency in English as a third language, thus demonstrating that multilingual education need not compromise achievement in any single language. This finding is particularly relevant to school leadership because it challenges the assumption that bilingual programming necessarily competes with English-language development, which appears to be a prevalent approach across English-majority nations based on the research examined. Rather, the Basque evidence suggests that well-designed multilingual programs produce additive outcomes, a conclusion that aligns with Cummins's (1979, 2000) linguistic interdependence hypothesis and with the Canadian and Australian findings reviewed above.

Italy's 2010 secondary education reforms (DPR 88/2010 and 89/2010) made CLIL compulsory in liceo linguistico and in the final year of istituti tecnici, requiring content to be delivered through a foreign language (Kohler, 2017). However, implementation has been constrained by teacher capacity, with concerns about the quality of teachers' linguistic proficiency and pedagogical readiness for bilingual instruction (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice and Policy Support [Eurydice], 2012). The Eurydice (2012) report further noted that across EU member states, the availability of CLIL-qualified teachers varied substantially, with newer member states in Central and Eastern Europe reporting particular difficulty recruiting educators with sufficient foreign language proficiency to deliver content instruction bilingually. This finding mirrors the teacher capacity challenges documented across the other national contexts examined and further supports that policy mandates alone are insufficient without leadership attention to workforce development.

United States: Bilingual Education Research and Illustrative Studies

In the United States, the most comprehensive evidence on bilingual education comes from Collier and Thomas's (2017) longitudinal research spanning 32 years and multiple school districts. Their findings consistently demonstrate that EL students in well-implemented dual language programs outperform their peers in English-only settings on standardised measures of academic achievement, with the benefits of dual language programming becoming increasingly pronounced over time. Synthesising findings for the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth, August and Shanahan (2006) concluded that instruction in students' native language provides benefits for literacy development in English, and that there is no evidence that English-only approaches produce superior outcomes.

Recent quasi-experimental and longitudinal evidence has further strengthened the empirical base for dual language programming. Drawing on lottery-randomised data from Portland Public Schools, Steele et al. (2017) found that students assigned to dual language immersion programs outperformed their English-only peers on state reading tests by 13% of a standard deviation in Grade 5 and 22% in Grade 8 with no decrease in mathematics or science. Umansky and Reardon (2014) similarly found that Latino EL students in bilingual and dual immersion programs were reclassified more slowly in elementary school but achieved higher overall reclassification, English proficiency, and academic threshold passage by the end of high school. A recent quasi-experimental state-level study of primary-grade EL students across 24 demographically matched schools provides additional support for the early-grade pattern: Kindergarten and first-grade students in dual language programs significantly outperformed their English-only counterparts on standardised English proficiency assessments, while second- and third-grade students showed no significant differences (Chailland & Gumbert-Harris, 2025). Read together with Steele et al. and Umansky and Reardon, this pattern is consistent with the international evidence that the advantages of bilingual programming are most pronounced in the earliest grades and that students in both program types demonstrate consistent English proficiency growth over time.

The U.S. policy landscape is further complicated by decentralised governance. Each state sets its own language education policies (Kohler, 2017). While some states have expanded bilingual programming (California's passage of Proposition 58 in 2016 reversed decades of English-only mandates), others maintain policies that restrict or discourage instruction in languages other than English (Flores & García, 2017; García, 2009). Flores and García (2017) further documented how federal and state policies ostensibly designed to serve ELs simultaneously created credentialing barriers that reduced the bilingual teaching workforce, thus illustrating how the English-only default was actively constructed rather than naturally occurring. This variation makes school-level leadership even more consequential, as leaders navigate different policy environments while making programming decisions that directly affect student outcomes.

School Leadership and Language Programming: An International Analysis

The LfL Framework

This review draws on the LfL framework (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009) to analyse the relationship between school leadership and language programming decisions. This framework positions student learning as the central purpose of school leadership and emphasises the conditions leaders create to support effective teaching and learning. Within this framework, language programming decisions represent a critical leadership lever, one that establishes the instructional conditions under which students learning English as an additional language either thrive or struggle. The framework's emphasis on evidence-informed decision making, distributed leadership, and accountability for learning outcomes provides a lens for examining how leaders' programming choices connect to the international evidence base reviewed above.

The relationship between school leadership and student achievement is well established in the broader literature. Meta-analytic research has consistently found that leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its impact on student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). Hallinger (2011) identified evidence-informed decision making as a hallmark of effective instructional leadership. Hitt and Tucker (2016) synthesised research on key leader practices and found that establishing rigorous curriculum and instruction was among the most consistently associated with student achievement. Yet language programming decisions, among the most consequential curricular choices a leader can make for EL students, remain largely absent from this leadership literature (Brooks et al., 2010; Scanlan & López, 2012).

Two cautions about applying this framework comparatively warrant explicit attention. First, the LfL framework was developed within Anglophone educational systems and reflects a particular set of policy assumptions about accountability, evidence, and the relationship between schools and their public. Applied across the five contexts of this review, it foregrounds some leadership practices and risks obscuring others. In the Basque Country, for example, leadership for multilingual education is shaped by sociolinguistic revitalisation politics that the LfL framework does not directly theorise. In Italy, the CLIL mandate operates within an upper-secondary tracking system whose internal differentiation is not well captured by frameworks calibrated to comprehensive Anglophone schooling. The framework remains analytically useful for cross-context comparison, but its findings should be read as a partial rendering of leadership practice rather than as a complete account. Second, the language of this review, which includes English Learners, EAL, language minority, is itself the language of the systems whose practices this review critiques. These categories are not neutral descriptors. They name students by what they are presumed to lack rather than by the multilingual repertoires they bring, and they encode the very monoglossic assumptions that this review identifies as constitutive of the English-only default. I retain these terms because the cross-national evidence base I synthesise uses them, but I read the terms themselves as artefacts of the leadership and policy environments under examination rather than as transparent descriptions of the students concerned.

Three Shared Barriers Across National Contexts

The international evidence reviewed above reveals three barriers that impede evidence-informed language programming across all five contexts examined. First, leadership preparation programs rarely equip school leaders with knowledge of bilingual education, second language acquisition, or the specific needs of students learning English as an additional language. Baecher et al. (2013) mapped how school leadership preparation curricula address English Language Learner (ELL) education and found that programs typically provide minimal content focused on this area. Brooks et al. (2010) documented how principals required structured professional learning to shift from surface-level responses towards equity-oriented approaches to ELL education, a pattern that cross-national evidence suggests is widespread. This preparation gap means that leaders often lack the foundational knowledge to evaluate the evidence base or to advocate for programming that departs from the English-only default.

Second, teacher workforce limitations constrain leaders' programming options across national contexts. Dual language and bilingual programs require teachers with bilingual proficiency, specialised pedagogical training, and understanding of cross-linguistic transfer (de Jong & Harper, 2005; Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Fewer than 20% of U.S. teacher education programs require coursework in teaching EL students (Samson & Collins, 2012). Similar shortfalls have been documented in Australia (Lo Bianco, 2009), Canada (Volante et al., 2019), the United Kingdom (Strand et al., 2015), and Europe, where Italy's CLIL mandate has been constrained by teacher readiness (Eurydice, 2012). This creates a self-reinforcing cycle. Without qualified teachers, leaders cannot implement bilingual programs. Without leadership demand for such programs, there is limited incentive for preparation programs to produce bilingual educators.

Third, a policy-practice gap exists in every context examined. Canada's constitutional bilingualism has not translated into widespread immersive bilingual programming for all language-minority students. While French immersion is well established for anglophone learners, programming for immigrant-background students learning English remains far less developed (Early et al., 2017). Australia's multilingual reality coexists with a monolingual educational practice. Despite having one of the most linguistically diverse student populations in the world, Australian schools overwhelmingly operate under what Lo Bianco (2009) has characterised as a monolingual mindset that treats English as the only legitimate language of instruction. Scotland's ambitious 1+2 policy has seen uneven implementation dependent on school-level leadership, with Christie et al. (2016) finding that schools whose leaders actively championed the policy made substantially more progress than those where leaders treated it as a low-priority compliance exercise. The EU's Barcelona Objectives have expanded foreign language instruction quantitatively increasing the number of students studying at least one foreign language but have not fundamentally altered pedagogical approaches for immigrant-background students who are learning the language of instruction itself. Across these contexts, a consistent pattern emerges. National policies establish the parameters of possibility, but school-level leadership is the mechanism through which evidence-informed programming is either enacted or neglected.

Table 1

Synthesis of International Evidence, Barriers, and Leadership Implications by National Context

National Context	Key Evidence Pattern	Primary Barrier(s)	Leadership Implication
Canada	Immersion students achieve equal or greater academic outcomes without loss to English development; benefits hold across socioeconomic groups (Genesee, 2004; Turnbull et al., 2001). Bilingualism among Canadian youth declined despite constitutional protections (Statistics Canada, 2019).	Policy-to-practice gap; limited-exposure models dominate despite the evidence base for immersion.	Leaders must select immersive rather than supplementary programming and sustain those structures within districts that default to minimal-exposure models.
Australia	EAL/D outcomes vary substantially by program quality and language support provision. A monolingual instructional default persists despite over 300 languages spoken in schools (Creagh, 2016; Lo Bianco, 2009).	Leadership preparation gap; institutional monolingual mindset.	Leaders with knowledge of bilingual education are more likely to adopt asset-based programming. Preparation gaps translate directly into programming gaps (Baecher et al., 2016; Brooks et al., 2010).
United Kingdom	EAL students close the achievement gap or exceed monolingual peers at full fluency. School-level factors, including leadership and language support structures, are key mediators (Demie, 2018; Strand et al., 2015).	Uneven policy implementation across schools; variable quality of language support provision.	School leadership is the primary mechanism through which national policy translates into practice. Principal commitment is the decisive differentiator in implementation outcomes (Christie et al., 2016).
European Union	CLIL produces stronger language outcomes and additive multilingual development without loss in first language or content knowledge (Cenoz, 2009; Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Pérez-Cañado, 2012).	CLIL-qualified teacher shortage across member states; implementation constrained by workforce readiness.	Leaders must address teacher capacity alongside program selection. Policy mandates alone are insufficient without sustained attention to educator preparation.

National Context	Key Evidence Pattern	Primary Barrier(s)	Leadership Implication
United States	Dual language students outperform English-only peers over time; advantages grow with sustained implementation (Collier & Thomas, 2017; Steele et al., 2017; Umansky & Reardon, 2014).	Decentralised governance; credentialing barriers that reduce bilingual teacher supply (Flores & García, 2017); state-level variation in language education policy.	School-level programming decisions are especially consequential where state policy varies widely. Leaders navigate different policy environments while making decisions that directly shape student outcomes.

Note. Evidence patterns, barriers, and implications synthesised from peer-reviewed sources cited in this article.

Discussion: Towards Language-Informed School Leadership

The international evidence synthesised in this review supports three conclusions relevant to educational leadership theory and practice: First, the research base for bilingual education is substantial and shows a recurrent direction of effects across national contexts, with variation in magnitude by context and design. From Canada's French immersion research (Genesee, 1987, 2004; Swain & Lapkin, 1982) to European CLIL studies (Cenoz, 2009; Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Pérez-Cañado, 2012) to U.S. quasi-experimental and longitudinal studies (Collier & Thomas, 2017; Steele et al., 2017; Umansky & Reardon, 2014), the evidence indicates that well-implemented bilingual programs produce equal or greater outcomes compared to English-only models, particularly when sustained over multiple years.

Second, the persistence of the English-only default across all five national contexts examined is not adequately explained by the evidence base. Where the research tends to support bilingual approaches, the continued dominance of English-only programming must be understood as a product of institutional, political, and leadership factors rather than evidentiary ones. García (2009) has described this as the legacy of monoglossic language assumptions, and specifically the unexamined default that monolingualism is the norm and that bilingualism requires special justification. Cruickshank (2004) identified a similar orientation in Australian education. These assumptions persist because leadership preparation programs have not equipped leaders to interrogate them. This is a significant gap, given the substantial evidence that bilingual education produces equal or greater outcomes across national contexts.

Third, the review identifies school leadership as the critical mediating variable between policy and practice. In every national context examined, the effectiveness of language education policies depended substantially on school-level implementation, which in turn depended on leaders' knowledge and training, values, and programming decisions. This finding aligns with the LfL framework's emphasis on the conditions leaders create for teaching and learning (MacBeath &

Dempster, 2009) and with Robinson et al.'s (2008) finding that leadership effects on student outcomes operate primarily through the instructional environment leaders establish.

The research reviewed offers evidence of what this leadership mediation looks like in practice. Christie et al. (2016) found that schools whose principals actively championed Scotland's 1+2 language policy made substantially more implementation progress than those where leaders treated it as a compliance exercise. Scanlan and López (2012) documented how school leaders who combined programmatic knowledge with equity commitments established and sustained dual language environments despite resource constraints. What these examples share is that the leadership contribution was exercised through concrete programmatic decisions and not through advocacy alone. Leaders who selected immersive models over supplementary ones and invested in developing the teaching staff to deliver them produced measurably different outcomes than those who did not make the same commitments.

Read together, these three conclusions raise a question of conceptual integrity for educational leadership scholarship more broadly. If the field's evidence base supports bilingual approaches consistently across national contexts and across decades, the persistence of an English-only default cannot be explained by the evidence base itself. It must be explained by the patterns through which leadership scholarship attends or fails to attend to the language practices that shape schooling. The leadership literature's near-silence on language programming is not a neutral oversight, as documented across the meta-analytic and review work of Leithwood et al. (2004), Robinson et al. (2008), Hallinger (2011), and Hitt and Tucker (2016). It reflects a definitional choice about what counts as substantive leadership work, a choice that has the effect of placing the educational experience of multilingual students outside the central concerns of the field. Recovering conceptual integrity in this domain therefore requires reflecting on why the question has been so consistently absent, what assumptions about students, families, and communities that absence has encoded, and whose interests have been served by treating language as a peripheral rather than a constitutive concern of school leadership. The English-only default is, in this sense, a programming pattern and a scholarly one that has been sustained by what leadership research has chosen to study, and by what it has chosen to leave unexamined.

Based on this synthesis, I propose three principles for what I call "language-informed school leadership". The first principle is evidence engagement. Leaders must be equipped with and responsive to the international research base on bilingual education. They must treat language programming as a domain requiring the same evidence-informed deliberation as any other curricular decision. This means moving beyond inherited assumptions about the superiority of English-only instruction and engaging seriously with the longitudinal and comparative evidence reviewed in this article.

The second principle is workforce development, which connects directly to the special issue's focus on developing teacher capacity through school leadership. The international evidence consistently identifies teacher workforce limitations as a primary constraint on bilingual programming across national contexts. Leaders who wish to implement evidence-informed language programming must attend to program selection as well as to the development of teachers who can deliver such programming effectively. This includes recruiting bilingual educators, providing sustained professional development in bilingual pedagogy and cross-linguistic transfer,

creating opportunities for teachers to develop their own language proficiency, and establishing mentoring structures that pair experienced bilingual practitioners with teachers developing these competencies. When leaders create dual language or bilingual programming structures, they simultaneously create the conditions that demand and incentivise teacher growth in these specialised areas. This results in programming decisions and teacher development mutually reinforcing one another rather than being sequential.

The third principle is cross-national learning. Given the shared challenges documented across national contexts, leaders and leadership organisations should engage with international research and practice rather than relying exclusively on local or national evidence. The evidence examined in this review offers insights that cross national borders. International professional networks and research partnerships are well positioned to facilitate such knowledge exchange.

Implications

For school leadership practice, the most direct implication is that language programming decisions should be treated as core leadership responsibilities that warrant the same rigour and evidence-informed deliberation as other high-stakes instructional choices. Leaders who default to English-only programming without engaging with the research base may be inadvertently constraining the academic trajectories of their most linguistically varied students. The international evidence suggests that the earliest grades represent a particularly consequential window for programming decisions, as both the Canadian immersion literature (Genesee, 2004) and the U.S. quasi-experimental evidence (Chailland & Gumbert-Harris, 2025) demonstrate, amongst others previously noted.

This leadership potential cannot be realised without leaders who have been prepared and supported to engage the research base and act on what they learn. A leader unprepared in this domain is unlikely to seek out the relevant knowledge independently once in practice. That dependency makes preparation programs and district leadership structures significant determinants of whether school-level agency on language programming is ever exercised.

For leadership preparation programs, this review highlights a significant and widespread gap. Across the five national contexts examined, school leaders are rarely prepared with knowledge of bilingual education, second language acquisition, or the language education evidence base (Baecher et al., 2016; Brooks et al., 2010). This represents a structural impediment to evidence-informed practice. If leaders are not taught to evaluate bilingual education research during their preparation, they are unlikely to seek out and apply such evidence once they are in practice. Addressing this gap should be a priority for universities, professional organisations, and credentialing bodies involved in preparing educational leaders. Coursework on language education should be integrated into core leadership curricula rather than treated as a specialised elective available only to those pursuing bilingual education credentials, and should include exposure and training in second language acquisition theory, bilingual programming models, and the international evidence base.

For international collaboration, the review demonstrates that the challenges facing school leaders in linguistically varied settings are shared internationally. The barriers are strikingly similar

across Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, such as inadequate leadership preparation, teacher workforce limitations, and policy-practice gaps, and are echoed in the European Union's multilingual education context. This shared challenge presents a compelling opportunity for international professional networks, research partnerships, and knowledge exchange. Organisations such as the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL), the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), and the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS) are well positioned to facilitate such exchanges.

For future research, this review identifies several productive directions. Comparative studies examining how school leaders in different national contexts make language programming decisions would advance understanding of the leadership factors that enable or constrain evidence-informed practice. Longitudinal research tracking the effects of leadership-driven programming changes on student outcomes across contexts would strengthen the causal evidence base. Research examining how leaders in linguistically varied settings develop the specialised knowledge needed to make informed programming decisions and how preparation programs can support this development is particularly needed. Finally, research examining the relationship between leaders' investment in bilingual teacher development and subsequent student outcomes would provide evidence for the proposed principle that programming decisions and teacher capacity development are mutually reinforcing.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, as an integrative review, it synthesises findings across various methodological traditions, assessment systems, and national contexts, which limits the precision of cross-national comparisons. Assessment instruments, student classification systems, and definitions of bilingual education vary substantially across countries, making direct outcome comparisons difficult. Second, the review focused primarily on English-majority nations, which limits the applicability of findings to contexts where English is not the dominant language of instruction. Third, the review drew on published sources, including peer-reviewed research and selected policy/theoretical works, which may underrepresent innovative practices or emerging evidence not yet reflected in the scholarly literature. Because this review synthesises heterogeneous designs (longitudinal, quasi-experimental, policy, and descriptive studies), conclusions should be interpreted as pattern-level rather than uniformly causal across contexts. Finally, the relationship between school leadership and language programming outcomes is difficult to isolate empirically, as leadership effects operate through complex, mediated pathways. The principles proposed in this review should be understood as evidence-informed propositions warranting further empirical investigation rather than as established causal claims.

Conclusion

This integrative review has synthesised peer-reviewed research on bilingual education outcomes across five national and regional contexts and analysed the implications of this evidence

for school leadership. Taken together, the findings indicate a recurring pattern, though effect sizes and implementation conditions vary across contexts. Bilingual and dual language programs are associated with equal or greater outcomes compared to English-only models across the national contexts examined. Yet English-only instruction persists as the default in most English-majority nations, a persistence I attribute to institutional inertia, inadequate leadership preparation, teacher workforce constraints, and insufficient engagement with the available evidence base rather than to the weight of the evidence itself. This disconnect between research and practice represents one of the most consequential gaps in contemporary educational leadership.

School leaders occupy a unique position in the educational system. They are the practitioners who translate policy into programming, who recruit and develop teachers, and who establish the instructional conditions within which students learn. The international evidence reviewed here suggests that one of the most consequential things leaders can do for students learning English as an additional language is to engage seriously with the bilingual education research base and to treat language programming as the high-stakes leadership decision it is. The three principles proposed offer a starting framework for language-informed school leadership (i.e., evidence engagement, workforce development, and cross-national learning). As student populations in English-majority nations become increasingly linguistically varied, the need for such leadership will only grow. The evidence base to guide it already exists. What the field has lacked is the leadership preparation and institutional will to act on it.

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The Epistemological Gap in Inclusive Education: Rethinking School Leadership

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*ABSTRACT: South Africa's inclusive education implementation gap persists across well-resourced reform cycles, and the dominant explanation, which attributes the gap to inadequate resources, does not account for schools that achieve genuine inclusion without additional resourcing or for reform efforts that fail despite it. This article acknowledges the resource-based gap and goes on to trouble the policy problem by examining the epistemological mismatches that contribute to failing inclusivity and a lack of teacher capacity. Drawing on decolonial epistemology, culturally responsive leadership, and Ubuntu philosophy, the article develops a leadership framework grounded in the South African context rather than adapted from Western models whose effectiveness depends on specific conditions that South African schools do not have. Three commitments are proposed, relational professional authority, an epistemology of situated knowing, and collective accountability for structural conditions to address this gap. An interpretive synthesis of a small, focused South African empirical base alongside a wider theoretical literature shows these practices are already present in some schools but unrecognised by the frameworks meant to guide school leadership that would foster teacher capacity. The article concludes that resourcing **and** epistemological reform are both necessary, and recommends that principal preparation include an Ubuntu-grounded practicum and that district accountability frameworks include relational indicators.*

Key words: Inclusive education, school leadership, Ubuntu philosophy, decolonial epistemology, teacher professional identity, South Africa

Introduction

In four KwaZulu-Natal schools, Grade 7 learners were asked to describe their experience of school life (Mbelu, 2025). Learners in three schools reported feeling invisible and unsupported; in the fourth, a learner described feeling loved and cared for, with a sense of belonging. All four

schools operated under the same policy and were designated full-service inclusive schools. The distinguishing factor was not resources but the nature of leadership.

South Africa has committed to inclusive education for 25 years, and Education *White Paper 6* (Department of Education [DoE], 2001) made that constitutional promise concrete, stating that every child, including those with disabilities, belongs in school and has the right to genuine inclusion. This is significant in a country whose education system was deliberately engineered to exclude. Apartheid schooling produced racial hierarchy, and the *Bantu Education Act* of 1953 redirected African schooling toward labor market subordination. By the early 1990s, 19 racially differentiated departments administered separate systems for African, Coloured, Indian, and White learners (DoE, 2001). Disabled learners were largely excluded from the professional development teachers received (Harber & Mncube, 2012). The teaching force that inherited the new democracy had been shaped by accountability structures built for racial control rather than professional trust. *White Paper 6* addressed the aspiration but not the institutional inheritance. Some schools manage genuine inclusion under the same policy and funding formula that leave others unchanged; the sections below examine whether resourcing accounts for that unevenness, and explore other explanations when it does not.

The South African Context

The historical and statistical material that follows serves a purpose beyond providing background; it functions as an explicit roadmap to the central argument of this article. Specifically, the discussion of the quintile funding system, the expansion of full-service schools, and persistent teacher-training gaps will each be directly linked to the core claim regarding the limitations of resourcing explanations. By tracing these strands to their implications for the implementation of inclusive education, this section clarifies where resource-based explanations suffice and where they fall short. In doing so, it establishes the contextual conditions grounding the argument that imported frameworks for inclusive education and leadership fail in South Africa because they presuppose conditions such as adequate infrastructure, comprehensive training, and systemic support that are not actually present.

South Africa's implementation gap sits within a larger global pattern in which 258 million children and youth worldwide are out of school, disproportionately girls and children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2019, as cited in Walton, 2023). The public education system in South Africa alone serves about 13 million learners across nearly 24,000 schools (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2023) and inherited apartheid-era inequalities through a quintile system that subsidises poorer schools (DBE, 2021). Former white urban schools retain substantial resource advantages while former homeland and township schools, mainly in Quintiles 1 to 3, operate with overcrowded classrooms, inadequate sanitation, and high teacher vacancy rates (Chikoko et al., 2015). These material inequalities are acknowledged, but they alone do not explain the implementation gap.

Since *White Paper 6*'s (DoE, 2021) introduction, full-service schools increased from 30 to 832 (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2023), yet up to 70% of children with disabilities remain out of school, with an estimated 2.5 million children aged five and older living with disabilities

(Statistics South Africa, 2025). Decades after *White Paper 6* (DoE, 2021), principals and departmental heads continue to conflate inclusive education with disability provision (Equal Education Law Centre [EELC], 2021), and the stressors Engelbrecht (2006) identified, such as inadequate training, absent support structures, and role overload, continue to persist today. The normative explanation for the implementation gap includes a lack of resources, trained teachers, support staff, and accessible facilities. I argue that a lack of resources does not explain the recurring failure in schools that have received resources and undergone reform, nor why a few schools achieve inclusion without waiting for systemic change, even while lacking adequate resources. Walton (2023) reviews the standard international explanations for failing inclusive education related to inadequate teacher education, lack of resources, negative attitudes, and policy-practice gaps, arguing these describe surface-level symptoms rather than the “real” problem; a deeper structural infrastructure is needed for genuine knowledge and identity inclusion. She builds her argument by applying Basil Bernstein's sociological concept of classification to the existing global literature on why inclusive education stalls, rather than collecting new data. Her method is conceptual argumentation, not empirical research. The article takes a parallel but distinct route from this one, as the link is not shared data or shared setting; it is a shared diagnosis reached through two different theoretical routes, substituting an epistemological account grounded in Ubuntu for Walton's (2023) structural classification analysis, while sharing her conclusion that resourcing explanations, however dominant in the literature, are not sufficient on their own.

White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education & Training System

White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) draws on the *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994) to reframe disability as barriers created by institutions rather than deficits in individuals, departing from apartheid-era special education's medical model (Engelbrecht et al., 2015). The full-service school model was designed incrementally (DBE, 2010), but *White Paper 6* never specified how school leaders should cultivate that capacity. The *Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support* (SIAS) policy (DBE, 2014) shows the same problem; only 6.7% of teachers have since received SIAS training (EELC, 2021). *White Paper 6* carries no force of law and no dedicated funding stream. The EELC's (2021) audit found 77% of districts are insufficiently resourced to support full-service schools, turning South Africa's 2007 ratification of the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006) into a human rights accountability failure.

I argue that the professional challenge stems from a system where teachers were trained for racial differentiation, where professional identity and relations look more like control than trust (Harber & Mncube, 2012), and where mainstream teachers have little contact with learners with disabilities, so expecting them to lead inclusive classrooms remains an unfulfilled and unrealistic demand (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). As illustrated in this article, a small number of schools depart from this pattern not because of exceptional resources but because of how professional relationships work. It recurs across sites with different demographics, resource levels, and local histories, suggesting a shared challenge rather than isolated instances of individual skill. Naming what is required for successful inclusive practices means moving past a compliance framing,

inclusion as a checklist, and toward asking how professional authority, knowledge, and accountability are actually distributed inside a school. South Africa's teaching workforce, trained under a hierarchy that rewarded compliance, has had comparatively little institutional support for developing that distribution, precisely why the schools that manage it deserve closer theoretical attention than the literature has so far given them.

Purpose and Approach

Schools where inclusion is realised are not simply applying existing inclusive frameworks more effectively. They build leadership on communal trust rather than positional authority, treat teachers' existing knowledge as the primary professional resource, and hold governing bodies and districts accountable for the structural conditions inclusion requires (Kramer, 2023; Naicker, 2015; Nkambule, 2023; Ramango & Naicker, 2022). These practices exist but remain unrecognised and unnamed as the basis of an alternative framework. Given the policy problem identified above, I ask a two-pronged research question: *Why does South Africa's implementation gap in inclusive education persist across reform cycles, and what leadership orientations fostering teacher capacity, already present but unrecognised in South African schools, could address this gap?*

The argument in this article develops through an interpretive synthesis of empirical and theoretical sources, drawing on a deliberately asymmetric source base comprised of a small, focused set of empirical studies on South African school leadership and teacher professional identity, alongside a larger body of theoretical and conceptual literature. This asymmetry is intentional, reflecting limited but focused empirical documentation alongside the need for theory to articulate these practices. Sources were located through Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus, combining terms for inclusive education, school leadership, teacher professional identity, and Ubuntu with South Africa and other Global South and sub-Saharan African contexts, restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles from the last decade while retaining foundational older sources where a concept originated there. Studies were selected for relevance and methodological rigour, favouring peer-reviewed, qualitative, case-based work, with seminal studies from closely related African or Global South contexts. A limitation follows from the empirical base's limited size and geographic scope, since findings may not translate directly to all South African contexts.

This article's claims rest on analytic rather than statistical generalisation (Yin, 2018), with the South African evidence base treated as theoretically instructive cases rather than a representative sample, closer to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call "transferability" rather than "generalisability". The article does not claim that concepts found in the theory section, such as "relational professional authority", "situated knowing", "and collective accountability", appear in fixed proportion across South African schools, only that the studies examined describe them consistently and independently enough to treat the pattern as theoretically stable rather than coincidental. Whether the pattern travels to an unexamined context is a judgement left to readers working in it.

Table 1

Sources Cited, by Type

Category	n	Role in the argument
South African empirical studies	19	Core evidentiary base for relational professional authority, situated knowing, and collective accountability (e.g., Mbelu, 2025; Naicker, 2015; Nkambule, 2023)
Theoretical, conceptual, and international/comparative literature	31	Establishes the contingency of dominant frameworks and grounds the Ubuntu and decolonial argument
Policy, government, and statistical sources	9	Establishes South Africa’s policy history, funding structure, and disability-education data

Literature Review

This review draws on three bodies of literature to build the case for an alternative inclusive approach. The first examines “dominant Western leadership frameworks” (e.g., transformational, distributed, instructional) that have been shown to work best for inclusive education. Yet, establishing their effectiveness is “contingent” on specific conditions such as sustained tenure, trust, and structural stability, which South African schools do not have. The second turns to “Global South” evidence that reveals both patterns of failure and contextually grounded successes, including within South Africa. The third examines “principal preparation and policy transfer”, showing how the frameworks imported to fill *White Paper 6*’s (DoE, 2001) leadership vacuum reproduced rather than resolved the mismatch.

