

## Article

# Exploring Educator Leadership Practices in Gifted Education to Facilitate Online Learning Experiences for (Re)Engaging Gifted Students

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**Abstract:** This article draws on case study findings of educator leadership in an online gifted education school, which emerged from a larger study exploring online engagement practices used by specialist gifted education teachers to (re)engage gifted learners. The gifted education teachers and their team leader were interviewed about leadership practices for supporting online engagement of gifted primary and high school students. Semi-structured interview data were transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed. Findings related to teachers voicing the importance of a passionate and committed team leader who understood giftedness and who acted as a facilitator in both the continuous development of teaching team skills and facilitation of online engagement practices for gifted students. Findings indicated five key themes related to transformational leadership practices: (1) understanding requirements of online practices for teaching gifted students; (2) supporting digital and online innovation and creativity for engaging gifted students; (3) leveraging the unique skills of the specialist teaching team for teaching gifted students in the online space; (4) actively facilitating and encouraging (re)engagement of gifted students through online participation; (5) follow-through to meet the needs and concerns of the specialist teaching team, gifted students, and their parents and/or carers. These leadership practices are of importance for actively supporting gifted education teachers and their students in online learning environments in order to achieve positive student engagement and learning outcomes commensurate with student potential.

**Keywords:** educator leadership in gifted education; gifted and talented education; gifted student engagement; online learning environment; leadership in gifted education



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## 1. Introduction

Significant research currently exists on leadership development for gifted students; similarly, there is a plethora of research on the characteristics of effective teachers of gifted students (e.g., teachers as passionate subject experts, strong achievement orientation, intuitive thinkers). However, there is little empirical research that specifically explores the leadership practices and characteristics that enable and empower teachers to support the learning and engagement of gifted students. This article draws on findings of transformational educator leadership in online gifted education, which emerged from a larger study exploring online engagement practices used by gifted education teachers to (re)engage gifted learners.

There are two common leadership styles—distributional and transformational—that are useful in understanding what ‘quality’ education leadership may look like. Distributed leadership purports that there is not just one traditional leader but multiple leaders who work collaboratively in reciprocal ways to achieve positive outcomes and change [1–3]. In other words, in educational contexts, every teacher is a leader. Studies have demonstrated that a distributed leadership approach enhances teacher morale and confidence where

sharing and collegiality occur [4,5]. However, opportunities for distributed leadership may be limited by systemic issues, such as entrenched rigid and formal hierarchies [6] (e.g., transactional leadership). Building on this view of distributional leadership, transformational leadership approaches rely on the team leader to exhibit characteristics such as trustworthiness, creativity, good communication and organisation skills [7,8], formal shared team goals [9], and support for innovative education practices [10]. It is essential that transformational leaders actively motivate, engage, and inspire their fellow teachers to achieve shared goals. It is important to note that distributed and transformational leadership are not separate concepts, nor are they opposed or exclusive, meaning that teachers and educators are also leaders in their fields, encompassing the qualities of both distributed and transformational leadership. Transformational educational leadership is a model that gifted education leaders can apply to lead by example in online learning environments, to foster student achievement and a model that values the creation of strong community relationships [9,11]. Transformational leadership includes the following key elements:

- Fostering divergent skills and abilities of self and team;
- Encouraging active participation by all in decision-making;
- Placing a strong emphasis on authenticity, communication, and morals;
- Encouraging student voice and choice through actively pursuing opportunities for student autonomy.

It is well recognised in the literature that transformational education leaders work towards improving the overall performance of their school, as well as student engagement and learning outcomes [9]. In turn, fostering the development of group goals and high performance of team members in working collaboratively towards common goals [9], along with school leadership qualities and skills, all have key roles in improving the learning experiences and outcomes of all students [12]. It is the actions of teachers who interact directly with students that play critical roles in implementing change and improving achievement of students [13]. The realisation that complementary leadership qualities of both teachers and team leaders are keys to success [14] is paramount, particularly in online learning environments where teachers often work in isolation, even though they may be part of an established network and teaching team.

