



Leadership development for educational leaders: Why it is critical at all stages of a leader's career

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Introduction

Effective school leaders play a vital role in providing every student in NSW public schools with an outstanding education so they can thrive (Day et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2019; Munby, 2020). A leader's influence extends to improving student outcomes by supporting teacher and leader growth, and fostering strong connections with the school community (Leithwood et al., 2019). Enhancing the leadership skills and capabilities of school and system leaders is key to achieving the goal of an equitable and excellent public education system in NSW and enabling a diverse and sustainable pipeline of effective, committed school leaders.

Effective school leaders embody a commitment to lifelong learning (Fuller & Young, 2022), engaging in reflective practices that enable them to adapt to complex challenges while fostering collaborative learning communities (Daniëls et al., 2019). Engaging in contextualised leadership development, leaders are empowered to become researchers of their own practice, aligning their growth with evidence-informed, student-centred practices that connect with their individual context (Tingle et al., 2019).

To ensure effective leadership development at every stage of a leader's career, a system must provide dynamic and responsive programs and resources that focus on practical applications suited to the diverse needs of school leaders (Bush, 2009). Education systems that prioritise inclusivity and equitable access to leadership learning resources and leadership development programs, allow all leadersregardless of their school context-to benefit from high-quality development opportunities (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009). By giving leaders agency over their professional learning, the system ensures that these opportunities align with unique contexts, fostering ownership and engagement that enhances their effectiveness (Tingle et al., 2019) and supports school improvement (Munby, 2020).

Evidence for why school leadership is important

Stable and consistent evidence highlights a clear link between effective school leadership, teacher professional development, and improved student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2019). Outstanding leadership is vital for the success of students and schools (Leithwood & Azah, 2016). It enhances student outcomes through goal setting, resource management, and creating a positive learning environment. Effective school leadership significantly enhances student outcomes through visionary goal setting, strategic resource management, and fostering a positive learning climate. This impact is quantifiable and highlights the importance of evidence-informed leadership in achieving school improvement (Kilag, 2024). Thus, investing in the development of the leadership capabilities of school leaders is crucial for effective reform and improvement strategies (Fullan, 2011).

The importance of leadership development for school leaders

Leadership development is vital at every stage of a school leader's career, as it directly impacts the quality of education and student outcomes. Ongoing professional development should be prioritised, with opportunities tailored to the unique contexts and challenges leaders face. By investing in support including coaching and mentoring, educational systems can foster a culture of continuous growth and adaptability. Context-driven leadership development equips leaders with essential knowledge and fosters a culture of inquiry and collaboration encouraging leaders to be active researchers of their practice (Kilag, 2024). Research also shows that effective leadership is significantly enhanced when leaders have agency in their learning journey, enabling them to apply their skills and insights into practice (Harris & De Flaminis, 2016; Munby, 2021).

The research literature reveals three key themes and eight sub themes that underscore the importance of leadership development at every stage of a leader's career. This development is essential for strengthening the effectiveness of leaders, schools and the system by:

- a. Enabling educational leaders to become lifelong learners
 - Providing ongoing opportunities tailored to each stage of a leader's career
 - Offering professional support to facilitate continuous learning and growth
 - Making strategic and sustainable investment in leadership development
- b. Promoting student-centred leadership through 'Sense making'
 - Connecting leadership theory to practice through context-driven learning
 - Ensuring that leadership training is responsive to specific contexts
 - Encouraging leaders to act as researchers of their own and others' practices
- c. A system-led response to leadership development
 - Delivering dynamic, responsive, inclusive and equitable leadership learning opportunities
 - Empowering leaders to be agents of their professional development

Enabling educational leaders to become lifelong learners

To effectively lead their schools, support their colleagues, and improve student outcomes, it is essential for leaders to be lifelong learners. They must actively invest in their professional development and stay informed about current and emerging educational leadership research and practices. This commitment fosters a culture of sustained growth and continuous improvement (Harris & De Flaminis, 2016).

Providing ongoing opportunities tailored to each stage of a leader's career

In an education system that embraces individual leadership development, school leaders can access personalised professional support and quality leadership development throughout their careers. This facilitates successful leadership transitions and helps prevent leadership attrition due to stagnation or leadership plateaus (Shah, 2006). By prioritising their own learning and committing to their professional development, leaders can create an environment that promotes ongoing growth and improvement (Harris & De Flaminis, 2016).

