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# Responding to the Current Capricious State of Australian Educational Leadership: We Should Have Seen It Coming!

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**Abstract:** The capricious state of Australian educational leadership is evidenced in the publication, "*The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey 2022 Data*", which highlights unsustainable adverse health outcomes for an increasing number of school leaders. According to this report, the accumulation of stress caused by the sheer quantity of work, the lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, a lack of sufficient teachers, and having to care for an increasing number of staff and students with mental health issues were the main causes of professional disillusionment and burnout among Australian school leaders. Moreover, the level of destabilisation and chaos that this situation could cause, should it continue to rise, is compounded by current research highlighting an ever-decreasing number of applicants for school leadership positions. To assign blame for this serious predicament on the excessive school leadership demands during COVID-19 is to ignore the abundant pre-existing evidence already pointing to this eventuality. However, the way in which Australian school leaders were able to constructively lead during the intensely demanding COVID-19 period does provide additional compelling support for the adoption of a far more relational foundation for leadership theory and practice. Hence, in response to this understanding, this article first presents during-COVID-19 and pre-COVID-19 Australian school leadership research literature to not only describe the evolving concerning issues but also to present the demand for a more relational approach to leadership. Then, the article proceeds to justify and illustrate a new relational approach to the practice of school leadership informed by our theory of organizational ecology. It is proposed that this new way of leading relationally will enable Australian school leaders to ultimately overcome the myriad of complex and stressful crises that now confront them.

**Keywords:** school leadership; wellbeing; stress; burnout; relational leadership

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## 1. Introduction

Although the focus of this special issue is educational leadership in turbulent times, this article considers turbulence to be a deficient descriptor for the Australian context. The seriously disruptive effect of turbulence is a very common personal experience for those who travel in aeroplanes. Such turbulence can quickly turn a calm and peaceful flight into a far more chaotic and, at times, frightening encounter. Moreover, it is understood that this turbulence is caused by fluctuating air pressure extremes in the environment around the aeroplane, over which the pilots have no control other than to skilfully use all available flight controls to ride out the problem. Thankfully, most often these encounters are temporary, and the flight ultimately returns to its pre-turbulence calm and peaceful state for the remainder of the trip. Applying this understanding of turbulence gained from such a common experience to the role of contemporary educational leadership implies that any perceived current demands or challenges are not only temporary due to the influence of exceptional but transitory environmental conditions (i.e., COVID-19) but also will disappear once the environmental (i.e., pandemic) stresses have been mitigated.

This article argues that such an understanding, whether held explicitly or implicitly, will exacerbate the precarious problems inherent within Australian educational leadership because these existed prior to the advent of COVID-19. Although there is an expanding body of research literature describing and analysing the impact of COVID-19 on Australian educational leaders because they had to suddenly attend to unprecedented serious issues, this article will describe how the genesis of these debilitating issues pre-existed the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 was simply a catalyst, the tipping point, and not the primary creator of these critical role- and context-changing issues. It is within this broader concern for the future wellbeing of Australian educational leaders that this article views their current workplace as being in a capricious, rather than a turbulent, state.

In support of this claim, this article first presents during-COVID-19 and pre-COVID-19 Australian educational leadership research literature to not only describe the evolution of these concerning issues but also to present the demand for a more relational approach to leadership. Then, the article proceeds to justify and illustrate a new relational approach to the practice of educational leadership informed by our theory of organisational ecology [1]. It is proposed that this new way of leading relationally will enable Australian educational leaders to ultimately overcome the myriad of complex and stressful crises that now confront them.

## 2. Australian Educational Leadership during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A common view in the Australian research literature is that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a crisis for Australian educational leaders. In support of this view, Striepe and Cunningham [2] describe this crisis as, "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 134). When elaborating upon the manifestations of this crisis, these authors draw attention to the essential serious responsibilities that educational leaders had to adopt in addition to their existing educational and administrative responsibilities. Such essential serious responsibilities included implementing advice on social/physical distancing and hygiene practices to limit the spread of the virus, managing issues associated with concerned staff members resigning, taking leave, or working from home, and overseeing the rapid implementation of online leading, teaching, and learning processes. Importantly, a key educational leadership recommendation posited by these authors as an outcome of this research is that "crises demand a certain type of pastoral care; one that includes providing empathy, love, support, and prioritises the physical health and mental wellbeing of children, staff, and the wider school community during and after the crisis" (p. 138). Based on their COVID-19-related research, these authors posit the need for educational leaders to adopt a far more relationally founded way of leading when confronted by an all-consuming and prolonged crisis.

