WHOLE CHILD TEACHER

The Whole Child Teacher Learning & Teaching Pillars

A research-informed framework for purposeful, responsive and personalised primary learning

FOUNDATIONAL POSITION PAPER | OCTOBER 2026

Abstract

Effective learning is neither a matter of exposure alone nor a simple equation of time spent and worksheets completed. Children must acquire knowledge, retain it, use foundational skills with increasing ease, consolidate emerging understanding and transfer learning beyond familiar exercises. Equally, effective teaching demands more than explanation: it requires precise formative judgement, explicit modelling, appropriately calibrated support, meaningful feedback and responsiveness to the learner. This paper introduces the Whole Child Teacher (WCT) Five Learning Pillars and Five Teaching Pillars as an integrated, research-informed framework for primary education and learning support. Drawing on cognitive science, explicit instruction, formative assessment and evidence-informed practice, it explains each pillar, illustrates its application and sets out important boundaries on interpretation.

Learning is not simply what a child can do today. It is what they understand, remember, can do independently and can use tomorrow.

1. Why distinguish learning from teaching?

A child may complete a classroom task accurately yet be unable to recall the relevant information a week later. Another may recall multiplication facts but struggle to recognise multiplication in a real-world problem. A third may understand a mathematical strategy but need repeated supported attempts before applying it independently. These are not necessarily the same learning need, and prescribing “more practice” for all three risks confusing activity with progress.

WCT therefore distinguishes two interconnected questions: What learning function does the child need now? And what teaching response will best support it? The Five Learning Pillars describe the functions through which learning develops and becomes usable. The Five Teaching Pillars describe the professional actions through which an adult can deliberately support those functions. The distinction is analytically useful rather than absolute: well-designed practice can also be an assessment opportunity; feedback can prompt retrieval; modelling can reveal misconceptions. The pillars are not a ten-step lesson plan and should not all be imposed on every activity.

This account is consistent with the emphasis placed by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) on explicit instruction, supported practice, review, and gradual release of responsibility, and with research reviews by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) on cognition, feedback and self-regulated learning (AERO, 2024, 2026; EEF, 2021a, 2025). It is also intentionally modest: a synthesis of defensible practices is not equivalent to an independently validated new causal model.

THE LEARNING PILLARS — WHAT THE TEACHING PILLARS — HOW

Retrieval & Retention — bring back and keep learning	Diagnose & Target — establish the actual learning need
Fluency & Automaticity — free attention for complexity	Explain & Model — make the invisible visible
New Learning — build unfamiliar knowledge and skills	Scaffold & Release — move from support to independence
Practice & Consolidation — secure emerging learning	Practise & Respond — use attempts and feedback purposefully
Application & Transfer — use learning flexibly	Adapt & Personalise — fit the approach to the learner

PART I | THE FIVE WCT LEARNING PILLARS

The learning pillars describe distinct but often overlapping priorities. Their order is not intended as a universal developmental staircase. A lesson may start with retrieval, introduce a new idea, practise it and end with application; at another time, targeted fluency work or conceptual re-teaching will be the more useful choice.

01. Retrieval & Retention

The purpose. Learning that was encountered once should remain accessible when the child needs it again.

Why it works. Retrieval practice asks learners to reconstruct information from memory rather than simply re-read or recognise it. Experimental research shows that retrieving material can improve delayed retention, while distributing learning over time reduces dependence on a single concentrated episode (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006; Dunlosky et al., 2013). AERO likewise recommends low-stakes, spaced opportunities to recall previously learnt content, with timely correction of errors (AERO, 2021). The mechanism is not that every quiz is beneficial: the value depends on successful retrieval, appropriate challenge, spacing and feedback.

In WCT practice. We revisit knowledge across days and weeks; ask children to recall, explain, sort or generate examples without first looking at the answer; and provide a cue or brief re-teaching when recall repeatedly fails. Review includes conceptual understanding, not merely isolated facts. The question is whether learning remains available after the original support has been removed.

A practical example. After learning paragraph structure, a child briefly reconstructs the purpose of a topic sentence before writing. Several days later, they identify one in a new passage and write their own. The review is short, cumulative and corrected where needed.

The important distinction. Retrieval is not a substitute for initial explanation. If a child never understood place value, repeated recall prompts will not by themselves produce that understanding.