A growing body of global evidence indicates that investing in leadership learning at all stages of a school leader's career significantly enhances the quality of teaching and consequently, student learning (Day et al., 2009; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2019; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Munby, 2021; Robinson et al., 2008). Munby (2020) further asserts that the quality of leadership improves more rapidly when leaders learn collaboratively with their peers and apply their insights in their contexts. High-quality leadership development programs and resources focused on context-driven problem solving are more effective than merely attending external professional learning courses (Munby, 2020). To address this need, education systems should provide ongoing support and access to leadership development opportunities throughout a leader's career, emphasising expertise in school improvement and curriculum development while ensuring these opportunities are sustainable and long-term.

Offering professional support to facilitate continuous learning and growth

Continuous learning enables leaders to adapt to change and complexity, ensuring they can implement innovative strategies to improve educational outcomes (Day et al., 2009). Leadership learning that fosters flexible and adaptable skills and mindsets equips leaders to address emerging and future challenges with confidence and efficacy (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015). By prioritising their skills and mindset development, school leaders model a commitment to adaptive learning for their staff and students, fostering a culture of ongoing growth and improvement (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Professional support is essential for school leaders to develop their leadership skills and mindsets, enhancing leadership effectiveness, promoting continuous learning, and improving student outcomes. By creating opportunities for professional support modes such as coaching and mentoring, leaders can refine their skills, adapt to changing educational contexts, and cultivate a positive school culture. These supports provide leaders with the tools, strategies, and feedback to navigate complex challenges, foster collaboration, and drive school improvement. Engaging in professional support to enhance effective leadership, not only benefits individual leaders but also strengthens the broader educational community (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Schools that are viewed as 'learning organisations' in the context of leadership development cultivate a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration (Huber, 2004). By embracing the concept of schools as learning organisations, where leaders and educators learn from and with one another, share practices, and adapt to emerging challenges, leaders are better equipped to drive improvement and support their teams to achieve shared goals. If schools are seen as dynamic, learning-oriented organisations that adapt to changing social influences (Huber, 2004), then leadership development programs must address not only educational goals and teaching-learning processes but also prepare school leaders to navigate complex, evolving challenges and foster collaborative environments.

Accessing professional supports such as coaching and mentoring throughout a leader's career offers personalised guidance and feedback, helping to develop their leadership skills and mindsets while addressing specific challenges (Searby, 2010). Research shows that accessing effective professional supports promote professional growth by providing strategies that enhance a leader's ability to drive school improvement and improve student achievement (Drucker, 2005).

Making strategic and sustainable investment in leadership development

Education systems that invest strategically in sustained leadership development opportunities support leaders throughout their leadership learning journeys, addressing the needs of all leaders at scale. Munby (2020) argues that achieving widespread system improvement requires leadership development that combines context-based learning, access to credible mentors and peers, high-quality evidencebased resources, and opportunities for reflection and discussion. Incorporating evaluative processes to assess effectiveness and impact can lead to sustainable improvements across the system.

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Provision of high-quality leadership development resources is essential for scaling support and sustainably meeting the leadership learning needs of school leaders. Through open access to leadership learning available to all leaders at every stage of their careers, the system creates an ecosystem of ideas, tools and frameworks, that leaders can navigate with agility (Williams, 2022). This approach enables leaders to view challenges as opportunities for professional growth, allowing them to leverage the high-quality resources at their disposal to address the issues they face directly.

Promoting student-centred leadership through 'Sense making'

School leaders are increasingly expected to be flexible, proactive, and adept at transforming challenges into opportunities for school improvement (Huber, 2004). Therefore, effective leadership development opportunities must focus on integrating theoretical insights with practical, context-sensitive decisionmaking fostering a thoughtful approach that merges theory and practice.

To enhance the relevance and effectiveness of leadership development programs and initiatives, promoting the concept of schools as "learning organisations" is essential. This prepares leaders to manage and lead in alignment with educational goals and democratic principles, cultivating selfautonomous, respectful, and cooperative leaders (Brauckmann et al., 2020). This approach enables leaders to act as researchers who inform and guide their practices, away from traditional leadership approaches and emphasising their role as active contributors to research.

Connecting leadership theory to practice through context-driven learning

Research indicates that leadership development focused on context-driven learning is crucial for addressing the immediate challenges faced by school leaders. Furthermore, when leadership development incorporates both informal and formal learning experiences it enhances leaders' effectiveness and adaptability across different contexts (Shah, 2006). A balanced approach to leadership development integrating both domain-specific knowledge for school improvement with essential generic leadership skills - enables leaders to lead effectively while supporting teachers and students (Munby, 2020).