This understanding that periods of prolonged crisis necessitate educational leaders adopting a different approach is mirrored in Striepe and colleagues' research [3]. More specifically, these authors argue that such a new leadership approach is characterised by the qualities of responsiveness, instinctiveness, and virtuousness, as the leader is required to react, manage, and recover from the crisis and the needs of the school community caused by the crisis. Furthermore, this approach is said to be more effective in providing care, fostering collaboration, developing effective communication channels, and utilising the expertise of other staff to not only manage existing processes and resources but also for developing new ways of working, building resilience, and finding ways to reduce the demands caused by educational bureaucracies. In summarising their research, the authors propose that "in times of crisis, leaders' work focuses on helping people to cope, utilising the partnerships and connections with the school and wider community, providing frequent communications, and understanding people and their individual needs" (p. 120) [3].

More specifically, Gurr's [4,5] extensive national and international exploration of the impact of, and response to, the COVID-19 pandemic on education and educational leadership can be summarised as follows:

(1) A greater focus on moral purpose and values-based leadership, coupled with a greater emphasis on trust.
(2) A more collective, collaborative, and dispersed work situation requiring more fluid and responsive leadership.
(3) Greater involvement of more people in meeting leadership responsibilities.
(4) More planned leadership development, as well as rapid professional learning support to respond to new needs and demands.
(5) A new way to describe the leadership so that its practice embraces the capacity for the leader to be adaptive, contextually responsive, community-based, and courageous.

Arguably, though, a more focussed research approach is the Australian Principals' Occupational Health and Wellbeing Survey, conducted by the Australian Catholic University's Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE), which includes data from Australian principals, assistant principals, and deputy principals from every school type, sector, state, and territory. Of note is that this is a longitudinal study of school leader health and wellbeing that commenced in 2011 and attracts approximately 2500 school leader respondents each year.

The survey captures three types of information drawn from existing validated research instruments that, together, focus on comprehensive school demographic items, personal demographic and historical information, and quality of life and psychosocial indicators/variables. More specifically, the survey drew items from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) [6], Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) [7], and My School (an online profile of each school established by the Australian federal government via its Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority) to identify and report occupational health and wellbeing data that reflect the diversity of Australian school contexts.

These components comprise an instrument in which participants are asked to rate how much stress they perceive is caused by each of 19 items on a 1–10 scale. Averages for each source are reported. The report uses 7.00 as a threshold because prior to 2020, the year that COVID-19 greatly impacted communities, only 2–4 sources of stress averaged 7.00 and above. Other instruments used were the Australian Quality of Life Survey (AQoL8D) [8] and the Copenhagen psychosocial questionnaire (COPSOQ-II) [9]. Participant responses to the AQoL8D and COPSOQ-II measures are reported against profiles of the general population. Thus, the researchers established significant indicators of how school leaders perceive their work is experienced each year. The longitudinal methodology also enabled the researchers to analyse how these have changed. Their findings report a discernible compression of factors prior to the pandemic.

Analysis of the 2022 data [10] emphasises the unsustainable stress levels now inherent in the role of an Australian school principal. According to the report, the top two stressors remain sheer quantity of work and the lack of time to focus on teaching and learning. These have been the top two stressors since the start of the survey in 2011. Each year, they show a mean score higher than 7.35 (on a scale of 1–10), with the highest ranked stressor, sheer quantity of work, having a mean score of 8.18 in 2022, the second highest on record (p. 3). However, for the first time, teacher shortage was reported as the third highest source of stress (mean score = 7.33, up from 5.35 in 2021). This has been steadily rising during COVID-19; however, the rate and scale of change are claimed to be significant. In 2020, teacher shortage was ranked 17th out of 19 stress items, and it rose in 2021 to 12th, but now it is the 3rd highest source of stress. Having responsibility for managing the mental health issues of students (mean score = 7.27) was the fourth highest source of school principal stress, while attending to the mental health issues of staff (mean score = 7.20) was the fifth highest stressor. Here, both have now reached their highest level since the establishment of the survey.

In summary, the authors of this report argue that the 2022 data "now show the highest levels of burnout, sleeping troubles, stress, depressive symptoms, somatic stress, and cognitive stress since the start of the survey" (p. 5). Furthermore, they propose that there

has been a worrying increase in the numbers of school leaders who have provided voluntary data indicating that they were considering leaving the profession early. "This year shows the number of comments indicating a willingness to leave the profession early has tripled. In 2021, there were 19 comments about intention to leave early, rising to 65 comments in 2022. Because this data is volunteered, it suggests the population considering such action may be far higher than those who have been willing to express it" (p. 5).

While these 2022 data are very concerning regarding the seriousness in and causes of unacceptable levels of workplace stress for Australian school principals during the COVID-19 period, the longitudinal data present a far bleaker picture. These data, as will be presented in the next section, not only show that these were key stressors well before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also, and far more alarmingly, they show that the level of stress caused by each of these is increasing rapidly.