The Contingency of Dominant Leadership Approaches

Dominant inclusive leadership approaches show positive results in Western educational contexts, but only where the right conditions the approaches themselves do not create already exist (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Leithwood’s (2021) review of 63 studies found equitable outcomes required sustained tenure, genuine trust building, and structural conditions that allowed practices to take hold. Li et al.’s (2024) *Teaching and Learning International Survey* (TALIS) analysis found distributed leadership increased teacher workload and stress across multiple countries rather than reducing them. Chaaban et al.’s (2025) systematic review of 124 studies establishes that this pattern is not incidental. Western dominance is a structural feature of educational leadership research on social justice, a gap this article’s Ubuntu-grounded framework responds to. None of these frameworks claim universal applicability in their original formulations; universalism is an artifact of policy transfer, models travelling into contexts like South Africa stripped of the conditions their originating studies assumed were already in place (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). The critique here is not of Leithwood or collaborators, but of a transfer process that treats context-

bound findings as portable. These studies are cited as corroborating evidence for specific claims, not adopted as the article's analytic framework. Ubuntu supplies that framework throughout. This empirical tradition documents principals struggling to enact inclusive reforms faithfully without asking whether the reform fits their context, the question DeMatthews et al. (2021) and Theoharis (2008) leave unexamined. South Africa's failure is not a failure to apply these frameworks correctly; rather, it is a failure of frameworks whose effectiveness depends on conditions that have never existed there. Distributed, transformational, and instructional leadership share this dependency. Distributed leadership builds shared ownership, and the trust and inclusion depend on it, but accountability can diffuse across so many actors that no one carries it (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Leithwood, 2021). Transformational leadership builds vision and motivation but rarely redistributes resources on its own (Leithwood, 2021). Instructional leadership strengthens pedagogy and disability inclusion when paired with differentiation, but its focus on classroom practice leaves structural conditions unaddressed (Hallinger, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). All three assume the tenure, trust, and structural stability Leithwood's own review found necessary and South Africa cannot supply.

Opoku's (2023) heuristic leadership model for low-income sub-Saharan Africa asks this suitability question directly, and this article builds on it, explaining why imported frameworks fail, grounding the alternative in Ubuntu, and treating the teaching workforce's knowledge as a resource. One further gap is worth naming. Leithwood's (2021) and Li et al.'s (2024) findings measure success largely through teacher-centred outcomes rather than student learning or belonging directly. This article treats that as an argument rather than a limitation, since student success depends on teachers' professional conditions and how they respond under different leadership orientations to reach students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Goddard et al., 2000); Mbelu's (2025) learner-voiced data supply student-outcome evidence. The study drew on interviews and focus groups with principals, department heads, and teachers at the same sites, and its findings align across these groups, where three of the four schools showed a consistent pattern of unmet need. Teacher-centred outcome measures capture whether a leadership approach changes how teachers describe their work, but cannot show whether that change reaches the learners the policy exists to serve; the gap Mbelu's (2025) data close by locating the outcome in learners' own accounts of belonging.

Culturally responsive leadership sits apart from this cluster. Where distributed, transformational, and instructional leadership treat context as a background condition for implementation, culturally responsive leadership treats context as the substance of the work. It requires leaders to interrogate their own assumptions and treat the knowledge of minoritised communities as authoritative rather than supplementary (Khalifa, 2018). This is closer in spirit to the Ubuntu-grounded framework this article develops than the frameworks critiqued above, but the two are not interchangeable. Culturally responsive leadership emerged from and remains grounded in the racial and institutional dynamics of United States schooling (Khalifa, 2018). Its attention to minoritised knowledge does not by itself supply the collective, relational epistemology Ubuntu provides, nor does it address the tenure security, trust, and structural stability that South African schools lack. Ubuntu-informed relational-communal leadership treats authority as

relational rather than positional and accountability as collective rather than individual (Naicker, 2015; Nkambule, 2023), the orientation this article takes forward.

Global South Evidence: Patterns of Failure and Contextually Grounded Success

The comparative material in this section highlights South Africa's implementation gap not as a local anomaly but as an instance of a wider structural pattern. Substantive classroom inclusion has not followed enrolment gains in India (Singal, 2019), while principals in Nepal produced measurable inclusive outcomes through humility and genuine community connection rather than positional power, despite limited resources (Dhakal et al., 2023). The common thread is not a particular program but a theory of leadership that builds the relational and epistemological conditions within which teachers and learners can work together, rather than assuming those conditions already exist (Opoku, 2023). The India and Nepal cases (Singal, 2019), drawn from unrelated national histories and resourcing conditions, illustrate that this is not a local artifact of South Africa's history but a wider pattern in how leadership models travel across contexts.

South African schools offer their own body of positive evidence. Naicker's (2015) study found that where principals enacted Ubuntu values, teachers described a changed professional standing, their knowledge was actively sought, decisions were made collectively, and authority was derived from communal commitment. Nkambule's (2023) and Kramer's (2023) Western Cape study found the orientation held across dramatically different material conditions, grounded in a theory of leadership's purpose rather than resources. Edwards et al.'s (2023) study of two Ekurhuleni secondary schools found that principals whose staff identified honesty, trust, and respect as lived values presided over more inclusive cultures and stronger outcomes for marginalised learners. Together, these studies span primary and secondary schools, urban and rural settings, and principal, departmental head, and learner perspectives, and converge on one finding. Leadership grounded in communal trust rather than position produces inclusion where imported frameworks have not. Ramango and Naicker (2022) identify shared purpose, professional trust, and distributed accountability as the conditions sustaining relational orientation beyond individual principals, echoing Leithwood's (2021) sustained tenure, trust, and structural stability. The difference is in what grounds them. Leithwood's conditions are prerequisites the system must supply, while Ramango and Naicker's are relational achievements principals and teams actively build, consistent with the Ubuntu-grounded orientation this article develops.

Principal Preparation and Policy Transfer

When *White Paper 6* (DoE, 2001) created a leadership vacuum, governments engaged in policy borrowing, invoking international standards not because they worked in the receiving context but because adopting them was a political move to stay current with Western education (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). South Africa's *Advanced Certificate in Education* school leadership program followed this pattern, a nationally standardised qualification drawing on Western leadership models that could not address the epistemological mismatch it was designed to solve (Bush et al., 2011); the *Advanced Diploma in Education* that replaced it revealed the same

mismatch. Together, these three bodies of literature establish that “dominant Western frameworks” cannot themselves produce the conditions their effectiveness requires, that “Global South” evidence shows failure is structural except where schools work from relational, contextually grounded practice, and that the frameworks imported to fill *White Paper 6*’s (DoE, 2001) leadership vacuum failed. The next section names that framework.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework developed here does more than name the leadership orientations the literature review found already present but unrecognised in South African schools; it builds the analytical apparatus itself, working through the tensions that leave any one tradition, used alone, incomplete. The three traditions operate at different levels of the same problem. “Decolonial epistemology” names the underlying issue, asking which knowledge a system treats as legitimate. “Culturally responsive leadership” translates that epistemic claim into a claim about practice, specifying what centring marginalised knowledge looks like operationally. “Ubuntu” supplies the relational mechanism through which centring becomes achievable in the South African cases, specifically, communal trust, interdependence, and authority derived from demonstrated commitment rather than position.

Decolonial Epistemology

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) shows how frameworks presented as universal encode the conditions of the systems that produced them, while Fataar (2018) argues that decolonising education means asking whose knowledge is considered legitimate. Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2018) own framework distinguishes colonality of knowledge from colonality of power, the latter naming how institutions distribute authority and decide whose expertise counts. Leadership is precisely where this operates, deciding whose professional judgement is trusted. In leadership theory, as in curriculum, what is presented as universal is provincial knowledge not yet named as such (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Fataar’s (2018) legitimacy question remains the connective tissue by asking: “Whose knowledge counts as legitimate?”

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Khalifa et al. (2016) specify concrete practices that include leaders critically reflecting on their own cultural position, building curricula and professional development around the knowledge students and teachers already bring, engaging the surrounding community rather than managing it, and treating cultural and racial identity as an asset rather than a deficit to accommodate. Unlike transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership, culturally responsive leadership prescribes no specific content, only responsiveness to whichever culture a school operates within. The dominant frameworks travel badly because they carry fixed content built for conditions South African schools do not have; culturally responsive leadership carries none to begin with, so the question is not whether it fits, but what fills it. To illustrate, the same underspecified-by-design

structure is found in Indigenous Māori relational pedagogy, which specifies “whanaungatanga” and kinship obligation as the local content (Bishop et al., 2014). Traditions such as these do not borrow each other’s content; each supplies the local answer to the same structural question, and this article argues Ubuntu supplies South Africa’s.

Ubuntu

“Ubuntu”, then, is the third tradition, captured in the Nguni phrase “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, “a person is a person through other persons”, placing relational interdependence, communal responsibility, and community’s role in forming identity at the centre of professional life (Letseka, 2012). Ubuntu is not a South African version of culturally responsive leadership but a parallel tradition with its own genealogy and political history, and three tensions matter for how it is used here (Akabor & Phasha, 2022). A full critique of Ubuntu philosophy is beyond this article’s scope, but a brief discussion of its tensions illustrates how an existing local leadership orientation can strengthen an inclusive framework. Some of the main criticisms of Ubuntu highlight how collective harmony can still suppress dissent and reinforce power hierarchies. Furthermore, as an Nguni tradition, it does not speak equally for all of South Africa’s linguistically diverse teaching force (Maphalala & Nkosi, 2025), and its understanding of professional identity as formed through community sits in tension with inclusive education policy’s individual rights framework. These tensions do not make Ubuntu unusable, only that careful use is necessary. Accordingly, “relational professional authority” here requires that teachers’ judgement visibly changes decisions, not merely that teachers are consulted, a check against Ubuntu functioning as compliance dressed in relational language. This article therefore treats Ubuntu as the primary but not the only legitimate relational vocabulary, and positions it as a claim about how professional authority and trust are built in daily practice.

Implications of the Three Commitments: Locating the Mismatches

Three mismatches run through the implementation-inclusive policy gap this article examines, each between what dominant leadership frameworks assume about teachers and what South African teachers actually experience. These frameworks, developed mainly outside Africa and imported into South African teacher preparation and school leadership policy, assume a professional who works as an individual, receives knowledge from outside the classroom, and operates within stable structural conditions. South African teachers work under different conditions. Professional identity forms through relationships rather than individually. The knowledge most needed in the classroom is generated inside practice rather than delivered to it. And the structural conditions dominant leadership theory takes for granted, such as sustained tenure, devolved authority, and protected time, are largely absent from South African schools. Three commitments respond to this gap, one to each mismatch. “Relational professional authority” answers the first, an “epistemology of situated knowing” answers the second, and “collective accountability” for structural conditions answers the third. These three follow directly from the

three levels of mismatch just identified, “ontological”, “epistemological”, and “structural”, which in turn mirror the article’s three literature strands, “dominant frameworks”, “Global South evidence”, and “principal preparation and policy transfer”. The dominant-frameworks strand documents the ontological assumption that professional identity is individual, the Global South strand documents the epistemological pattern of knowledge imported rather than generated in practice, and the principal-preparation and policy-transfer strand documents the structural conditions these frameworks assumed but South African schools were never given. Together they describe what schools already achieving genuine inclusion are doing differently. These schools are not applying imported frameworks more effectively; they are working from a different premise about where professional capacity comes from (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018).

Relational Professional Authority

The first mismatch is “ontological”, as dominant frameworks treat teachers as discrete individuals who bring knowledge to collaborative activity. At the same time, Ubuntu and culturally responsive leadership propose that professional identity forms through communal relations, shifting attention to building the communal conditions within which capacity develops (Khalifa et al., 2016). Khalifa et al. (2016) trace this pattern across four recurring practices with critical self-reflection on cultural position, community-engaged curriculum building, culturally inclusive school environments, and outward-facing community advocacy. Setlhodi (2019) found principals enacting communal practices such as “letsema”, the tradition of neighbours pooling labour, to build the trust an inclusive school depends on.

It is worth noting that Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) three-year study of 12 Chicago elementary schools found that relational trust, not individual authority, distinguished schools capable of sustained improvement. Baxter and Ehren’s (2023) study of eight South African primary schools reaches the same conclusion within this context. Uhl-Bien (2006) makes a parallel claim in organisational leadership theory more broadly, that leadership is a social-relational process rather than an individual attribute, developed independently of Ubuntu but reaching a similar conclusion through a separate route. These studies are used only to show that other researchers, working separately and in different settings, found the same thing, that relational trust matters more than individual authority. The same pattern holds in research linking collective teacher efficacy to student achievement (Goddard et al., 2000) and in social justice scholarship reframing relational trust as professional accountability (Ryan, 2006).

Furthermore, Walton (2023) applies Bernstein’s idea of classification to explain this problem. Inclusive education breaks down whenever rigid lines separate groups that inclusion needs to bring together, and working together across those lines is what loosens the divide. This idea overlaps closely with what this article terms relational professional authority despite differing vocabulary. Bernstein’s work on educational knowledge, Ubuntu philosophy, and decolonial thought come from entirely separate traditions, yet intersect on the same root cause. The problem lies in who a system treats as a legitimate source of knowledge, not in what resources it hands out. “Relational professional authority” proposes something built through communal relations, trust, mutual obligation, and shared accountability; when leaders work from within the relational norms of their communities, teachers exercise genuine professional agency rather than compliance.

Naicker's (2015) study provides the clearest South African illustration: teachers described changed professional standing as their practical knowledge was actively sought, decisions were made collectively, and authority was derived from demonstrated commitment to the community. Kramer's (2023) Western Cape study extended this same orientation to a different provincial setting. Setlhodi's (2019) ethnographic study of Ubuntu-inspired leadership found principals invoking communal practices such as "letsema" to build the trust and social cohesion schools relied on for improvement, converging on the same relational orientation. Setlhodi's (2019) findings, introduced above, extend to the trust and social cohesion schools relied on for improvement, converging on the same relational orientation. Chibaya and Gcelu (2026) capture this interdependence by stressing that trust without Ubuntu produces compliance contingent on the principal's presence, and without trust relational language becomes performative without the structural support needed to make it real. "Relational professional authority" is visible in practice when a teacher's judgement changes a decision, not merely when the teacher is consulted. Ramango and Naicker (2022) illustrate the normative alternative, when teachers comply, and the district still records success because what has been distributed is administrative responsibility, not professional authority. Of concern is that knowledge from African-language teachers, teachers from rural and township communities, and teachers with disabilities is absent and excluded.

Epistemology of Situated Knowing

The second mismatch is "epistemological". Dominant frameworks assume professional knowledge is generated externally and delivered through continuing professional development, positioning teachers as recipients. At the same time, an "epistemology of situated knowing" treats the knowledge teachers develop in their classrooms and communities as the primary resource external research still needs, consistent with Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory that knowledge is constructed through participation in communities of practice rather than transmitted from outside them. This is the epistemological analogue to what Walton (2023) calls pedagogical insulation, the boundary a system draws between externally validated knowledge and knowledge generated in practice, a boundary she argues collaboration weakens. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework supports this claim that continuing professional development begins with the knowledge already existing in practice rather than its replacement by something external. In most South African professional development programs, knowledge flows one way, from the university, curriculum documents, or external facilitators down to the teacher. An "epistemology of situated knowing" reverses this, treating that knowledge as a resource rather than a deficit, and is visible in practice when professional development sessions begin with teachers' documented classroom knowledge rather than an externally set agenda. In South Africa, Nkambule's (2023) study provides direct evidence, where departmental leaders who drew on Ubuntu values to frame knowledge sharing saw teachers engage in collective responsibility and develop professional voice, and build professional learning communities around situated knowing, providing a space for diverse teacher knowledge to be visible and operative. Without this framing, teacher roles become sites of subordination, and Ubuntu's continued absence from formal teacher preparation leaves educators unprepared for multicultural classrooms (Mashiane-Nkabinde & Nkambule, 2025). The knowledge most needed in South African classrooms includes culturally

and linguistically situated understanding of learners' contexts, language, and community, and is held most fully by teachers from those communities and least recognised by the professional development frameworks meant to develop them.

This is not a rejection of external expertise. University researchers, curriculum specialists, and departmental facilitators hold knowledge South African teachers need, but that knowledge functions best as a resource teachers draw on to extend what they already know about their learners, language, and community, not as a replacement. Nkambule's (2023) departmental leaders did not discard external frameworks; they used Ubuntu values to decide which parts of those frameworks were worth adopting and which were not.

Collective Accountability for Structural Conditions

The third mismatch is "structural". Dominant leadership frameworks assume conditions such as psychological safety, genuine authority devolution, and protected professional learning time, conditions that South Africa's accountability structure actively prevents. Leithwood's (2021) findings that equitable outcomes require sustained tenure, trust, and structural stability describe exactly what South African schools lack. Du Plessis and Heystek (2020) note that holding principals individually accountable for institutional performance creates a high professional risk against devolving authority. Mthembu and Bhengu (2025) found accountability sessions in two South African education districts ran in one direction only, principals reported upward while districts offered little reciprocal support, and argue that a shift toward genuinely reciprocal accountability is both needed and feasible. Mbelu (2025) documents one consequence directly, a school denying admission to learners with disabilities because NNESSF funding was insufficient for the resources their inclusion required. The result is what Msila (2014) and Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2018) call policy mimicry, and reform forms are adopted while the conditions that would make inclusion real are never established.

Finally, the first two commitments can build professional authority and develop situated knowing within individual teachers and teams, but without "structural accountability", that capacity remains fragile. When the principal moves on, funding changes, or the district imposes a new compliance cycle, the conditions that sustained professional growth disappear. "Collective accountability" converts individual school-level capacity development into a system-level condition, with governing bodies, district, and provincial departments taking co-equal responsibility for creating the conditions inclusive education requires, visible in practice when district and provincial reporting includes measures of the structural conditions schools were given, not only school-level compliance. Without this, the first two commitments become professional voluntarism, asking individual practitioners to change practice within structural conditions that make it impossible to sustain. When African-language teachers, teachers with disabilities, and teachers from marginalised communities experience occupational burnout, DeMatthews et al. (2025) argue this is an environmental outcome, not an individual resilience failure. District and provincial accountability for accessible working conditions is a structural condition for belonging, not a wellbeing program. Structural accountability is, at root, an epistemological question, since which conditions a district measures determines whose judgement counts as evidence of success, so reporting only compliance quietly re-imports the assumption decolonial epistemology names as

the underlying problem. Taken together, the three commitments reframe teacher diversity. Where dominant literature treats diversity as a management challenge, this article argues diverse teacher knowledge is the primary resource without which a contextually adequate leadership framework will fail.

Conclusion

This article set out to explain why South Africa's inclusive education implementation gap persists across well-resourced reform cycles, and to identify what leadership orientations could address it. A review of "dominant Western leadership frameworks", "Global South" evidence, and South African "principal preparation" showed that imported models fail because they assume conditions such as sustained tenure, trust, and structural stability, conditions South African schools do not have, answering why the gap persists even when resourcing is adequate. Building on "decolonial epistemology", "culturally responsive leadership", and "Ubuntu philosophy", the article developed three commitments, "relational professional authority", "an epistemology of situated knowing", and "collective accountability for structural conditions". It located them empirically in a small set of South African schools already practicing them without institutional recognition. The implementation gap in South Africa reflects both a resource deficit and an epistemological mismatch. The resource deficit is real, but the epistemological mismatch is what explains why reform cycles have reproduced the same failure patterns.

Some may contend that emphasising leadership orientations risks overlooking the profound impact of material investments, or assert that resource constraints alone sufficiently explain the implementation gap. However, while acknowledging the importance of resources, the recurring failure in some well-resourced schools, alongside the success of others operating with fewer supports, calls into question the adequacy of a solely materialist account. Others might argue that imported frameworks can be successfully adapted to local contexts. Yet, as the evidence indicates, without confronting and reconceptualising foundational assumptions about knowledge, authority, and professional identity, such adaptation is likely to remain only superficial. This analysis signals a broader policy and practical implication. Effective inclusive education reform in South Africa requires both adequate material resources and a fundamental shift in the epistemological and relational foundations that underpin school leadership.

The three commitments named above answer the research question directly: *Why does South Africa's implementation gap in inclusive education persist across reform cycles, and what leadership orientations fostering teacher capacity, already present but unrecognised in South African schools, could address this gap?* But they respond to a policy failure with a specific history. *White Paper 6* (DoE, 2001) established a sound aspiration that its own implementation structure could not deliver, leaving unspecified a model of school leadership adequate to the context. The frameworks imported to fill that gap carried assumptions about professional identity, knowledge, and authority that did not match conditions South African teachers actually inhabit, conditions the apartheid system had actively prevented them from developing.

The three commitments address what resource investment alone cannot. They are not aspirations; a small number of studies document them in South African schools, but the empirical

base is too limited to establish their widespread prevalence. These studies should be understood as theoretically instructive cases rather than evidence of generalisable trends (Chibaya & Gcelu, 2026; Kramer, 2023; Naicker, 2015; Nkambule, 2023). Because these studies often support multiple commitments rather than validating each independently, the three commitments are best read as interconnected aspects of a single documented pattern, not yet integrated into principal frameworks and not yet verifiable across the country's approximately 24,000 schools without further research.

The agent of change is not a single principal but the teaching workforce as a collective, supported by researchers naming what teachers already do, principal preparation programs treating Ubuntu-grounded practice as curriculum, and district and provincial structures held accountable for the conditions under which that practice becomes systemic. Epistemological change is generational, already happening quietly in the schools this article cites, and the system's task is to recognise it rather than design around it. What the learner in KwaZulu-Natal described as feeling loved and cared for is not an unreachable outcome, though whether it can be produced reliably at scale remains untested. Two concrete policy steps are recommended. First, principal preparation programs should include a mandatory practicum in Ubuntu-grounded leadership, built through partnerships with schools that already demonstrate this practice. Second, district accountability frameworks should include explicit indicators for relational professional authority and collective decision making, so South Africa can move from recognising pockets of inclusive practice to sustaining and scaling them.

None of this implies that resourcing is irrelevant. A school without functioning sanitation, enough classrooms, or a stable teaching staff cannot build the relational conditions this article describes, regardless of how its leadership is oriented, and the material inequalities documented above remain a legitimate and urgent policy target. The claim is narrower. Resourcing reform without epistemological reform will keep producing the pattern this article opened with, four schools under one policy, three failing and one succeeding, because money alone cannot supply what the fourth school's leadership supplied. Both reforms are necessary. Only one of them currently has a name.

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The Role of Policy in Shaping School Leaders' Capacity to Develop Inclusive Teaching Practice in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how Saudi national policy instruments shape school leaders' capacity to develop inclusive teaching practice for learners with disabilities. While inclusive leadership is often analysed as school-level behaviour, leaders' scope for strengthening mainstream classroom inclusion is conditioned by policy texts that allocate responsibility, authorise procedures, and define accountability. Using UNESCO's (2005) four-element conception of inclusion as an analytic lens, the study applies qualitative content analysis to two instruments that most directly govern leaders' daily work in Saudi public schools: the Saudi School Leadership Standards (ETEC, 2020) and the Regulatory Guide for General Education Schools (MoE, 2025b), read alongside Saudi Vision 2030 (2021) and the Rights of People with Disabilities (The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023). The analysis identifies a consistent pattern: the policy corpus enables leaders administratively—through specialist roles, referral routes, resourcing, and monitoring—while constraining them pedagogically by not constructing inclusive classroom practice as a whole-school responsibility. Review structures are largely confined to schools already hosting disability programs; developing general teachers' inclusive practice is delegated to specialist staff; and the Standards target gifted learners but not learners with disabilities, despite their role in licensure. The study shows that policy “alignment” can still produce implementation gaps when rights-based commitments sit in higher-order texts while specialist-managed framings dominate operational instruments.

Key words: Inclusive education, disability, school leadership, policy enactment, Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central commitment in contemporary education reform, driven by global rights frameworks and growing expectations that schools ensure equitable participation and achievement for all learners. Yet the practical realisation of inclusion depends not only on values or declarations, but also on how systems translate these commitments into the everyday work of schools (United Nations, 2006, 2016; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2005). In this context, school leadership is routinely positioned as pivotal: leaders are expected to organise resources, develop teacher capacity, and build the cultures and routines through which inclusive teaching is sustained (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Ainscow, 2024; Cardno, 2018; Cobb, 2015). However, leaders do not act in a vacuum. Their room to lead, especially their ability to develop teachers' inclusive classroom practice, is shaped by national policy instruments that allocate responsibilities, authorise procedures, and define the organisational supports and accountabilities available in schools (Ball, 2011; Hayes & Bulat, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2004; Madhesh, 2023).

In Saudi Arabia, inclusive education is situated within a reform environment that combines a strong normative foundation with a rapidly evolving policy architecture. Education policy is grounded in Islamic principles of dignity and non-discrimination (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2026; see §2.1). At the same time, national reform is articulated through Vision 2030, which foregrounds quality, transparency, and improved outcomes (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021). Saudi Arabia has also aligned itself with international commitments, including the Salamanca Statement and the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD) (Madhesh, 2023; Ragmoun & Alfalih, 2024; United Nations, 2006, 2016). These higher-order commitments are reinforced in national texts such as the Ministry of Education's 2016–2020 Education Strategy and the *Rights of People with Disabilities* (MoE, 2019, 2025a; The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023), which frame inclusion in rights-based terms and emphasise the removal of barriers across educational environments (UNESCO, 2005; United Nations, 2006, 2016).

Despite these commitments, research both internationally and within Arab systems repeatedly points to a familiar problem: the distance between policy aspiration and school-level enactment (Barak et al., 2021; Ghamrawi, 2025; Hayes & Bulat, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2004). Policy can enable inclusive practice by clarifying responsibilities, resourcing professional learning, and creating robust accountability for participation and progress (Ainscow, 2020; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020). Equally, policy can constrain inclusion when guidance is narrow, responsibilities are displaced onto specialists, or accountability focuses on compliance rather than teaching and learning (Ball, 2011; Duncan et al., 2020; Madhesh, 2019). Ball (2011) and Madhesh (2019) similarly suggest that policy's most consequential effects arise not in high-level statements of intent but in the operational and evaluative instruments that structure daily work. In the Arab region, Ghamrawi's (2025) analysis of fragmented reform further highlights how leadership agendas can be undermined by gaps between standard-setting and implementation conditions.

These tensions are visible in the Saudi case, but they have not been examined closely in relation to the most recent policy instruments that directly govern school leaders. Existing Saudi-focused scholarship has often concentrated either on the broad alignment of national frameworks with international standards or on practitioners' experiences of inclusion in schools (Alharbi & Madhesh, 2018; Alothman, 2014; Alsalem & Alzahrani, 2023; Alshahrani, 2018; Alsolami, 2024; Madhesh, 2023). Comparatively less attention has been paid to how the policy texts themselves construct disability-inclusive schooling and, through those constructions, shape what school leaders are expected and permitted to do to build inclusive teaching across mainstream classrooms (Barak et al., 2021; Ghamrawi, 2025). This gap matters because the way policy assigns responsibility for inclusion, specifies legitimate procedures, and embeds (or omits) mechanisms for teacher development directly affects leaders' capacity to make inclusion a whole-school pedagogical project rather than a specialist program (Ainscow, 2020, 2024; Hayes & Bulat, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2004).

To address this gap, this study asks: *How do Saudi national policies construct inclusive education for learners with disabilities in ways that enable, or constrain, school leaders' efforts to develop inclusive practice in schools?*

The study adopts UNESCO's (2005) *Guidelines for Inclusion* as its theoretical framework, defining inclusion through four interlocking commitments: 1) inclusion as a continual process of responding to diversity; 2) the identification and removal of barriers; 3) the presence, participation, and achievement of all students; and 4) particular attention to groups at risk of marginalisation (Ainscow, 2005; UNESCO, 2005). Methodologically, it employs qualitative content analysis of two instruments that most directly structure leaders' work in Saudi public schools: the Saudi School Leadership Standards (Education and Training Evaluation Commission [ETEC], 2020) and the *Regulatory Guide for General Education Schools: Goals and Tasks Guide* (MoE, 2025b), read in relation to Vision 2030 and the *Rights of People with Disabilities* (MoE, 2019, 2025a; Saudi Vision 2030, 2021; The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023).

By analysing how these texts distribute responsibility, support, and accountability for inclusion, the study contributes to inclusive leadership scholarship in two ways. First, it shifts attention from leadership practice alone to the policy conditions that enable or restrict leaders' pedagogical influence (Ball, 2011; Madhesh, 2019). Second, it provides an empirically grounded account of how rights-based commitments may be weakened or redirected when translated into operational guidance and professional standards (Barak et al., 2021; Duncan et al., 2020). The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: the next section situates inclusive education and leadership within the Saudi and regional reform context and reviews relevant literature on policy enactment; the methodology section outlines the document corpus and analytic approach; the findings section presents the analysis organised around UNESCO's (2005) four elements; and the concluding section draws implications for policy, leadership practice, and future research on enactment.

Literature Review

The Saudi Context

Saudi Arabia, officially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is an absolute monarchy governed under the Basic Law, with legitimacy drawn from the Quran, Sunnah, and Islamic Law (Al-Aoufi et al., 2012). The Kingdom has a population exceeding 32 million, of whom approximately 1.5 million hold a recognised disability (General Authority for Statistics of Saudi Arabia, 2022). General education spans public, special, private, and international sectors, all regulated by the Ministry of Education, with around 82% of students enrolled in public schools (Encyclopaedia of Education in Saudi Arabia, 2019; MoE, 2025c). The system is predominantly gender-segregated, with only a small number of primary schools running integrated programs (MoE, 2025c).

Defining and Situating Inclusion in the Saudi Context

There is no single agreed definition of inclusion for Saudi educational settings (Madhesh, 2023), though it has been characterised as “actively and deliberately including students with additional needs into regular classroom settings, creating a welcoming and accessible learning environment that meets the various needs of all students” (Alsolami, 2024, p. 361). National policy frames inclusion as a climate of fairness, acceptance, and respect in which all students are valued members of the learning community (MoE, 2019, 2025a), and the *Rights of People with Disabilities* affirm learners’ right to inclusive, non-discriminatory educational services, including adapted curricula, training, and technologies (The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023). These commitments align closely with the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006, 2016) and UNESCO’s (2005) guidelines.

As discussed in the Introduction, this normative orientation is rooted in Islamic principles of dignity and non-discrimination and articulated through Saudi Vision 2030. National policy translates these values into specific administrative and governance requirements defining leaders’ roles, responsibilities, and permissible courses of action, a translation point at which the scope of school leaders’ work is shaped as noted in the *Regulatory Guide for Public Schools: A Guide to Goals and Tasks* (MoE, 2025b).