A 2014 study by Kanjanaphoomin and Laksana [14] examined teacher leadership in gifted education in Thailand and found that school leadership, teacher leadership, and principles of learning were all key factors in successful leadership for gifted education teachers. From this study, teacher collaboration and collegial relationships signified solid leadership attributes for gifted education teachers. Leadership for gifted education teachers is an urgent topic of exploration, with DaVia Rubenstein [15] stating that for the field of gifted education to 'remain relevant, we need to foster deliberate leadership practices that contribute to a shared purpose' [15] (p. 131); transformational leadership may be one significant response to this call. Importantly, DaVia Rubenstein [15] emphasised that gifted education leaders can become more effective teachers by focusing on a shared purpose that underscores increased expectations and engagement for gifted students. In turn, encouraging educational leaders in gifted education to collaborate and learn with and from each other, as well as from leaders in other disciplines.

Furthermore, a qualitative study from Mexico [10], which explored the role of teachers as leaders in teaching gifted students, found that these teachers were highly innovative in their pedagogical practices and their use of technology. Importantly, the study reported that the educational institution's organisational culture actively promoted teaching leadership of gifted students through elements such as openness to new ideas, fostering of teacher initiatives, and autonomy in teaching practices. Moreover, these teacher leaders in gifted education were shown to motivate and engage their students using technology (e.g., specific software and university-level multimedia resources), empathy towards their students, and tailoring activities to specific student groups. By applying pedagogical practices specifically focusing on tailoring learning to their gifted students (e.g., through personalised

differentiation), the teacher leaders facilitated student engagement, and from the students' own perspectives, connected this to a model of 'continuous innovation ... considering emotional empathy with students ... [which] the students themselves [stated] generated greater confidence in their teachers' [10] (p. 32). Some inhibitors to educational leadership in gifted education were also identified and included teacher bias and systemic issues around sensitivities to potential loss of control and limited support for teacher initiative. Significantly, this study found a strong connection between teacher leadership and student outcomes, evinced by students graduating from the institute at a very early age and continuing to university [10].

Transformation educational leadership is used to frame the present study because it allows a deeper exploration of what can be leveraged from the perspectives of current practicing teachers working in the field of gifted education. This enables a scaffold for increasing understanding of the roles, relationships, and characteristics of quality gifted teacher leaders. This potentially will provide new ways to better resource, nurture, and support gifted education leadership that is transformational, especially in the new millennium and worldwide situations (e.g., COVID-19), where gifted students are increasingly learning in online environments.

### *Conceptualising Giftedness*

In Australia, gifted students are frequently defined according to Gagné's Differentiating Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) [16], embracing conceptualisations around differences between giftedness (as potential) and talent (evidenced by achievement). Gagné's DMGT designates the development of giftedness into talent, highlighting specific catalysis needed for talent development and defining gifted students as those whose potential is in the top 10% of age peers [16]. Gagné's model highlights one catalyst relevant to this study: 'Learning Environments', where teachers make explicit and deliberate efforts to engage gifted learners by means of differentiated curricula—in the present study, the online learning environment.

Some commonly listed characteristics of gifted students include their ability to learn rapidly, having varied interests, being easily disengaged (particularly in areas that are viewed as mundane/repetitive), perfectionistic, passionate, and curious. However, as Ronksley-Pavia and Neumann [17] suggest, disengagement (and underachievement) for gifted students can impact their actualisation of talent potential due to several factors, including limited opportunities to engage in areas of their interest, lack of voice and choice in learning, and lack of opportunities to work with like-minded peers. Gifted students need to be appropriately challenged and extended with opportunities to learn that are associated with their potential (and abilities) which facilitate behavioural, affective, social, and cognitive engagement [17,18].

## **2. The Study**

This article describes findings of the leadership practices and qualities of gifted education leaders working in an online learning environment, which delivered courses specifically designed for gifted students. These findings emerged from a larger qualitative exploratory Australian case study, which explored the pedagogical practices of an online education context serving gifted students in Kindergarten to Year 10. The guiding research question about leadership practices was 'What are key educational leadership practices for supporting gifted and talented students in online learning environments?'