A significant challenge in providing high-quality leadership development is determining how to apply research-based leadership knowledge to the specific contexts in which school leaders operate (Brauckmann et al., 2020). School leaders must engage in a process of 'sense-making' (Spillane et.al., 2002 cited in Brauckmann et al., 2020) interpreting and adapting general leadership theories to their unique school environments. This process is influenced by their specific contexts and the inherent ambiguity of translating universal findings into effective practices (Brauckmann et al., 2020). Therefore, a thoughtful, context-aware approach to merging theory and practice is essential for advancing leadership development programs and resources to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.

Ensuring that leadership training is responsive to specific contexts

School leaders are both learners and educators, requiring continuous adaptation and improvement in response to change while transforming challenges into opportunities (Huber, 2004). Effective leadership demands flexibility, proactivity, and the ability to navigate complex school systems to create environments where teachers can support students effectively. Therefore, leadership development programs should focus on understanding these intricate relationships and guiding current and future leaders in addressing the evolving needs of schools. This student-centred approach emphasises a valuedriven paradigm that prioritises equity, fairness, and social responsibility over solely technical or managerial skills.

Contextually responsive leadership explores the relationship between the quality of leadership and school improvement as reflected in student outcomes, and considers how well leaders are prepared for this task (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). The search for school leadership talent reveals ongoing issues of underrepresentation among certain groups, highlighting challenges related to entitlement, equity, and access (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2019; Fuller & Young, 2022; Shah, 2006). To effectively develop successful school leaders at various career stages, pipeline strategies for leadership succession must address equity, personal growth, and the balance between system-led initiatives and context-driven innovation (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009). This approach fosters the capabilities, knowledge, and wisdom, essential for contextually responsive leadership (Shah, 2006).

Encouraging leaders to act as researchers of their own and others' practices

Effective leadership development programs and resources must address the complex and evolving nature of school leadership to ensure that school leaders are equipped to support teachers in meeting the diverse needs of their students (Kilag, 2024). Effective professional learning for school leaders requires a shift from generic, one-size-fits-all models to personalised, research informed approaches that cater to the diverse and evolving needs of educational leadership (Kilag, 2024).

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Educational leadership learning that positions school leaders as researchers of their own and others' practices fosters a culture of inquiry and continuous improvement. By engaging in reflective practices and evidence-based research, leaders can critically evaluate their approaches and collaborate with peers to adapt strategies and enhance their effectiveness. This process promotes professional growth and encourages leaders to share insights and learn from each other's experiences, creating a collaborative learning environment that benefits the entire school community (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015). Harris and Jones (2023) note that when school leaders adopt a research-oriented mindset, they become catalysts for transformative change, driving both their own development and that of their colleagues.

By providing system-developed programs and resources that include context-driven, evidenceinformed learning opportunities, leadership development can empower effective school leadership, celebrating creative solutions and fostering genuine school improvement without stifling passion and innovative decision-making (Shah, 2006). Leadership development strategically aligned with school improvement efforts, facilitated by a context driven, 'sense-making' approach, creates a renewed agenda for the future, strengthening public education systems with access to high-quality leadership development programs and resources for all school leaders.

A system-led response to leadership development

Research indicates that a well-structured leadership development program should be dynamic, responsive to feedback, and focused on practical, real-world applications to enhance leaders' effectiveness and facilitate school improvement (Tingle et al., 2019). Effective leadership development is a deliberate, and structured process that balances a system-led framework with the tailoring of experiences to meet leaders' individual needs and prior experiences (Bush, 2009; Daniëls et al., 2019).

Dynamic, responsive, inclusive and equitable provision of leadership learning

A systemic approach to leadership development is essential to ensure that programs are dynamic, responsive to feedback, and centred on practical, contextual applications to enhance school leaders' effectiveness and facilitate school improvement (Davis, 2012; McIntyre, 2001). Additionally, leaders should have agency over their leadership learning at each stage of their career. When leaders choose learning opportunities that align with their goals and unique contexts, they are more likely to perceive the relevance and impact of their professional learning on staff and student learning (Robinson, 2011). Empowering leaders in their development, fosters more effective, responsive, and resilient leaders within educational systems (Campbell et al., 2015). By integrating these principles into leadership development programs and resources, educational systems can cultivate more effective leaders who are well-equipped to lead in diverse and changing contexts.

The NSW public education system encompasses a wide variety of contexts – ranging from large and small schools located in metropolitan, rural, and remote settings. Each school has unique characteristics and serves diverse communities and student populations. To navigate this complexity and diversity effectively, highly skilled leaders at every level are essential to realising the vision for public education. A key focus of a system-led approach to leadership development is ensuring inclusivity, diversity, and equitable access to programs and resources, designed to meet the needs of leaders across all school settings (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2019; Fuller & Young, 2022). Tailored and sustainable initiatives and resources that address the unique challenges of rural and remote areas provide highquality leadership development opportunities for all school leaders.