02. Fluency & Automaticity

The purpose. Foundational knowledge and skills should become sufficiently secure and efficient that they no longer consume disproportionate mental effort.

Why it works. Working memory has limited capacity for processing unfamiliar material. As foundational knowledge becomes well established in long-term memory, less conscious effort may be needed for familiar elements of complex tasks (Sweller et al., 1998). Fluent word recognition, for example, can help leave attention available for making sense of connected text, while efficient access to number facts can support multi-step mathematics. Such fluency arises from understanding paired with well-designed,

repeated opportunities for accurate performance—not from speed alone (AERO, 2020; National Reading Panel, 2000).

In WCT practice. We check that the child understands the concept before asking for quicker or more effortless responses. Practice is brief, varied and supportive; accuracy is protected, and timing is optional rather than compulsory. A child is ready to move beyond a fluency emphasis when foundational responses are reliably accurate and increasingly effortless across more than one occasion.

A practical example. A Year 2 learner can represent 6 × 4 with equal groups but still counts every item. We offer small, low-pressure opportunities to derive and recall related facts, compare strategies, and revisit them later. The objective is accessible multiplication knowledge, not winning a speed contest.

The important distinction. Automaticity is not synonymous with shallow rote memorisation. Conversely, rapid but unexplained answers do not prove conceptual understanding; and reading fluency encompasses accuracy and expression, not just words per minute.

03. New Learning

The purpose. Children need coherent, comprehensible introductions when knowledge, concepts or strategies are genuinely unfamiliar.

Why it works. Explicit explanation and worked examples can reduce unnecessary demands on novice learners, especially when tasks contain many interacting elements. Cognitive load theory and reviews of explicit instruction support breaking demanding material into manageable steps, building on prerequisites and gradually increasing independent work (Kirschner et al., 2006; Hughes et al., 2017; AERO, 2024). This does not remove curiosity or dialogue: explanation and purposeful exploration can complement one another when the degree of guidance matches prior knowledge.

In WCT practice. We establish the starting point, make the purpose of the new idea clear, connect it with what the child already knows, and demonstrate a small number of carefully selected examples. We check for understanding before asking children to complete unfamiliar problems independently. When necessary, we shift from symbolic to concrete or visual representations without changing the central learning goal.

A practical example. A child meeting equivalent fractions for the first time begins by folding paper strips or comparing fraction diagrams. The adult explicitly connects equal-sized wholes to 1/2 = 2/4 before showing how the same relationship is represented numerically.

The important distinction. Novelty is not proof that a child is ready for acceleration. “New learning” includes repairing a misunderstood prerequisite, not only racing into content above the school year.

04. Practice & Consolidation

The purpose. Emerging understanding must be strengthened through purposeful attempts, correction and growing independence.

Why it works. Initial understanding is often fragile. Well-sequenced practice gives children opportunities to apply an introduced method, notice errors and refine a developing skill. AERO advises multiple practice opportunities and progressively removing supports as proficiency grows; EEF highlights the influence of specific, actionable feedback (AERO, 2020, 2026; EEF, 2021b). Practice is most useful when the task difficulty, feedback and variation suit the learner—not when volume is the sole measure.

In WCT practice. We begin with accessible, closely matched examples, attend to the steps rather than the final answer alone, and vary the challenge as success becomes more reliable. Support may include a worked example, prompt, checklist or partially completed item; these are deliberately reduced as competence emerges. Errors guide the next instruction rather than triggering another page of identical work.

A practical example. A child has just been taught vertical multiplication and understands the example with help, but independently misaligns tens and ones. We use a place-value guide, practise a small set of increasingly varied problems, discuss the error and remove the guide once alignment is secure.

The important distinction. This pillar differs from Fluency & Automaticity: consolidation strengthens a skill that is still being learnt; fluency makes a substantially understood foundation increasingly efficient.

05. Application & Transfer

The purpose. Knowledge becomes more powerful when children can recognise where and how to use it beyond its original presentation.

Why it works. Transfer requires more than changing the decoration around a question. Learners must recognise relevant structures, select an appropriate strategy and adapt it to a different setting. Research on learning and transfer emphasises prior knowledge, the organisation of knowledge and the importance of opportunities to connect ideas across contexts (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). AERO recommends varying practice and helping students apply learning in different representations and contexts (AERO, 2026). Transfer cannot be assumed simply because a child performs well on routine exercises.

