



SEPTEMBER 2025 | EDITION 6

LEADERSHIP CONNECTIONS

CONTENTS

PAGE

Welcome	3
Leading with Possibility: Cross-Cultural Insights on Childhood, Equality, and Inclusivity in Schools.	4
The Leadership Learning Scheme: Where Ideas Meet Action	7
Democratising Education Through Peer Learning: A Conversation with Zubair Junjuna.	10
Building a school that works hand in hand with the community: The journey toward "ONE TEAM".	13
Building Bridges Through Partnership: An interview with Prof. Metin Ozkan. Interview by Aida Tinayeva.	16
Transforming Leadership: Key insights and lessons learnt from the NPQs.	19
Sustainable Leadership through Altruistic Mentoring.	22
Children's "Invisible Backpacks": A Family-Centered Approach in Early Childhood Leadership.	25
The Power of Storytelling: Connecting through Human Libraries.	28
Belonging by Leading: Giving All Students a Role in School Culture.	31
Leading through Complexity: Why Wellbeing Intelligence is The Bedrock of Sustainable Success.	35
Leadership Under the Algorithm: What School Leaders Need to Know About AI - Right Now.	38
Experiences of John Harris, MBA Educational Leadership graduate and EdD student, UCL Centre for Educational Leadership. Interview by Mamta Ondhia.	41

WELCOME

We are pleased to announce here our second collaboration with ECIS and our sixth edition of Leadership Connections, a magazine that brings together members of the educational leadership community.



Once again contributions come from a committed group of practitioners, academics, students of educational leadership and alumni. More than ever, we show a range of perspectives, touching on a huge array of topics from around the world. I hope you enjoy reading the articles within.

David Godfrey, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership Editor, Leadership Connections

ECIS (The Educational Collaborative for International Schools) is delighted to continue our valued collaboration with the UCL Institute of Education (IOE) for another compelling edition of Leadership Connections.

This partnership is one we cherish, not only for the opportunity it offers to bridge research and practice, but for the inspiration it provides to emerging and established leaders across our global community. Leadership Connections is a magazine shaped by the research and critical thinking of IOE MA students and ECIS educational thought leaders who are leading change in real time.

This edition brings together another rich array of voices and perspectives on educational and leadership matters.

Sarah Kupke, Head of Schools Relationships and Partnerships. ECIS



Editorial team

David Godfrey, Sarah Kupke, Clare Chambers, Mamta Ondhia, Moustapha Bennadi, Mark Pritchard, Xiaoyu Lu, Shuying An, Tina Wang, Yuxi Li, Yilin Bao, Atsuya Ito, Aida Tinayeva, Anel Mustafina, Wanxue Zhao.

Leading with Possibility: Cross-Cultural Insights on Childhood, Equality, and Inclusivity in Schools

By Meicheng Zhang



Meicheng Zhang,
UCL MA Educational Leadership student

Educational leadership shapes not just schools but the futures of the students within them. As globalization connects diverse systems, understanding different approaches becomes crucial for leaders seeking to innovate and improve.

This article stems from a visit to Torridon Primary School in London, where I observed practices that starkly contrast with my experiences growing up in China's education system. Through this lens, I explore three areas: the freedom given to children, the nature of teacher-student relationships, and the embrace of diversity. Each section highlights how Torridon's

methods differ from traditional Chinese practices and what these differences mean for school leadership. By examining these contrasts, I aim to offer fresh perspectives on managing schools in ways that prioritise student well-being and inclusivity. This article is not about declaring one system superior but about expanding the possibilities for educational leaders everywhere.

Section 1: Letting Kids Be Kids

Torridon Primary School embodies the philosophy of "letting kids be kids." The culture embraces and respects kids' natural instincts. In classrooms, children are free to sit or lie on the floor, listening to lessons in whatever position feels comfortable. Younger students might even crawl under desks to ask teachers questions. However, the teachers do not get angry or force everyone to sit still in their assigned seats.

This freedom reflects a profound respect for childhood, allowing kids to express their curiosity and energy without rigid constraints. Beyond the classroom, the school's campus is a wonderland of play. There are slides, ping-pong tables, balance beams, and even sand specially brought in from the beach for kids to play with. They can also plant flowers and other plants themselves, as the school provides them with the necessary tools.