## 3. Australian Educational Leadership before the COVID-19 Pandemic

As illustrated in Figure 1, a comparison of the most significant 2022 stressors from a longitudinal perspective provides an extremely important insight. The perceived stress from the factors of sheer quantity of work and a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning has been consistent across 2011–2023:

- Sheer quantity of work: average = 7.9; range = 7.6–8.2.
- Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning: average = 7.7; range = 7.4–8.0.

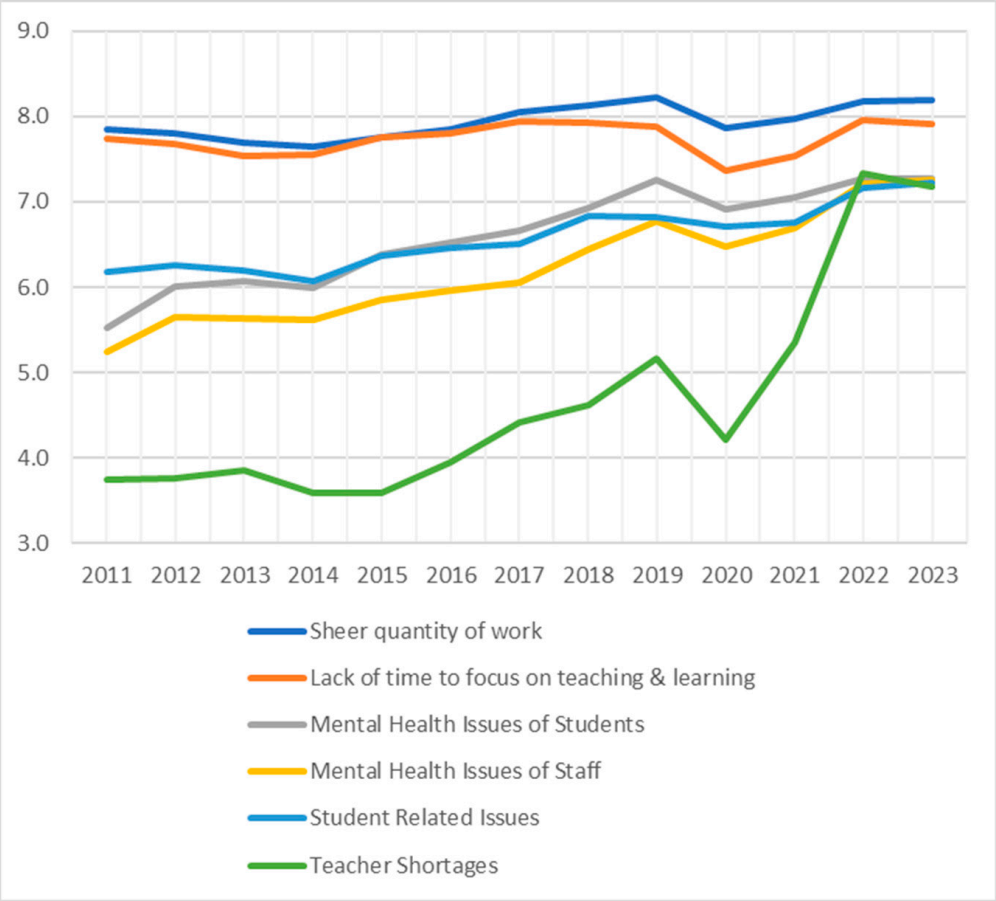


**Figure 1.** Top sources of school leader stress across 2011 to 2023 (Dicke et al., 2024) [11].

Of critical note, though, is that the stress from these two sources is now complemented with a significant rise in four other top stressors. Moreover, the compression of these six components is evident in the range of the top six stressors in 2023 being only 1.0 (7.2–8.2). In contrast, the range of the top six stressors in 2011 was 1.8 (7.9–6.1), and in 2019 it was

1.4 (8.2–6.8). The level of heightened stress in the role of Australian educational leaders is not only increasing, it is also becoming more multifaceted. Furthermore, these stressors are not new, they are only getting worse.

Of additional importance is the realisation that the mental health issues of students and the mental health issues of staff as sources of perceived stress have risen dramatically in the past decade, with a discernible shift occurring from 2014. In 2014, these two sources of perceived stress were ranked, respectively, 9th (average (avg.) = 6.0) and 10th (avg. = 5.6), but they are now ranked 3rd (avg. = 7.3) and 4th (avg. = 7.3). Similarly, in 2014, the worry formed from having to cope with teacher shortages was ranked 18th (avg. = 3.6), but now it is ranked 6th (avg. = 7.2).