Policy as a Mechanism for Inclusion and the Role of School Leadership

Policies play a fundamental role in shaping education systems, and this is especially the case in matters of inclusion. As Ball (2011) argued, policy is never purely technical; it is entangled with interests, power relations, and questions of justice. Within education systems, policy frames governance arrangements, allocates responsibilities, authorises procedures, and directs resources, thereby influencing how equitable access and participation are defined and pursued (Madhesh, 2019). Inclusive education (IE) policy, in particular, has become a key mechanism through which states signal their commitments to equity and access for all learners, including those with disabilities (Ainscow, 2024). Yet a persistent challenge in the field concerns the distance between

policy aspirations and what becomes possible within schools, where inclusion must ultimately be enacted through organisational routines and the everyday work of professionals.

A core theme in international research is that inclusion is determined not simply by whether policy exists, but by how it is formulated and the kinds of discretion, guidance, and accountability it produces at different levels of the system (Ainscow, 2020). Policies may enable schools to respond to context-specific barriers by granting flexibility to adapt supports and reorder priorities, or they may constrain action through highly centralised procedures and demanding compliance expectations. Ainscow (2020) suggested that achieving greater equity depends in part on the capacity of school-level practitioners to interpret priorities locally and to make responsive decisions. Comparative work points in a similar direction, indicating that in some systems, school leaders are positioned to adjust aspects of curriculum and provision to address local needs, illustrating the potential of policy to authorise contextual responsiveness (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020).

Within this policy-to-school interface, leadership is repeatedly identified as pivotal. Inclusive school leaders are frequently positioned as key mediators who interpret policy requirements, organise resources, and translate system expectations into school-level priorities and routines (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Cobb, 2015). In this intermediary role, leaders' decisions can either facilitate or hinder the realisation of inclusion in schools (Cardno, 2018). Yet even where policy is framed around equity, its translation into school-level work is rarely straightforward. As Leithwood et al. (2004) observed, "there is generally a gulf between how policy elites understand educational reform and how practitioners understand it" (p. 33). Moustache and Makhoba (2024) found that limited support and unclear policy direction can leave teachers feeling isolated when trying to meet learners' needs. Related studies also report that such conditions are associated with inconsistent and often inadequate classroom practices, as teachers struggle to adapt teaching to diverse learners (Alshahrani & Abu-Alghayth, 2023; Moustache & Makhoba, 2024).

Hayes and Bulat (2017) have similarly emphasised that unclear policy guidelines and weak enforcement mechanisms create significant barriers to achieving inclusive education. Duncan et al. (2020), in a scoping review of Australian disability discrimination legislation, identified critical gaps between legal frameworks and their application in practice, including inconsistent interpretation of laws, unclear definitions of key terms, and reliance on complaints-driven enforcement systems that often failed to address systemic discrimination. Such findings underscore the importance of clear, actionable policies accompanied by robust mechanisms for accountability. Building on this concern, Barak et al. (2021) developed the concept of policy-practice decoupling, drawing attention to the ways formal policy expectations can become disconnected from what is actually enacted through organisational processes and professional routines.

Policy Enactment and Inclusion in the Arab and Saudi Contexts

These dynamics are far from unique to Western systems. Drawing on interviews with policymakers and focus groups with school leaders across seven Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, Ghamrawi (2025) identified a set of interconnected barriers to leadership policy enactment: culturally misaligned standardisation, limited stakeholder engagement, governance and resourcing constraints, fragmented reforms that foster superficial compliance, and leadership instability. Thus,

these findings highlight a persistent gap between policy aspirations and implementation realities, reinforcing the need to examine more closely how policy instruments themselves enable, or constrain, the work of school leaders (Ghamrawi, 2025).

A growing body of Saudi-focused scholarship echoes these concerns and locates them within national specificities. Several studies have identified systemic barriers that hinder the implementation of inclusive policies in the Kingdom. Alharbi and Madhesh (2018) and Alsalem and Alzahrani (2023) have argued for clearer local policies capable of moving the system beyond integration and toward genuine inclusion. Using a modified Bacchi approach, Alharbi and Madhesh (2018) examined Saudi Arabia's legislative and policy frameworks supporting inclusive education, focusing on the deployment of terms such as "rights", "integration", and "inclusion". Analysing key documents, including the Disability Law (The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023) and the *Regulatory Guide for Special Education* (MoE, 2016), they found alignment with international standards but noted slow progress toward meaningful inclusion, and they called for clearer, localised policies that prioritise the perspectives of students, families, and educators. Related scholarship has raised similar questions, suggesting that inclusion in Saudi schools is sometimes treated primarily as placement within mainstream settings rather than as systematic attention to barriers in teaching, learning, and participation (Allothman, 2014; Alshahrani, 2018; Madhesh, 2023). Studies discussing disability rights legislation more specifically have also asked how regulatory commitments are operationalised and experienced within educational settings (Alsalem, 2023; Alsolami, 2024).

The Research Gap

While this body of literature firmly establishes the importance of both policy and leadership in advancing inclusion (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Ainscow, 2024; Cardno, 2018; Cobb, 2015), it also reveals an underexplored space. Much existing research concentrates either on the broad alignment of Saudi frameworks with international standards (Alharbi & Madhesh, 2018; Alsalem & Alzahrani, 2023) or on the experiences of practitioners as they attempt to implement inclusive practice (Allothman, 2014; Alshahrani, 2018; Alsolami, 2024; Madhesh, 2023). Comparatively little attention has been paid to how the most recent national policy texts themselves construct disability-inclusive schooling and, through these constructions, shape the scope of what school leaders are expected and permitted to do (Barak et al., 2021; Ghamrawi, 2025). This matters because the way policy allocates responsibility for inclusion, defines legitimate procedures, and specifies, or leaves unspecified, the organisational and professional supports available to leaders has direct consequences for their capacity to develop teachers' inclusive classroom practice (Hayes & Bulat, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2004). Inclusive school leadership is most often studied as a set of school-level practices, yet leaders' actual scope for action is conditioned by national policy instruments that distribute responsibilities, authorise procedures, and prescribe organisational supports (Ainscow, 2020; Duncan et al., 2020). Examining these instruments directly, rather than inferring their effects from practice alone, offers a clearer view of how the policy environment enables or constrains inclusive leadership (Ball, 2011; Madhesh, 2019).

This study is particularly significant in light of the rapid evolution of the Saudi policy landscape. Recent instruments, including the *Regulatory Guide for Public Schools: A Guide to*

Goals and Tasks (MoE, 2025b), have introduced enforceable expectations and concrete organisational arrangements that postdate much of the existing analysis. Reading this text alongside the *Saudi School Leadership Standards* (ETEC, 2020) makes it possible to trace how Saudi policies construct the conditions of leaders' work, and to examine an emerging tension between two understandings of inclusion that coexist within the policy corpus: inclusion as rights-based barrier removal across systems, cultures, and practices, and inclusion as a set of specialist-managed procedures organised around assessment, diagnosis, eligibility, referral, and program management (Ainscow, 2024; MoE, 2025b; UNESCO, 2005). How these framings are distributed across policy texts has implications for whether leaders are equipped to treat inclusive pedagogy as a universal mainstream teaching responsibility or are steered toward narrower, compliance-oriented, specialist-bounded approaches.

By analytically foregrounding these policy instruments, rather than treating policy as mere context, this study clarifies how inclusion becomes actionable through the allocation of responsibility, authority, and accountability in formal texts (Ball, 2011; Madhesh, 2019). It thereby provides evidence for current reform, showing how recent instruments enable or constrain leaders' pedagogical work and informing efforts to align policy so that inclusive classroom teaching becomes a whole-school leadership responsibility, not a bounded specialist task (Ainscow, 2020, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts UNESCO's (2005) *Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All* as its theoretical framework. One of the most widely accepted international definitions of inclusive education, adopted in this study, is provided by UNESCO (2005, pp. 15–16) and similarly articulated by Ainscow (2005) in terms of four core elements. First, inclusion involves a continual process of finding better ways to respond to diversity. As Ainscow (2005) explained, inclusion requires continuous improvement in addressing diversity; it is about accepting and learning from differences and seeing difference as an opportunity to deepen learning rather than a problem to be solved (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow et al., 2003), entailing ongoing efforts to ensure that educational practices, policies, and attitudes remain responsive to the diverse needs of students. Second, inclusion focuses on identifying and eliminating barriers, emphasising that the right to inclusive education necessitates cultural, policy, and practical transformation across all educational environments in order to accommodate the diverse needs and identities of individual students (United Nations, 2006). Third, inclusion is concerned with the presence, active participation, and achievement of all students, implying that every student, regardless of disability or need, is viewed as an important and valued member of the general education classroom community (Theoharis et al., 2015). Fourth, inclusion places particular emphasis on groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion, or underachievement, including those populations vulnerable to disproportionate barriers without targeted support; in this case, students with special needs as the focus of this study.

This framework is well suited to answering the research question because it moves the analytic focus away from whether a system has adopted inclusive language, which Saudi Arabia

did early through its ratification of the Salamanca Statement and the UNCRPD (Madhesh, 2023; Ragmoun & Alfalih, 2024; Unified National Platform of Saudi Arabia, 2022), and toward how a system locates responsibility, authorises procedures, and distributes the organisational supports through which leaders build inclusion. The framework also allows the analysis to hold apart two competing conceptions of inclusion already visible in the Saudi corpus: a rights-based, whole-school conception, consistent with the definition adopted by Alsolami (2024) and the MoE (2019, 2025a), in which inclusion is barrier removal across cultures, systems, and everyday teaching; and a specialist-managed conception in which inclusion is a set of procedures organised around assessment, diagnosis, eligibility, referral, and program administration. Organising the discussion under the framework's four elements makes it possible to show not only that both conceptions are present, as Alharbi and Madhesh (2018) anticipated in their analysis of competing policy terminologies, but how they are distributed, and therefore which conception the policy environment actually equips leaders to pursue.

Methodology

Building on this framework, the study is guided by the following research question: *How do Saudi national policies construct inclusive education for learners with disabilities in ways that enable, or constrain, school leaders' efforts to develop inclusive practice in schools?*

Answering this question requires an approach capable of examining not only what policy texts say about inclusion, but how they distribute responsibility, authorise procedures, and allocate organisational support across the two conceptions of inclusion identified above. The following sections set out the research design, document corpus, and analytic procedure used to address this question, before turning to the coding frame through which the four elements of the theoretical framework were operationalised.

Research Design

To examine how inclusion is constructed across the national policy corpus, the study employs content analysis. The study of documents often necessitates a technique known as "content analysis" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), which entails a critical examination of both the explicit and implicit representations within textual materials (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Content analysis allows for the identification of core patterns or themes within the examined content (Clark et al., 2021), and is advantageous in that it reduces the volume of material by surfacing underlying patterns, offering both flexibility and systematicity. While content analysis can be either qualitative or quantitative (Clark et al., 2021), qualitative analysis was employed for the purposes of this research, as the aim was interpretive rather than enumerative: to reveal how inclusion is constructed in policy and how those constructions enable or constrain the work of school leaders. The decision to use content analysis was driven by the desire to identify the patterns through which policy assigns responsibility for inclusion, authorises particular procedures, and prescribes, or leaves unspecified, the organisational and professional supports available to leaders (Patton, 2015).

Document Corpus and Selection Criteria

Under the theoretical framework outlined above (UNESCO, 2005), two publicly available national policy documents were selected for analysis: the *Saudi School Leadership Standards* (ETEC, 2020) and the *Regulatory Guide for General Education Schools* (MoE, 2025b). These texts were chosen because they constitute the principal policy instruments of Saudi public education, which all school staff are expected to apply in their practice (MoE, 2025b), and because together they span the levels at which inclusion is articulated, from the organisational architecture of schools to the expectations placed upon those who lead them.

The two documents differ in scope of applicability. The Regulatory Guide is written specifically for public schools and governs their internal structures, roles, and procedures (MoE, 2025b). The Leadership Standards, by contrast, apply to school leaders across both the public and private sectors, since they underpin the licensure and performance evaluation administered by ETEC for all leaders seeking or holding this credential (ETEC, 2020). This asymmetry means that while the Regulatory Guide's provisions for inclusion are confined to the public system, gaps or omissions in the Standards have implications for leadership practice, credentialing, and accountability across Saudi schooling more broadly, regardless of sector (MoE, 2025b).

Both documents were read and analysed in full. Rather than searching only for sections explicitly labelled as pertaining to disability or special education, the analysis proceeded through a complete reading of each text, during which any content relevant to students with additional or diverse needs, and to inclusion more broadly, was identified, extracted, and coded, regardless of where in the document it appeared or under what heading (see Appendix 1). This approach was intended to capture not only the sections formally designated for disability provision but also any incidental or implicit references to diversity, barriers, participation, or marginalisation elsewhere in the text, consistent with the study's aim of establishing how inclusion is constructed across the corpus as a whole rather than only within its designated inclusion-specific provisions.

The Regulatory Guide for General Education Schools

Written by the MoE in 2025, the Guide establishes a hierarchical structure of authority (Ministry–principals–teachers–students) and sets out the responsibilities, policies, and procedures expected of general schools, covering staff roles, student affairs, facilities, curriculum, and staff evaluation (MoE, 2025b). It functions as the operational manual through which the day-to-day organisation of public schools, including provision for students with additional needs, is structured.

The Saudi School Leadership Standards

Established by ETEC in 2020, the Standards comprise 19 professional leadership competencies covering strategic planning, implementation, evaluation, and student development, and reference leaders' role in supporting all learners, including those with additional needs (ETEC, 2020). Because the Standards underpin leaders' formal licensure and performance evaluation, what they specify or omit carries direct consequences for whether inclusive practice is treated as a required leadership competence.

Analytic Procedure

Given the volume of material, the analysis focused on aspects most directly related to the research question (Schreier, 2012). The procedure followed Schreier's (2012) steps for qualitative content analysis: deciding the research question; selecting material; building and trialling a coding frame; coding; and interpreting findings. This staged approach ensured that coding remained systematic and closely tied to the study's analytic focus.

Coding assigned labels to units of meaning (Schreier, 2012), with the coding frame built directly around UNESCO's (2005) four elements, each operationalised as a category against which units of meaning were labelled as enabling or constraining leaders' capacity to develop inclusive practice. Coded units were compared across the corpus to identify recurring patterns before interpretation (see Appendix 1).

Documents were reviewed in full. Relevant Arabic texts were translated and checked through researcher re-reading against the source, supplemented by an AI-based tool (Claude-Sonnet-5) as a secondary accuracy check. Coding consistency was supported by repeated comparison of coded units across the corpus throughout analysis.

Findings and Discussion

This section examines how the *Regulatory Guide for Public Schools* (MoE, 2025b) and the *Saudi School Leadership Standards* (ETEC, 2020) construct disability-inclusive schooling, and how these constructions enable or constrain school leaders' efforts to develop inclusive teaching practice. The discussion is organised around the four elements of the theoretical framework, treating each not as an abstract ideal but as a test of whether the policy corpus equips leaders to develop inclusive practice across the whole school or instead positions them as administrators of a separate, specialist-managed provision (Almudarra, 2017; Meemar et al., 2018). Table 1 demonstrates the analytical chain connecting evidence to the research question.

Table 1

UNESCO Framework, Policy Evidence and Leadership Effects

UNESCO Element	Document	Code	Evidence Cited in Findings (Page)	Enabling / Constraining
1. Continual process of responding to diversity	Regulatory Guide (MoE, 2025b)	<i>Conditional review mechanism</i>	Disability Work Team “exists only in schools that already host a disability programme”; schools without one have “no equivalent structure or guidance for reviewing and improving provision for diverse learners” (pp. 24, 27)	Constraining — partial, uneven review structure
	Leadership Standards (ETEC, 2020)	<i>Diversity-blind improvement duty</i>	Self-evaluation and improvement duties tied to “performance, quality, and staff development, [but] not explicitly to diversity or the progress of marginalised learners” (Standards 6–7)	Constraining — generic competency not required to be directed at diversity
2. Identifying and eliminating barriers	Regulatory Guide (MoE, 2025b)	<i>Material barrier escalation route</i>	Teacher of Students with Disabilities given “a clear route to identify deficits in buildings and equipment and escalate them” (p. 38)	Enabling — actionable duty, named escalation path
	Leadership Standards (ETEC, 2020)	<i>Generic barrier-identification duty</i>	Leader required “to identify and address barriers to learning” (Standard 13)	Enabling — barrier identification constructed as leadership duty
	Regulatory Guide (MoE, 2025b)	<i>Teacher development delegated to specialist</i>	“The only explicit reference to teacher development for inclusion is delegated to the specialist disability teacher, [not framed as] a whole-staff development agenda that leaders must plan, guide, and monitor” (p. 38)	Constraining — most consequential barrier (general teacher capability) left unaddressed at leadership level

Inclusion as a Continual Process of Responding to Diversity

The framework's first element treats inclusion as ongoing improvement in responding to learner diversity, embedded in a school's routine practices, policies, and attitudes (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2005). Read against this element and against the research question's focus on leaders' efforts to develop inclusive practice, both texts position continuous improvement as a core leadership duty while failing to equip all schools to apply that duty to diversity and disability. The Guide establishes a review mechanism, but only a partial and uneven one, and the Standards reproduce this limitation in their own terms (see Table 1). In both instruments, then, review machinery exists, but it is not systematically oriented toward the learners that an inclusive system is meant to keep in view.

This is consistent with what Barak et al. (2021) describe as policy–practice decoupling: although an inclusive commitment is expressed in Saudi Vision 2030 (2021), the MoE's 2016–2020 Education Strategy (MoE, 2019), and the *Rights of People with Disabilities* (The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023), this commitment has not been translated into routine school improvement processes that would make responsiveness to diversity a normal, expected part of leaders' work. The point connects directly to Ainscow's (2020, 2024) argument that greater equity depends on school-level capacity to interpret priorities locally and respond to context-specific barriers, and to evidence that such capacity is stronger where leaders are authorised and expected to adjust provision (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020). Here, by contrast, the policy provides generic improvement competencies that an individual leader could apply to diversity, but does not ensure that every school has the structures, roles, or expectations to do so.

In terms of the research question, this is a first clear way the policy construction constrains rather than enables: leaders who seek to make the participation and progress of learners with disabilities a routine focus of the improvement cycle may have to create structures and responsibilities that the instruments neither specify nor require (see Table 1). This reflects the “gulf” between policy intent and school-level enactment described by Leithwood et al. (2004) and the implementation barriers Hayes and Bulat (2017) associate with unclear guidance and weak enforcement. It also aligns with Saudi-focused research noting slow movement from integration toward more meaningful inclusion and calling for clearer, localised policy direction (Alharbi & Madhesh, 2018; Alsalem & Alzahrani, 2023).

Inclusion as Identifying and Eliminating Barriers

The framework's second element requires that barriers be explicitly named, located, and made the object of organised action, and that inclusion be understood as requiring cultural, policy, and practical transformation of the whole school environment (Ainscow, 2024; UNESCO, 2005). Supporting evidence for this element is set out in Table 1. This element speaks most directly to the research question's concern with building teacher capacity, and it is where the two texts show both their strongest enabling moves and their sharpest constraints. The Guide gives the teacher of students with disabilities a clear route to identify deficits in buildings and equipment and escalate them (MoE, 2025b), and the Standards require the school leader to identify and address barriers to

learning (ETEC, 2020, Standard 13). In framework terms, barrier identification is constructed as an actionable duty.

However, the kinds of barriers that are made actionable are predominantly physical and material. The barrier most consequential for equitable participation in mainstream classrooms, general education teachers' capability to teach diverse learners is not named in comparable terms, nor is it translated into leadership responsibilities for improving classroom practice. The only explicit reference to teacher development for inclusion is delegated to the specialist disability teacher (MoE, 2025b), rather than framed as a whole-staff development agenda that leaders must plan, guide, and monitor. As a result, the policy offers school leaders little concrete direction on how to provide clear guidance to general classroom teachers about inclusive pedagogy, differentiation, or participation-focused classroom routines. This provides one of the most direct answers the corpus gives to the research question: the policies do not construct the development of general teachers' inclusive teaching capacity as a leadership task, and thus constrain the very work the question foregrounds. Consistent with this, research suggests that general education teachers, who enact inclusion day to day often report limited training and support and feel isolated when policy expectations are unclear, contributing to uneven and inconsistent inclusive practices across classrooms (Moustache & Makhoba, 2024).

This sits in tension with the *Rights of People with Disabilities* (The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023), which articulate a rights-based duty to adapt curricula, training programs, and technologies so that learners can achieve their fullest academic and social progress, echoing the transformative obligations of the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006, 2016) and the dignity and non-discrimination emphasised in Islamic teaching underpinning Saudi education (MoE, 2026). Yet this higher-order commitment to transforming teaching is not carried into corresponding duties in the instruments governing leaders' day-to-day work. This extends Duncan et al.'s (2020) observation that legal frameworks may not translate into consistent application where responsibilities and mechanisms are underspecified. Where leaders are directed primarily toward managing facilities rather than developing pedagogy, inclusion can be achieved procedurally, without changing what happens in mainstream classrooms precisely the risk highlighted in the inclusive leadership literature (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Cardno, 2018; Cobb, 2015).

Inclusion as Presence, Participation, and Achievement of All Students

The framework's third element holds that every learner, regardless of ability, should be a valued and active member of the general classroom community (UNESCO, 2005). Corresponding evidence is provided in Table 1. This aspiration is also reflected in Saudi policy definitions of inclusion as a climate of fairness, acceptance, and respect (Alsolami, 2024; MoE, 2019, 2025b). However, in both texts, this idea is operationalised mainly through a specialist-led, separate-provision model, rather than through expectations for participation in mainstream classrooms.

The Guide organises provision for learners with disabilities around the resource room and individual or small-group instruction, and it tracks their progress through a separate system of individual plans and periodic reporting (MoE, 2025b). The Standards similarly narrow the leader's responsibilities for this group to a single competency: effective management of special education

programs (ETEC, 2020, Standard 11). As a result, the leader is positioned primarily as an administrator of parallel provision, not as the pedagogical leader responsible for ensuring that learners with disabilities are present, participating, and progressing within ordinary classrooms. This construction supports administrative oversight of special education, but it limits leadership for inclusive mainstream teaching and whole-class participation.

This positioning reflects a deeper and historically embedded understanding of the purpose of school leadership. Leadership in Saudi Arabia has traditionally focused on senior managerial roles, a product of the system's centralised policies (Almudarra, 2017; Meemar et al., 2018), a model that sits uneasily with the change-oriented vision that Vision 2030 promotes (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021). Yet the findings here show that, for learners with disabilities, the managerial inheritance has not given way to this change-oriented vision: the leader is invited to manage a program rather than to drive the pedagogical and cultural change through which these learners would participate in the mainstream. The agent-of-change framing, in other words, stops at the threshold of the resource room.

This convergence gives empirical specification to a concern long raised in Saudi-focused scholarship. Alharbi and Madhesh (2018), using a modified Bacchi approach on the Disability Law (The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023) and the *Regulatory Guide for Special Education* (MoE, 2016), found alignment with international standards but slow movement toward meaningful inclusion, while Alothman (2014), Alshahrani (2018), and Madhesh (2023) argued that inclusion in Saudi schools is too often treated as placement rather than systematic attention to participation. Studies of disability-rights legislation by Alsalem (2023), Alsalem and Alzahrani (2023), and Alsolami (2024) similarly asked how regulatory commitments are operationalised and experienced. The present analysis locates the mechanism behind these patterns in the texts themselves: the system does not move beyond integration toward inclusion partly because its most recent governance and credentialing instruments define disability as a program to be administered rather than a dimension of the whole school's responsibility.

Particular Emphasis on Groups at Risk of Marginalisation

The framework's fourth element requires deliberate, targeted attention to learners who are most vulnerable to exclusion or underachievement (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2005). Supporting excerpts are listed in Table 1. Here, the two texts diverge in a way that directly sharpens the answer to the research question. The Guide repeatedly names learners with disabilities, links them to staffing entitlements and referral pathways, and assigns an escalation function to the Disability Work Team (MoE, 2025b). In this sense, the group is clearly visible and some targeted provision is resourced. The Standards, however, make targeted expectations explicit only for gifted learners whom leaders are required to identify, support, and develop (ETEC, 2020, Standard 13). Learners with disabilities are not named as an at-risk group whose participation and progress the leader must routinely monitor and protect.

This asymmetry matters for two reasons. First, even in the Guide, targeting is delivered through a split architecture: disability is managed through specialist structures, while mainstream school leadership bodies are not given an explicit disability remit (MoE, 2025b). The group is recognised, but their inclusion is organised as a parallel track rather than a whole-school

responsibility. Second and more consequentially for the research question, the omission in the Standards has practical force because the Standards underpin leaders' licensure and performance reporting (ETEC, 2020). What is not named in the competence framework is unlikely to be assessed, credentialed, or rewarded, and leaders are therefore not required or incentivised to develop inclusive practice for learners with disabilities.

As a result, the framework's requirement for targeted protection is operationalised for gifted learners but not, in the instrument that defines professional leadership competence, for learners with disabilities. This weakens the translation of rights-based commitments: equal opportunity and non-discrimination in the Regulations (The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023), the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006, 2016), and the lifelong-learning aims of the 2016–2020 Strategy (MoE, 2019), into enforceable leadership expectations, echoing calls for clearer, locally grounded, and implementable inclusion policy (Alharbi & Madhesh, 2018; Alsalem & Alzahrani, 2023).

From Vision to Practice: Where Inclusion Fractures

Across the four elements of the framework summarised together in Table 1, the corpus offers a clear answer to the research question: Saudi national policies on disability-inclusive schooling tend to enable school leaders administratively while constraining them pedagogically. The documents specify specialist roles, provide escalation routes for physical and material barriers, and allocate resources to an identified at-risk group. However, they stop short of framing the meaningful inclusion of learners with disabilities as an ongoing whole-school, all-staff responsibility that leaders are explicitly mandated, supported, and held accountable to develop.

This pattern is best understood in relation to a linked national policy agenda that runs from Saudi Vision 2030 (2021), through the *Rights of People with Disabilities* (The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023), to the instruments that govern school organisation and leadership competence. Vision 2030, the 2016–2020 Education Strategy (MoE, 2019), and the Regulations articulate inclusion in explicitly rights-based, whole-system terms, consistent with the Salamanca Statement, the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006, 2016), and UNESCO (2005), and grounded in Islamic commitments to dignity that underpin Saudi public life (MoE, 2026). In this sense, the corpus does contain the framework's first conception of inclusion as the removal of barriers across cultures, systems, and practices.

The central tension identified here, consistent with Barak et al.'s (2021) account of policy–practice decoupling and Ghamrawi's (2025) analysis of fragmented reform in the Arab region, is that the two instruments most directly shaping leaders' work, the Regulatory Guide (MoE, 2025b) and the Leadership Standards (ETEC, 2020), mainly reflect a second, specialist-managed conception of inclusion. The agenda fractures at the point of policy translation that Ball (2011) and Madhesh (2019) argue is decisive: higher-order texts frame inclusion as a mainstream responsibility tied to teaching and participation, whereas operational and evaluative texts steer leaders toward narrower, compliance-oriented approaches bounded by specialist provision. This is the same dynamic that Leithwood et al. (2004), Hayes and Bulat (2017), and Duncan et al. (2020) associate with weak enactment.

In direct response to the research question, these policy constructions both enable and constrain but in uneven ways. They enable the administrative management of separate provision, yet they constrain leadership for building inclusive teaching and learning across mainstream classrooms. This is less a failure of aspiration than a failure of policy distribution: rights-based commitments are concentrated in instruments that do not directly structure leaders' daily work, while specialist framings are embedded in the instruments that do. Realising the inclusive ambitions affirmed in Vision 2030 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021) and the Regulations will therefore depend on closing this internal gap by carrying a rights-based, whole-school conception of inclusion into leadership standards and organisational guidance. Only then can developing teachers' inclusive classroom practice become a defined, mainstream, and accountable dimension of school leadership, rather than a discretionary activity outside the role's formal boundaries (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Ainscow, 2024; Cardno, 2018; Cobb, 2015).

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

This article examined how Saudi national policies construct inclusive education for learners with disabilities, and how these constructions enable or constrain school leaders' efforts to build inclusive teaching practice. By reading the *Regulatory Guide for Public Schools* (MoE, 2025b) and the *Saudi School Leadership Standards* (ETEC, 2020) through UNESCO's (2005) four-element conception of inclusion, the analysis reached a consistent conclusion: the policy corpus tends to enable leadership in administrative terms while limiting leadership in pedagogical terms. The instruments specify specialist roles, establish escalation routes for physical and material barriers, allocate resources to an identified group, and embed routines for monitoring and reporting. However, they do not frame the meaningful inclusion of learners with disabilities as an ongoing whole-school, whole-staff responsibility that school leaders are explicitly mandated, supported, and held accountable to lead.

Contribution to Knowledge

The deeper issue is therefore one of policy distribution rather than a lack of aspiration. Higher-order national instruments, Vision 2030 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021) and the *Rights of People with Disabilities* (The Saudi Arabian Experts Committee of the Council of Ministers, 2023) articulate inclusion in rights-based, system-wide terms, aligned with the Salamanca Statement, the UNCRPD, and the dignity-centred commitments emphasised in Islamic teaching. However, the two texts that most directly shape leaders' daily work largely reflect a narrower, specialist-managed approach, where disability is treated primarily as a program to be organised and monitored rather than as a dimension of mainstream teaching, learning, and participation requiring pedagogical leadership (Alharbi & Madhesh, 2018; Alnasser, 2021). In this sense, the leader as agent of change agenda promoted by Vision 2030 does not consistently extend into the ordinary classroom contexts where inclusion must be enacted. This study contributes to inclusive leadership

scholarship by locating this gap directly within the policy texts themselves, rather than inferring it from practitioners' reported experiences alone.

Limitations

These contributions should be read in light of the study's limitations. The analysis is limited to two key texts and does not capture the full policy environment (e.g., circulars, regional directives, and implementation guidance). As a document study, it clarifies how policy defines leaders' scope for action, but it cannot show how leaders and teachers interpret or enact these expectations in practice. The use of translated Arabic material adds an interpretive layer, and qualitative analysis necessarily involves researcher judgement. Translation relied on researcher re-reading and AI-assisted verification rather than independent bilingual back-translation or a second coder, which may limit the trustworthiness of the Arabic-to-English translation and coding consistency. Finally, because Saudi policy is evolving, these findings represent a particular point in time; later instruments may reshape the administrative–pedagogical imbalance identified here.