Empowering leaders to be agents of their professional development

When school leaders have agency to shape their professional learning, they can select opportunities that align with their specific needs, goals, and the unique challenges of their schools. This personalised approach ensures that their development is directly relevant and immediately applicable to their work (Leithwood et al., 2020). Empowering school leaders to direct their own professional growth fosters a sense of ownership and commitment, which in turn enhances motivation and engagement. Leaders are more likely to invest in learning experiences they perceive as valuable and beneficial to their roles (Day et al., 2009). Leadership development programs and resources that adapt to contextual changes enable leaders to remain current with evolving and emerging trends and best practices allowing them to implement effective strategies tailored to their specific context (Drucker, 2005). This flexibility encourages adaptability, equipping leaders to respond effectively to changing educational environments and emerging challenges. Moreover, a personalised approach helps leaders cultivate the skills and mindsets necessary for innovation and effective problem-solving. Finally, agency in leadership learning promotes a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration, as leaders share their experiences and insights with their peers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015). This collaborative learning environment enhances collective efficacy and drives school improvement, ultimately benefiting students and the wider school community (Hite & Donohoo, 2020).

Conclusion

A strategic and inclusive approach to leadership development strengthens the entire educational ecosystem, ensuring that all leaders are equipped to meet the evolving demands of their roles and drive meaningful school improvement. This investment is not just about enhancing individual capabilities; it is foundational to the success of the education system.

System leaders play a crucial role positively influencing others by refining and extending 'next practices' and building the professional capabilities of others (Harris et al., 2021). This is a key lever in school improvement as it creates positive conditions for learning to flourish (Harris & Jones, 2023). To foster the growth and success of all students across every school, leadership capability building must be systemic. System leaders provide the glue needed to develop leadership capabilities at all stages of their career through strategic leadership development., The evidence is clear: school leadership matters (Leithwood et al., 2019), Therefore, high-performing education systems prioritise leadership development and preparation as a fundamental strategy for achieving system improvement (Munby, 2020).

The role of the School Leadership Institute

The NSW Department of Education's School Leadership Institute (SLI) was established in 2018 and offers a range of world-class leadership development programs and resources for NSW teachers and school leaders. The department, through the work of the SLI continues to invest in and develop the skills of school leaders to help lift student achievement. The SLI's vision is to enhance the capabilities of all educational leaders in NSW public schools, so they have the greatest impact on teacher and student learning. The mission is to provide world-class, evidence-informed, futurefocused leadership development programs and resources to support school leaders at every stage of their career.

The Leadership Learning Framework

The SLI's Leadership Learning Framework describes the way in which school leaders continue to grow and develop, enhancing their leadership practices and deepening and amplifying their impact and influence as they engage with the 4 core leadership principles and 10 key drivers of leadership effectiveness. The purpose of the Framework is to articulate the leadership principles and drivers for effective school leadership and provide guidance to school leaders as they deepen and amplify their impact on leader, teacher and student learning. The Framework provides a language to describe leadership impact in a way that can be universally and consistently understood and acted upon across the NSW public education system.



A continuum of leadership learning programs and resources support the development of leadership capabilities of school leaders at each stage of their career. This continuum is constantly evolving to address the changing needs of the profession and the shifting priorities of the system. Examples of this include the systematic approach to coaching and mentoring, and the Rural, Regional, Remote leadership development program. Predominately, the work of the SLI articulates opportunities for leadership learning through broad interrelated programs and resources focusing on developing the skills, capabilities and mindsets to enhance leadership impact. This will enable leaders to expand their sphere of leadership influence on the learning of teachers and students within and across NSW public schools.

The Leadership Learning Resource

The Leadership Learning Resource is based on the Leadership Learning Framework and describes the way in which school leaders continue to grow and develop, enhancing their leadership practices and deepening and amplifying their impact and influence as they engage with the 4 core leadership principles and 10 key drivers of leadership effectiveness. The purpose of the Resource is to enhance the ongoing leadership learning of school leaders through an open-access, on-demand catalogue of resources that enable leaders to deepen and amplify their impact on leader, teacher and student learning.

The Resource enables reflection, analysis and feedback of current practice to support leaders to identify the most appropriate key drivers on which to focus their leadership learning and inform their professional learning goals. This interactive and on-demand resource includes research-informed explanations, videos, frameworks, strategies, reflective questions and links to other leadership resources. It supports self-reflection, professional learning and professional conversations between leaders, their line managers and other colleagues. It brings together current national and international research and evidence informed practices to support school leaders to deepen their leadership impact and influence and support the professional growth of leaders so that they can make the greatest difference for students.



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