What these data highlight is the evolving growth of cognitive, emotional, and relational demands placed on today's Australian school leaders. Succeeding as a contemporary Australian school leader is more about having the knowledge and capability to be able to work most effectively and confidently through a mutually healthy relationship with others. One component impacting the possible development of a relational approach to leadership is evident in the research data gathered via the Copenhagen psychosocial questionnaire (COPSOQ-II). This questionnaire is a five-point intensity scale (0, 20, 40, 60 80, and 100), with responses then averaged and reported on a 0–100 scale. While there is a steady increase in each of the four core demands placed on school leaders, it is the demand for hiding emotions that stands out for particular attention when considering a relational leadership approach (Figure 2). Not only do principals report this to be very high in an absolute sense, but it is particularly stark in comparison to the wider general population's long-term average of 50.6 [11].

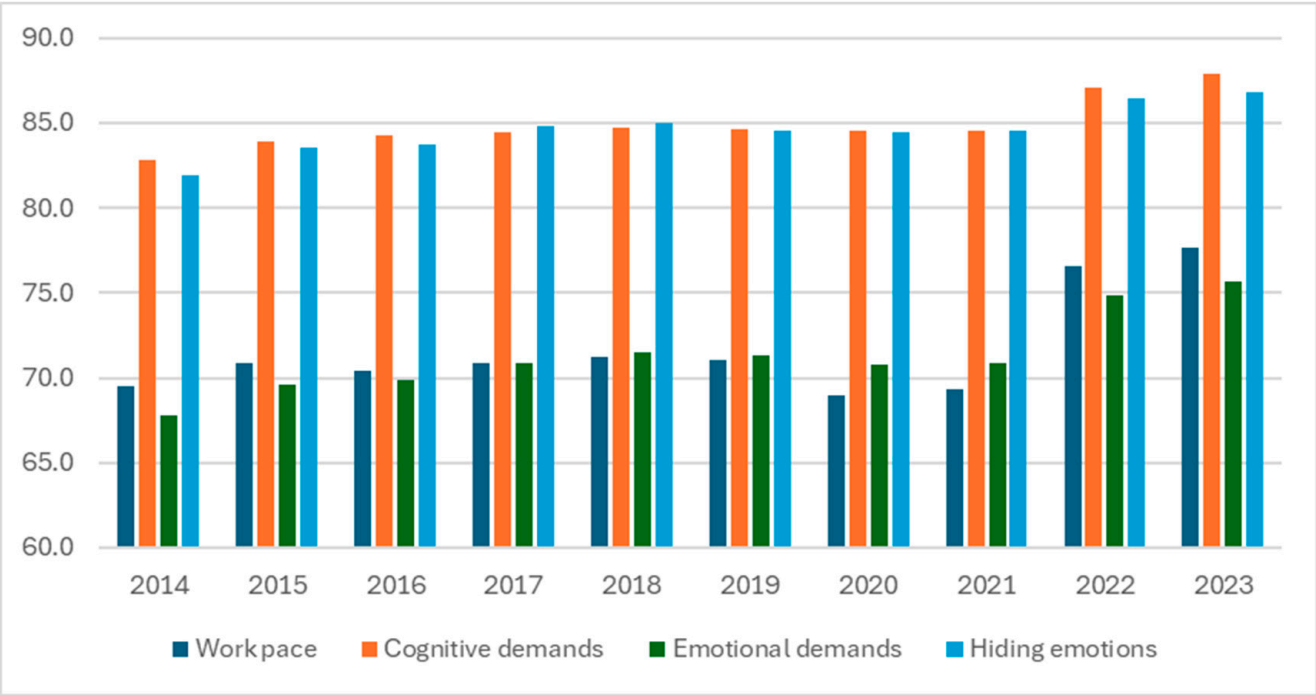


**Figure 2.** School leader work demands (COPSOQ-II) across 2014 to 2023 (Dicke et al., 2024) [11].

These data speak to increasing socioemotional challenges for leaders, both personally and relationally, a view consistent across wider literature on principals' emotional labour [12], interpersonal conflict [13], and the lack of clarity on issues of school leader autonomy and accountability [14,15]. Moreover, these data again illustrate that the need for Australian school leaders to be better prepared and supported towards coping with this unavoidable relational responsibility is not simply a COVID-19-related responsibility but, rather, one that has been present throughout the past decade or more.

Hence, Figure 3 seeks to identify some essential components of a better school leadership preparation and support program by presenting 2011 to 2023 data associated with central attitudinal changes of the participants towards their workplace environment. Here, it is noted that the school leaders have maintained a consistently high impression regarding the meaning of their work, despite changing circumstances and demands throughout the entire research period. Indeed, these data are much higher compared to the general population, based on the results of the COPSOQ-II. The school leaders readily recognise the importance of their work towards ensuring the best learning environment for the students, an attitude widely supported in research literature that acknowledges the role of school leaders being only second behind that of the teachers in achieving this vital outcome [16]. This is important to note because it shows that any subsequent attitudinal changes have not been caused by a diminished sense of meaning and purpose of their work.