Implications for Policy

For policymakers, the key task is to close the gap between rights-based commitments and the instruments that govern leaders' work. This requires revising the Leadership Standards (ETEC, 2020) so that leaders' responsibility for the participation and progress of learners with disabilities is a named, assessed, and credentialed competence, not simply a special-education management function. It also requires revising the Regulatory Guide (MoE, 2025b) so that reviewing and improving provision for diverse learners is built into routine leadership structures in all schools, not only those running a formal disability program. Because the Standards underpin licensure and performance reporting, omissions are unlikely to be addressed in practice; making inclusive pedagogy a leadership obligation is therefore the most consequential reform.

Implications for Practice

For practitioners (school leaders), under current policy, strengthening inclusive teaching in mainstream classrooms will often depend on leaders' initiative beyond what is explicitly required. Leaders can use existing improvement, evaluation, and professional-development processes to make the progress of learners with disabilities a routine focus, and to extend professional learning from specialist staff to the whole teaching workforce.

Directions for Future Research

For researchers, the study shows the value of analysing policy texts directly and points to next steps: examining enactment through interviews and observation; investigating how assessment, diagnosis, eligibility, and referral pathways operate; comparing across Gulf and wider Arab systems (e.g., Ghamrawi, 2025); and tracking change over time as the Regulatory Guide (MoE, 2025b) is implemented.

Concluding Statement

This study demonstrates that policy alignment at the level of national vision does not guarantee alignment at the level of daily practice. Closing this gap requires not new aspirations but redistributing existing rights-based commitments into the standards and guides leaders are actually required to follow. Until inclusive pedagogy is written into the instruments by which leaders are trained, licensed, and held accountable, the inclusion of learners with disabilities will remain administratively supported but pedagogically optional.

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Appendix 1

Analytical Process

Stage	Analytical action	Example
1. Document familiarisation	Both policy documents read in full	Complete reading rather than keyword searching
2. Relevant text identification	Passages relating to diversity, disability, participation, barriers, leadership and teacher development identified	Responsibility for disability provision
3. Initial coding	Meaning units assigned descriptive/interpretive codes	“Specialist responsibility”; “barrier identification”; “generic improvement duty”
4. UNESCO mapping	Codes mapped against one or more of UNESCO’s four elements	Barrier identification → Element 2
5. Policy-effect classification	Coded material examined for whether it enabled or constrained inclusive leadership	Specialist escalation procedure → enabling administratively
6. Cross-document comparison	Regulatory Guide compared with Leadership Standards	Explicit disability provision in Guide versus omission from Standards
7. Interpretive synthesis	Patterns interpreted in relation to the research question	Administrative enablement versus pedagogical constraint

Leading for Inclusion: Building Teacher Capacity Through Relational and Shared Leadership

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ABSTRACT: Despite strong policy commitments to inclusive education, enacting inclusive practice in secondary school contexts remains complex and contested. Teachers often report uncertainty, workload pressures, and limited confidence in supporting diverse learners, thus highlighting the critical role of leadership in building teacher capacity and fostering inclusive school cultures.

This ethnographic study, informed by an insider leadership perspective, examined how inclusive leadership shaped teacher learning and practice within a large Australian secondary college undergoing leadership transition, whole-school improvement, and implementation of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD). Data were generated from 19 participants, including school leaders, teachers, and education assistants, through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and a reflective leadership journal.

Findings indicate that inclusive cultural change is enabled through leadership practices that prioritise relational trust, shared responsibility, and context-based professional learning. Distributed leadership and the role of a specialist leader in Diversity Education were critical in translating inclusive intent into classroom practice.

This study contributes a model for inclusive leadership that illustrates how disruption, shared leadership, reflective processes, and capacity building interact to influence teacher practice over time. The study offers practical insights for school leaders seeking to move beyond policy compliance towards sustained inclusive practice.

Key words: Inclusive leadership, teacher capacity, distributed leadership, professional learning, inclusion

Introduction

Globally, education systems have undergone gradual shifts in how they respond to students with special educational needs. We have witnessed shifts in practice from separate learning

environments to integrated systems, and more recently towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms (Cologon, 2019). Interpretation and enactment of these changes, however, continue to vary across contexts.

In Australia, schools are required under the National Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability ([NCCD] Australian Government Department of Education, 2023) to make “reasonable adjustments” to ensure students can access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. While this policy position reflects a strong commitment to equity, the enactment of inclusive practice remains inconsistent, particularly in secondary school contexts where teacher confidence, competing demands, and curriculum pressures present ongoing challenges.

The primary focus of this study was to explore how more inclusive practices for students with special educational needs can be developed within a secondary school context during and following a period of disruption. The study was guided by the overarching research question: *What can be learned about enabling the development of more inclusive practices for students with special educational needs in a school undergoing disruption?* This question was explored through an examination of the structures, challenges, enabling factors, and implications for teacher praxis that shaped inclusive practice during this period.

The inclusion of students with special educational needs into mainstream secondary classrooms requires more than structural change; it demands a shift in school culture and in teachers’ everyday practices (Ainscow, 2020; Carrington et al., 2022; McMaster, 2015). Teachers often report uncertainty regarding their capacity to respond effectively to learner diversity, particularly within secondary school contexts characterised by competing curriculum and accountability demands (DeMatthews & Mueller, 2022; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). This, in turn, places significant responsibility on school leaders to build teacher capacity, influence professional beliefs, and create conditions that support inclusive practice development. Despite strong policy direction, there is growing concern that education systems continue to fall short in providing meaningful inclusion, raising questions about how leadership can more effectively support teachers to respond to diverse learners.

In this study, the researcher draws on their role as a middle leader in Diversity Education to examine how leadership influenced inclusive practice development. The study was situated within this professional role in the College where the research was conducted, providing an insider perspective on the development of inclusive practice over a sustained period of change. Having previously worked as coordinator of the Education Support Centre, and later as Leader of Learning for Diversity Education, the researcher experienced first-hand the tensions between policy expectations, teacher capacity, and the realities of secondary classroom practice. This dual position enabled close examination of how leadership, relationships, and professional learning influenced inclusive practice over time.

Literature Framing

Leadership is widely recognised as a critical influence on the development of inclusive school cultures and practices. Research highlights that school leaders shape teacher beliefs, build

professional capacity, and create organisational conditions that support inclusive education (Ainscow, 2014, 2020; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Carrington & Kimber, 2020; Carrington et al., 2022; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). School principals are recognised as key agents of inclusive change through their influence on vision, culture, relationships, and organisational learning (Ainscow, 2020; DeMatthews & Mueller, 2022; Riehl, 2000). McMaster (2015), Andrews and Conway (2020), and Carrington et al. (2022) highlight the importance of social relationships in influencing learning and teaching. According to Northouse (2007), fostering collaboration, openness, and shared decision making requires leaders to establish and uphold strong relationships of trust with their staff. This aligns with their perspective on leadership as a transformative process.

Drucker (2011) suggests that effective leadership involves guiding, inspiring, and motivating others to improve their practices. One approach that has been found to respond successfully to learner diversity is collective leadership, where the principal employs a constructivist approach to sharing leadership with like-minded others (Lambert, 2002; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). Shared leadership encourages the participation of all staff and builds collective responsibility for student learning across the community (Eaker & Keating, 2008). Similarly, Conway and Andrews (2016) and Lieberman and Miller (2005) have highlighted the unique contribution of teacher leaders in influencing improvement in practice across the entire school.

Ainscow (2018) argued that effective leadership can be facilitated through experience working with others in diverse social learning contexts. Furthermore, he posits that leadership can promote inclusive thinking through social learning processes within a school's cultural context. This approach aligns with the notion of shared leadership and collective responsibility, where all members of the school community are encouraged to participate in leadership and work together towards achieving a common goal of inclusivity and equity. Therefore, promoting diverse social learning contexts and building collective responsibility among staff can be instrumental in promoting effective leadership and fostering a more inclusive school environment.

Riehl (2000) presented theoretical and empirical evidence based on a comprehensive integrative review of the principal's role in creating inclusive schools. Riehl (2000) concluded that effective school leaders use social learning processes to promote inclusive practices, create new meanings about diversity, and establish connections between schools and communities. This indicates the potential for school principals to engage in inclusive, transformative developments, particularly when they are committed to equity, voice, and social justice and promote inclusive cultures and practices in schools while building positive relationships (Riehl, 2000).

Effective leaders gather, generate, and interpret information within a school to encourage thinking for change (see Lambert's, 2002 prior research). Cranston et al. (2018, as cited in Carrington & Kimber, 2020) suggest that leaders can discuss ethical dilemmas associated with inclusion in professional conversations with staff. Harris et al. (2018, as cited in Carrington & Kimber, 2020) posit that leaders can encourage deep reflections and promote robust debate on inclusion through such conversations. Supported by Leithwood et al. (2020), and others (Ashby, 2012, as cited in Jarvis et al., 2020; Ashton & Arlington, 2019, as cited in Jarvis et al., 2020) providing intellectual stimulation is one of the key practices of influential leaders, as it can cause dissonance in thinking and allow leaders to challenge existing assumptions and create new meanings about learning and teaching. Furthermore, this is a crucial step that can enable leaders

to influence behaviour and change the culture to improve access to equitable learning opportunities for all students (Johnston & Hayes, 2007, as cited in Jarvis et al., 2020; Schein, 2004, as cited in Jarvis et al., 2020).

Despite this, school change presents a significant challenge for educational systems and leaders (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). A key challenge is promoting diversity and inclusivity within schools. Despite these challenges, Ainscow (2014) and others (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Marsh et al., 2014) emphasise that it is never too late to learn and embrace new approaches to teaching that promote inclusivity and equity. Nevertheless, creating inclusive schools requires more than just a desire to change. Desimone and Garet (2015) suggest that supporting teachers to build capacity is critical to addressing the increasing diversity of students' needs. This means equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to create inclusive learning environments that support all students.

In terms of building staff capacity for improvement, Duncan et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of ongoing professional development for educators to support inclusivity in schools. They highlight the need for sustained, collaborative, and reflective learning opportunities that can help teachers develop the necessary skills and knowledge to create more inclusive learning environments.

Jarvis et al. (2020) reported a positive relationship between professional learning and student learning, highlighting the indirect influence of leadership on student outcomes through teacher development. Leadership plays a significant, albeit indirect, role in this relationship. Studies have found that high-quality professional development programs that are relevant, engaging, and aligned with the school's objectives can positively impact student learning (Archibald et al., 2011). In addition, Guskey and Yoon (2009) reported that actively engaged teachers tend to be more effective in their teaching practices, leading to positive student learning outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial for school leaders to create a culture of continuous learning and provide opportunities for meaningful professional learning. The school's cultural context also plays an essential role, as professional learning needs to address outdated teaching and learning practices (Ainscow, 2020).

Despite the evidence indicating a positive relationship between professional learning and student outcomes, establishing a direct causal link is challenging due to various factors that can impact student learning (Desimone, 2009). Therefore, school leaders must consider other factors that influence student learning, particularly the quality of instruction, as effective teaching practices are associated with improved student outcomes (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). This highlights the need to develop pedagogy that is not only inclusive but also effective in supporting diverse learners, with research indicating that inclusive pedagogical approaches can enhance academic achievement, engagement, and participation (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Morina, 2020). Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of considering how broader organisational factors, particularly leadership, shape the conditions for inclusive and effective practice. While the literature demonstrates the complexities of inclusive education and the influence of teacher beliefs, knowledge, and confidence, it also consistently identifies leadership as a critical factor in shaping school culture and practice (Jarvis et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020). Leadership that prioritises relational trust, collaborative professional learning, and shared responsibility has been shown to

influence teachers' willingness and ability to engage in inclusive practice (Ainscow, 2018; Andrews & Conway, 2020; Carrington et al., 2022; McMaster, 2015). Such leadership practices create the conditions in which teachers feel supported to reflect on and adapt their practice in response to diverse learner needs.

Yet, there remains limited understanding of how such leadership is enacted in secondary school contexts experiencing disruption and competing priorities. There is a need to better understand how leadership can build teacher capacity for inclusion in ways that are responsive to the realities of practice. This study aimed to address this gap by examining how leadership, within a period of organisational disruption, can influence the development of inclusive practice through the deliberate development of teacher capacity.

Methodological Approach

To examine how leadership influenced the development of inclusive practices for students with special educational needs in a secondary College context during and following a period of significant disruption, this research employed a qualitative methodology grounded in a constructivist/interpretivist approach. This approach aligned with the belief that meaning is socially constructed through lived experience and interaction, and therefore required an approach that privileged participant voice, context, and interpretation. An ethnographic design was adopted to enable an in-depth exploration of teacher practice within its natural setting, capturing the cultural, organisational, and relational dynamics influencing inclusion over time.

The research was conducted on the secondary campus of a single co-educational Pre-kindergarten to Year 12 College catering for approximately 1,950 students, where an on-site Education Support Centre was located. At the time of the study, the College had experienced approximately two years of significant organisational disruption associated with leadership transition, whole-school improvement processes, and increasing accountability requirements linked to NCCD. As an insider researcher and member of staff, the researcher was embedded within the setting, allowing access to everyday practices, relationships, and decision-making processes as they unfolded. This positioning enabled a deeper understanding of how inclusive practices were experienced, challenged, and reshaped while requiring continual reflexivity to manage the researcher's influence.

Participants were purposefully selected based on their direct involvement in supporting students with special educational needs and their experience of the organisational disruptions occurring within the College. Nineteen staff members participated, including the principal, vice-principal, middle leaders, teachers, and education assistants, providing multiple perspectives on the development of inclusive practice across the College.

Data were generated through multiple sources to build a rich and holistic account of practice. These included semi-structured interviews, College documentation, and a reflective journal capturing observations, informal conversations, and professional experiences.

College documents included policies and procedures, annual improvement plans and reports, curriculum programs, teacher planning documents, student individual plans, enrolment interview records, and NCCD documentation. Analysis of these documents revealed an increasing

organisational emphasis on personalised learning, inclusive pedagogy, and shared responsibility for student learning. The reflective journal documented observations arising from learning walks, staff collaboration, professional learning activities, parent communications, and leadership interactions. Together, these sources provided contextual insight and enabled triangulation of findings across multiple forms of evidence.

Data were analysed using an adapted thematic analysis framework informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts, College documents, and reflective journal entries were repeatedly reviewed to identify words, phrases, and patterns relevant to the research questions. Initial codes were generated and clustered according to conceptual similarity. Related codes were then grouped into sub-themes before being refined into broader themes through an iterative process of comparison and review. This process resulted in two interconnected themes: *Disruption and Influence* and *Evolving Praxis*.

Trustworthiness was addressed through several complementary strategies. Interview transcripts were returned to participants for review, clarification, amendment, or withdrawal prior to analysis. Prolonged engagement within the College strengthened contextual understanding, while triangulation across interviews, documentation, and reflective journal data enhanced the credibility of interpretations. Reflective journaling supported reflexivity by documenting observations, assumptions, decisions, and emerging interpretations throughout the study. Journal entries were revisited regularly to examine the influence of the researcher's dual role as leader and researcher and to identify potential bias. Interpretations were continually compared against interview transcripts and documentary evidence to ensure findings remained grounded in participant experiences and organisational data.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics process (Approval No. H18REA210). Research approval was obtained from the College principal, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Participant anonymity was protected using pseudonyms and the de-identification of data, with all research data stored securely throughout the project. Care was taken to minimise potential power imbalances associated with the researcher's insider leadership role. Participants selected interview times and locations that suited them, and these processes supported participant autonomy while helping ensure that participation did not influence professional relationships within the College.

Findings

The findings are presented through two interconnected perspectives: the researcher's insider leadership perspective examining the tensions and enabling conditions influencing inclusive practice development, and participant perspectives capturing how these changes were experienced and enacted across the College.

Researcher Perspective: Leading Inclusive Change

The findings revealed that cultural change towards inclusive education at the College was shaped by a complex interplay of challenges and enabling conditions. At the core of this was the influence of teacher attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. These were often reinforced by the presence of on-site special education provision and resourcing, which at times created confusion around roles and responsibilities, with some teachers deferring responsibility for student learning to education assistants. As one teacher reflected:

If I have got someone with special needs in my class and they start making a lot of racket it is up to them [education assistant] to tap them on the shoulder or just say stop. I'm too busy with the rest of the class to deal with it.

In addition, structural, organisational, and human resourcing complexities placed considerable pressure on teachers, impacting their capacity to enact inclusive practice. Another teacher explained:

I understand there is a policy of inclusivity, but thus far, I have found it challenging to adhere to the teaching and learning process with the other twenty-five odd students in the room due to the boy's different learning needs.

Despite these challenges, several enabling factors emerged that supported a shift in culture. Central to this was leadership with an inclusive mindset. The principal and vice-principal demonstrated a clear commitment to inclusion through the College vision, learning framework, and strategic resourcing, including the appointment of a Leader of Learning for Diversity Education. Leadership practices were explicitly focused on improving teaching and learning, with an externally developed and internally implemented improvement process (Crowther et al., 2008) acting as a catalyst for change. This process led to the development of a shared vision and pedagogical framework that provided a common language and direction for practice.

Building leadership capacity was also critical. Middle leaders were supported to share responsibility for improvement, working collaboratively to influence change across the College. Through contextualised professional learning and the development of a learning cycle, teachers were supported to engage with the framework in practice, strengthening their capacity to personalise learning. Over time, more inclusive ways of working emerged. Structures and processes were introduced, professional trust developed, and teachers became more open to collaboration and support. This contributed to increased participation of students with special educational needs in mainstream learning and College life, reflecting a growing collective capacity for inclusive practice. One participant noted:

Teachers have been encouraged and challenged to push harder and to create opportunities for all students. They are more aware of their practice. It has been reinvigorating. Their capacity to plan for and teach students with needs has grown heaps.

Participant Perspectives: Experiencing Inclusive Change

Participant perspectives reinforced and deepened these findings, providing insight into how change was experienced and enacted in practice. While challenges remained, particularly in

relation to teacher beliefs, the built environment, and the complexities of secondary schooling, there was a shared recognition that change was necessary. The arrival of the new principal was widely viewed as a turning point, disrupting existing practices and encouraging staff to rethink teaching and learning from an individual student needs perspective. One teacher reflected: “He challenged us to look more at the individual rather than the classroom as a base”. Participants valued the leadership approach, particularly the autonomy to experiment, the opportunity to learn, and inclusion in decision-making processes.

Middle leaders played a key role in supporting staff through this transition. Participants described feeling motivated and empowered by opportunities to share leadership, collaborate with peers, and receive mentoring from senior leaders. The introduction of a dedicated Diversity Education role was consistently identified as a significant enabler, raising awareness of student needs and clarifying teacher responsibilities. Another teacher explained: “It’s just about knowing who to go to ... every time I’ve asked for help, I get support”. Staff valued having a clear point of support and guidance, which contributed to increased confidence and reflection on practice. One participant noted:

One of the things you [researcher/middle leader Diversity Education] mentioned the other day, that little clip you showed when you were doing PD with the staff ... that was really powerful. Where the student with special needs was saying, “don’t underestimate me” and “don’t use me as a model”, “don’t take pity on me”. That’s really a very important thing for teachers to take stock of.

Importantly, the improvement process fostered a professional community where staff could engage in dialogue about practice. Over time, relationships strengthened, and confidence grew, influencing shifts towards more inclusive ways of working. The College vision and pedagogical framework provided a shared language for discussing practice and student success, while the learning cycle supported consistent implementation in classrooms. Together, these conditions enabled greater access and participation for students with special educational needs, signalling a shift towards more inclusive and equitable practice across the College. One teacher reflected: “We are getting better at building opportunities ... teachers are starting to see what students can do rather than what they can’t”.

Discussion

The findings were interpreted through a rigorous thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), demonstrating how leadership, improvement processes, and contextual disruptions influenced the development of inclusive practice within the College. Using an adapted Braun and Clarke (2006) framework, data from interviews, observations, reflective journaling, and College documentation were systematically analysed to identify patterns, codes, and themes.

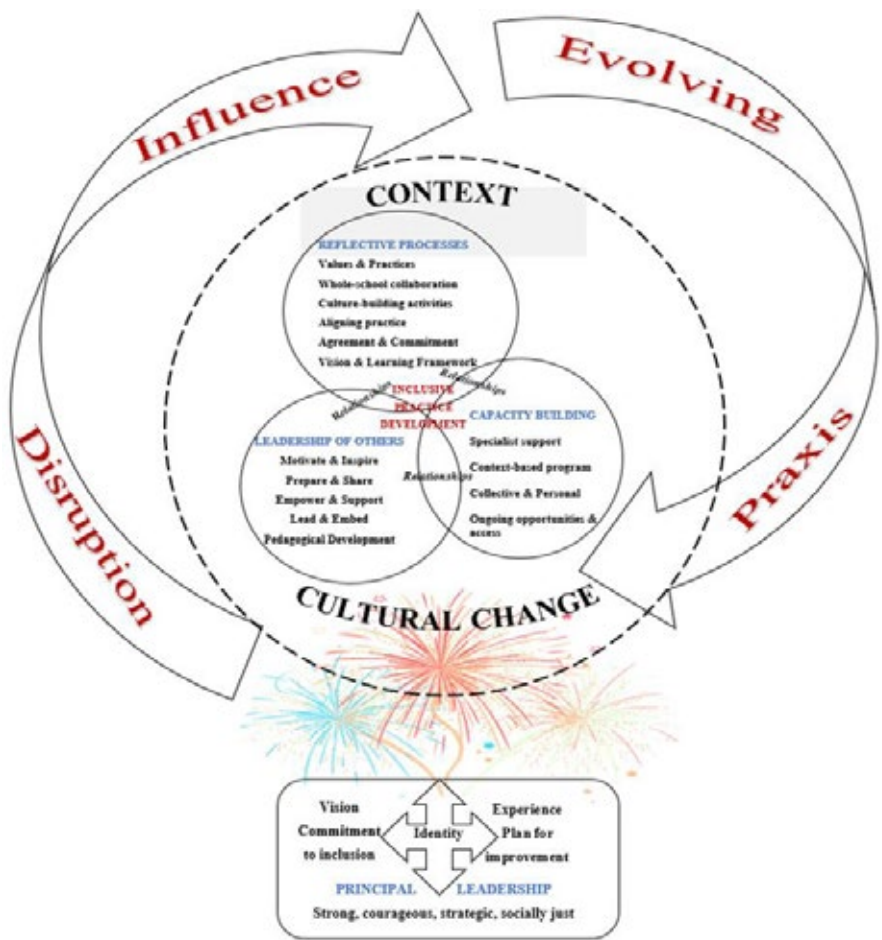
The analysis revealed that disruption, driven by a new principal with a strong inclusive vision, acted as a catalyst for change by challenging entrenched practices and creating opportunities for improvement. Structured improvement processes supported collaboration, reflection, and the co-construction of a shared vision and pedagogical framework that provided a common language for inclusive practice.

Shared leadership was central to this process. Middle leaders, including the role of the Leader of Learning for Diversity Education, were empowered through the school improvement process to influence practice and build capacity across the College. Targeted professional learning strengthened individual and collective capacity, increasing teacher confidence, competence, and clarity of roles.

The findings of this study are synthesised through a model for inclusive practice development (Figure 1), illustrating how leadership, professional learning, and relational trust interact to build teacher capacity and support sustained inclusive change. Informed by ethnographic data and systematic thematic analysis, two interconnected themes—*Disruption and Influence* and *Evolving Praxis*—were identified and together informed the model for inclusive practice development shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

A Model to Support the Development of Inclusive Practices in Schooling



In particular, these findings suggest the importance of the principal's commitment to change, followed by enabling processes and strategic thinking and action. Together, the principal and Leader of Learning for Diversity Education wielded a profound influence in nurturing trust-based relationships, a linchpin in fostering effective communication and creating a secure environment where teachers dared to innovate and embrace change as an integral part of the cultural improvement process.

The model uses a firecracker metaphor to represent leadership as the catalyst for inclusive cultural change through disruption and influence. Three interconnected factors—Leadership of Others, Reflective Processes, and Capacity Building—are illustrated within a Venn diagram, showing their collective influence on developing relationships. The model also illustrates how these relationships promote cultural change over time through Evolving Praxis towards inclusive practice development.

Disruption and Influence

This theme captures the scale of change required to shift the College culture towards inclusion. The data reflect how the principal's actions disrupted the status quo and influenced teacher thinking:

Everything has changed ... the restructuring of the curriculum, leadership roles, and timetable. The new principal came with a clear vision and challenged us to look more at the individual rather than the classroom. While I value the changes, many staff feel overwhelmed by the pace and scale of change.

The findings indicate that teacher attitudes and beliefs about inclusion set the context in which students experience learning. Teachers must be both supported and challenged to continually adapt to diverse student needs. Yet, this is not straightforward within a secondary school context where subject-based structures, curriculum demands, and time pressures shape practice.

A significant finding is the role of the principal in leading structural and cultural change. A clear vision and strategic direction created dissonance in thinking (McMaster, 2015), which became a necessary condition for change. By challenging existing practices and setting expectations, the principal was able to engage staff in improvement and influence behaviour towards inclusion.

Evolving Praxis

This theme provides insight into how leadership supported the development of teacher capacity and the emergence of more inclusive practice. The data demonstrate how enabling structures and processes influenced teacher knowledge, skills, and confidence:

Our vision for learning has made me rethink and reflect on what I do ... we are now focusing more on individual student needs and creating flexible pathways rather than sticking rigidly to traditional curriculum structures.

A whole-school approach to improvement promoted a collaborative learning culture that was central to engaging teachers in reflective practice. Through collaboration, relationships strengthened and a shared commitment to an inclusive vision and pedagogical framework emerged, providing a common language for practice and alignment across the College: “We now observe each other’s teaching and share practice ... because of that we have a better understanding of students’ needs and the expectation for ongoing learning and improvement”.

The findings indicate that building teacher knowledge and skills is essential for developing confidence and capacity for inclusive teaching. Whole-school, context-based professional learning supported collective learning, while job-embedded opportunities addressed individual needs. These approaches strengthened the College’s capacity for improvement and are consistent with research on effective professional learning for inclusion.

Together, these themes demonstrate that cultural change towards inclusion is not achieved through support alone, but through the deliberate interplay of challenge and support—where leadership disrupts existing norms while simultaneously building the conditions for teachers to develop more inclusive ways of working.

Practical Implications

Building on the findings, the development of inclusive practice in secondary schools is shaped by leadership, relationships, and the conditions created for teacher learning. Central to this process is the role of the principal in setting direction and creating the conditions for change. Leadership grounded in strong inclusive values, combined with a clear vision and strategic approach to improvement, can disrupt entrenched beliefs and practices that limit inclusion. Even so, disruption alone is insufficient. Sustainable change was enabled through the intentional use of shared leadership, particularly through the involvement of a Leader of Learning for Diversity Education, who played a critical role in translating inclusive intent into classroom practice and supporting teacher development.

The study also highlights the importance of context-based, job-embedded professional learning in building teacher capacity. Whole-school improvement processes created opportunities for collaboration, reflection, and a shared pedagogical framework that aligned practice and provided a common language for inclusion.

The model (see Figure 1) illustrates how leadership actions, improvement processes, and capacity-building strategies work together to influence teacher attitudes and practice.

Limitations and Potentials

This study was conducted on the secondary campus of a single co-educational Pre-kindergarten to Year 12 College with an Education Support Centre on-site. While it provides a contextualised account of practice, the findings are not intended to be generalised across settings. The insider researcher position enabled deep engagement with the culture and participants; it also required ongoing reflexivity to manage potential bias and role duality. Leaders in comparable

secondary school settings may find value in applying several principles identified through this study, including developing leadership with inclusive intent, building middle-leader capacity, investing in contextualised professional learning, creating structures for collaboration, and fostering relational trust. The study also took place during a period of significant disruption, including leadership change and system-level reform, which shaped both the process and outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a meaningful contribution to both theory and practice. It provides an empirically grounded model (Figure 1) illustrating how leadership can influence cultural change towards inclusion through the interplay of disruption, shared leadership, and capacity building. Importantly, the study moves beyond policy discourse to demonstrate how inclusive practice can be enacted in a secondary school context. In doing so, it offers practical insight for school leaders seeking to build teacher capacity, align whole-school practices, and create the conditions necessary for sustained inclusive improvement.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the complex interplay of disruption, leadership, and cultural change in the development of inclusive practices for students with special educational needs within a secondary school context. Leadership change, school improvement processes, and the increasing accountability associated with the National Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) disrupted established practices and created conditions that both challenged and enabled change.

The findings provide empirical insight into the factors that constrain and enable the development of inclusive schooling, particularly through their influence on teacher attitudes, confidence, and practice. Central to this process was the role of strategic principal leadership in setting direction, challenging assumptions, and creating the conditions for improvement. Nevertheless, sustainable change was not achieved through principal leadership alone.

A critical driver of change was the role of the Leader of Learning for Diversity Education and the enabling actions of the principal. Through relational approaches, collaborative engagement with teachers, and contextualised professional learning, inclusive intent was increasingly translated into classroom practice. Over time, this contributed to shifts in teacher thinking, increased confidence, and the development of more inclusive ways of working across the College.

This study extends existing understandings of inclusive leadership by demonstrating that cultural change in secondary schools is achieved through a dynamic, context-responsive process rather than fixed frameworks. While previous research has emphasised the importance of leadership in promoting inclusion (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Riehl, 2000), the findings of this study highlight how disruption, when strategically led, can challenge entrenched beliefs and practices. Importantly, this disruption must be accompanied by deliberate efforts to build teacher capacity through relational trust, shared leadership, and job-embedded professional learning.

Inclusive leadership is enacted not as a singular role, but as a distributed and evolving practice developed through interaction, reflection, and collective responsibility. The findings reinforce the importance of teacher leadership and collaborative professional cultures in building collective capacity for inclusive practice across secondary school contexts.

Overall, the study demonstrates that developing inclusive practice in secondary schools requires purposeful, distributed leadership that balances disruption with support while developing teacher capacity for lasting change. The model for inclusive practice development presented in this study offers school leaders a practical and empirically grounded framework for navigating complex change while fostering more inclusive cultures, practices, and outcomes for diverse learners.