In WCT practice. We change representations, present contrasting examples, pose genuine problems and ask children to explain why a familiar concept applies. Meaningful applications can be practical, imaginative or academic; a real-world setting is useful only when the target learning is actually needed to solve the task.

A practical example. A child who can multiply 8 × 6 on a worksheet plans eight teams of six players, then compares two different ways of organising the same 48 participants. They must decide whether to multiply, divide or regroup and justify their choice.

The important distinction. Engagement alone is not transfer. A football-themed page of unchanged calculations may be motivating, but it does not necessarily demand flexible reasoning.

PART II | THE FIVE WCT TEACHING PILLARS

The teaching pillars concern the quality of the adult response. Unlike the learning pillars, some are best understood as continuous professional habits: formative judgement and adaptation are present across an activity, not confined to its opening and closing minutes.

01. Diagnose & Target

The purpose. Choose the next teaching move on the basis of what the child actually knows, understands and can do.

Why it works. Formative assessment informs instruction by making current understanding visible, revealing misconceptions and showing whether a response was independent or supported. Research-informed explicit instruction and mastery approaches repeatedly emphasise identifying prerequisites, checking understanding and adjusting instruction before moving on (AERO, 2020; EEF, 2021c). WCT uses “diagnose” in the educational, formative sense; it does not imply medical, psychological or clinical diagnosis.

In WCT practice. We examine school work, child explanations, teacher observations and brief targeted questions while distinguishing what each source can legitimately tell us. We identify a precise target—such as regrouping across a zero—rather than settling for a broad label like “bad at maths”. Evidence is dated, contextual and revisable; when no reliable sample exists, conclusions are explicitly provisional.

A practical example. A child completes subtraction correctly at home with a parent talking through every step, but performs poorly in a school test. We investigate whether the difficulty lies in place-value understanding, task independence, time pressure or a difference in question types before prescribing further activities.

The important distinction. A single worksheet, school grade or timed score cannot establish a comprehensive learning level. Apparent differences between home and school are questions for investigation, not proof that either setting is wrong.

02. Explain & Model

The purpose. Make the underlying thinking of a task visible, understandable and replicable.

Why it works. Clear instruction, worked examples and teacher think-alouds can help novices attend to relevant information without expending their limited working-memory resources on unguided search (Kirschner et al., 2006; Sweller et al., 1998; AERO, 2024). Modelling is especially valuable when the learner cannot yet infer the steps or decision points independently. It is most effective when explanations are accurate, sequenced and responsive, rather than merely longer.

In WCT practice. We name the learning intention in child-friendly language, show a concise model, articulate the reasoning behind each critical decision and highlight common misconceptions. We can use diagrams, manipulatives, examples and non-examples when these clarify—not clutter—the thinking. We then check whether the child can explain the idea in their own words.

A practical example. Instead of instructing “carry the one”, we model addition with place-value blocks: ten ones are exchanged for one ten. Only after the regrouping makes sense do we show how the written notation records that exchange.

The important distinction. Explaining a procedure is not the same as developing understanding. Good modelling connects the steps to the concept and creates an opportunity for the learner to think.

03. Scaffold & Release

The purpose. Provide enough support for success now while deliberately building capacity for independence.

Why it works. Instructional support can improve novice performance, but prolonged support may mask what a child can do alone. Gradual release and the fading of worked examples align with research on the expertise-reversal effect: instruction that benefits a novice may become redundant for someone with established knowledge (AERO, 2020, 2024; Sweller et al., 1998). Independent learning is not the absence of teaching; it is often the intended result of well-calibrated teaching.

In WCT practice. We begin with the least intrusive support that enables productive success, then reduce prompts as skill improves. Scaffolds may include a think-aloud, prompt, model, checklist, visual, oral rehearsal or shared example. We distinguish adult-supported success from independent performance and revisit the scaffold when new errors reveal that support was removed too quickly.

A practical example. For persuasive writing, an adult first models a claim with reasons, then co-constructs a paragraph with the child, and finally invites an independent response using a brief prompt card. As independence grows, the card is removed.

The important distinction. “I do, we do, you do” is a useful pattern, not an inflexible script. Some children need to revisit modelling; others already know enough to begin independently.

04. Practise & Respond

The purpose. Teaching improves when learner attempts produce useful information and specific next-step feedback.