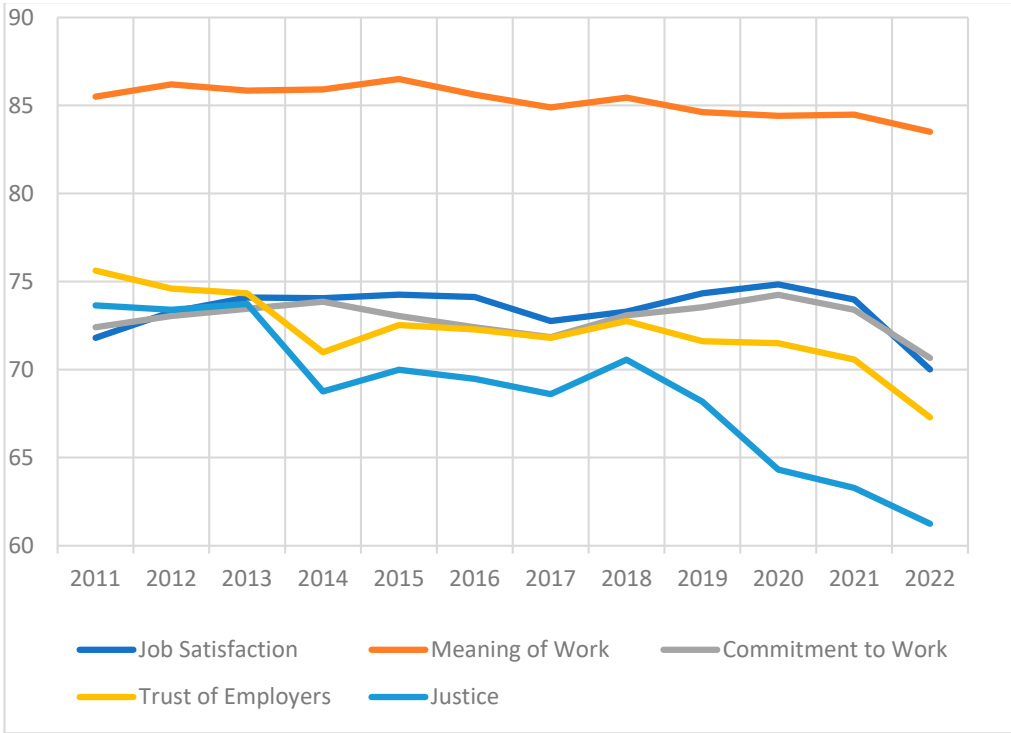


**Figure 3.** Changing workplace attitudes of Australian school leaders from 2011 to 2022.

However, despite this positivity, these data illustrate not only a disparity between the school leaders' sense of meaning with that of their job satisfaction and their commitment to their work but also that this disparity has been increasing alarmingly since COVID-19. Seemingly, throughout the past decade, the culture in many Australian schools drains rather than supports or enriches the school leader's sense of satisfaction towards being able to effectively achieve their desired purpose, such that their commitment and engagement are showing signs of suffering.

However, an interesting variation to this trend can be seen in Figure 3, where the school leaders' job satisfaction and work commitment data both reached their highest points in 2020. Although the report does not delve into reasons for this perceived anomaly, it is argued that a possible cause might be the relative freedom and independence school leaders gained in how their school community addressed the COVID-19 demands from both a health an educational perspective. During this time, the school leaders may well have felt a far more tangible sense of being in control of the workplace and having the freedom to work far more closely with their staff, as externally imposed administrative responsibilities were moderated. Probably, COVID-19 provided an environment in which they had the opportunity to concentrate on working more closely with their teachers as

they strove to adapt to an online rather than an in-class learning environment. During COVID-19, the school leaders had the freedom to concentrate much more on supporting their staff and students and much less on meeting external imposed administrative and managerial requirements.

Arguably, of far more concern are the Figure 3 data associated with the two remaining elements, trust of employers and justice, which have been trending down significantly throughout the past decade but even more so during the last four years. As described in the report, trust of employers assessed "whether the [school leaders] can trust the management. . .and. . .can be observed in the communication between the management and the employees" (p. 45) [10]. The concept of justice assessed the school leaders' perceived fairness of their employer regarding the distribution of tasks and recognition, information sharing processes, the handling of conflicts, and the handling of suggestions from the employees. In response to the serious deterioration of these survey elements, See et al. [10] urge that "more needs to be done to create and sustain trusting cultures. Providing ongoing opportunities for professional dialogue, both consultative and evaluative, on workload, health, and wellbeing in an environment of collegial support is essential" (p. 13). This is a view that can be more simply stated by urging both Australian governmental educational authorities and educational employing authorities to adopt a far more relational form of leadership, both between themselves but also, and most importantly, with school leaders. Redressing the unsustainable deterioration in the health, wellbeing, and retention of Australian school leaders requires the adoption of a holistic relationship-based approach to leadership throughout the educational spectrum, wherein mutually beneficial professional relationships become the foundation for leadership practice across all three essential levels of educational leadership—government, employing authority, and school leadership. What this might mean in practical terms is described in the following section.