### *The Context*

The educational context explored for this case study was an online gifted education 'school' (pseudonym of Lake Online School) in an Australian state jurisdiction, which supplemented classroom learning in government schools across the state for gifted students enrolled by their classroom teachers in the online school program from Kindergarten (5 to 6 years of age) to Year 10 (15 to 16 years of age).

Lake Online School (LOS) was an initiative of the state education directorate specifically aimed at providing free online courses for gifted learners in government schools. The primary purpose of LOS was to support regular classroom teachers across the state to meet the needs of gifted and talented students in their schools. The courses were delivered online by experienced educators of gifted students (Lake Online Delivery Teachers (LODTs) using a popular learning management system (LMS). The teachers were responsible for developing, designing, and delivering challenging learning experiences for their enrolled gifted students in their specialist subject areas. The teachers were supported by a team leader (LOS manager) who was responsible for the overall operations of LOS and for meeting the primary goal of supporting gifted students enrolled in government schools in the state education jurisdiction.

The online courses extended learning from the Australian Curriculum in terms of extension in one curriculum area, and/or integrated units of work across multiple curriculum areas, thus providing significant extension opportunities, as well as opportunities to cover breadth and depth in curriculum content. Specific core skills developed in the courses were literacy, numeracy, and ICT, as well as critical and creative thinking and problem-solving. The learning tasks included opportunities to work individually and with like-minded peers on projects designed to challenge thinking, extend understanding, and further develop students' skills and interests. Specific courses were dedicated to both curriculum connections and student interest and included Mathematical Methods, Creative Writing, Life Sciences, Visual Arts, Programming and Coding, Philosophy, Robotics, and enterprising and entrepreneurial projects connected with local community action and student passion projects.

The way the courses were delivered varied across schools, but predominantly, classroom teachers were to provide time during the school day (minimum of one hour per week) for their enrolled students to engage with their LOS courses. Each school that had gifted students enrolled in LOS provided a school-based support teacher who worked in person with the gifted students during school hours to support them in goal setting, choosing learning activities, and ensuring effective online participation. Individual schools were responsible for resourcing the necessary technology, computer equipment, and internet access required for students to engage in the online learning environment. Gifted students were also able to access their courses outside school if they had internet access and the necessary equipment (e.g., laptop) to be able to engage in the course.

Each course was taught by a specific LODT and had an individual dedicated site in the LMS where students engaged with their course content and related learning activities. LODTs used the tools available via the online LMS (e.g., discussion forums, virtual classrooms) and email to communicate with students enrolled in their courses, to facilitate student learning, provide feedback on their learning, and give guidance when needed. Individual student engagement was monitored by each LODT, the LOS Manager, as well as classroom teachers, school-based support person, and, in some cases, parents/carers.

### **3. Materials and Methods**

#### *3.1. Participants*

Participants in this study (Table 1) consisted of one gifted education team leader (LOS manager) and three specialist teachers (LODTs) ( $N = 4$ ) working via the School LMS, which complemented state school classroom learning experiences for gifted students across the government school network. Participants were all female, between 40 and 49 years of age. All participants were qualified and registered teachers, with specialist qualifications in gifted education (see Table 1). The team leader was responsible for managing 14 LODTs across 26 different course offerings available through LOS.

**Table 1.** Overview of participants.

Pseudonym (Gender)	Role	Gifted Education Qualifications and Experience
Heather (Female)	Team leader (LOS * Manager)—responsible for 14 LODTs **	Certificate in Gifted Education, ongoing gifted education PD ^; Online educator; 10 years teaching gifted students.
Aria (Female)	LODT **	Certificate in Gifted Education, ongoing gifted education PD ^; Online educator; 11 years teaching gifted students.
Nubia (Female)	LODT **	Certificate in Gifted Education, ongoing gifted education PD ^; Extensive online teaching experience; science and mathematics specialist teacher; 6 years teaching gifted students.
Evelyn (Female)	LODT **	Master’s Degree in Gifted Education, Certificate in Gifted Education, ongoing gifted education PD ^; Extensive online teaching experience; over 20 years teaching gifted students.