Disclosure

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026) to support the structuring, organisation, and editing of sections of this manuscript. All intellectual content, analysis, and interpretations are the author's own. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

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The Inclusion Paradox: Creating Shared Culture by Valuing Individuality

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ABSTRACT: The importance of catering to students' individual needs to foster engagement and enjoyment in learning is highlighted in contemporary research (Woodcock et al., 2023). Far less attention, however, is given to teachers' personal interests and the need for professional learning that values their individuality. Increasingly standardised and pre-packaged professional development (PD) models can limit teacher autonomy and diminish engagement (Murtagh et al., 2023; Salton et al., 2022).

In 2023, the Glennie School adopted the Cultures of Thinking framework, grounded in Harvard's Project Zero research, to place thinking at the centre of school life. Central to this shift was the belief that creating a genuine culture of thinking requires building inclusive, communal spaces where teachers learn alongside students. As Ritchhart (2015, p.1) notes, "for schools to be cultures of thinking for students, they must be cultures of thinking for teachers". The school

therefore intentionally expanded its focus to support all teachers to be challenged, stretched, and engaged through meaningful, interest driven learning.

To achieve this, leadership moved away from whole staff, one size fits all PD and implemented a more inclusive, individualised Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) model. Through a school–university partnership, teachers interested in higher degree study join a collegial HDR learning community with shared supervision. Early thematic analysis of narrative inquiry data shows that when teachers pursue areas of personal passion with sustained support from colleagues and leaders, their expertise, engagement, and enjoyment of their work deepen significantly.

School leadership also responded to the rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) by inviting all staff to co-develop resources that support ethical and informed classroom practice. In collaboration with University researchers, teachers engaged in design based research to create an open education resource, the Teacher’s Guide to Academic Integrity and AI, that builds a shared language of academic integrity within the school’s learning culture (Roux et al., 2023).

Finally, the Authentic Research Mentor Program (ARMP) connects rural high-ability Year 10 students and their teachers with academic mentors to conduct real scientific research. Survey data show positive impacts on teaching and learning: teachers gained greater clarity about scientific processes and supported a shift from memorisation to inquiry driven, collaborative learning. Students reported growth in inquiry skills, and many rural high-ability girls indicated the program helped them imagine futures in science.

Through these three core partnerships, the school leadership has created an inclusive, individualised professional learning environment, a starkly different model from the popular “out of the box” PD. Each of these projects in partnership with the University has provided mutual benefits for inclusive professional development by fostering a culture of collaboration, professional growth, and research informed practice. By creating an inclusive workplace which caters to staff interests, addresses their shared challenges, and supports their professional growth and assists them to offer new learning opportunities to their students, the school has seen increased staff engagement and retention and improved student outcomes. Across these initiatives, the shared priority is clear: inclusive, interest driven, and community supported learning environments that value teachers as learners, strengthening both teacher agency and school-wide learning cultures.

Key words: School leadership, inclusion, professional development, values, partnerships

Context

The Glennie School (the School) is a regional girls’ boarding school located in regional Queensland, Australia. Over its 100-year history, the School has developed strong traditions and entrenched approaches to teaching and learning, centred on academic success and a holistic education. As a boarding school, there is also a strong emphasis on pastoral care and wellbeing, as well as on engagement in co-curricular sports and arts opportunities. Over the years, the School has adopted a range of pedagogical frameworks, including Marzano’s (2007) *The Art and Science*

of Teaching (2007), with varying success. Despite leaders' efforts to create a shared language, there lacked a consistent approach that fostered positive cultural connections. The School's structured approach to the implementation of pedagogical frameworks aligns with Evers et al.'s (2023) concerns that "centralised control may deny teachers the control and flexibility they need to do the job effectively and undermines their motivation" (p. 144). As the School evolved, it began a gradual shift away from "one-size-fits-all" frameworks and professional development delivery models "with a focus on performance control" (Evers et al., 2023, p. 153), to a more nuanced, context-responsive and personalised approach that provides staff with a shared basis for their teaching practice while also recognising and fostering their professional expertise, autonomy, and self-efficacy (Woodcock et al., 2023). As Evers et al. (2023) argue:

[This focus on school development] can support school leaders to empower teachers, to develop and to innovate based on the autonomy and professionalism of teachers and teacher teams, which in turn influences teacher professional development and thus takes their school to the next level. (pp. 153–154)

In 2023, the School commenced a process of reframing teaching and learning where thinking was visible and valued across the school community. This shift emerged from a growing need and recognition that developing students as critical, creative, and reflective learners required more than just a strong pedagogical framework; it required a cultural shift, one that created opportunities for authentic learning experiences not only for the students but also the staff. The focus shifted from a more outcome-centric "what to know" approach to a more process-centric "how to think" culture, which foregrounds and values the act of learning itself. The School initially sought to cultivate and nurture the character dispositions associated with a culture of thinking, drawing on the research of Ron Ritchhart (2023) and the Harvard School of Education, by providing opportunities for rich learning through curiosity, intellectual risk taking, and reflection.

Central to this work is the belief that establishing a culture of thinking is not something we do, but something we are. Ritchhart (2023) asserts that, "for schools to be cultures of thinking for students, they must be cultures of thinking for teachers" (p. 1). This commitment to professional growth and a cultural shift featured prominently as the School reflected on opportunities within the curriculum and the professional learning program for staff to be innovative, challenged, and to actively and authentically model a culture of thinking.

For the purpose of this article, "culture" is understood through Schein's (1991) tripartite model of organisational culture, comprising the visible artefacts, espoused values, and underlying shared assumptions that together shape collective behaviour. This is considered alongside Geertz' (2017) view of culture as a public, symbolic system of shared meaning through which members interpret their own actions and those of others. The School's culture of thinking, when considered through this lens, moves beyond isolated activities to become a deeply connected and coherent way of working, not in the practices themselves but in a deeper, jointly held set of assumptions about learning, teacher autonomy, and professional identity that those practices both express and continually reinforce.

It was clear that the pre-packaged models of professional development on offer would not create an environment for staff to pursue their own professional and intellectual interests (Murtagh et al., 2023), so the School adopted a more flexible, collaborative approach. The work of DuFour

(2004) was also important in establishing Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) that were grounded in a shared purpose, a collaborative culture focused on learning and sharing, action-oriented, and committed to improvement. It was important that these PLTs gave staff a shared focus but also allowed them the freedom and flexibility to pursue that focus within their own classroom contexts (Brodie, 2021). This is supported by Evers et al.'s (2023) findings that decentralised professional development in which teachers work in teams "puts teachers in a position to influence and control their own work" (p. 144). Using professional action research cycles, teams investigated their chosen topic, shared and synthesised their findings, and reported back to the whole staff at the end of each year. The approach to whole school professional learning, outlined in this article, was aimed at connecting individual initiatives to underlying united cultural priorities that the school was building.

As PLTs practices and Cultures of Thinking became more firmly established, new opportunities to further extend staff and allow them even greater professional autonomy emerged. A strategic partnership was subsequently formed with a closely located regional University known for its commitment to research and engagement with schools. The purpose of this partnership was initially to provide opportunities for staff to engage in action-based research and for students to work collaboratively with researchers and academics using authentic data through inquiry projects; however, over time, this has developed into broader opportunities for collaboration. This article describes three partnership projects that have enabled the School leadership to create an authentically inclusive professional learning environment for its staff, which ultimately serves to benefit its students and the School's cultural progression.

The tension between individual autonomy and shared institutional coherence is well documented in the professional learning community. Brodie (2021) identifies trust and collaboration as central to effective PLTs, while noting that this requires balancing individual teacher agency against a collective purpose. Evers et al. (2023) go further, arguing that decentralised professional development structures, in which teachers are given genuine control over their own work, do not undermine shared culture but actively support it, because teachers who feel trusted are more likely to internalise collective values rather than merely comply with them. Organisational paradox theory offers a useful frame for understanding why this is not a contradiction to be resolved but a persistent, productive tension to be managed. Smith and Tracey (2016) argue that organisations facing competing demands, such as autonomy and control, benefit from treating these as interdependent rather than opposed. Read this way, alongside Schein's (1991) and Geertz' (2017) view of culture as a jointly held assumption, coherence is best understood as emerging through autonomy, not despite it. What this article explores is how to work with these tensions across three structurally distinct partnership models operating at different timeframes and levels of complexity.

The contribution of this article lies in bringing three distinct partnership models, a cohort-based doctoral supervision program, a rapid-response policy co-design project, and a sustained student research-mentoring initiative together under one school leadership philosophy. The article illustrates how a shared commitment to staff and student autonomy can navigate varying purposes, timeframes, and structures for maximum benefit and impact. While teacher-researcher and school-university partnership models have each been explored (see Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al.,

2017; Morris et al., 2021), this article’s distinctive contribution lies in considering them together as a unified, coherent, and decentralised approach to professional culture building in a regional Australian context.

The research question central to the article is: *How does a regional school’s strategic partnership with a regional university enable an authentically inclusive professional learning culture that balances staff and student autonomy with a shared institutional culture of thinking?* The three partnership projects presented below are offered as illustrative cases in response to this question.

Methodology

The project central to this article adopts a multi-case practitioner-research design (Yin, 2018), presenting three purposively selected partnership initiatives as illustrative cases of the School’s approach to inclusive learning. Data informing on each of the cases were gathered through a combination of staff and student surveys, reflective narrative writing, and thematic analysis (Table 1). The cases are presented through their description, aim, design, rationale, and impact. The three cases were selected because each represents a structurally distinct model of school–university partnership, allowing comparisons across the different partnerships and their contribution to the overall school’s professional learning. The contribution of the illustrations of practice responds to the research question largely through the impact statements. This will be further considered within the discussion and conclusion of the article. The projects all received individual ethical clearance through the partner University.

Table 1

Summary of Studies

	Partnership 1: PhD PLT	Partnership 2: Academic Integrity	Partnership 3: Scientists in Schools
Methodology	Narrative Inquiry	Design-based Research	Qualitative survey
Participants	6 teacher-researchers	• Years 7–12 teaching staff • Curriculum leaders (CL)	3 science specialist teachers
Data Collection	6 x 2,000 word written reflective narratives	• All staff survey (n=34) – challenges and needs • CL focus group (n=5) – framework design • All staff survey – framework feedback	Qualitative survey – open-ended. Reflecting on efficacy of Scientists in School’s program.
Data Analysis	Thematic analysis	Descriptive statistical analysis Thematic analysis of open-ended responses	Thematic analysis

Partnership 1: PhD-PLT Partnership

The “PhD-PLT” was one of the first initiatives to be developed in partnership with the University. This builds upon the School’s implementation of PLTs for professional learning by creating a PLT for staff who wish to undertake further formal study through higher degree research. Currently, the program involves 14 teachers engaged in the Higher Degree Research Program. A further four teaching and professional staff are engaged in research and postgraduate studies through other universities. Unlike the other PLTs who are investigating a common interest, the PhD-PLT cohort is united by their experience of being teacher-researchers, while having the freedom to choose their own area of focus. These range from plant microbiology to agricultural education to Australian Gothic literature. Many of the current teacher-researchers are engaged in research that reflects their current role within the school; however, it is an opportunity to extend their thinking and broaden their knowledge by either undertaking a Master’s degree or a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

Aim

Recent research on professional learning indicates that some school leaders have a “lack of interest” in their staff pursuing further study (Mohammad Nezhad & Stolz, 2025, p. 1074), and teachers who do so independently can be made to feel like “outsiders”. However, if “school leaders recognise and value the PhD, the influence on the school environment can be beneficial” (Kowalczyk-Walędziak et al., 2017, p. 348). The School wanted to ensure that the professional learning opportunities for teaching staff were authentic and reflected the teachers’ own passions and interests. The main aim of this was to reinforce the importance of each individual’s professional identity rather than a more standardised approach to Professional Development (PD), and thus, improve teacher engagement and retention by supporting them to pursue their own professional interests with greater depth and rigour.

Design and Rationale

Teachers-researchers in this program are well supported through a cohort-based supervision model that provides practical support and time for collaboration. There is structured time within the timetable for teacher-researchers to work independently, meet as a cohort, or liaise with their Common Associate Supervisor, who supports the cohort through shared challenges like ethics applications and developing their academic writing. They are further supported by a topic expert supervisor who provides guidance around their own field (Bedford et al., 2024). This approach streamlines the supervision process for the academics by allowing topic experts to stay focused on the research itself, while the Common Supervisor provides the more general academic support. The teacher-researchers are expected to report back to the teaching staff as other PLTs do at the end of each year, keeping them connected within the School’s broader PD approach. The partnership also extends to researching the efficacy of the cohort model, with the first phase of research taking a narrative inquiry approach. Six participants wrote reflective narratives about their choice to join the PhD-PLT, and led by the Common Supervisor, four teacher-researchers

undertook a thematic analysis of the narratives, identifying self-belief/doubt, challenges and hesitations, motivation, support, and impact as factors which shaped their emerging teacher-researcher identities.

The six participating teacher-researchers were purposively included from the 14 staff who were active in the PhD-PLT at the time, based on their further progression within the program, which positioned them to contribute richer accounts of their lived experience.

Impact

The initial findings from the narrative inquiry emphasise the vital role of school leadership in ensuring the program's success. Both structural and relational support were identified as key enablers for the staff in making the choice to undertake higher degree research while managing family and caring responsibilities and their own full-time workloads (which were some of the challenges identified). The time given to the staff to attend PLTs meetings and flexibility around attending research-related conferences or development opportunities was a tangible support, while the positive way in which school leadership and colleagues spoke about their work provided a sense of relational support. This was enhanced by the relational support from the University supervisors, which countered some of the self-doubts expressed about their capacity to do this sort of research (Woodcock et al., 2023).

Appova and Arbaugh (2018) found that teachers are ultimately motivated to support their students' learning, while also learning from or with others to become a "better" teacher (p. 10). While motivations for participation varied, making a difference to their students was a common element, as was the freedom to pursue their personal interests rather than a mandated focus. The theme of motivation and impact intersected, with participants focusing on impacts within their own practice and the school community initially, while seeing their potential impact upon the profession or their field as a longer-term potential outcome. These initial findings demonstrate that a positive teacher-researcher identity is enabled in environments with both structural and relational support, where teachers are motivated and encouraged to pursue their own interests, and trusted by the school leadership to do so.

There are a range of benefits emerging from this cohort supervision model. Not only does it provide a unique model and framework to support teachers by countering many of the challenges of higher degree study (Bedford et al., 2024; Kowalczyk-Walędziak, 2017), but it also offers opportunities for teaching staff to become teacher-researchers, to model the learning process, and to further build teaching excellence within the school. This program has given all teaching staff equal opportunities to further their knowledge, skills, and abilities, enabling them to become leaders in their fields, both within and beyond the school gates. Data from the narrative inquiry supported Appova and Arbaugh's (2018) finding that seeing themselves as learners and wanting to learn more about their own interests were also important motivating factors for teachers. Sharing their learning allows the teacher-researchers to model the core values underpinning the School's culture of centralising thinking for both colleagues and their students. Ritchhart (2023) refers to this as "institutional mirroring, the idea is that in any institution, people will generally mirror the practices, behaviours, and treatment they experience in their communities" (p. 5).

Ultimately, the school leadership's decision to allow teachers authentic autonomy and individual choice in undertaking further study and providing both structural and relational support for these staff strengthens teacher agency and provides teachers with the opportunity to model lifelong learning to their students in an authentic way. As one teacher-researcher recounted:

I already feel energised to be given the opportunity to explore an area of particular interest to me. It is reassuring to know that the school values personal and professional growth and will provide time during school hours to pursue this area of study. One of the many advantages of working as a group is that I am part of a like-minded community from which I can draw inspiration and energy.

In this context, inclusive leadership values the growth of the individual over the need for strict compliance with mandated processes. However, by giving staff the freedom to pursue their own interests, they are more engaged in their work and actively embody the collective culture of thinking that the leadership aims to foster. This testimony illustrates a broader pattern across the data whereby teachers repeatedly described the PhD-PLT model as motivating, not because it was mandated, but because it was chosen. This highlights the consideration that autonomy is a driver of engagement. This is not, however, a contradiction to be resolved. As organisational paradox theory suggests, autonomy and coherence are better understood as interdependent poles that need to be held together, rather than opposing forces needing to be balanced (Smith & Tracey, 2016). We return to this seeming paradox in our conclusion.

Partnership 2: Academic Integrity in the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Era

Another initiative that emerged from the partnership with the University resulted in *A Teacher's Guide to Academic Integrity and AI*, an inquiry project led and developed by staff at the School and University researchers. This was an opportunity to develop a shared language around AI and policy, and to create practical ways to teach for academic integrity (Roux et al., 2023). The outcome of this collaborative project was a flexible, practical, and research-informed teaching resource that helped nurture a school culture that was responsive to changing needs while remaining grounded in integrity and respect.

Aim

The aim of co-designing the teacher resource was to respond to a critical point-in-time need for teaching staff to have a fair and consistent approach to the rapid emergence of AI technologies. Rather than adopt the blanket ban which characterised many initial responses (Duffy, 2023), the school wanted to allow staff to explore the educative potential of the tools, while mitigating the risks generative technologies pose to maintaining academic integrity and ensuring the work reflected the students' own thinking, in line with the school's values and culture.

Design and Rationale

The University team adopted a design-based research approach to co-design a resource for staff and a clear policy direction for the school (Burke et al., 2025). Design-based research was

particularly suited for this collaboration, as it focuses on “developing workable solutions to problems in context” (Burke et al., 2025, p. 495). Teaching staff completed an initial survey about their understanding of generative AI, which then informed further focus group discussions with discipline leaders. Working collaboratively, the researchers and curriculum leaders identified the need for consistency in approach, clarity in understanding what constitutes acceptable use of AI, training for staff to leverage AI appropriately, awareness of academic integrity, and processes for managing instances of academic misconduct (Burke et al., 2025). The models, policies, and resources developed were then shared with staff and further developed based on their iterative feedback.

Impact

The final outcome, *A Teacher’s Guide to Academic Integrity & GenAI*, centred on fostering academic integrity while using AI, and provided resources and policies to support both staff at the School and other schools to navigate this period of rapid professional change. Unlike the other partnership projects discussed, this collaboration was time-bounded and responded to a distinct, immediate challenge. While Mohammad Nezhad and Stolz’s (2025) study showed that teachers are often “marginalised in designing and implementing professional learning” (p. 1067), this process of co-design ensured that teacher expertise and interest underpinned the response. This works to counter a trend which foregrounds policy over teacher expertise in professional learning (Mohammad Nezhad & Stolz, 2025). Murtagh et al. (2023) describe this as a need to reclaim the professional narrative from homogenous, prescriptive policy, re-centring teachers as active agents in shaping their own practice rather than recipients of externally imposed solutions. The co-design process described here reflects exactly that kind of reclaiming. It demonstrates another approach to creating inclusive professional learning environments; rather than school leadership dictating a response to a perceived “crisis”, the partnership approach allowed teachers’ ideas and concerns to be considered as the team co-constructed the policies and resources. This approach supported teachers to take action which aligned strongly with the schools’ values, centring on honesty and fairness (Burke et al., 2025). It also positioned the school team as leaders in this field, with other schools requesting support in adopting and adapting the resource for their own contexts.

Partnership 3: Scientists in School: The Authentic Research Mentor Program

In 2023, the School partnered with the University, focusing on science education. A Research Mentor Program was developed in collaboration with University academics to provide Year 10 science students with opportunities to engage in real-world research and use authentic data as part of their inquiry project. Embedded within the School’s Year 10 Science Program, and running for a year, the program provided students with an opportunity to collaborate with their academic mentor, deepen their scientific understanding, and undertake relevant research in their chosen field. Through student surveys, students reported increased confidence in conducting research and analysing data. Students valued the program’s real-world authenticity, seeing science applied outside the classroom. Ultimately, students engaged in the program found that it had furthered their interest in STEM-related fields.

Aim

The aims of this partnership were two-fold: the first was to create authentic learning experiences that extend rural high-ability girls' science inquiry skills and motivation for a STEM career. Secondly, the partnership aimed to develop science teachers' deeper pedagogical understanding of how to engage students in authentic, real-world problems that extend students' science-inquiry skills. Importantly, the second aim recognised teachers' current pedagogical expertise and aimed to build upon that expertise.

Design and Rationale

The program was designed based on impactful research mentor programs that have been implemented in rural Australian schools previously (Puslednik & Brennan 2020, 2026). Over the course of the school year, high-ability Year 10 students engaged in authentic scientific research with mentors from a range of scientific fields, including ecology, physiology, biomedical sciences, physics, and genetics. The range of scientific fields matched the three teachers' specialist areas as well as the areas of interest for the students. Of the seven mentors, five were female, and two were male; a variety of scientific career stages were represented, from PhD candidates to professorial-level scientists. Whilst gender matching approaches for mentor programs is considered the best approach to support female retention in STEM fields (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017; Mullet et al., 2018), others argue exemplary mentor programs bring mentees together with a variety of mentors across various career stages, as females will experience a variety of mentors from a range of genders across their careers (Beck et al., 2022).

Five different communities of people were involved in the program, with the structure drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. At the centre of the program were the high-ability female students, with the teachers representing the microsystem and the mentors the mesosystem. At the exosystemic level is the School–University partnership. Students worked in small groups with the mentors, ensuring a low ratio of students to mentors. The program was embedded into the School timetable within students' regular Year 10 science lessons. One lesson per week (1 hour) was dedicated to the program over the school year.

Initially, students and scientists engaged in a "Question and Answer" session, where students had the opportunity to ask the scientists a range of questions about their research and their work. This was followed by scientists providing authentic datasets to students. Scientists explained these datasets either in person or via a video presentation that students had the opportunity to review as many times as they needed. Based on their personal interests, students selected to work with mentors and their respective datasets. This was followed by a series of online Zoom sessions over two school terms, where students and mentors connected on a regular basis to develop research questions and data analysis methods, review results of data analysis and interpretations, and finally construct and present an oral presentation for an academic audience at the University. This hybrid mentor approach was undertaken to sustain the partnership between the rural school and the university. Programs such as these require significant mentor investment (Morris et al., 2021) to avoid mentor burden. This hybrid model was employed, incorporating aspects of face-to-face learning and online synchronous learning (Treasure et al., 2022).

To examine the impact of the program relative to the aims, qualitative measures were used, and data were collected through surveys of both the students and staff. Following Puslednik & Brennan (2020), anonymous student surveys were used before and after participation in the program to self-evaluate student growth in science inquiry skills.

For the three staff involved in the program, the open-ended survey questions included :

- What do you see as the benefits of the program for the students?
- What were the challenges of the program?
- Has the program influenced or changed your teaching practice? If so, how?
- What have you learnt the most from being involved in the program?

Impact

The findings of the student data showed significant growth in their science inquiry skills and will be reported in subsequent articles; we focus here on the teacher data. Teacher responses provided a deeper insight into what they observed as the benefits of the program for their students. Teachers were able to identify that the program extended the students beyond their normal classroom activities, as it “provides authentic, high-level scientific research experience beyond the ACARA Science syllabus”. The ARMP also aligned with the School’s culture of thinking, as it improved students’ scientific inquiry skills by “develop[ing] student skills in experimental design and data analysis”. Teachers also observed that the experience “builds confidence and professional communication skills” and “fosters independent thinking, curiosity, and a deeper understanding of the scientific process”, again highlighting how the program contributed to fostering the School’s culture of thinking and valuing of learning as a process. The teachers in the program also recognised that the program supported students in their vision of their future selves, with a teacher responding that “meeting scientists and seeing real-world science is motivational and opens horizons for students”. Like the teacher-researchers in the PhD-PLT, the students’ self-perception shifted as a result of being a part of a program which modelled and allowed them to experience learning through research and inquiry.

These types of research mentor programs are not without their challenges within the mainstream schooling system. Both students and teachers recognised the time management challenge of their involvement, with one teacher noting: “balancing the program’s intensity with other academic and extracurricular commitments” as the largest challenge.

Interestingly, the teachers identify that the students are not used to being engaged in authentic scientific research, which has a strong focus on examining real-world problems that are complex and that “students can initially struggle with open-ended research, particularly in framing questions and interpreting complex data”. One teacher identified a solution to this problem in that the “pairing of students with experienced scientists for guidance” helped to address this issue. This again highlights how the School’s culture is gradually changing to be more process-centric and explicitly focused on thinking and learning, an approach supported by research which suggests “school-based interventions that aim to enhance factors consistent with mastery goals (i.e., learning skills and understanding the subject, rather than assessing competence in comparison to peers) could prevent depression in adolescents” (Stear et al., 2024, p. 413).

Closer examination of teacher data highlights that the program has influenced their teaching practice by “shift[ing] focus toward a skill-based approach that emphasises developing inquiry skills over content delivery”. The teacher here unknowingly echoes the rationale for changes to the School’s approach to PD; one less centred on content and more focused on the process of learning and thinking. Critically, for the teacher who has been part of this program, it has “reinforced the value of integrating authentic research experiences into teaching”.

The program has provided teachers with key insights into how they can effectively adapt their pedagogy to ensure that high-ability students are authentically challenged within the regular classroom environment, recognising that “students can engage meaningfully with sophisticated research when given autonomy and guidance”. The program has allowed teachers to effectively reflect on their practice and modelled that “effective scaffolding, feedback, and reflective practice are critical for student success”. The takeaway for the teachers and their professional development is that the program has “reinforced the importance of inquiry-based learning and mentorship in preparing students for higher-level science pathways”. The ARMP has provided the School’s science teachers with a customised, discipline-centred opportunity to develop their pedagogical practice in partnership with the visiting scientists and researchers, and in so doing, they are extending the opportunity to participate in a culture of thinking to their students by foregrounding the process of scientific inquiry as a learning process.

Discussion: The Inclusion Paradox

Having outlined the three individual partnerships, we now return to our central question: *How does a regional school’s strategic partnership with a regional university enable an authentically inclusive professional learning culture that balances staff and student autonomy with a shared institutional culture of thinking?* While each of these partnership projects differs in scope, duration and design, they are unified by the School’s underpinning belief in the value of centralising thinking and learning, and not just “achieving”. Having established shared values which foreground process over product through the Cultures of Thinking model, the School has trusted their staff, as critical thinkers and professionals, to contribute collaboratively as members of a learning community, beyond being passive recipients of external wisdom. Thus, a shared purpose, individual value, trust, and autonomy have emerged as key components of the strategic partnership which have created an authentically inclusive professional learning culture.

One of the key enablers of this outcome is rooted in the trust that school leadership has shown in their staff. Brodie (2021) identifies “focus, long-term inquiry, collaboration, leadership support and trust” (p. 562) as the elements that constitute effective PLTs. The School’s approach establishes a shared focus on the process of learning, framed through the Cultures of Thinking model. This is not prescriptive, however, and staff are encouraged to undertake an inquiry of their own choosing that can support their individual and collective pedagogical practice. As the three projects illustrate, collaboration exists not only within the PLTs but also between the School and various University staff. Leadership support and trust underpin the success of the professional learning occurring across the school. Evers et al.’s (2023) analysis of more than 30 years of research in professional learning found that “empowering teachers” and “decentralization” (p. 140)

were two vital structural factors that support teacher autonomy. The partnership projects at the School exemplify this concept, as the “school leaders support teachers in their educational design and trust them to teach according to their own professional insights” (Evers et al., 2023, p. 144), building on their shared understandings of the School’s core values.

The PhD-PLT gives teachers authentic freedom and autonomy to shape their own professional learning, and in so doing, engage deeply in a culture of thinking not only in their professional life but within their field of research. The School’s choice to support staff through a six-year (part-time enrolment) PhD journey shows their long-term commitment to staff professional growth. The AI and Academic Integrity project also showed the power of inclusive leadership, by engaging in a research-informed process and listening to staff concerns and needs. The School leadership placed their trust in their curriculum leaders to work collaboratively with their University partners to co-design a solution that empowered teachers and students to use AI with integrity, and to develop a shared understanding of what this meant in the context of the School. The ARMP demonstrates that “trusting teachers to behave as autonomous professionals gives the possibility to involve their students in critical thinking” (Evers et al., 2023, p. 151). By working with University research partners and practising scientists, the ARMP models for students the rigorous intellectual work of scientific inquiry. This aligns with the School’s focus on learning and thinking and works to counter the fixation on results common amongst high-achieving female students. Importantly, the ARMP involved the teachers in every respect, valuing them as discipline and pedagogical experts.

Conclusion

Across the three partnership projects, what first appears paradoxical, that the School has achieved a more coherent, shared professional culture precisely by giving staff greater individual autonomy rather than less, is better understood through organisational paradox theory as a productive, ongoing tension rather than a contradiction to be resolved. Smith and Tracey (2016) describe paradox as persistent, interrelated contradictions that organisations must learn to work with over time rather than eliminate, and they extend this to show that organisations facing competing demands such as autonomy and control benefit from engaging both poles simultaneously rather than favouring one over the other.

The three partnerships described in this article illustrate exactly this kind of ongoing negotiation: by developing a school culture that values making thinking visible, and by designing professional learning opportunities that give staff a voice, allow them to make choices, and trust their expertise, the School has created space for individuality and shared purpose to operate together rather than in competition. This addresses the key research question posed in the opening of this article, and confirms, rather than contradicts, Evers et al.’s (2023) and Brodie’s (2021) findings that trust and decentralised structures support, rather than undermine, collective culture. What this article adds to that existing understanding is an empirical account of how one school has sustained this tension productively across three structurally distinct partnership models, operating at different timeframes and levels of formality, brought together for the first time under one

leadership philosophy. A shared, coherent professional culture, the School's case suggests, is achieved not despite valuing staff individuality, but through it.

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Disclosure

AI tools were not used in the creation of this article, beyond the spelling and grammar recommendations inbuilt in Word.

Ethics

The projects described within this article were undertaken in accordance with Australian research guidelines and with approval from the University of Southern Queensland's Human Research Ethics Committee. PhD-PLT: ETH2026-0054; AI and academic integrity: ETH2024-0544; ARMP: ETH2023-0380.

Consent

In accordance with the Ethics approvals for each project, participants provided their informed consent to the use of their data.

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Empowering Teachers, Fostering Inclusion Through Distributed Leadership Practices

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ABSTRACT: School leadership is increasingly recognised as essential for empowering early career teachers and supporting their retention. However, many early career teachers continue to struggle and face challenges to support students with disabilities, highlighting a persistent gap between policy intentions and school-level practice. This article begins by outlining the common struggles that early career teachers face, particularly the complexities of inclusive education and the pressures associated with responding to the needs of students. It then examines the crucial role of inclusive school leaders in addressing these challenges, highlighting how they can foster agency by inviting teacher voice, sharing decision making, and creating safe and supportive school environments that enhance early career teachers' sense of belonging and efficacy. The discussion then turns to the application of a distributed leadership framework in inclusive contexts, examining how principal–teacher relationships can either constrain or enable inclusive practices and support teacher empowerment, drawing on international examples with a particular focus on Australia. The article concludes by identifying practical implications for leadership, including the design of mentoring programs, trust building, and creating early leadership opportunities that support the professional growth of early career teachers.