## 4. A Holistic Relationship-Based Approach to Educational Leadership

Considering that both the pre- and post-COVID-19 educational research literature has called for a more relationally based approach to Australian school leadership, this section will begin by describing what this implies and how it can be achieved. Then, a description of what a relational approach to leadership at the employing authority level looks like will be presented, in keeping with the aim of describing a seamless relational approach to leadership between the school leader and their employing authority. Finally, this section will conclude by presenting a description of what a relational approach would look like at the national and/or state government educational ministry level.

Although the application of a relational-based approach to school leadership is yet to be widely practiced in Australia, there is a growing body of literature promoting and describing its nature and practice [1,17–21]. However, the structural limitations of this article necessitate a somewhat abridged description drawn from this literature.

Essentially, the purpose of a relational approach to leadership practice "is to move others, the organisation, and the leader to higher levels of functioning by means of relationships" (p. 115) [22]. Rather than trying to be in total control, school leaders who are attuned to the pivotal relational dimension underpinning their leadership cultivate conditions where others can produce innovations that lead to somewhat unpredictable yet largely productive outcomes [17]. Their influence derives from their ability to allow rather than to direct and is grounded in people in the school remaining engaged and connected. Through recognising the importance of interactions as the ideal source of staff engagement, high performance, and innovation, these leaders build 'correlation': the emergence of a common or shared school vision and a positive school culture, where all have a sense of purpose and opportunity.

In addition, these leaders enable the emergence of new ideas and behaviours that sustain and grow the school community by directing attention to what is important to note from contrasting the internal and external educational environments. From this perspective, building collegiality, cooperation, and teamwork should not be seen as only

part of their leadership endeavours but, rather, be understood as its very essence. This way of leading is contextual and not generic because it emerges out of a sincere interpersonal engagement of the leader with those they are leading. In short, because this way of leading is first and foremost relational, it implies that it is specifically suited to each leader's unique context. Essentially, relational leadership shifts the power of the school leader from a position of authority to be obeyed to that of the positive energy that radiates out of trusting relationships.

Furthermore, its essence is a relationship that seeks to create a culture based upon the shared values of trust, openness, transparency, honesty, integrity, collegiality, and ethicalness [23]. This is a culture in which all feel a sense of safety and security because they each feel that they can rely on each other in order to achieve their best performance. Through facilitating and supporting mutually beneficial relationships, the leader enables the cultural conditions to be created whereby those they are leading willingly and readily perform at their best. This, in turn, allows the leader to actually become the leader, and to continue to enact true leadership, which ensures the growth and sustainability of the staff, students, and the entire school community.

As described in far more detail elsewhere [1,18], how one can become a relationally based leader involves developing and enacting the following qualities of leadership. The first quality is that the leader must have the relevant knowledge, skills, and experiences required to fulfil the role with wisdom and confidence. The next quality comes to the fore when first appointed to the leadership position, where the leader must show that they are willing to become an integral member of the school staff and community. This is about the leader building sustainable trust among those they are leading. Sustainable trust is built upon predictability, consistency, and authenticity. For a leader, this means interacting with the staff, building trusting relationships, talking with them, and understanding what is happening for them in their varied roles. This allows the leader to understand workloads and pressures, achievements and effort, the learning needs of the staff, where there are gaps in knowledge and capability and how these can be overcome, and how to affirm and promote the school. In essence, these interactions with staff acknowledge that there is always greater wisdom in the room than that of the leader—particularly if the room is full of experienced and enthusiastic teachers. It also provides the platform for the leader to create professional networks and connections so that new ideas can flow and be shared to generate continual professional growth and development.

Then, upon this deepening familiarity, the third quality calls upon the leader to take every opportunity to praise, affirm, champion, and promote individual staff and teams. Words of praise and affirmation from the leader for behaviour that mirrors desired beliefs, values, and aspirations are a powerful influence not only on the thoughts and actions of staff members but also for reinforcing their own trustworthiness.

After this, the relationally based school leader is far more able to propose and nurture individual, team, department, and school growth and transformation. This commitment to a growing and transforming responsibility is about fostering dialogue with individuals, committees, departments, and staff that leads to insights about current beliefs, values, and practices in order to help the person, group, or school to devise ways to enhance and improve learning and teaching outcomes. In essence, this involves the capacity of the leader to create a school culture in which all have a sense of wellness and belonging, and thus they are committed to actively and continuously improving or growing in some way towards a future professional ideal.