\* Lake Online School. \*\* Lake Online Delivery Teacher. ^ Professional Development.

### 3.2. Methodology and Data Collection

Permission was granted from the University Ethics committee (GU ref No: 2020/949), the LOS education jurisdiction, and the LOS team leader for the conduct of this study. Each teacher provided informed consent to participate in the study and completed some demographic questions (e.g., age and highest education qualification).

LODTs and the team leader each participated in an individual, one-hour, online semi-structured interview at a time convenient to them. In contrast to more rigid structured interview methods, semi-structured interviews have the benefit of being flexible, allowing extension of discussion and providing greater opportunity for participants to express their perceptions, opinions, and experiences [19,20].

To guide the interviews in the current study, a set of focus questions was posed (Table 2). Each semi-structured interview was conducted online by a trained researcher and the audio was recorded using best practice in interviewing approaches [21]. Where appropriate, each interviewer probed further to follow up any responses allowing opportunities for extension of participant ideas and clarification of responses where needed. All audio data were transcribed for coding and thematic analysis. Through the process of collating, drafting potential themes, and reviewing [22], relevant themes were identified.

**Table 2.** Overview of interview questions and alignment with the research questions.

Example Interview Questions	Purpose
Could you please tell me a little about your role and responsibilities (as a team leader/teacher)?	Ascertain specific details of the role and leadership-specific practices
What key capabilities make a good team leader for teachers who are teaching gifted students online?	Explore key capabilities, with specific examples, of leaders for teaching gifted students in an online environment
How do you manage interactions/programs/courses?	Inquire about specific examples of leadership relationships; LOS; courses
What kind of accountability do you have for the courses that you teach?	Delve further into elements of leadership in LOS
Could you talk about key capabilities that teachers who are teaching gifted students online need to have?	Elucidate specifics about leadership capabilities of online educators of gifted
What do you think makes a good team leader for you as a teacher?	Explore characteristics and capabilities of what teachers considered a ‘good’ team leader

### 3.3. Data Analysis

A generalised, inductive approach was taken for the analysis of the qualitative transcript data. The data analysis procedure comprised transcript grouping for stakeholder groups to create sub-group datasets of (1) team leader (Heather, LOS manager) and (2) online gifted education teachers (LODTs—Aria, Nubia, and Evelyn). Next, the sub-group datasets were individually examined by each member of the research team. This examination involved an initial reading of each transcript, discussion, and noting of initial themes (i.e., eclectic coding). Each member of the research team then proceeded through a re-reading process culminating in *in vivo* coding directly from participants' own words. Encoding evolved to produce eclectic codes as initial responses to the guiding research question. Lastly, descriptive codes summarising and identifying the primary topic of specifically quoted excerpts emerged to respond to the research question.

## 4. Findings

Five key themes emerged from the data in relation to transformational educational leadership in online gifted education practices for supporting (re)engagement for gifted students. The LOS manager and LODTs expressed the importance of a team leader who understood the requirements of online practices for teaching gifted students; supported digital and online innovation and creativity; was able to leverage the unique skills of the specialist teaching team; could actively facilitate and encourage (re)engagement of gifted students through online participation; and, follow through to meet the needs and concerns of the specialist teaching team, gifted students, and their parents/carers. These elements were repeatedly acknowledged by the teacher participants as essential to any online gifted education program. In this section, we will briefly present each key theme and a sample participant quote to exemplify the respective theme.