Why it works. Practice and feedback are mutually reinforcing: a response gives the teacher information; feedback helps the child change the next attempt. EEF finds that feedback is most effective when it is actionable and grounded in clear learning intentions rather than vague praise or scoring alone (EEF, 2021b). Effective instruction creates frequent opportunities for children to respond, check reasoning and correct misconceptions before errors become entrenched (Hughes et al., 2017; AERO, 2020).

In WCT practice. We design a manageable sequence of attempts, examine the steps where possible and respond with a cue, explanation, worked contrast or new example. We recognise correct reasoning as well as errors. Feedback is calibrated: some mistakes need a reminder, others need a return to conceptual teaching. After correction, the child has a chance to attempt something similar independently.

A practical example. A child writes 403 − 178 = 335. Rather than saying only "try again", we inspect the exchange across the zero, show why hundreds and tens must be regrouped carefully, then invite a new example with reduced support.

The important distinction. This is the teacher's action, not an extra learning stage. It supports every learning pillar, including retrieval, consolidation and application.

05. Adapt & Personalise

The purpose. Preserve ambitious learning goals while making the route appropriately responsive to the child.

Why it works. Children differ in prior knowledge, language, attention, working memory demands, confidence, disabilities, motivation, opportunities and the support available around them. Evidence-informed adaptation adjusts instruction in response to these factors while protecting the learning objective. AERO highlights matching sequence and support to existing knowledge; EEF guidance on metacognition emphasises explicitly teaching and scaffolding strategies within authentic curriculum learning (AERO, 2020, 2024; EEF, 2025). Research does not justify assigning fixed "learning styles" or assuming a child's preferences predict a uniquely effective teaching modality.

In WCT practice. We draw on the child's demonstrated skills, interests, goals, preferences and family constraints when choosing examples, level of challenge, participation and format. We might replace an uninspiring drill with a short football-based activity, offer oral rehearsal before writing, or choose a printable task for a family avoiding more screen time. The adaptation serves the learning goal; it never replaces it.

A practical example. An eight-year-old who enjoys Pokémon but finds multiplication tedious works through carefully chosen fact families using a trading-card scenario. We still check conceptual understanding, vary the problems and provide feedback: the theme increases relevance, while the teaching supports learning.

The important distinction. Personalisation is responsive decision-making, not a promise that every child needs an entirely different pedagogical theory. Equity and inclusion require flexibility without lowering expectations.

3. How the pillars work together

The strength of the WCT framework lies less in treating each pillar as a separate feature than in the decisions made between them. Consider a child who knows a multiplication procedure but hesitates on facts. Formative questioning first establishes whether equal groups are understood (Diagnose & Target). If understanding is secure, Fluency & Automaticity becomes the leading learning priority; the adult designs a brief and accurate sequence of repetitions with feedback (Practise & Respond), makes adjustments to challenge and interest (Adapt & Personalise), and periodically revisits the facts (Retrieval & Retention). If the child cannot explain the meaning of multiplication, however, the response changes:

New Learning, Explain & Model and Scaffold & Release take priority. The same parent concern can lead to different teaching because the learning need is different.

Similarly, a child may perform routine fraction exercises accurately yet be unable to compare differently represented quantities. The appropriate response may be Application & Transfer, using diagrams, number lines and contextual decisions rather than merely more exercises of the same format. The framework is therefore responsive and iterative: observe, interpret, teach, check and adjust.

COMMON OBSERVATION	PRIMARY LEARNING PRIORITY	LIKELY TEACHING RESPONSE
Previously knew it; now cannot recall	Retrieval & Retention	Provide a supported retrieval prompt, correction and spaced revisit
Correct but slow on secure foundations	Fluency & Automaticity	Verify concept; use brief accurate repetitions and feedback
No reliable understanding of a new idea	New Learning	Explain/model and scaffold before independent work
Understands with help; inconsistent alone	Practice & Consolidation	Design graduated attempts; respond to error patterns
Can do routine tasks; cannot use idea elsewhere	Application & Transfer	Vary representation and ask for strategic justification

4. Principles of responsible implementation

Precision before volume

A longer worksheet is not inherently a better intervention. Identifying whether the difficulty concerns memory, understanding, automaticity, consolidation or transfer often has greater instructional value than producing additional activity. At home, this is particularly important: manageable, high-quality interactions can be more sustainable than extended sessions that create conflict or fatigue.