The final foundational leadership quality within a relational-based approach to school leadership is the need for the leader to develop a secure yet transcendent school culture. Once the staff are working better together towards achieving the school's desired vision through incremental improvement, the leader is then in a position to draw the staff's attention to the changing nature and demands of the external educational and socio-communal environment. This involves all personnel in the school being supported in looking to the future to determine what is necessary to be initiated in the present. Without

such a leadership eye on the future, schools will constantly be reactive to environmental demands, such as those played out during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While it is possible to describe these qualities that constitute a relationally based approach to school leadership, it is essential to simultaneously acknowledge that these cannot be adequately attained in a workplace environment that mitigates or suppresses their adoption. The previously described *Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey 2022 Data* provide evidence that more and more school leaders are feeling caught in between, or sandwiched between, governmental and employing authorities to whom they are accountable and the school's staff, students, and parents for whom they have professional, functional, and often moral responsibility. How they are being led by those in authority is becoming far less commensurate with how they need to lead their school community, and this is a source of increasing tension, stress, and burnout. Hence, it is imperative that an alternative, more relationally based leadership approach is adopted at the employing authority level, as well. A review of relevant corporate literature provides a suitable approach.

Here, two important and essential characteristics were identified and differentiated —corporate identity and corporate brand [24–26]. Within the context of this article, these will be referred to as educational identity and educational brand. Educational identity refers to what a school stands for and the mix of elements that give it its educational distinctiveness. This distinctiveness is authenticated via six dimensions: communication, visual identity, managerial structure, employee behaviour, mission and values, and charisma ideals. Of significance is the understanding that educational identity is considered a strategic concept and, therefore, is a school leadership and not a consumer construct. It is how the school chooses to present its distinctiveness to the school and wider community, especially current and future parents. Thus, educational identity is a crucial characteristic of each school, as this is the arena in which its desired distinctiveness becomes tangible to the intended audience. This implies that its development and sustainability is a key responsibility for the school leader through close attention to formal communication, informal communication, physical architecture and furnishings, signs and symbols, staff behaviour, leadership practices, mission and values, ceremonies and celebrations, pedagogical and pastoral practices, curriculum, and marketing strategies. A key insight is that the potential influential outcome generated by the school's educational identity is not solely dependent on any pre-existing familiarity of the school since it can influence both school and non-school persons alike.

In contrast, the educational brand is manifested through the actions of the educational employing authority. Specifically, it acts as the cornerstone, the fundamental force, that informs and guides the particular education system, especially in relation to the enactment of its core philosophy and culture. More specifically, attention to the educational brand explicitly dovetails school values with leadership and management practices. It makes explicit what is implicit in the administrative and managerial functioning of the educational system. A healthy educational brand provides an overarching alignment throughout the system of form, function, communication, identification, and emotion. While the educational identity's aim is to positively influence non-employees, the educational brand's aim is to have a positive influence upon employees. A healthy educational brand ensures that those who work in the system are able to routinely discern, evaluate, and connect with its educational policies and practices in a positive way. This means that, unlike educational identity, those whom the educational brand is aiming to positively influence will have knowledge of fundamental system beliefs and values, and it is upon these impressions that they will judge the appropriateness of the employing authority's activities. These impressions are largely formed through the perceived impact produced by how the system is structured and how its administrative personnel seek to relate to and support the school-based employees. It is in this sense that the relative health of the educational brand is determined by those affected by it rather than those tasked with the responsibility of creating it.

Importantly, the research literature [27] posits that, although identity and brand are unequivocally linked, a school's poor identity will have minimal impact on the education system's brand, but improving the system's brand will have an immediate positive impact on the school's identity across the system. What is being proposed here is that the alarming increase in school leader tension, stress, and burnout must be acknowledged as an educational brand issue and not simply an individual school leader health and practice concern. Australian educational employing authorities need to take responsibility for ensuring that the school leaders are working in the most supportive and helpful educational environment. In order for this to happen, each and every employing authority needs to attend to its educational brand to ensure that its structure, policies, processes, and interactions fully support the school leaders. Fundamentally, attention to their educational brand requires the employing authority personnel to treat all school employees the same way that they expect these school personnel to treat the students. Focussing on their brand, rather than misguided managerial and administrative efficiencies and accountabilities, means that the system has adopted a relational-based approach to how it oversees and supports its school leaders and school staff.

However, it is readily acknowledged that the educational employing authorities are not standalone entities. They are accountable to their dominant funding sources, the federal and state governments, via the policies and processes of the respective educational ministries. Herein lies another potential level of leadership misalignment once employing authorities adopt relationally based leadership practices that enhance their educational brand. To avoid stress and tension that such a misalignment could cause, it is essential to posit an achievable solution. Again, drawing upon contemporary corporate research literature, it is argued that a possible leadership practice misalignment between the educational employing authorities and educational ministries can occur around the concept of the 'business model'.