### 4.1. Theme 1: Understanding Requirements of Online Practices for Teaching Gifted Students

This theme related to leadership practices that demonstrated an understanding of the uniqueness of both gifted students and the online learning environment where the students were being taught. Evelyn, a teacher with over 20 years of experience in teaching gifted students explained:

*"We need a manager that understands what we do and why we do it . . . I need to be allowed to run really. I'm happy to share and help, and I'm fairly confident in what I do, because I've been doing it for a long time . . . I need support in terms of the system, that our manager doesn't let the system lock us down."*

### 4.2. Theme 2: Supporting Digital and Online Innovation and Creativity for Engaging Gifted Students

The importance of a team leader who supported innovation and creativity was a recurrent theme across the participants' experiences, principally openness to using and finding new technology and resources for engaging gifted students in the online space. This was evident in the openness to new ideas which Heather (as LOS manager) held for her teaching team:

*"As a leader, you have to ask [when a teacher approaches with an idea]. You can't just say, no . . . 'Why have you got that idea?' Then, often, you'll get a really surprising answer [from the LODT]. You think, well, actually, yes, that's a worthwhile thing. So, we have a lot of negotiation in the team about how some people work this way, some people work another way. If you've got a proposal, come to me. We'll try and work it out. 'Make me understand why you think it's a good idea'."*

### 4.3. Theme 3: Leveraging the Unique Skills of the Specialist Teaching Team for Teaching Gifted Students

There was considerable agreement from participants that a key capability of a team leader for their context was around online teaching practices, developing different thinking

routines for gifted students, and being competent in recognising the unique expertise of the LODTs in their specialist teaching areas. Heather (LOS manager) exemplified this when she stated:

*“Sometimes . . . we’re looking within the team [for new ideas] . . . there’s usually an answer there . . . There’s a Team’s chat, now. They’re in there every day. Someone’s [an LODT has] got a new problem. Then, other people [LODTs] are saying, ‘Well, have you tried this?’ ‘Have you looked at that website?’ . . . They’re sharing. I don’t go in there a lot, because I don’t want to be checking on them. So, I just let the conversation run.”*

#### 4.4. Theme 4: Actively Facilitating and Encouraging (Re)Engagement of Gifted Students through Online Participation

Heather and the LODTs all emphasised the importance of student engagement, which emerged predominantly in the form of active participation in online class learning activities. Heather described how this was evident for courses offered by LOS as follows:

*“We’d say healthy participation in the course is an hour to two hours a week . . . So, [students are] putting up [their] ideas and responding to someone else’s idea. So, that would be healthy participation in that course. That you’re on every week. You’ve been on for about an hour. You’ve left a comment yourself and commented against something a few other people have said. Some of the courses give reward badges for those things . . . We also ask students to review other students’ work or comment on their work, like a peer review. Some courses show students the learning material. Then, they have to go offline and do some art or make something in a STEM challenge or code their robot to do something. So, their good online engagement might be sending in a video or uploading a photo of something they’ve done with some notes.”*

#### 4.5. Theme 5: Follow-through to Meet the Needs and Concerns of the Specialist Teaching Team, Gifted Students, and their Parents/Carers

Heather as team leader was often responsible for following up on student engagement (e.g., active participation), but individual teachers also took responsibility for this role. Engagement was also important to students in the online courses; for example, one student had contacted Heather to voice her concern that, although her classroom teacher had enrolled her in LOS, she had not been provided with time to engage with the course. This presented Heather with an opportunity to follow up and advocate with the classroom teacher on behalf of the gifted student. Other examples of monitoring engagement arose from the assigned school support teacher and parents/carers, as Heather explained:

*“Sometimes I’ve been to schools where things are not going right. The parents got angry. But the parent didn’t even know their child was in this course [at LOS]. That really came to light last year when kids went to learning from home [due to COVID]. Because the one thing they did have straight away, on day one, for being at home, was these [LOS] courses. The parents said, ‘What’s that? How often do you do that?’ My staff were getting emails from parents saying, ‘I’ve just discovered Jack’s got coding. I can see he hasn’t done very much’. So, it was really powerful. The parent needs to know, as well.”*

## 5. Discussion

To date, little research has examined the leadership practices and characteristics that enable and empower teachers to support the learning and engagement of gifted students [14]. Even less is known about educator leadership practices for supporting teachers of gifted and talented students in an online learning environment. Therefore, the present study explored important key educator leadership practices needed for positively supporting and engaging gifted and talented students in online learning environments. Five key educator leadership practices for supporting specialist teachers and students in gifted online learning environments were identified. These practices offer promise for creating collaborative and collegial workplaces for teachers while resulting in engaging

online learning experiences for gifted students, therefore both teachers and students feel part of a learning community.