Key words: Inclusive school leadership, distributed leadership, principal–teacher relationships, teacher empowerment, professional growth, early career teachers

Introduction

Early career teachers enter the profession with potential and commitment yet often encounter a challenging transition into the realities of school life. In many education systems, new teachers consider leaving within their first five years, citing stress, burnout, and inadequate support as the main reasons (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Boyle et al., 2023; Räsänen et al., 2022). This is particularly concerning in Australia, where teacher retention and workforce shortages have intensified attention on how school leaders can support early career teachers (McPherson et al., 2025). Research suggests that school leadership is an important factor in whether early career teachers thrive or struggle during these formative years (De Nobile, 2021; Dunn & Thompson, 2026). In particular, the ways principals and senior leadership teams build and manage relationships with early career teachers can significantly influence their professional experiences, sense of belonging, and career intentions (Peters & Pearce, 2012; Szeto, 2022).

Shore and Chung (2022) argue that inclusion, which underpins inclusive leadership, depends on both a sense of belonging, where individuals feel accepted as part of a group or organisation, and a sense of distinctiveness, where they are valued for their unique identities and contributions. In schools, inclusive leaders draw on elements of instructional, distributed, and transformative leadership (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020) by guiding teaching and learning (Harris et al., 2017), promoting shared decision making and collective responsibility, and inspiring staff through a shared vision and supportive professional relationships (Adams, Harris et al., 2025). In the context of early career teachers, inclusive leaders seek to connect these new professionals to collegial networks and decision-making processes, rather than leaving them to navigate the profession on their own.

Inclusive leaders also recognise that traditional school hierarchies can create status differences between experienced and novice teachers (Adams, Hussain, & Tan, 2023; DeMatthews et al., 2021). When left unaddressed, these differences may limit early career teachers' confidence to ask questions, seek support, contribute ideas, or participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. Inclusive leadership therefore involves reducing relational distance between school leaders and early career teachers through open communication, mutual respect, and trust (Orekoya, 2024). By creating psychologically safe environments, school leaders enable early career teachers to discuss challenges openly, learn from experienced colleagues, exercise professional judgement, and develop confidence in their roles.

This article brings together the concept and research on inclusive school leadership, distributed leadership, and early career teacher development to develop an understanding of how school leadership can empower novice teachers to enact inclusive education. It argues that these three areas should not be treated as separate concerns. Inclusive leadership and distributed leadership when combined can create the relational and school conditions that enable early career teachers to develop agency, confidence, and the capacity to respond to diverse learners.

The article therefore first outlines the challenges early career teachers face in inclusive schools. It then examines the crucial role of inclusive school leaders in addressing these challenges. The discussion then turns to the application of a distributed leadership to explain how principal–teacher relationships and school structures can either enable or constrain early career teacher empowerment, drawing on international examples with a particular focus on Australia. The article concludes by considering the implications for leadership preparation, teacher professional learning, and school practice.

Challenges for Early Career Teachers

Early career teachers often face significant challenges as they navigate the complexities of inclusive education, respond to the diverse needs of students and families (Lane & Sweeny, 2018), and develop their professional practice in contexts where training and support may be limited. Many early-career teachers enter the profession with a commitment to inclusion but then quickly discover that inclusive education is highly complex and context-dependent. Creating classrooms that respond effectively to diverse learner needs requires sophisticated pedagogical knowledge and judgement developed through sustained experience, professional learning, and support, rather than through initial teacher education alone.

Research consistently identifies student diversity as a major challenge for early career teachers. In Shafi's (2025) study of 20 early career teachers, participants described difficulties in differentiating instruction, implementing reasonable adjustments, and designing learning that addressed the needs of students with disability, neurodivergent students, learners with English as an additional language, and students experiencing trauma or mental health and wellbeing concerns. Lane and Sweeny (2018) reported similar findings, with 17 of 18 participants struggling to meet diverse student needs. These challenges were compounded by expectations to maintain curriculum requirements, academic standards, and student engagement while applying inclusive pedagogies with limited classroom experience. Early career teachers may therefore understand the principles of inclusion but still have trouble applying them effectively in classroom practice.

Behaviour management and emotional demands further intensify these challenges. Lane and Sweeny (2018) found that 15 of 18 participants experienced difficulties managing student behaviour, including disciplinary concerns involving individual students and groups. Early career teachers have to respond to students' behavioural and emotional regulation needs while managing the emotional labour involved in supporting learners. They are also expected to meet the demands of parents, colleagues, and school leaders and to contribute to collaborative planning and assessment. Although collaboration can provide valuable support, it may become an additional burden when early career teachers are already managing heavy workloads and attempting to establish their professional credibility. Lindqvist and Kelchtermans (2025) similarly highlight the emotional toll experienced when teachers' efforts do not produce the outcomes they seek or when relational conflict with other teachers challenges their professional judgement and sense of competence.

These pressures are reinforced by a perceived gap between the expectations placed on early career teachers and the preparation they receive through initial teacher education. Adams,

Mohamed et al. (2023) found that early career teachers often felt underprepared in disability inclusion, and limited opportunities to apply theoretical learning in classroom contexts may reduce their confidence when supporting students with additional needs.

Collectively, these studies show that the difficulties experienced by early career teachers are not simply the result of limited competence or insufficient classroom experience. They also reflect the organisational conditions in which new teachers are expected to work. Their capacity to enact inclusive education depends on whether schools provide the professional support, resources, and organisational structures needed to apply their knowledge effectively in classroom practice. This changes the focus from asking whether early career teachers are adequately prepared for inclusion to asking whether schools are led in ways that enable them to succeed. From this perspective, early career teacher development becomes an inclusive leadership responsibility rather than a teacher's process of adaptation.

Role of Inclusive School Leaders

Recent studies highlight the critical role school leaders play in establishing and sustaining effective inclusive schools (Billingsley et al., 2019; Opoku, 2023). Principals are important actors to this work because they are responsible for leading school administration, representing the school within the wider community, and ensuring that educational policies are implemented effectively. Beyond these managerial responsibilities, principals also serve as ethical role models who support the growth of teachers and other school staff (Khaleel et al., 2021).

This section uses the four leadership practices as identified by DeMatthews (2021) to create effective inclusive schools to address some of the challenges faced by early career teachers in inclusive schools. These leadership practices are i) creating a culture of collaboration; ii) building teachers' capacity, iii) engaging in collective inquiry; and iv) buffering teachers from external pressures that can limit their effectiveness.

Creating a Culture of Collaboration

School leaders play an important role in creating safe and supportive professional cultures in which teachers can collaborate, engage in critical conversations, and reflect on their practice (Bhowmik et al., 2023). For early career teachers, collaboration can provide access to practical knowledge, shared problem solving, and support in responding to diverse learner needs. Co-teaching is one example. It involves two teachers sharing responsibility for planning, teaching, assessing, and supporting the same group of students. In inclusive settings, it often brings together a classroom teacher and a colleague with specialist knowledge of disability, learning support, or inclusive teaching. Effective co-teaching requires both teachers to contribute to instructional decisions and share responsibility for all students, rather than positioning one as the primary teacher and the other as an assistant.

Co-teaching is particularly relevant to early career teachers because it embeds professional learning within everyday classroom practice. By planning and teaching alongside a more experienced or specialist colleague, early career teachers can observe how inclusive pedagogies

are adapted to students' needs, receive timely feedback, trial new approaches with support, and develop a deeper understanding of students' learning, behavioural, and wellbeing needs. Sharing knowledge can strengthen instructional decision making and reduce the burden of responding to complex needs in isolation (Rytivaara et al., 2023). More broadly, collaboration can help teachers address instructional challenges (Butler et al., 2004), improve student achievement (Mora-Ruano et al., 2019), strengthen professional skills (Jones-Goods, 2018), and enhance self-esteem (Adams et al., 2016). However, co-teaching does not automatically lead to professional learning; teachers require time to plan, reflect, receive feedback, and develop collaborative skills (Rytivaara et al., 2023).

This is especially important for early career teachers because co-planning and making instructional decisions can increase workload and emotional demands. They may also feel pressure to defer to more experienced colleagues when roles are unclear or relationships are shaped by differences in status. The value of co-teaching therefore depends on how school leaders organise and support it. Principals need to provide protected planning time, clarify responsibilities, match partners carefully, and ensure that both teachers have meaningful roles in teaching and decision making (Bhowmik et al., 2023). When collaboration is adequately resourced and centred in trust, role clarity, shared responsibility, and equality, it can strengthen early career teachers' confidence, inclusive pedagogical knowledge, and sense of belonging (Adams, Mohamed et al., 2025). Collaboration then contributes to more than collegial support; and fosters relational inclusion by positioning early career teachers as contributing members of the school community just like their more senior colleagues.

Building Teachers' Capacity

Early career teachers often felt inadequately prepared for the complexities of an inclusive classroom (Rosenberg, 2022). School leaders could improve the professional capacity of early career teachers to support students by developing their knowledge, skills and attitudes through access to targeted professional development opportunities as well as mentoring and coaching from experienced colleagues with pedagogical expertise and commitment to inclusion. These professional development activities did not just focus on lesson planning, differentiating instruction and adapting classroom management practices, but also how to collaborate and understanding how teams work together and with other teams, for instance, co-teaching and co-planning. According to Bhowmik et al. (2023), these professional development activities can be formal (e.g., organised meetings, seminars, and workshops) and informal (e.g., day-to-day interactions).

In addition, school leaders could connect these early career teachers to professional learning communities within and outside the school. This will mitigate the sense of professional isolation and accessing collegial support to find new ways to support students could also improve their practice (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Rosenberg, 2022). Additionally, school leaders could cultivate teacher leadership through encouraging early career teachers to be innovative and empowering them to put their ideas into practice (DeMatthews, 2021). Rosenberg (2022) found that early career teachers having access to ongoing professional development facilitated their teaching practice while McKay (2016) found that early career teachers who were well supported through mentoring

and coaching were able to respond to students with learning difficulties in a variety of ways. Capacity building is therefore empowering when it moves beyond perceived deficiencies and enables early career teachers to develop expertise, confidence, and professional agency.

Engaging in Collective Inquiry

DeMatthews (2021) defined collective inquiry as a collaborative process where teachers move beyond isolated problem solving to systematically investigate and address shared challenges in their schools. This entails school leaders bringing together a diverse group of teachers to “prioritize what is most important” (DeMatthews, 2021, p. 16), “set goals, identify interventions/actions and evaluate and revise/replace goals at the midyear and end of year” (p. 17). School leaders leverage “the power of group thinking by empowering individuals in decision-making and allowing them freedom when dealing with difficult situations” (Bhowmik et al., 2023, p. 145). To ensure success, school leaders ensured that teachers utilised data, implemented effective teaching practices, and closely monitored classrooms (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

School leaders recognise that traditional school hierarchies can create status differences between experienced and novice teachers (DeMatthews et al., 2021) and they seek to build an inclusive culture by promoting the participation and representation of early career teachers and making sure that the voices of all teachers are valued and heard (Bhowmik et al., 2023). This helps school leaders maintain a trusting and supportive relationship with early career teachers, where they feel valued and included in important decision making. Collective inquiry redistributes professional influence by allowing early career teachers to contribute knowledge, question existing practice, and participate in decisions that shape teaching and learning.

Buffering Teachers From External Pressures That Can Limit Their Effectiveness

School leaders should acknowledge that early career teachers might become overwhelmed by the demands of teaching in inclusive schools and take actions to mitigate these pressures. These include buffering early career teachers from outside pressures related to high-stake accountability measures (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013, as cited in Bhowmik et al., 2023). Billingsley (2010) recommends school leaders look into reducing teaching and non-teaching loads for early career teachers through clarification of their roles, assigning early career teachers to teach content areas they are most prepared to teach, allocating adequate funds for curriculum and teaching materials, and organising the necessary professional development tailored to their professional needs. This so that they could focus on their work.

Research has shown that inclusive school leadership plays an important role in shaping early-career teachers’ transition into the profession, particularly in relation to their commitment to and attitudes towards inclusive education (Rosenberg et al., 2025). This is because beginning teachers’ capacity to enact inclusive practices is not developed in isolation, but is strongly influenced by the quality of support, guidance, and professional conditions provided within the school. As Rosenberg (2022) argues, beginning teachers are more likely to flourish as inclusive educators when school leaders provide both initial and ongoing support, together with the

resources and conditions needed for them to succeed. Buffering should therefore not be understood as protecting early career teachers from professional responsibility, but as providing the conditions needed for them to develop sustainable and effective inclusive practices.

Distributed Leadership in Inclusive Contexts

The inclusive leadership practices discussed above explain what school leaders can do to support early career teachers, but they provide less detail about how leadership, expertise, and responsibility can be organised across the school. Distributed leadership offers an organisational lens for addressing this question by shifting attention from the actions of principals to the interactions among formal and informal leaders, teachers, teams, and school structures. This perspective helps explain how inclusive values can be enacted through everyday opportunities for early career teachers to participate, contribute, and lead.

Distributed leadership has gained prominence over the past two decades for its contribution to strengthening school improvement strategies and improving student outcomes (Harris et al., 2022; Walker & Hallinger, 2015). It views leadership in schools not as conventional, hierarchical, or heroic one-person leadership, but as a collective effort in which formal and informal leaders, such as principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders, actively participate in school decision-making processes (Bush, 2023; Gronn, 2000; Harris et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2024). Spillane et al. (2001), whose work first influenced the emergence of distributed leadership, conceptualised it as the interdependencies and interactions among multiple leaders within a school context, rather than focusing solely on the individual practices of the principal. This distributed approach naturally creates a more inclusive environment because it acknowledges that leadership capability exists at multiple levels of the organisation and that teachers can step forward as leaders in different situations.

Additionally, under the right conditions, distributed leadership has been found to positively influence teachers' attitudes and professional practice, including organisational commitment (Thien & Adams, 2021), professional learning (Polatcan, 2024), motivation and empowerment (Bektaş et al., 2022), self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Liu et al., 2021), and wellbeing (Liu et al., 2024). Distributed leadership is particularly relevant to inclusive leadership and the empowerment of early career teachers because it challenges traditional hierarchical models (Oduro & Kobeli, 2025). Rather than relying on top-down structures where decisions and directives flow primarily from principals or senior leadership teams, distributed leadership envisions leadership as fluid, collaborative, and based on expertise, initiative, and collective responsibility (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016).

Scholars have identified teacher participation in decision making, cooperative team culture, shared responsibility, and trust as primary indicators of distributed leadership in schools (Adams, Harris et al., 2025). For example, Hulpia et al. (2012) found that instructional guidance and teacher support provided by principals contributed to a more positive school climate. Within a distributed leadership practice, early career teachers may find that their ideas for improving curriculum and teaching are welcomed in department meetings or that they are invited to contribute to professional development activities alongside more experienced colleagues. This contrasts with traditional

hierarchical structures where early career teachers are often expected to listen and comply with the direction of more experienced teachers rather than actively contribute to school improvement initiatives.

Distributed leadership is not synonymous with inclusive leadership; however, it provides the conditions that enable inclusive practices to emerge. When leadership is distributed, early career teachers have greater opportunities to exercise agency, participate in professional dialogue, and contribute to school initiatives. For instance, a technology-skilled early career teacher may lead an initiative involving digital learning tools, allowing expertise rather than seniority to shape learning within the school. In this way, formal hierarchies become less rigid, and leadership can flow in multiple directions. Research suggests that when leadership is shared, teachers, regardless of their levels of experience, are more likely to contribute ideas toward school goals, which not only benefits students but also fosters a stronger sense of inclusion and collegiality among staff (Thien & Adams, 2021).

Importantly, distributed leadership has also been associated with inclusive values and the development of inclusive schools (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Cooperative teamwork, shared decision making, and collaborative professional cultures can strengthen student-centred practices and encourage the participation of a broad range of stakeholders within the school community. Furthermore, distributed leadership promotes teacher development by encouraging continuous professional learning, collaboration, and collective responsibility for student outcomes (Bektaş et al., 2022; Polatcan, 2024). Principals who embrace distributed leadership often create structures and processes that value every teacher's input and professional growth, including those of early career teachers (Thien & Adams, 2021). As a result, early career teachers are more likely to feel recognised, supported, and included within the school community.

Inclusive principals play a particularly important role in reducing hierarchical barriers between experienced and early career teachers (DeMatthews et al., 2021). One way they do this is by intentionally building personal and professional relationships with early career teachers. Inclusive principals are approachable, visible, and attentive to the concerns of early career teachers, creating conditions where teachers feel comfortable seeking guidance and discussing challenges (Peters & Pearce, 2012; Szeto, 2022). This may involve adopting open-door policies, actively listening to teachers' concerns, and explicitly reassuring early career teachers that they can ask questions or seek support without fear of judgement. Over time, such practices help reframe the principal not merely as an authority figure, but as part of the teacher's support network.

Inclusive principals also recognise that early career teachers may become overwhelmed by the emotional and professional demands of teaching (Peters & Pearce, 2012). Consequently, they may shield novice teachers from excessive external pressures by offering practical support. For example, principals may intervene in particularly difficult parent-related issues, temporarily adjust workloads, or reduce teaching preparations when early career teachers are struggling. These actions demonstrate care, responsiveness, and professional trust, all of which contribute to psychologically safe school environments.

Perhaps one of the most important changes in principal–teacher relationships occurs when principals intentionally include early career teachers in leadership conversations and decision-making processes (Szeto & Cheng, 2018). Rather than reserving important discussions solely for

senior leadership teams, inclusive leaders invite early career teachers to participate in committees, consultation groups, and school improvement initiatives. For example, a principal introducing a new literacy program may include one or two early career teachers in the planning committee alongside experienced teachers. Such actions signal that the perspectives and contributions of early career teachers are valued despite their limited experience. They also strengthen teachers' confidence, professional identity, and sense of belonging within the school community (Karnopp & Bjorklund, 2025).

Carrington et al. (2024) similarly found that in Australian schools, teachers without formal leadership positions contributed to inclusive education through coaching, collegial partnerships, and communities of practice. The presence of trustful and collaborative relationships enabled leadership to be exercised by multiple members of the school community, including early career teachers. This reflects Spillane et al.'s (2001) emphasis on interactions, interdependencies, and collective agency as important in distributed leadership practices. When schools cultivate trustful professional relationships, early career teachers are more likely to take initiative, participate in leadership activities, and contribute meaningfully to inclusive practices as they feel professionally valued.

However, it is important to acknowledge that simply decentralising leadership does not automatically guarantee positive experiences for early career teachers. Much depends on how leadership distribution is enacted within the school. Micro-political dynamics, such as cliques, informal power structures, or tensions among staff, may still emerge and undermine inclusion if not carefully managed. Effective inclusive leaders therefore cultivate school cultures characterised by transparency, fairness, trust, and open communication (Adams, Mohamed et al., 2025). Transforming hierarchical relationships into inclusive and collaborative ones requires deliberate and ongoing effort. It is not a one-time initiative, but an everyday practice embedded within the culture of the school. When early career teachers consistently experience principals and senior colleagues listening to them, investing in their growth, trusting them with responsibilities, and supporting their wellbeing, hierarchical barriers begin to diminish. In such environments, schools become less bureaucratic and more reflective of collaborative communities of practice that empower both teachers and students.

Research across different contexts further shows the relationship between distributed leadership, teacher development, and inclusive school practice. Although studies from Spain, Norway, England, Slovakia, and Australia differ in context, they identify several common patterns. First, distributed leadership is most effective when participation is purposeful rather than limited to the delegation of tasks. Teachers need genuine opportunities to influence decisions, contribute expertise, and engage in collective problem solving (Dai, 2023; Tejeiro, 2024). Second, shared leadership does not remove the principal from the process. Principals remain responsible for coordinating support, maintaining inclusive values, and ensuring that early career teachers are included in professional networks (Caglar-Ryeng & Antonsen, 2025). Third, distributed leadership contributes to inclusion when it is underpinned by collaboration, shared responsibility, and a commitment to diverse learners (Miškolci et al., 2016).

These findings suggest that distributed leadership supports early career teachers through more than the allocation of formal roles. Its primary contribution lies in expanding access to professional relationships, collective expertise, and meaningful participation (Caglar-Ryeng &

Antonsen, 2025; Miškolci et al., 2016). For early career teachers, this may involve contributing to professional learning communities, participating in decisions about curriculum and student support, or leading an initiative in an area of emerging expertise (Dai, 2023). Such opportunities strengthen professional agency while also connecting novice teachers to the knowledge and support required for inclusive practice (Tejeiro, 2024).

Within Australia, the relationship between inclusive leadership, distributed leadership, and early career teacher support is reflected in several national initiatives. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's ([AITSL], 2023) guidelines for the induction of early career teachers in Australia emphasise that induction should extend beyond initial orientation and include sustained mentoring, professional learning, collaboration, and access to school leaders. The guidelines also indicate that effective mentoring requires careful mentor selection, clear expectations, mentor preparation, and adequate resources. These expectations position the induction of early career teachers as a shared organisational responsibility rather than a task delegated solely to an individual mentor.

The Australian Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2014) provides a further policy basis for this shared responsibility. Its emphasis on developing self and others, leading teaching and learning, and strengthening school improvement suggests that principals are responsible for creating the conditions through which early career teachers can learn, collaborate, and contribute. From a distributed leadership perspective, this involves coordinating the expertise of mentors, middle leaders, learning specialists, wellbeing personnel, and classroom teachers while remaining actively engaged in the development of early career teachers. The principal's role is therefore not diminished when leadership is distributed. Instead, the principal becomes responsible for ensuring that distributed arrangements remain coherent, equitable, and aligned with inclusive school goals.

Victoria's Disability Inclusion reform offers a practical illustration of this approach. (Victorian Department of Education, 2026). The introduction of specialised roles, such as Disability Inclusion Leaders, Inclusion Coordinators, Disability Inclusion Learning Specialists, and wellbeing teams, reflects a shift towards distributing leadership responsibilities and expertise across schools. Rather than relying solely on principals or classroom teachers to drive inclusive practice, these roles enable early career teachers to access specialised knowledge and receive guidance when responding to complex student learning, behavioural, and wellbeing needs. In this way, early career teachers can experience leadership as a relational and collaborative practice in which expertise is shared, rather than as something exercised only through formal authority. However, the effectiveness of this process depends on principals coordinating the various roles, ensuring that early career teachers can access their support, and maintaining collective responsibility for inclusion across the school.

The intersection of inclusive leadership, distributed leadership, and early career teacher development produces a more integrated understanding of teacher empowerment. Inclusive leadership contributes to belonging, recognition, fairness, and participation. Distributed leadership adds to the process by locating leadership in interactions, shared expertise, and collective responsibility rather than in formal positions alone. Early career teacher empowerment emerges when these values and processes enable novice teachers to develop professional agency while receiving the support necessary to enact inclusive practice.

Implications

Research suggests that the initial training, preparation, and ongoing professional development of prospective and current school leaders are of great importance (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2018). This is particularly important because school leaders often work in complex and contested contexts shaped by local and national histories, policies, and practices related to both exclusion and inclusion (DeMatthews et al., 2025). Without preparation and professional development, they may not have the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead effective inclusive schools (Adams, Mohamed et al., 2025; Billingsley, 2010; Opoku, 2023; Sider et al., 2021).

Before being appointed as a school leader, initial training and preparation should develop the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and professional commitments needed to lead effective inclusive schools. This includes cultivating an inclusive consciousness that enables leaders to understand inclusion as both a moral and instructional responsibility (McMillan & Hoppey, 2021). Such preparation should help future school leaders navigate the intersection between improving academic achievement and ensuring the meaningful inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings. It should also equip them to foster belonging, participation, and a strong sense of community for all students (McKenzie et al., 2008; McMillan & Hoppey, 2021).

However, initial training and preparation alone are insufficient to support school leaders in leading inclusive schools effectively (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2018). McMillan and Hoppey (2021) argue that training, preparation, and support for school leaders should be ongoing so that they can develop deeper capacity as inclusive leaders. Similarly, Billingsley et al. (2018) emphasise that ongoing professional development should help school leaders develop a strategic vision that supports the success of all learners, including students with disabilities. It should also encourage leaders to adopt strength-based rather than deficit-based perspectives and to work collaboratively with a range of stakeholders to strengthen professional capacity and improve outcomes for all learners.

These could be provided by school systems, professional or philanthropic associations (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Sider et al., 2021). For example, McMillan and Hoppey (2021) suggested professional development for current principals should focus on instructional leadership and also include opportunities for job-embedded coaching and feedback on inclusive leadership from other effective school leaders. These would enable established school leaders to pass on their experience and expertise, while learning new insights from the experience (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This article has argued that empowering early career teachers in inclusive schools requires more than induction, mentoring, or the delegation of leadership tasks. Inclusive school leadership, informed by distributed leadership theory, creates conditions that support the empowerment of early career teachers. Inclusive leadership provides the values of belonging, recognition, and equitable participation, while distributed leadership provides the organisational processes through which expertise, influence, and responsibility can be shared.

As schools become increasingly diverse, inclusive school leaders therefore have a responsibility not only to support early career teachers, but also to create organisational conditions

in which they can exercise agency, develop expertise, and participate meaningfully in the professional community. Such leadership positions schools as learning organisations where everyone, from early career teachers to middle leaders to the principal, learns and leads together. In these schools, distributed leadership does not simply broaden who performs leadership tasks; instead, the hierarchy gives way to shared goals, mutual trust, and collective efficacy. Early career teachers are recognised as important members of the school community who can contribute to innovation and inclusive practice. Inclusive school leaders are therefore catalysts for this transformation, creating the conditions for teachers, especially early career ones, to develop professionally, participate meaningfully, and contribute to more inclusive and equitable school communities.

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

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Inclusive School Leadership Under Constraint: How Early Career Teachers Navigate Emotional and Professional Challenges

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ABSTRACT: Inclusive leadership is increasingly recognised as a leadership orientation that fosters staff participation, belonging, professional learning, and equitable organisational conditions (Çevik, 2025; Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Randel et al., 2018; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). These practices may be especially important for early career teachers (ECTs), whose entry into the profession is often marked by accelerated learning and heightened emotional demands. Yet leaders' capacity to provide inclusive support is increasingly challenged by workload intensification, competing priorities, and limited time within contemporary schools (Dicke et al., 2024). Consequently, little is known about how such leadership is experienced by ECTs in everyday practice.

Drawing on contemporary conceptualisations of inclusive leadership (Nishii & Leroy, 2022), this study examined two interconnected dimensions of inclusive leadership: relational practices and structural practices that expanded access to support, voice, and professional learning while fostering psychological safety and professional capacity (Çevik, 2025; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). Using a qualitative single-case study design, semi-structured interviews with five ECTs from an Australian primary school were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Findings showed that leadership supported ECTs through relational signalling, structural mediation, emotional co-regulation, and navigational coaching in high-stakes situations. Leaders'

approachability and responsiveness shaped whether teachers felt safe to seek support, while explicit guidance and visible backing strengthened confidence and professional judgement. However, constrained access and inconsistent follow-up also required ECTs to self-manage emotional demands and carefully calibrate help-seeking. Overall, inclusive leadership was experienced as essential but unevenly available under conditions of constraint. While relational and structural practices strengthened ECTs' confidence, emotional regulation, and professional learning, these supports were mediated by leaders' competing demands and limited availability.

Key words: Inclusive leadership, early career teachers, principalship, teacher retention

Introduction

Inclusive leadership is widely recognised as central to building teacher capacity, supporting professional sustainability, and subjective wellbeing (Çevik, 2025; Randel et al., 2018). Rather than being understood solely as a set of values or personal dispositions, inclusive leadership is enacted through relational and structural practices that shape equitable access to support, voice, and professional learning (Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). These practices become visible in the everyday life of schools through interactions, decisions, and the allocation of resources, including time. In this sense, inclusion is accomplished through the routine work of school leadership.

Inclusive leadership practices are particularly significant for early career teachers (ECTs), whose transition into the profession is often marked by accelerated learning, professional uncertainty, and heightened emotional demands. During this phase, teachers must develop practitioner expertise while learning to navigate complex school environments, regulate emotional responses, and make nuanced judgements about when and how to seek support (Black et al., 2023; Schuck et al., 2018; Woodhouse & Pedder, 2017). In Australia, these challenges carry broader workforce significance, as ongoing efforts to attract new teachers continue alongside persistent concerns regarding retention, workload, and sustainability (AITSL, 2022). The conditions shaping ECT experience are therefore not only individual, but organisational, influenced by the cultures, structures, and leadership practices of schools. This is especially important in a context where school leaders are themselves working within rising levels of complexity (Dicke et al., 2024).

The capacity of principals to enact inclusive leadership has become an increasingly significant issue within contemporary schooling. In Australia and internationally, principalship is characterised by workload intensification, persistent time scarcity, expanding administrative responsibilities, policy compliance demands, and growing relational complexity (Dicke et al., 2024; Maxwell & Riley, 2017). Principals are expected to lead teaching and learning, support staff wellbeing, respond to families and communities, implement system reforms, and address increasingly complex student needs, often simultaneously (McKay et al., 2022). These pressures carry serious implications for leader wellbeing and retention, while also constraining the time, presence, and relational availability through which inclusive leadership is often enacted (Creagh et al., 2023). This creates a critical nexus in which the importance of inclusive leadership for ECTs may be increasing at the same time as principals' capacity to enact it is being diminished.

Despite growing scholarship on inclusive leadership and support for ECTs, these fields remain only loosely connected. Existing research has focused largely on broad outcomes such as job satisfaction, wellbeing, and attrition (Black et al., 2023; Weldon, 2018; Woodhouse & Pedder, 2017), with less attention to how leadership is experienced in the everyday life of schools, particularly by ECTs navigating uncertainty and professional challenge under emerging organisational constraint. Consequently, little is known about how leadership practices are accessed, interpreted, and mobilised in situ, or how they shape teachers' responses to emotional and professional demands when leadership capacity is under pressure. Yet it is through these everyday encounters that leadership often becomes most consequential.