Informed by the corporate literature [28–30], there are two dominant types of business models—the product-based business model and the service-based business model. Here, it is argued that the core of the capricious issues now engulfing Australian education is Australian educational ministries' employment of a product-based business model. Hence, redressing this unsustainable situation necessitates these ministries adopting a service-based business model. It should be noted that the corporate world's research literature describes how this service-based business model is slowly but surely becoming the preferred option across all corporate sectors.

When applied to educational ministries, a 'product-based' business model implies that the fundamental aim of the government's educational policies and processes is to produce its product (education) for as low a cost as possible while maintaining a reasonable level of quality. Thus, those working in the ministry believe the educational system is more concerned about what parents think, since they are the purchasers of the product, and far less about the working conditions, since the employing authorities and school employees are only considered to be the service providers. Essentially, the educational system is more concerned about the product than it is about the people who oversee and produce the product. More specifically, in Australia, this educational product is largely defined by where the nation is ranked on the various PISA lists and, furthermore, the annual trends within each respective list.

In contrast, a service-based business model shifts the fundamental aim of the government's educational policies and processes from its product to the support of those who produce its product—the employing authorities and the school employees. The application of this model would see the educational ministries explicitly and deliberately focussing their primary concern on the quality of support in the work of all those tasked with enacting the policies and processes. Moreover, the determination of what constitutes quality in this sense is made by those implementing the policies and processes and not by the ministry personnel. This would require the ministry to concentrate on offering, and seamlessly integrating, all of its policies, practices, and resources towards enhancing and enriching the employing authority and school employee experiences and activities. Simply, this entails

the educational ministry shifting from predominantly concentrating on what it deems to be the best way to meet current educational requirements to that of guiding, supporting, and resourcing these requirements in a way that aligns with how the school believes best suits its student and community needs. In practical terms, this is about the educational ministry ensuring that each employing authority is fully aware of what is required of Australian schools but then allowing each employing authority to work in mutual partnership with each of its schools in determining how the particular school will strive to meet this requirement. It then provides support and assistance to the employing authority as it strives to support the school as best it can.

Australian education in a service-based context returns schooling to its fundamental purpose—enabling each and every student to become a fully contributing citizen—which stands in marked contrast to its product-based aim of enabling the exceptional students to enhance Australia's economic outlook. Moreover, the contradiction of this current product-based business model is that governments regularly look to schools to help redress social issues within an already overflowing curriculum. When it suits, governments turn to schools to provide a desired service. In reality, this unacknowledged duality whereby educational ministries apply both a product-based and a service-based approach is an undoubted cause of the perceived excessive workload among school leaders.

Importantly, a commitment to a service-based approach does not eliminate the need for accountability. How taxes are spent on education needs to be known and validated. What a service-based approach proposes is that the accountability criteria must become specific to the school and not determined by national criteria that do not take into consideration the significant differences between students, schools, and school communities. Adopting this strategy would do away with the divisive and undermining impact of national standards and 'league tables' and allow each school the freedom and confidence to establish its own defensible accountability criteria around such items as principal retention, staff retention, longitudinal analysis of NAPLAN data, truancy levels, parental communication and support, attention to creative problem solving, attention to student self-regulation and civil behaviour, attention to equity, attention to student wellbeing, and so on. This is rigorous accountability founded on the growth and development of the students rather than data points in a national survey. It is a human approach to accountability rather than a mathematical and technical approach. Furthermore, it is an approach used in countries such as Finland [31], which regularly outperforms Australia in the PISA tables. Moreover, it reflects the call to all businesses in the 2024 Deloitte publication, *Global Human Capital Trends* (p. 4), where it is argued that, "Historically, organizations have sought to unlock the power of their workforce by implementing structures, processes, technologies, and systems meant to make humans better at work. But by most measures, current efforts are falling short" [32]. Hence, this report argues for a new approach to workplace accountability, "prioritizing human sustainability, the degree to which the organization creates value for people as human beings, leaving them with greater health and wellbeing, stronger skills, and greater employability" (p. 3). Simply, educational ministries adopting a service-based business model is not a radical idea but rather an example of best practice in Australia's current capricious educational environment.

## 5. Conclusions

It is crucially important to acknowledge that there are serious leadership, wellbeing, and burnout issues throughout the Australian educational sector. Moreover, these serious issues were not caused by the COVID-19 pandemic since they pre-date its impact. COVID-19 simply magnified these issues rather than created them. Thus, it cannot be assumed that these issues will disappear during the ensuing post-COVID-19 period. Rather, they will persist and worsen. However, it is futile to believe that past ways of leading will overcome these issues—we cannot lead the same way and expect different results. In unison with a burgeoning body of educational research literature, this article has called for the adoption of a far more relationally based approach to school leadership practice. However, such a

new approach will be ineffective towards redressing these issues unless it is supported and adopted at both the employing authority and the educational ministry levels. A holistic approach to relationally based educational leadership is desperately needed if Australian education is to survive and prosper.

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