It is essential that a team leader of specialist educators of gifted students understands who gifted learners are, knows how they learn, and understands the evolving nature of online learning environments. It was critical that the team leader had the capability to carefully listen to and respond positively and seamlessly to the teaching team. Attentive listening practices are reported to help build the foundation of collegial relationships and the exchange of ideas between gifted teachers [23]. This was because the online gifted teachers needed to feel confident that any decisions that were being made by management were central to meeting the core needs of themselves as teachers and their gifted students.

Having a leader who is open to new ideas, application of innovative online learning tools, and creative resources allowed teachers to have an autonomous and flexible approach to their program planning and online course design and development. Trusting and offering members of the teaching team voice and agency to take academic risks and try out new online applications, interactive activities, and project-based learning activities was strongly emphasised by the teachers in the current study. Such an approach has also been highlighted in previous research (e.g., [10]).

The teachers in the gifted education team were selected for their roles because of their knowledge and passion about both their content area expertise and supporting the unique needs of gifted students. These passions were closely associated with specialist training and qualifications that all of the teachers brought to their roles. It was clear that the team leader strategically harnessed these unique skills so that there was diversity in teaching approaches, which, in turn facilitated greater sharing and collaboration of online teaching ideas and resources. The team leader placed a strong emphasis on capitalising on the strengths of each team member as active contributors to the gifted online education program. Such collaboration and collective leadership approaches have also been described by Harris and Muijs [1].

On occasion, the teachers experienced some barriers to student participation in the online activities due to reasons such as limited time provided to them in their school classroom and minimal support and guidance some students received from their regular classroom teachers. A team leader who is flexible and proactive in readily facilitating teachers and schools in supporting their gifted students was shown to be essential for student engagement, for example, by providing flexibility to fit in with a student's regular class timetable while ensuring time was allocated for students to participate in their online gifted courses; and following up when learning and engagement problems arose. Such an approach can also help and motivate gifted students to engage and participate more regularly in their online learning activities.

Indeed, within any educational system, complex networks, relationships, curriculum priorities, and various views from key stakeholders (e.g., parents/carers, teachers, and students) arise. Unsurprisingly, issues and concerns occur daily, and it is important for a team leader in gifted education to act as an empathetic problem solver who cares about people and is also able to build and maintain positive relationships. This finding concurs with other researchers [9,11,14]. Other elements of transformational leadership also emerged from the findings. This was evinced by how Heather as team leader was able to facilitate innovative and creative practices for her teachers working in the online context, where the teachers reported improved overall performance for LOS and educational outcomes for their gifted students. According to Anderson [9], transformational leadership in education stresses the importance of teacher learning, establishing new ways of thinking, and tackling established norms in educational contexts to transform school culture.

## 6. Limitations

The primary limitation of this case study relates to the small participant number which does not allow generalisations of the findings to be made. Nevertheless, the qualitative responses from the gifted educators provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon

under exploration, in this case, educational leadership for specialist teachers of gifted students in an online context. A further limitation is the study's focus on the leadership of specialist online gifted education teachers practicing in an online school and delivering courses solely online. This suggests that the findings may not be applicable in other educational contexts, such as face-to-face gifted education settings. Nonetheless, the findings may still have important implications for informing gifted education leadership practices in other contexts, especially within the ongoing COVID-19 landscape that is impacting greatly on educators around the world with school lockdowns and increasing use of online learning activities.