Knowledge and confidence develop together

WCT treats children as active learners with legitimate preferences, feelings and perspectives, while avoiding the false dichotomy between rigorous instruction and an enjoyable learning experience. A predictable sequence, a reasonable challenge and evidence of improvement can support confidence. Praise should recognise strategy, effort and progress accurately; it cannot substitute for teaching the missing concept.

Evidence informs decisions; it does not erase context

School reports, work samples, observations, formal assessments and child explanations capture different aspects of learning. Their interpretation depends on the task, conditions, independence, date and method used. Where evidence conflicts, good practice invites curiosity rather than certainty. Where a learning difficulty is persistent or substantial, school collaboration and appropriately qualified professional assessment may be warranted. The framework does not diagnose a disability or replace specialist intervention.

Research informs practice, but context matters

There is substantial evidence for explicit instruction, retrieval opportunities, purposeful practice and actionable feedback, but effect sizes vary across settings, age groups and implementation. EEF itself cautions that cognitive-science findings from tightly controlled studies do not always translate directly into routine classroom outcomes (EEF, 2021a). Likewise, the WCT ten-pillar structure has not been tested as one intervention. We therefore regard it as a disciplined professional framework for choosing and explaining practice, not an assertion of guaranteed outcomes.

5. Conclusion

Good learning support begins with a deceptively simple discipline: ask what the child needs to learn, then choose how best to help. The WCT Five Learning Pillars foreground the outcomes of instruction—knowledge acquired, retained, fluent, consolidated and flexibly applied. The WCT Five Teaching Pillars foreground the adult's responsibility—to investigate, explain, scaffold, respond and adapt. Together, they challenge the assumption that more work necessarily means more learning, while preserving the importance of explicit teaching and rigorous evidence.

For families, the practical promise is clarity: understand the specific barrier, choose the next useful move, and make each learning interaction count. For educators, the framework offers a common language for professional judgement without reducing teaching to a rigid script. Its value rests not in memorable labels alone, but in whether those labels lead to better questions, better-designed experiences and more accurate interpretations of children's learning.

Know what matters. Do what counts.

References

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2020). Explicit instruction: Practice guide. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/explicit-instruction-practice-guide-full-publication

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2021). Spacing and retrieval practice: Practice guide. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/spacing-and-retrieval-practice-guide-full-publication

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2024). Teach explicitly. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/teach-explicitly

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2026). Vary practice (updated 14 May 2026). https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/vary-practice

Dunlosky, J., Rawson, K. A., Marsh, E. J., Nathan, M. J., & Willingham, D. T. (2013). Improving students' learning with effective learning techniques: Promising directions from cognitive and educational psychology. Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 14(1), 4–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612453266

Education Endowment Foundation. (2021a). Cognitive science approaches in the classroom: A review of the evidence. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/cognitive-Science-approaches-in-the-classroom

Education Endowment Foundation. (2021b). Teacher feedback to improve pupil learning: Guidance report. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/feedback

Education Endowment Foundation. (2021c). Mastery learning. Teaching and Learning Toolkit. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/mastery-learning/

Education Endowment Foundation. (2025). Metacognition and self-regulated learning (2nd ed.): Guidance report. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/metacognition

Hughes, C. A., Morris, J. R., Therrien, W. J., & Benson, S. K. (2017). Explicit instruction: Historical and contemporary contexts. Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 32(3), 140–148. https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.12142

Kirschner, P. A., Sweller, J., & Clark, R. E. (2006). Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: An analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching. Educational Psychologist, 41(2), 75–86. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep4102_1

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). How people learn II: Learners, contexts, and cultures. National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/24783

National Reading Panel. (2000). Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/nrp/Pages/findings.aspx

Roediger, H. L., III, & Karpicke, J. D. (2006). Test-enhanced learning: Taking memory tests improves long-term retention. Psychological Science, 17(3), 249–255. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01693.x

Sweller, J., van Merriënboer, J. J. G., & Paas, F. G. W. C. (1998). Cognitive architecture and instructional design. Educational Psychology Review, 10, 251–296. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022193728205

© 2026 Whole Child Teacher. Research-informed educational framework and practitioner synthesis. This publication is intended for educational information, not clinical diagnosis or a claim of independently validated program efficacy.