Addressing this gap, the present study was guided by the question: *How do inclusive leadership practices influence early career teachers' navigation of emotional and professional challenges?* The study focused on how leadership is enacted and accessed through relational and structural practices, and how these practices are interpreted and organised by teachers in moments of uncertainty, emotional strain, and professional risk. In doing so, the study offers a contextually grounded and empirically situated account of inclusive leadership as it is experienced under conditions of constraint.

Literature Review

Inclusive Leadership: Relational and Structural Dimensions

Inclusive leadership refers to the everyday leadership practices through which leaders create organisational conditions that enable staff to participate, contribute, and experience a sense of belonging within their workplace (Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Randel et al., 2018). Although inclusive leadership has most frequently been examined in relation to workforce diversity and inclusion, it is not limited to diverse work groups. Rather, the practices associated with inclusive leadership can foster participation, belonging, and equitable opportunity across both diverse and more homogeneous organisational contexts (Randel et al., 2018). While scholars have conceptualised inclusive leadership in a variety of ways (Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022), there is broad agreement that it is enacted through leaders' everyday interactions and the organisational conditions they create (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). Among the multiple dimensions identified within the literature, this study focuses specifically on two mutually constitutive dimensions of inclusive leadership: relational practices, including trust, accessibility, and interpersonal responsiveness, and structural practices, encompassing formal decision-making processes, resource allocation, and the conditions under which staff work and learn (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). These dimensions reinforce one another, as structural support is experienced as inclusive only where relational conditions are sufficiently safe and consistent, while relational warmth is undermined where structural barriers limit practical access. Inclusive leadership is therefore accomplished through the routine interactions, decisions, and resource allocations of organisational life.

Building on this conceptualisation, Veli Korkmaz et al.'s (2022) systematic review of 107 studies is particularly instructive because it synthesises four recurring dimensions through which inclusion is commonly enacted: fostering employee uniqueness, strengthening belongingness,

showing appreciation, and supporting organisational efforts toward inclusion. Their review also highlights leader accessibility, guidance, and relational attentiveness as consistent features across conceptualisations. However, the evidence base remains dominated by studies examining outcomes such as psychological safety, voice behaviour, creativity, and engagement (Randel et al., 2018; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022), with less attention to how inclusive leadership is experienced, interpreted, and navigated in everyday work settings. Related scholarship has likewise focused on principal behaviours, leadership frameworks, and broader workforce outcomes (Kelly et al., 2019; Lummis et al., 2022), stopping short of how inclusive intent translates into the lived experience of those whom leaders seek to support. Accordingly, while recognising the multidimensional nature of inclusive leadership, the present study focuses on how its relational and structural manifestations are experienced by ECTs in everyday school practice, as these dimensions are particularly salient to questions of support, access, and professional navigation under conditions of organisational constraint.

Early Career Teachers: Vulnerability, Help-Seeking, and the Role of Leadership

Early career teachers (ECTs) are commonly understood as teachers within the first three to five years of professional practice, a period characterised by the transition from initial teacher education into the demands of independent teaching (Kelly et al., 2019; Schuck et al., 2018). This study adopts that definition, with participants having between one and five years of teaching experience. During this career stage, how support is organised, signalled, and accessed within schools carries particular significance. ECTs must develop practitioner expertise while navigating complex school environments, regulating emotional responses, and making judgements about when and how to seek support (Black et al., 2023; Schuck et al., 2018). Help-seeking is not straightforward; much of what ECTs must learn to navigate sits outside formal teacher preparation, closer to a hidden curriculum of unstated organisational norms (Lampert et al., 2025). It requires teachers to assess whether support is available and psychologically safe, judge the legitimacy of their need, and manage the professional risk of disclosing uncertainty to those in positions of authority. Often, this means relying on informal situational guidance to work out how to respond well when it counts (Schuck et al., 2018).

ECTs represent a group for whom its relational and structural dimensions may be particularly significant, as they often occupy positions of comparatively lower status and confidence within school hierarchies (Çevik, 2025; Randel et al., 2018). Drawing on data from 2,144 Australian ECTs, Kelly et al. (2019) found that access to quality mentoring and collegial relationships was significantly associated with stronger intentions to remain in the profession. More broadly, their findings demonstrated that the mere provision of support was insufficient. Rather, the quality and relevance of that support shaped ECTs' experiences, with those receiving unhelpful formal support faring little better than those who received none at all. However, while these findings demonstrate the importance of support, aggregate outcome data reveal little about the everyday leadership practices through which support comes to be experienced as accessible, meaningful, and worth pursuing.

Research examining leadership and ECT retention also tends to rest on an assumption of leadership as stable and consistently available. Leadership has been identified as a protective factor, with accessible and responsive leaders associated with greater teacher confidence, stronger professional belonging, and reduced intentions to leave (Burt & Jones, 2023; Lummis et al., 2022). Yet support is often treated as a fixed feature of the workplace rather than a relational process that must be continually enacted, interpreted, and renewed through everyday practice. This risks obscuring how leadership may be encountered unevenly across interactions and changing organisational conditions. Schuck et al. (2018) suggest that beginning teachers develop adaptive responses to the professional environments they encounter, yet the micro-processes through which these adaptations form remain insufficiently examined. Greater attention is needed to how ECTs make sense of leadership support in practice, and how this shapes their navigation of early professional challenges.

Inclusive Leadership Under Constraint: The Contemporary Principalship

Any account of inclusive leadership in contemporary Australian schools must be situated within the conditions of the principalship itself. Large-scale longitudinal data from the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey document sustained role intensification, with more than ninety percent of principals working over fifty hours per week and more than half seriously considering leaving the profession (Dicke et al., 2024). Principalship is also characterised by substantial emotional labour, with sustained relational demands depleting the capacity on which inclusive practice depends (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). Critically, this is not only a matter of workload volume. Creagh et al. (2023) distinguish work intensification, the experience of multiple complex demands competing simultaneously for attention, from the amount of work performed. Together, these conditions produce time poverty: a structural scarcity of time that constrains both what leaders can do and the quality and consistency with which they can do it. For principals, this can displace the sustained presence and attentiveness on which inclusive leadership depends (Creagh et al., 2023).

Research on principal workload documents intensification from the leader perspective, while research on ECT retention documents insufficient support from the teacher perspective. The relationship between these bodies of evidence has received limited direct empirical attention. How the structural conditions of principalship shape the quality, consistency, and accessibility of inclusive leadership as ECTs encounter it therefore remains poorly understood. The present study addresses this gap by examining how inclusive leadership is accessed, interpreted, and navigated by ECTs when the conditions of its enactment are themselves constrained.

Methodology

This study employed an instrumental single-case study design (Stake, 2005) to examine how inclusive leadership shapes early career teachers' navigation of emotional and professional challenges. An instrumental case study was appropriate because the aim was not to understand this particular school as an end in itself, but to use it as a vehicle for developing broader analytical

insight into how inclusive leadership is experienced and mobilised under conditions of organisational constraint (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Stake, 2005). This design enabled in-depth, contextually situated exploration of leadership as it was lived and interpreted by participants, supporting analytical rather than statistical generalisation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Case Context

The study was conducted in a metropolitan primary school in Queensland, Australia, enrolling approximately 450 students and employing 45 staff, including 31 teachers. The student population reflected above-average socio-educational advantage, with an ICSEA score above the national mean. The school operated within a Catholic education governance framework, led by a principal supported by two formal leadership positions. The principal retained primary responsibility for staff management, professional culture, and whole-school direction, and had held the role for four years at the time of data collection.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants able to provide contextually relevant insight into the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Inclusion criteria were: five or fewer years of teaching experience, and a minimum of six months' tenure at the school. All five ECTs employed at the school participated, ranging from first- to fourth-year female practitioners teaching across Prep to Year 6. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participants' confidentiality.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews of 60 to 75 minutes, focusing on participants' experiences of leadership support, help-seeking, emotional challenge, and high-stakes professional situations. Interviews were conducted following institutional ethics approval and informed consent, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), an approach chosen for its capacity to centre researcher interpretation and generate theoretically engaged themes rather than purely descriptive accounts. Coding was conducted iteratively, with initial codes developed inductively from participants' accounts and progressively refined into themes capturing how leadership practices shaped teachers' navigation of uncertainty, emotional strain, and professional risk. Themes were reviewed for internal coherence and analytic distinction across the dataset.

Findings

Four themes addressed the research question. Together, they show that inclusive leadership influenced ECT navigation by: (1) establishing conditions for support-seeking, (2) providing

emotional co-regulation that was valued but unevenly sustained, (3) structuring when and how support could be accessed, and (4) offering concrete coaching in high-stakes moments.

Theme 1: Relational Access as an Inclusive Leadership Practice

Across participants' accounts, inclusive leadership was first experienced through felt approachability; the perception that the principal was emotionally accessible, receptive to uncertainty, and safe to approach. For several participants, the earliest encounters with the principal established the relational conditions for help-seeking. Sarah attributed her comfort directly to the principal's manner: "I think it's the way that she carries herself ... So I think it's the way she's just very welcoming and very open, so very easy to talk to". Shortly after, the principal initiated an unsolicited conversation about Sarah's needs: "She pulled me aside just to talk about what I wanted from the school ... I was glad that she took the time to tell me I was doing well". Maggie described a similar pattern of leader-initiated contact, noting that the principal made deliberate visits to her physically isolated classroom in the first weeks. She recalled feeling relationally safe: "I didn't feel intimidated to come and find her ... I wasn't anxious about approaching her with questions"—yet simultaneously constrained: "I would say it was more just difficult to track her down and find time to do that".

Samantha described relational access as communicated through repeated signalling: "She tells the staff that, that's what her job is, to support us ... She makes sure that she says it all the time and lots of times in different ways". Samantha also noted that the principal's humour softened hierarchical distance: "She's approachable, absolutely. She's funny. She's always telling jokes, so people feel at ease". Ayla's experience extended relational access to cognitive support: "She is very good at questioning so that she can help you get to the bottom of whatever it is in your mind is happening". The principal's questioning helped Ayla organise experiences she could not yet make sense of independently.

Relational access was also deepened through moments of professional risk. Sarah described approaching the principal about a sensitive concern: "I think if I didn't have that relationship with [Principal], maybe I felt like that conversation could have turned back onto me ... but through that conversation, I knew that she had my back". Amanda described a quality of attention that was deeply inclusive when secured: "Even if she's got a million things to do in her office and you pop in, she will often just sort of drop everything to chat to you about it". Amanda also identified the principal's approach as building professional trust: "I do feel like she very much trusts us as teachers as well ... she trusts our teacher judgement as well, which is really nice".

Relational access was therefore established through accumulated interactions: welcoming, explicit invitation, attentional presence, humour, and cognitive scaffolding that communicated help-seeking was permissible and that vulnerability would be met with care. These relational signals shaped whether ECTs felt able to voice uncertainty, disclose struggle, and seek guidance during the emotional and professional challenges of their early careers.

Theme 2: Emotional Co-Regulation and Its Limits

This theme captures how inclusive leadership shaped ECTs' navigation of emotionally demanding moments and what happened when that support was not sustained. ECTs' capacity to manage emotional challenges depended not only on whether support was available in acute moments, but on whether it was maintained over time. When follow-up was inconsistent, ECTs learned that sustaining emotional support was ultimately their own responsibility.

Co-regulation took distinct forms. Ayla described deliberately bringing her struggles to the principal:

I still want it on the Principal's radar. So I bring it up to her as well just so that she knows that if I'm struggling with something she knows and then she kind of helps me come up with the path.

Amanda described in-the-moment attention she experienced as emotionally containing: "She'll keep talking to you until you feel like okay about it, which is really nice". Maggie sought guidance before a confronting parent interaction, feeling "quite inferior and babble and not stand up for myself very well":

I did go to the Principal before I met with the parent ... what sort of scripts I could say in order to just get my point across clearly and directly and know that the school was going to support me.

Samantha's account was the only instance where co-regulation extended beyond the initial encounter: "She checked in via phone, via text message, that evening. She came and saw me the next day and the next week". The singularity of Samantha's experience made visible how rarely sustained care occurred across the findings.

However, the durability of this support was uneven. Maggie reported no follow-up after her parent meeting: "No, I don't think so. No". She later observed that proactive check-ins had ceased: "She's not checking on me anymore". Ayla articulated the emotional cost most directly:

Disappointed, not going to lie. I get a bit upset because ... it's very one-side ... especially if she's seen me at a low emotional point just to follow up, say, "How are you feeling?" after a few days of that conversation.

The absence of follow-up increased the effort required to maintain the relationship: "I felt like I had to rehash it all from the beginning if she wasn't told". For Sarah, her struggles remained invisible to the principal because the structured format of their meeting did not allow space for disclosure: "At the goal meeting, she had set of questions that she asked me, and I guess the behaviour stuff is more with the [Deputy principal] role, so I didn't think it was her space to be worried about that".

Inclusive leadership shaped ECTs' emotional navigation through both the presence and absence of sustained support. Where the principal helped teachers stabilise emotions and identify pathways forward, ECTs experienced relief and confidence. When follow-up was inconsistent, teachers learned to carry that emotional work themselves.

Theme 3: Structural Mediation and the Hidden Curriculum of Access

Participants described learning an implicit set of rules about when support was appropriate, who should be approached first, and how much need could be expressed. These rules were internalised through observation of the principal's busyness, the organisation's delegation patterns, and the physical and temporal cues that governed daily interaction. Inclusive leadership was therefore not only relational but structurally mediated and the structures taught ECTs as much about restraint as about access.

Sarah described the principal's busyness as evident from the outset: "She's always running around. She's often not even at school, so she's always at meetings or PDs or things like that, always in meetings with a shut door". When the principal was on campus, her pace shaped whether Sarah would approach: "Sometimes she got her head down and she's walking fast. 'Oh, not now, maybe later'". A shared understanding had developed among staff: "If we have an issue, we always report to the [Deputy principal] first. The Principal is not usually a first port of call for many things". Sarah accepted this, reasoning that the principal "probably doesn't have the time to sit down and check in constantly", but acknowledged the cost: "I would like more ... But, again, I understand that she is dragged in many different directions".

Strategic timing became a routine feature of help-seeking. Ayla noted that the principal was "so zippy, you've got to catch her if she's here or there". She identified the after-school bus duty as the most reliable opportunity: "That's usually the time you can catch her because she's got nowhere to go. I'm going to get her now because she's trapped". Even when the principal was available, competing demands shaped whether Ayla would approach: "You do get a bit of a line outside, so you're like, 'How important is this chat?' ... Is it worth it? Can I wait till later?"

Where access was difficult, ECTs redirected their help-seeking. Amanda noted: "Unless you've booked a time, it can be quite tricky to track the principal down". The difficulty redirected her help-seeking: "It probably makes me think of who else could I ask first before having to wait for that response". Maggie framed this more explicitly as shaped by respect for the principal's workload: "I have seen all of the things that she needs to do every day and I respect her time. I don't want to add unnecessary burden if it's not warranted". Samantha offered a counterpoint, describing reduced access as a natural progression and growing independence rather than structural limitation. She also described delegation as a reliable alternative: "There's always someone delegated I can go and see if she's not here" and estimated the principal's availability at "half of the time". Samantha's account suggests that the same structural conditions were experienced differently depending on the ECT's prior professional experience and career stage.

The pattern across these accounts was one of learned restraint. ECTs had internalised when to seek support, when to delay, and when to manage independently. Delegation to middle leaders provided alternative pathways but also reinforced norms that shifted the responsibility for timing and emotional containment onto teachers themselves.

Theme 4: Navigational Coaching in High-Stakes Professional Moments

In high-stakes professional situations such as parent conflict, behaviour escalation, and emotionally charged communication, the principal provided navigational coaching that helped

ECTs act with confidence, procedural clarity, and institutional protection. Through modelling, scripting, documentation practices, and visible backing, the principal built concrete repertoires that ECTs could draw on independently.

The most sustained example of navigational coaching came from Ayla, who asked the principal to observe her teaching during struggles with behaviour management. The principal went further: “She also suggested, ‘I can come in and teach for you and you can see what I do and how I manage’. So I did that as well, and then we sort of had a debrief after those to get the feedback”. Over time, this coaching extended to professional communication: “She gives me the words that I need to respond to things and how to deal with situations and how to mentally work through them”. For Ayla, navigational coaching addressed not only what to do but how to say it.

Observation of the principal in practice was also valued by Amanda: “I’ve been in a few meetings with the principal and some trickier parents and that has been amazing as well, to see just how cool, calm, collected she is all the time and how she deals with it”. Amanda also described co-crafting responses with the principal’s guidance: “We sort of crafted a response from me all together”. Following the incident, the principal established ongoing oversight: “Anytime I communicate with that parent, she asked me to always pop her in just as like a BCC so she can keep an eye on that situation”.

For Samantha, navigational coaching operated through documentation. The principal included Samantha in ongoing parent correspondence: “She blind copied me, and so I can see those trails of emails so I can see how they’re written. That’s a learning experience”. Samantha described this as “actually invaluable her doing that so I could see how to do that”. Her learning extended beyond individual messages: “If you can see a bit of the history in the back and forth, that’s helpful to understand how to navigate that in the future in different circumstances”.

More routine forms of coaching were also evident. Sarah described flagging concerns early to ensure institutional visibility: “Things like behaviours or emails from parents, things like that, that I wanted to flag with her? I’ve come to her and go, ‘Hey, I got this email’, and forward it to her”. Maggie described the principal’s most useful contribution as providing clear direction: “It’s usually caused by me needing support for a behaviour ... and her just letting me know what to do really”.

What distinguished these high-stakes moments from the everyday interactions described in Theme 3 was the temporary suspension of structural constraints. The principal made themselves immediately available, intervened directly, and provided the sustained, hands-on support that the daily pressures of the role otherwise precluded.

Discussion

Inclusive Leadership as Contingent Rather Than Stable

The findings suggest that inclusive leadership shaped how ECTs navigated emotional and professional challenges, but operated unevenly across contexts. Rather than functioning as a stable leader attribute, inclusion was experienced as contingent, emerging through the interaction of relational practices and structural conditions that neither the leader nor teachers fully controlled.

This supports multi-dimensional accounts of inclusive leadership that position inclusion as dependent on both interpersonal processes and organisational arrangements (Nishii & Leroy, 2022).

All five participants described the principal as approachable, caring, and responsive, yet support was not always sustained, and access was constrained by the practical demands of the school day. Inclusive leadership was most visible in acute moments and least visible in routine follow-up, a pattern that complicates how inclusion is typically conceptualised. Contemporary scholarship frames inclusive leadership as enacted through ongoing patterns of interaction rather than as a stable leader characteristic (Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). The present findings extend this work by showing that, from the perspective of those receiving it, inclusion could be experienced as episodic rather than consistently available. The question this raises for inclusive leadership scholarship is not simply whether a leader is inclusive, but when inclusion becomes available, to whom, and under what conditions it can be sustained.

Episodic inclusion still built capacity. Participants learned to document, escalate, communicate, and protect themselves professionally. Yet it also taught ECTs to self-manage when support was unavailable, a form of adaptive capacity building that carries emotional cost and shifts the labour of sustained support onto those least resourced to provide it. If inclusive leadership is to function as a driver of teacher capacity and professional sustainability, these findings indicate that consistency, not only warmth, is what distinguishes inclusion as a sustained practice from inclusion as a situational response. This also extends Kelly et al.'s (2019) finding that the quality and relevance of support matter as much as its formal availability.

A Hidden Curriculum of Access

The findings also identified a hidden curriculum of access through which ECTs learned, through observation rather than instruction, when to seek help, who to approach first, and how much need could be expressed. Strategic timing, self-triage, redirection to other staff, and self-silencing developed in response to the principal's visible busyness and competing demands. These were neither deficits in the ECTs nor failures of the leader; they were rational responses to the structural conditions of contemporary school leadership. Access to leadership, therefore, was governed not only by formal role structures, but by tacit organisational cues that participants quickly learned to read and accommodate. In this sense, inclusive intent did not always translate into inclusive experience, particularly where structural barriers made support difficult to access.

Structural Conditions and the Limits of Individual Leadership

Research on ECT retention frames leadership as a protective factor and notes that teachers are more likely to seek support where leadership is experienced as responsive and non-judgemental (Schuck et al., 2018; Weldon, 2018). The findings extend this by showing that responsiveness alone is insufficient. Even when the principal was perceived as approachable, structural conditions could constrain access and teach ECTs patterns of restraint that may persist beyond the early career phase. The study's distinctive contribution lies in showing that leadership may be relationally present yet structurally fragile. The constraints participants described, busyness, competing demands, and time scarcity, mirror the systemic pressures documented in research on principal

workload and wellbeing (Creagh et al., 2023; Dicke et al., 2024; Maxwell & Riley, 2017). They are also consistent with Creagh et al.'s (2023) concept of time poverty, in which competing demands constrain the principal's capacity for sustained relational work. What the findings add is the view from the receiving end: what the principal may experience as workload intensification, ECTs may experience as reduced access, delayed support, and the need to self-regulate more intensively. Framed this way, the constraint is not an individual leadership failure but a systemic condition with relational consequences for the teachers the principal is working to support. This perspective addresses a gap in the inclusive leadership literature, which has tended to examine leadership intention and design rather than how inclusion is interpreted and navigated by teachers in practice. By foregrounding ECTs' lived experience of leadership under constraint, the study offers insight into how inclusive practices are accessed, calibrated, and sometimes foreclosed within the realities of contemporary schooling.

Implications

These findings raise important questions for how schools resource and sustain inclusive leadership in practice. If the conditions of contemporary principalship mean that relational consistency is structurally difficult to maintain, then inclusion cannot rest on the efforts of an individual principal alone. Schools and systems need to consider how organisational design, workload allocation, and middle leadership structures either enable or foreclose the sustained relational work that ECTs depend on during their most formative and vulnerable professional years.

Distributed models of support are already common practice in many schools and are not proposed here as a novel solution. Where such structures exist, they may function as an important buffer against the inconsistency that even a well-intentioned, relationally present principal cannot always avoid. Yet the principal remains central to how inclusion is set and sustained at a whole-school level, shaping the culture within which distributed structures operate and whether inclusion is treated as a shared institutional value rather than an individual leader's disposition (Çevik, 2025). Distributed support therefore does not diminish the principal's significance; its effectiveness depends on the tone the principal sets for the school (Lummis et al., 2022).

The ECTs in this study were not failing to seek support; they were learning, rationally and efficiently, to expect less of it. These patterns of adaptation reflected participants' efforts to navigate the organisational conditions they encountered, recalibrating when and from whom support could reasonably be expected. While support is inherently relational and co-constructed, shaped by both leader practices and teachers' interpretations of those practices, the expectation that support should be rationed may become normalised if established early in a teacher's career. Whether such adaptation supports long-term professional sustainability or gradually erodes it warrants further empirical and policy attention.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it was not designed to disentangle individual variation among ECTs from the structural conditions described above. Differences in self-efficacy, professional independence, and disposition toward help-seeking may have shaped how support

was sought, interpreted, and experienced, independently of these conditions. Similarly, some instances of perceived unavailability may reflect mismatched expectations about when and how support could reasonably be accessed, or gaps in communication between principal and ECT. The data collected do not allow individual differences in help-seeking disposition to be examined directly. This is a limitation of qualitative case study research more broadly: its contribution lies in generating rich understanding of lived experience and the mechanisms through which it unfolds, rather than in isolating possible individual-level explanations for the observed patterns. The value of the present findings rests on this basis, as a detailed account of how inclusion was experienced and navigated within the case, rather than as a claim that structural constraint was the only factor shaping ECTs' perceptions of support.

Conclusion

This study examined how inclusive leadership practices influenced early career teachers' navigation of emotional and professional challenges within a single Australian primary school. The findings show that inclusive leadership was experienced as consequential but episodic, shaped by relational warmth and situational responsiveness yet constrained by the structural conditions of the leader's role. ECTs learned not only how to seek and receive support, but when to withhold the request. As a single-case study with five participants, the findings are not generalisable, but they offer transferable insight into the lived experience of inclusive leadership under constraint. Future research should examine how these patterns operate across different school contexts, leadership structures, differences in individuals and system conditions, and whether the patterns of learned restraint identified here persist as ECTs progress through their careers.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the relevant university Human Research Ethics Committee and the participating education system.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants provided consent for the use of de-identified data in publications arising from the study.

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Who Gets to be a “Good” Teacher? Extending Destabilisation of Normalcy to the Profession

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This special issue begins from a proposition that when school leaders intentionally support teachers from diverse cultural, linguistic, and gendered identities, they expand the collective skill and insight available to every student (Adams & Velarde, 2021). Bornstein and Black (2025) offer an important warning. They argue that schools run on acceptable rationales that make exclusion feel sensible, therapeutic, and even kind. They examine how these rationales shape decisions about student discipline referrals, disability classification, academic pacing, and perceptions of who is considered a smart and a good student. This commentary turns the lens 90 degrees. The same rationales that decide which students belong in classrooms also decide which teachers are presumed competent, professional, and worth developing. Leaders who challenge what is considered normal students but do not do so for teachers may find that professional development simply reproduces the exclusion it seeks to remedy.

We deliberately write as a US–Australian team. As such, we accept the argument that the rationales which treat structural problems as individual student deficits are evident across educational systems globally (Bornstein & Black, 2025). From our perspective, we emphasise an important distinction: a teacher’s identity and a teacher’s competence in antiracist and inclusive practices are not the same thing. A teacher’s identity does not ensure their ability to engage in these necessary practices. Minoritised teachers are not inherently equipped to do this work, nor should be assumed to be obligated to do this work. Likewise, majoritised teachers are neither inherently incapable of it, nor excused from it. The same applies to colleagues marginalised by gender or disability. We argue that leaders who recognise that distinction can develop all faculty’s capacity and avoid overburdening marginalised teachers.

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The Normal Teacher

Davis (2018) reminds us that normalcy is an invention, barely two centuries old, born of statistics and matured in eugenics. Bornstein and Black (2025) draw on this history to show how schools identify students as abnormal via statistically normed benchmarks, pacing guides, and behaviour checklists. We argue that similar processes can be found within the teaching profession. Teaching standards, evaluation rubrics, dispositional assessments in teacher preparation programs, and hiring can collectively construct an image of the “normal” teacher. This image is often implicitly white or Anglo, nondisabled, monolingual in the dominant tongue, conventionally gendered, and fluent in middle-class expectations of professionalism.

These systems differ between our two countries, but they are functionally alike. In the United States, persistent racial inequalities in disability classification and school discipline persistently show how ableism supports and reinforces institutional racism (Bornstein & Manaseri, 2022). In Australia, the national data collection focuses on the adjustments made for individual students with disability. It gives less attention to how the design of schooling itself may create barriers. The Disability Royal Commission (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023) also did not agree on whether segregated special education should end. We see this disagreement as evidence that separate educational settings for students viewed as different remain widely accepted. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are suspended and excluded at disproportionately high rates, reflecting patterns also found in the United States. These decisions often rely on behavioural labels that describe racism as student disorder (Graham et al., 2020). The administrative language differs, but the underlying process is the same.

Teachers are judged through the same assumptions. Judgements of “fit”, “polish”, and “presence” perform for the profession what benchmarks perform for students: they locate deficiency in individuals while the norm itself sits above scrutiny. Disabled teachers are subject to “inherent requirements” and fitness-to-teach framings that treat their bodies and minds as potential professional risks. Teachers who speak accented English may be judged as less capable because they do not use the preferred form of English. Racially and linguistically minoritised teachers may also have their authority questioned because accepted ideas of professional behaviour are often shaped by white norms. None of this typically announces itself as exclusion. It announces itself as standards. Frattura and Capper (2007) instruct us to ask who gets to draw the line for student belonging; we ask the same of professional belonging. A leader cannot develop the capacity of a teaching force while measuring it against stereotypical norms that most of its members were never meant to resemble.

Identity Is Not Competence; Competence Is Not Identity

Questions about whose knowledge is valued are as important in the staffroom as they are in the classroom (Bornstein & Black, 2025; Emdin, 2016; Khalifa, 2024). Minoritised educators may carry anti-colonial and Indigenous knowledges in the forms of culturally relevant pedagogy, obligation to community, languages, hard-won lessons about how institutions treat people like them and their students. Those knowledges constitute vital professional expertise in diverse schools. Too often, leaders value that expertise for token measures such as cultural celebrations,

but ignore it as criteria in important decisions such as scheduling, assessment design, and discipline policy. Instead, they rely on the institutionalised acceptable racist and ableist rationales. Leaders who are serious about faculty capacity must facilitate moving their teachers' expertise from the margins to core institutional decision making.

Yet recognition can too easily become exploitation. It is exploitive to expect minoritised teachers to serve on every equity committee, translate for their communities on demand, and lead antiracism training as unpaid overtime. Thus, leaders should develop these capacities in all faculty. Further, when leaders do call on teachers for these roles, they must also support, credit, and compensate those teachers accordingly.

In the U.S., Santoro (2015) warns against assuming that diversifying the workforce is itself an adequate equity strategy. A teacher's identity does not automatically provide the knowledge or skills needed for equitable teaching. Minoritised teachers may not wish to be their school's resident authority on educating students with the same identities. The opposite assumption harms in the other direction as well, quietly excusing majoritised teachers and leaders from ever developing the competence themselves.

This is why we argue for intentionally separating assumptions about identity and ability. Competence in antiracist and inclusive practices is a developed repertoire, not a demographic inheritance. Khalifa et al. (2016) synthesise culturally responsive school leadership precisely as observable practice: critical self-reflection, the development of culturally responsive teachers, inclusive environments, and engagement with community epistemologies. These practices are not inherent to any particular identity. They can be developed by anyone and should be expected of everyone. The same principle applies to gender and disability. A disabled teacher is not thereby an inclusion specialist, and a nondisabled teacher is not excused from becoming a competent one. Australia has, on paper, already universalised part of this expectation: Standards 1.4 and 2.4 of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) require every teacher to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students effectively and to promote reconciliation (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011).

Furthermore, AITSL Standard 1.5, "Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities", requires teachers to demonstrate knowledge of differentiation but how they go about this with integrity is not specified under the Standards (de Bruin, 2021). This is most concerning, especially when considering the conceptual confusion that often surrounds the term differentiation let alone its known incorrect application (de Bruin, 2020; Rosenberg et al., 2024). Additionally, Standard 1.6, "Strategies to support full participation of students with disability" (AITSL, 2011) does not mandate evidence-based practices be used when implementing this standard (de Bruin, 2020). This means that numerous possibilities are potentially acceptable under the pretext of supporting students with disability (Rosenberg et al., 2025). In practice, these standards become routinised as a compliance checklist with minimal effect on professional practice. Leadership for belonging treats this competence like any other core professional standard that must be developed and evaluated, not simply claimed (Adams et al., 2023).