Additionally, prior research studies on the topic of educational leadership for gifted education teachers are limited. This presents a possible limitation in terms of the need to develop a novel research typology for this phenomenon in terms of connecting to descriptions of differing leadership behaviours and qualities. However, this study presents useful findings for moving the field forward and for highlighting that further research is required.

## **7. Recommendations and Implications for Theory, Practice, Future Research, and Policy**

Recommendations from the current study relate quite specifically to how educational leaders (in online contexts in particular), need to work as a collaborative team, moving in the same direction to benefit their gifted students—a team in which collegiality and respect for teachers' expert knowledge are both recognised and valued. It is imperative that team leaders foster strong collegial connections with their teachers, between teachers, and between teachers and their gifted students. This is particularly important in online contexts, where teachers (and their gifted students) may be working in relative isolation.

The foundations to facilitating online learning experiences for engaging gifted students were found to be based on trust, provision of space and time for innovation and creativity, leveraging teacher skill, passion, and expertise, and following through on issues when and as they arose through open and responsive leadership practices. Developing and providing ongoing opportunities for building trust, as well as sharing skills, resources, and specific innovative practices, are strongly recommended in developing collaborative teaching teams for online gifted education environments.

As there is little empirical research that specifically explores the leadership practices and characteristics that enable and empower teachers to support the learning and engagement of gifted students, further research is needed. Effective engagement and learning depend greatly on how content is delivered, and how teachers are actually engaging and working with gifted students. This is difficult to explore in asynchronous learning contexts. However, differing methodologies could potentially be employed to explore what may be happening in classrooms where a number of students could conceivably be working synchronously in online gifted programs. For example, observing the delivery of online gifted classes in action over a longer time period (e.g., a school semester) and examining impacts on student learning outcomes and how teacher leadership practices may have impacted on these outcomes. This may assist in demonstrating how gifted students engage with, and respond to, the content, and how it is being taught, and furthermore, how specific leadership practices of teachers can have positive effects on gifted students actualising their potential. Future research that explores teacher leadership (e.g., transactional leadership) and the specific content areas of online courses could provide deeper insights for teachers about ways to further enhance gifted student learning and engagement.

Implications for policy from this study, relate to the need of mainstream classroom teachers to receive increased support in delivering engaging content and learning activities for gifted students. In Australia, in particular, there are no mandated requirements for teachers to be trained in understanding or supporting the needs of gifted students and as a result gifted education is not seen as a priority. This study suggests that there is an immense (relatively) unmet need at the ground level, for engaging learning opportunities

on a daily basis for gifted students, and that at present, teachers are struggling to meet in regular face to face classrooms. Therefore, we would strongly recommend that all classroom teachers engage in continued professional development in the field of gifted education. Also that support gifted students and the practices of online schools, such as Lake Online School, be expanded to support urban, regional, rural, and remote gifted students to have access to quality gifted education every day. Furthermore, we would strongly recommend that Australian education jurisdictions make it a key priority to mandate teacher training (and preservice teacher education) in gifted education, to support the obvious learning needs of both classroom teachers and their gifted students.

## 8. Conclusions

The findings of this study extend previous research to better understand ways to enhance gifted education leadership practices in online gifted education contexts for supporting and engaging gifted learners. Professional learning opportunities should be given to leaders for developing practices that deepen practitioner understanding of the requirements of leading a gifted online school. As this study demonstrated, leadership qualities that promote teacher innovation and creativity for engaging gifted students are essential. Harnessing the multiple unique skills and expertise of passionate gifted education teachers will strengthen the engagement of gifted students, especially those at risk of underachieving and disengaging from their learning. During the ongoing disruptive landscape of the global COVID-19 pandemic, educators in gifted online schools and programs are best placed to listen and act through sensitive and thoughtful ways to address potential concerns of stakeholders (e.g., teachers, students, parents/carers). Genuine multi-way communication is key to building and maintaining strong relationships. These research findings related to transformational approaches to gifted education leadership will assist in ensuring that educators of gifted students feel confident to overcome challenges that arise, and ultimately, provide positive engaging learning experiences for gifted students to reach their full potential.

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