Capacity Building as Organising

How, then, do leaders grow faculty capacity? We argue that building faculty capacity requires more than episodic professional development sessions. The dominant model of professional development in which external experts present to passive recipients on a pupil-free day reflects poor pedagogy for faculty as well as students. In particular, it often overlooks the knowledge, experiences, and expertise that participants bring to the learning process. A different method is available from outside the teaching profession. Evans (2007) distills educational leadership lessons of this method from Myles Horton and the Highlander Folk School, which trained the leadership of the American labour and civil rights movements. Horton drew leaders from within communities rather than importing them. The curriculum for their further development came from participants’ own experiences and problems. It analysed the local challenges, explored their economic and political dimensions, then developed collective responses. These responses were more effective as they were locally grounded and developed collaboratively, — reflecting the principles of democratic mobilisation. The Highlander method brought people together to learn, act, and speak for themselves.

When school leaders view teacher capacity building through the Highlander approach, their role begins to change. Teachers become the local leaders that Horton sought to develop. Staffrooms become sites where teachers examine and respond to their school’s own data and challenges, rather than places where externally developed solutions are simply introduced.

Toward an Expansive Profession

None of this unfolds in a stable political environment. Bornstein and Black (2025) conclude by highlighting the growing authoritarian pressure bearing down on inclusive education in the United States, including those reflected in Project 2025’s blueprint for schooling as enforcement (https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf).

Similar pressures are evident in Australia. Debates about teaching colonisation, religious exemptions affecting LGBTQ+ educators, and concerns about teacher quality all follow a familiar pattern: control is presented as rigour, and exclusion as maintaining standards. The Highlander experience offers an important lesson here as well. Although the state of Tennessee closed the school in 1961 on disputed charges, community organising effectively reopened it. Therefore, in education, resistance is more than a position; it has a history of producing meaningful change.

Effective inclusive leaders cannot build our schools on the myth of the normal for students or faculty. Inclusion should not require a diverse faculty to fit a narrow ideal before they are accepted. Instead, schools should value different identities, experiences, and ways of teaching as part of genuine belonging. An expansive profession encourages a diverse faculty to reshape what teaching looks like, while expecting teachers of all identities to develop the skills and dispositions to create belonging. Students cannot be told they belong unconditionally by teachers who are themselves tolerated conditionally. Developing capacity in teachers begins with leaders who recognise that the “normal teacher”, like the “normal student”, is a myth that should not define educational practice.

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A review of Theoharis, G., & Scanlan, M. (Eds.). (2026). *Leadership for Increasingly Diverse Schools* (3rd ed.). Routledge. (400 pp.) ISBN: 9781032901046

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In *Leadership for Increasingly Diverse Schools* (3rd ed.), George Theoharis and Martin Scanlan assemble a distinguished community of scholars and practitioners to address one of the most pressing concerns in contemporary education: how school leaders can create systems that genuinely serve all students. As with other edited volumes in this tradition, the text reads as an ongoing conversation among contributors, with chapters that both reinforce and extend one another's arguments in productive ways. The book is carefully structured to move from conceptual foundations toward applied leadership practice. The foreword states: "We must prepare leaders to promote an inclusive climate, which embraces supporting teachers who are reluctant to work in diverse schools" (p. xxv). The opening chapter continues by explicitly framing educational leadership through intersectionality, emphasising that students' identities, race, socioeconomic status, disability, language, gender, sexuality, and religion interact to shape lived experiences of both opportunity and marginalisation. This framing is then developed across subsequent chapters, each focused on a particular dimension of diversity while also referencing its intersections with others.

This organisational logic is clearly reflected in the table of contents, with specific chapters addressing poverty, disability, race, language, gender, religion, and engagement with families and communities that can exhibit all those identities. The structure not only provides clarity for readers but also mirrors the practical realities of leadership preparation programs, where leaders often engage with specific domains while working toward broader systemic coherence. A defining strength of the third edition lies in its practical grounding. Across chapters, theoretical discussions are consistently paired with highly accessible strategies, tools, and richly detailed case studies. These case studies are particularly effective, enabling readers to visualise how inclusive leadership practices might unfold within real school and district contexts. The practical suggestions are well written offering a level of usability that makes the book highly relevant for practising leaders. The inclusion of school-level and district-level examples, along with extended learning opportunities and online resources, further enhances the book's accessibility and utility. This emphasis on application positions the text not only as an academic contribution but as a genuine professional

resource, one that is readily recommended for leadership teams, system leaders, and academic programs focused on inclusive educational leadership alike.

Another noteworthy contribution is the text's sustained focus on race and community as pivotal to educational equity. From Douglass et al.'s (2026) chapter on inclusion vis-à-vis race, the following statement highlights the importance of this contribution.

Educational leadership must be equipped with the knowledge, dispositions, skills, and strategies to navigate the complexities of race and racism in schools. Given the power of race as a social and political construct (albeit informed by physical features like skin color and hair texture), it is important that educational leaders understand that race was created in order to justify the empowerment and unearned privilege granted to those who are raced "White," while denying rights and protections to those who are raced "Black" despite laws prohibiting discrimination by race. (p. 111)

Racial equity functions as a throughline across many chapters, reflecting the United States context from which the text emerges. While the authors explicitly acknowledge this perspective, the analysis nonetheless invites international readers to adopt a critical lens and consider parallels within their own systems and contexts. From an Australian standpoint, these parallels are readily apparent. Historical and contemporary inequities, including the marginalisation of First Nations communities and the persistence of deficit discourses, echo many of the patterns described in the text. Thus, rather than limiting its relevance, the United States focus provides a productive opportunity for comparative reflection and critical adaptation.

Importantly, the text is grounded in a human rights orientation, asserting that access to meaningful, high-quality education is not optional but fundamental. This perspective reframes leadership as ethical and transformative rather than administrative. It challenges leaders to move beyond ensuring attendance toward creating environments in which every child experiences belonging and is supported to thrive, raising the critical question: are schools attempting to fit "square pegs" into "round holes", or are they reshaping themselves to honour learner diversity? The final chapter addressing equity audits and systemic analysis further reinforce this point (Capper et al., 2026). The book emphasises the importance of interrogating data to uncover patterns of inequity, while also cautioning against deficit interpretations of that data. The focus remains on fixing the system, not the students, a message that is both clear and compelling. Drawing on Safir and Dugan's (2021) work, Theoharis and Scanlan caution that "without careful consideration, equity audits can become just another equity practice that perpetuates inequities" (p. 322), highlighting the need to critically examine the assumptions and positionality of those conducting such audits. These tools must be enacted with consistency and vigilance. Without sustained structural change and ongoing critical reflection on privilege and belief systems, particularly among those conducting the audits, these processes risk remaining symbolic rather than leading to meaningful transformation. Each chapter on a different dimension of diversity provides the conceptual grounding to inform such data analysis.

While the book's contributions are considerable, there are also areas where further development would strengthen future editions. Most notably, the implementation of intersectionality, though explicitly emphasised in the abstract and chapter design, reflects a strong aspirational direction, with opportunities for deeper realisation in practice. Each chapter focuses

on a specific dimension of diversity, which provides clarity but can occasionally result in identities being presented as discrete rather than dynamically interconnected. This structure can inadvertently create a checklist effect, where leaders attend to individual categories separately. While such an approach has practical value, it risks obscuring the complex ways in which identities intersect in lived experience. In response to this, a more deliberately integrated approach where intersections are not only acknowledged but consistently foregrounded across chapters would enhance the coherence and depth of the text. In particular, there is scope for stronger exploration of how disability can be racialised, and how systems of classification and support are shaped by dominant cultural norms. Similarly, while gender and LGBTQ+ identities are addressed (McQuillan et al., 2026), further attention to how these intersect with race, disability, and socioeconomic status could potentially deepen the analysis. We offer these observations as areas for growth rather than critique of intent. The text clearly aspires to intersectional thinking, and future editions are well positioned to build on this foundation.

Another important strength of the book is its collective authorship. The contributors represent a well-respected and passionate group of scholars, and this diversity of voices enriches the text. The chapters function as a community of practice in themselves, modelling the collaborative and reflective work that effective leadership requires. Ultimately, *Leadership for Increasingly Diverse Schools* succeeds in presenting itself as both a guide and a companion for school leaders. It is accessible, relatable, and grounded in practice, while still engaging with complex theoretical and ethical questions. It challenges leaders to reflect on their assumptions, interrogate their systems, and commit to ongoing transformation.

In conclusion, the third edition represents a significant contribution to the field of inclusive educational leadership. Its integration of theory, practice, and moral purpose makes it an essential resource for those committed to equity and inclusion. While there remains scope to further deepen its intersectional integration, the book provides a strong and compelling foundation. For these reasons, we advocate strongly for this text to be on the shelves of all school leaders. It not only equips them with practical strategies but invites them into the ongoing work of creating schools where every student belongs and is supported not merely to attend, but to thrive.

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Reforming the Generation and Application of U.S. Research Evidence: Opportunity!

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ABSTRACT: The previous article in this two-article series showed how the current, well intentioned, evidentiary infrastructure in the U.S. failed in its mission to provide useful evidence to practitioners to improve their schools and increase equity. The basic problem appeared to be focusing on causal methodology and internal validity to determine the effectiveness of interventions, while ignoring external and ecological validity. When the preferred methods yielded tiny effects that were not educationally meaningful, the research community doubled down and rationalised why they were indeed evidence of effectiveness. Alternatively, if applied research is to generate needed evidence of big effects across diverse contexts, education could follow other clinical disciplines that have transitioned from causal research to a more flexible, non-causal, scientific methods for designing and identifying effective interventions—generally referred to as Improvement Science. Theoretical and pragmatic issues for such a transformation in education are explored. Each country can determine which of the recommendations can also benefit their own applied research efforts.

Key words: Big effects, improvement science, non-casual research, external validity, reforming applied research

Introduction

The first article in this series showed how the U.S.'s reliance on “rigorous” causal research methods to generate evidence of effective interventions did not provide useful evidence for enabling education leaders to improve practice and reduce inequities. The problem was that RCT methods, and high quality quasi experimental—i.e., controls without randomisation—generated small effects which researchers then made to seem like important findings via threshold hacking.

The research community chose to believe that if the evidence it provided did not lead to noticeable benefits in the real world it was because practitioners were resisting applying the evidence or were not implementing the findings properly. However, the preponderance of evidence does not support these assertions.

The previous article in this series concluded that the big problem was that the “rigorous” evidence generated was flawed because causal methods were not a good fit for generating useful information for leaders. Efforts to control an environment in a complex and chaotic setting such as schools creates an artificial cocoon that does not represent actual practice, and limits the kinds of interventions that can be tested to highly structured, single dimensional ones. Finally, causal methods focus on internal validity, whereas leaders seek evidence of external and ecological validity.

As a result, most (but not all) of the evidence misled leaders who were trying to use research evidence to improve their schools. Especially problematic were the interventions geared to high poverty schools that were widely adopted by leaders based on evidence of their effectiveness. However, it turns out that the most widely adopted interventions for “helping” high-poverty students had not actually been effective in the original research, or subsequent practice. This evidentiary misdirection served to maintain existing structural inequalities.

If applied research is to in fact provide useful evidence for enabling leaders to improve their schools and increase equity, It is time to admit that relying on causal methodology has failed, and it is time to consider a different methodological approach.

Alternatives

Preferred methodologies do change over time. Pearl and Mackenzie (2018) note that determining whether interventions were effective transitioned from the prior dominance of correlational methods to a belief over the past 40 years that causal analysis of outcomes via randomised controlled trials (RCT) methods is the best way to determine effectiveness of interventions. So, the call to once again transition the preferred methodology for applied research in education has an historical precedence.

One widely advocated alternative to RCT is Bayesian Analysis in general (Pearl & Mackenzie, 2018) and for education research specifically (Frisby, 2025; Kassler et al., 2020; Kubsch et al., 2021). However, Bayesian Analysis is still a causal method which will have many of the same problems for applied research as the current methods.

Another methodology that is advocated goes in a very different direction. Improvement science is a non-causal methodology—i.e., almost an opposite approach. You are not trying to prove that the intervention caused whatever benefits occur, rather you are trying to determine whether the schools using the intervention consistently see noticeable improvement as compared to their existing performance. Improvement science is more intuitive and more flexible, as it allows for making needed adjustments to the intervention in real time across different experiments. It also had established a track record of success in other clinical disciplines before being adapted to education—particularly in other complex settings such as hospitals.

Given Improvement science’s track record in improving clinical outcomes in complex settings, it is viewed as having high potential to provide useful evidence for education leaders on how to improve their schools. This article explores “why” and “how” to apply this non-causal methodology, and the reforms needed to the evidentiary infrastructure.

A Non-Causal Research Method for Improving Practice

The current dominant RCT methodology for identifying effective educational practices was inspired by its utility for testing the effectiveness of a specific medicine. However, not all successful forms of medical clinical practice use RCT. Obstetrics has *never* conducted formal experiments, yet it is the branch of medicine that has produced the greatest improvement in saving lives (Gawande, 2007). Berwick (2008) and Plsek (1999) note how improvements in the quality of health care provided across hospitals was made possible by switching from RCT methods to more adaptive forms of research that could take into account the constantly shifting social processes and context specific mechanisms inherent in delivering better patient care across hospitals. Kolata (2015) describes *precision medicine* as the newest federal initiative for discovering new and more powerful treatments for cancer that can generate very large improvements in patient outcomes. Precision medicine does not use randomised control groups or control groups of any kind. It simply seeks results that are noticeably better than the baseline cure rate of what existing treatments have been able to generate. Carroll (2018) describes the less controlled approach of “pragmatic trials” for testing complex, multi-step medical procedures in order to determine whether treatments work in the real world as opposed to the optimal conditions of a controlled trial.

The above types of more flexible and adaptive methods are often lumped together as representing improvement science methodology. The following is a brief overview of improvement science.

Characteristics of Improvement Science Methodology

Improvement science does not try to control extraneous variables but embraces their reality. It does so by iterating the design of the intervention in real time in conjunction with implementation and evaluation via rapid prototyping experiments. The intervention’s design is adjusted in real time as implementation problems and unexpected contextual issues arise. The processes of design, redesign, evaluation, refinement, and scaling occur simultaneously in real-world settings. Iterative evaluations are used to adjust key design parameters in real time to develop more effective interventions. If the intervention is successful in initial pilots, the intervention is implemented in an increasing number of varied contexts, and the design continues to be iterated in response to new challenges.

Outcomes are compared to benchmarks of existing performance—as opposed to control groups. The goal is to demonstrate a big improvement over an existing performance benchmark. The wide variety of existing databases on the performance of education at the state, federal, and local school levels can be used as evaluative benchmarks to document whether the actual performance improvements are obvious to, and valued by, practitioners. No sophisticated statistics needed!

As the design of an intervention matures after several rounds of expansion, the goal is to demonstrate big benefits relative to an existing benchmark on a consistent basis across the vast majority of contexts. Clearly, such an outcome expectation sets a very high evidentiary bar that is

consistent with the federal mandate to generate research that improves student outcomes. Conversely, there is no effort to demonstrate that the intervention has caused the outcome, or with internal validity. At the same time, if one can demonstrate consistent big benefits across a variety of contexts, what is the likelihood that it was not caused by the intervention? Pogrow (2026) has referred to such a probabilistic inference as “implicit causation”.

Improvement science methodology is designed from the ground up to establish the external and ecological validity of its research findings. Some of its characteristics are:

- The simplicity of the methodology makes it easier to establish experiments at scale—essential for external validity;
- The absence of control groups means that it is easier to recruit larger samples since all the sites are experimental ones;
- Testing the intervention on larger samples makes it easier to identify the specific conditions of practice where the intervention is effective;
- The flexibility of the methodology allows for designing and testing more multi-dimensional, adaptive, interventions;
- It uses mixed methods; and
- Establishing the consistency of big benefits relative to existing benchmarks across a wide variety of contexts provides evidence of replication, and establishes credibility with practitioners.

While it is difficult to design interventions that can provide consistent, big, effects relative to an existing benchmark, improvement science has proven useful in other disciplines and there are indications that it can be successfully applied in education. Bryk et al. (2011) have played a leading role in adopting the methods of improvement science to education using a process which they called “network improvement communities”.

The following are two examples of highly promising improvement science interventions—one from education and another from psychiatry.

Examples of Big Effects from Improvement Science Interventions

The Statway intervention was developed by the Carnegie Foundation to improve upon one of the greatest systemic failures in American education. Approximately half the students who enrol at a community college (CC) are placed into a remedial/developmental math course sequence of at least a year which they must pass before they can enrol in CC credit-earning courses. In this sequence they are essentially asked to relearn high school mathematics. Unfortunately, 60–70 percent of these students nationally fail to complete the sequence of developmental math courses and drop out without having had the opportunity to earn any CC credit (Bryk et al., 2011). This may be the highest dropout rate in American education.

The Statway initiative designed and tested a new beginning math sequence that emphasised the statistical types of math knowledge that students need in CC coursework and the types of problems they will encounter in a variety of CC majors.

Results from the field tests of Statway found that the percentage of students earning CC math credits increased from only 15% after two years of developmental math to 50% after only a single year of Statway math. That is clearly a big effect.

Barry (2025) describes a street psychiatry intervention for the most acutely mentally ill individuals living on the street in Los Angeles. In addition to the dangers posed by their psychotic delusions and living on the street, their cycling in and out of emergency rooms cost the county as much as \$1 million USD a year per person. There was no previous evidence on how to best deal with such individuals as they were not the type to come into a psychiatrist's office or participate in any type of research in a controlled setting.

The intervention was to build trust with individuals and then administer antipsychotic medicine on the street to stabilise them as a critical step to get them into housing. Previously, such treatment was traditionally only administered in hospital settings given the potential side effects.

This "practice-based experiment" that started with a single psychiatrist has now grown to 223 full-time staff members. Barry (2025) reported that out of 1,919 people served last year, 22% ended the year housed.

Both these improvement science interventions represent novel approaches to seemingly intractable problems. Both interventions illustrate big effects that are obvious to practitioners and policy makers without the need for sophisticated statistics.

A transition from rigorous, causal methods that produce small effects to a less formal methodology with the potential to produce larger benefits is consistent with Ziliak and McCloskey's (2004) theory of "economic significance". In this theory, imprecise findings of big benefits are more important for real-world impact than being able to precisely predict the level of small benefit. This theory suggests that less formal research methods such as improvement science that demonstrate the replication of big benefits across a variety of contexts are more likely to impact real world practice than gold-standard causal models that generate small effects.

Researcher Resistance to Less "Rigorous" Applied Research Methods

It is difficult to get researchers to consider alternative scientific mechanisms to causality—even one as great as Albert Einstein. After Albert Einstein's early work revolutionised physics by developing the causal rules that govern the natural world at the astronomical level, he spent much of his later life trying to find causal rules that govern nature at the quantum level. He failed! He was so focused on finding deterministic causal mechanisms for everything that he could not accept the growing body of evidence supporting the probabilistic nature of quantum theory because he viewed describing any phenomena in the natural world as probabilistic, as opposed to causal, as the end of physics (Isaacson, 2007).

He famously pushed back against uncertainty in any principles of how nature functions by stating that "God does not play dice with the universe"—to which Niels Bohr retorted: "Einstein, stop telling God what to do!" (Isaacson, 2007, p. 326). Heisenberg went even further. He rebuffed Einstein's objection to the uncertainties inherent in quantum mechanics by stating that in order to

understand the physical world at the quantum level “the nonvalidity of rigorous causality, is necessary” (Isaacson, 2007, p. 332). However, more recent research (Becker, 2018) concluded that Einstein’s critique of Bohr’s conception of quantum physics was valid and inspired others to offer alternative quantum theories. However, Bohr and his disciples were able to impose their view on the field of physics for almost 50 years despite its flaws.

In other words, there is hubris and scientific inertia in all disciplines, and a form of intellectual stagnation sets in regardless of how prestigious the advocates of status quo are. Having new ideas is not enough. It takes a concentrated effort to push aside the status quo.

Similarly, education researchers who initiated the current educational research infrastructure are likely to resist using simpler and more intuitive scientific methods. The unwillingness of education research to backtrack is exemplified by the previously discussed case of Success for All (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Intervention/214>). The federal What Works Clearinghouse continues to designate it as having strong evidence of effectiveness despite the contrary, independent evidence that has emerged.

An expected criticism is that the less formal and intuitive nature of improvement science is not “real” science. However, this ignores that the primary imperative of science is to accurately describe/predict real-world phenomena. Sophisticated, rigorous methods that do not accurately predict real-world outcomes—in this case, predict real-world effectiveness of interventions—is not good science. As such, the claims of findings of effectiveness from RCT research have not been good science.

Indeed, transitioning the applied evidentiary infrastructure to less complex methodologies and analyses is supported by Gigerenzer’s (2022) conclusion about the predictive validity of algorithms in a variety of disciplines and studies of human behaviour. He concluded that: “I have found that simple heuristics often match or outperform complex algorithms in making predictions about health care outcomes, financial outcomes, and other uncertain situations” (p. 122).

Creating an Applied Evidentiary Infrastructure for Non-Causal Methods

If applied education research is to meet its mandate to provide evidence that is useful to practitioners, it needs a major methodological do-over. However, acknowledging that reliance on causal models to determine the effectiveness of intensive interventions has not lived up to its promise, and that “less rigorous” methods without control groups can be a more valid scientific method for identifying effective interventions, will require a major culture change in the research community to overcome “researcher-resistance”.

Changing the culture in the U.S. will probably have to start with eliminating or making major modifications to the two key linchpins of the current federal evidentiary infrastructure, the Institute for Educational Sciences (IES) and the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) agencies. Mark Schneider (2025), the former director of IES, has similarly questioned whether WWC should survive.

There also needs to be major changes in the methodologies employed for applied research at every stage of the process from publishing research to its funding. Since the evidence is supposed to be useful to practitioners, we need new threshold standards for determining whether research evidence leads to useful real-world outcomes, much as the standards for determining the efficacy

of a vaccine. We need standards for the expected consistency of benefits when practitioners adopt evidence-based practices, as well as for the size of desired benefits. Perhaps the best way to proceed would be for a panel of practitioners to make a judgement as to whether a given outcome does indeed represent a big improvement over existing benchmarks. Is practitioner judgement not a better threshold than the supposedly “unbiased” measure of statistical significance for research whose goal is to noticeably improve student outcomes and increase equity? Applying old thresholds and standards to new applied research methods—i.e., threshold hacking—will constrain their potential benefits.

Emergent evidentiary thresholds should be ones that provide greater likelihood that if leaders use the evidence their students will truly benefit. This will require leaders and policy makers to push back against the methods and thresholds that have been imposed by the research community. Developing new thresholds should start with leaders telling researchers the type of research evidence they need to conclude that a new approach is effective and likely to improve their schools. These practitioner views should then become the basis of how a new applied research methodology and agenda is formed.

Leaders also need to hold the research community accountable for its findings. When I confront researchers about the need for evidence that its claims of effectiveness predict real world outcomes, as *often* occurs in medical research, the response is usually something like: “That’s unfair as nothing works all the time”.

We also need research methods that produce more intuitive findings that are accessible to practitioners and parents. The benefits from the two prior examples of improvement science projects relative to the existing baselines of practice are obvious. Statisticians are not needed to decipher the results. Knowing just the average outcome for those who received the experimental treatment is sufficient for judging the effectiveness of the intervention. Similarly, applied education research should require that the actual, final, achievement level of the experimental students (only) in the interventions being tested be reported without statistical adjustments. (Adjustments to the Means are fine as long as the unadjusted Means are also reported.) Such evidence can easily be interpreted by practitioners and parents. If the research evidence as to the final Means for the experimental students in the Success for All and Reading Recovery interventions had been presented, practitioners probably would not have judged them to be effective interventions.

AERA and funding agencies should stop imposing the same methodological requirements for applied research as it does for basic research. AERA needs to establish specialised journals for applied research with different editorial criteria, and funding agencies need to differentiate the funding criteria for basic research versus applied research. For example, it is now assumed that to warrant publication and/or funding, a proposal must have a strong theoretical basis. However, Pogrow (2023) studied the similarities between two very different successful education improvement science interventions. While he found 13 common design characteristics, neither intervention was based on theory. The initial ideas for the design were based on intuition and metaphor. Therefore, funding and publishing standards that require that an intervention be theory based could prevent the most potentially effective interventions from being funded or published.

Indeed, working from academic theory is but one of two methods used in science. The physicist Lisa Randall characterises the other approach as “model building” in which the researcher builds something from bits of available ideas and information and then tests it (Randall, 2005).

That is not to say that improvement science is atheoretical. The success of the interventions studied led to new theory as to why each ended up being effective. We tend to forget that much of the most important discoveries in science came from intuitive and metaphorical insight-based interventions—e.g., bike builders creating the intervention of powered flight—which then led to the modern theories of aerodynamics.

Finally, a significant percentage of overall applied research funding should be set aside for independent, large-scale evaluations on whether schools and students actually benefit from adopting an “evidence-based” practice. This will ensure studies of external and ecological validity. Researchers should be held accountable for the claims they make.

Reforming the Teaching of Quantitative Methods in Leadership Graduate Programs

The quantitative methods course(s) in leadership programs at the Masters and doctoral (EdD) levels tend to be traditional statistics courses. However, while this is appropriate for PhD programs, it is not very useful for leaders. The quantitative methods taught to students who are, or are planning to be, educational leaders should be different from those taught to students who plan to be researchers/professors.

Given the earlier critiques of applied research, the most important skill for leaders is to reach their own independent conclusions as to whether in any applied research findings researchers have exaggerated the importance of their findings, or whether if they act on the basis of that evidence it is likely to improve their schools. Pogrow (2026) labelled such a perspective as “authentic quantitative analysis”. For example, he has developed a series of techniques which enables students and leaders to easily and intuitively conduct such critiques—even for the most statistically dense articles. There are also other specific research skills that are critical for leaders in their everyday practice such as (a) analysing their own schools’ data and organising data teams to apply the data to solving problems of practice, (b) conducting improvement science projects in their schools, and (c) learning the quantitative skills needed to conduct an applied dissertation or action research project. These authentic methods have been combined into a quantitative methods textbook that enables leadership programs to reform their quantitative methods courses to make them more dynamic and useful for leaders (Pogrow, 2026).

Another influential effort to make EdD programs more linked to the actual needs of leaders is the work of the Carnegie project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). One of its influences has been to emphasise improvement science in EdD programs. As a result, many EdD programs in the U.S. have a strong focus on improvement science methods and some even require students to develop an improvement science dissertation. Such a dissertation requires students to design a new intervention for solving a problem in their schools, then implementing it and evaluating the result.

Conclusion—Cause for Optimism

Clearly, using research evidence to improve education remains a critical professional goal. In addition, establishing the IES and the WWC were good, well-intentioned, ideas. However, they did not live up to their potential. Instead, the research community created an evidentiary infrastructure in the U.S. that focused on their preferred method of scientific inquiry with little knowledge about, or concern for, the usefulness of the resultant evidence—even though the legislative mandate was to provide useful evidence that leaders could apply to improve their schools and increase equity.

The good news is that improvement science provides an alternative, non-causal, applied research methodology that is more flexible and adaptive, and that has a track record of increasing clinical outcomes. Other clinical disciplines that deal with complex organisations and processes have found success shifting to these alternative methods. Instead of emulating the methods medical research uses to test the effectiveness of a single medicine, we should seek to emulate the methods it uses to validate complex operations, medical devices, and that hospitals use to improve health care—i.e., improvement science.

If education was to similarly shift and create a new applied evidentiary infrastructure based on non-causal methods, there is every reason to believe that it will be possible to develop more dynamic interventions that can generate consistent big effects in practice. Improvement science has already been applied to education and its techniques are increasingly being taught in graduate educational leadership graduate programs.

Establishing consistent big benefits as the expected evidence for certifying the effectiveness of school-based interventions will be difficult. It will require making major changes in the existing evidentiary infrastructure and overcoming researcher resistance to such change. It will require reforming how federal agencies administer grants and set research policy and changing editorial policies at research journals—and/or AERA creating new journals that focus on improvement science. In addition, it will require leaders who, while committed to the ideal of evidence-based practice, take a more active role in demanding more authentic forms of research and thresholds of evidence and a major say in their development. They know what type of evidence they need and should put the onus on the research community to generate such evidence. Finally, leadership faculty need to move away from focusing on traditional statistics methods to more authentic forms of quantitative methods.

This article has recommended a series of reforms in how applied research is conducted, governed, and judged, as well as how education leaders are trained. While these recommendations are based on the experience in the U.S., other countries can determine which of these recommendations will improve their own applied research efforts.

These recommendations create an opportunity to apply more flexible, non-causal, research methods that better represent the chaotic environments of schools, and thereby lead to innovative R & D efforts that unlock the potential of using research evidence to actually improve student outcomes and increase equity. Finally, evidence demonstrating consistent big effects will not only lead to noticeable improvements in education, but it will also enhance the credibility of applied research evidence and thereby benefit the research community.

There is now the potential for using new research methods to create a generation of more effective interventions—which in turn will stimulate new knowledge and theory to explain why they were so effective. In addition, methods that present more intuitive and valid evidentiary findings will stimulate new discussions and respect between researchers and leaders.

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Comprehensive History of ACEL

Written by Dr Marie Jansen (FACEL)

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

How It All Started: The History of ACEL

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

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

In the mid 1960’s, an enthusiastic Australian, William Walker, was a Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkley. 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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The title should be concise and informative.

Author information:

The name(s) of the author(s)

The affiliation(s) of the author(s), i.e., institution, (department), city, (state), country

A clear indication and an active e-mail address of the corresponding author

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

Word Length

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

Keywords

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

Paper: 6,000 – 7,000 words

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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.

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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.

AI

The use of AI must be declared.

Acknowledgements

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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.

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Leading & Managing, the academic journal of the Australian Council of Educational Leadership, accepts Commentaries for publication.

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

ACEL Leading & Managing

Volume 32 Number 2

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Special Edition: Inclusive Leadership: Developing Capacity in Teachers

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Leadership for Increasingly Diverse Schools (3rd ed.)

G. Theoharis & M. Scanlan (Eds.)

REBECCA ROSENBERG & JOSHUA BORNSTEIN