In contrast, my upbringing in China's educational system emphasised discipline over freedom, which is deeply rooted in traditional values. Classrooms demanded strict adherence to rules: standardised sitting postures, neat uniforms, and a quiet, orderly classroom atmosphere.

Those who conformed, sitting still and following instructions, were labeled 'good students.' While this approach ensures excellent classroom organization and simplifies management, it may suppress children's natural instincts, as strict rules demand behaviour beyond their developmental stage. In campus, play facilities were limited—uniform basketball courts and 'no football allowed' playgrounds, with no room for imaginative elements like Torridon's sandpits. There are probably many reasons behind this: maintaining the school's cleanliness, worries about children getting injured, and so on.

This contrast struck me profoundly and also led me to contemplate an alternative approach to leading a school: by cultivating a culture—an environment where leadership can prioritise joy, trusting that learning flourishes when children are free to be themselves.

Section 2: Respect and Equality in Teacher-Student Relationships

At Torridon Primary School, the ethos of teacher-student interaction dismantles traditional hierarchies. Children address teachers by their first names, bypassing formal titles. Teachers sit on the floor to communicate at eye level, completely free from the traditional 'authority on the podium' mentality. Instead, they move freely among students, often pausing to sit and chat with them individually while offering guidance. I vividly recall a female

teacher kneeling beside a child, listening attentively to a question and responding with the warmth of a "big sister" rather than the authority of an instructor. When I asked a school leader about this dynamic, he said, "We respect each other not because we are teachers and students, but because we are human beings." They respect childhood instincts, but at the same time they treat them like adults in this teacher-student relationship.

China's public schools uphold a starkly different model. Rooted in Confucian reverence for educators, teachers embody authority and moral guidance. This is reinforced by the intense pressure of exams like the Gaokao, where teachers are seen as key to success. Students rarely question this dynamic, accepting it as essential for academic progress. It's an efficient system, streamlining teaching and learning toward measurable outcomes. Yet, this authority can sometimes veer into dominance, with students expected to conform without negotiation—a power imbalance that occasionally borders on coercion.

The question of which model is superior remains unanswerable because no educational philosophy can be evaluated without considering its sociocultural context. However, this comparison invites a deeper question: whether this egalitarian pedagogical relationship could be adaptively integrated into China's unique educational ecosystem.

Section 3: Embracing Diversity and Inclusivity

Another Torridon's defining value is its emphasis on diversity, which is actively instilled in children from an early age. This includes discussions on ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ identities, and other social

issues. I was particularly struck by the small bags hanging outside every classroom, filled with topic cards covering themes like religious equality, gender equity, privacy rights, and anti-violence.



Each week, students and teachers jointly explore one of these themes, which fosters genuine inclusivity in children’s perspectives. One moment that stayed with me was a student’s notebook with an entry on LGBTQ+ issues, where the child had written: “We deserve to be loved and respected for who we are.” It was surprising for me to see such young children engaging with these concepts so thoughtfully. The school’s inclusivity also extends to students with special needs—I observed a dedicated teacher assisting a visually impaired girl throughout a lesson, ensuring she could access contents in all visual materials

This level of childcare is universal, and China is no exception. However, our approach to it often takes the form of creating a separate, sheltered circle for children. Adults tend to curate this space strictly, excluding topics deemed ‘inappropriate.’ Growing up, many of the themes Torridon openly discusses gender, religion, minority rights were considered unnecessary knowledge for children. As a Mongolian (an ethnic minority in China), I rarely felt my cultural identity, language, or heritage were fully acknowledged or celebrated in school.

This is not to say Chinese education rejects diversity outright; rather, in a system hyper-focused on academic performance, diversity simply is not prioritised. It is not actively suppressed, it is just irrelevant to the dominant metrics of success.

This contrast became one of my deepest reflections during the visit. Torridon’s philosophy (or maybe western philosophy) treats children as future citizens, gradually integrating them into societal discourse. Their ‘circle’ starts small but exists within the broader social framework, eventually expanding to merge with it. In China, traditional views hold that children must be shielded from society until they’re ‘ready.’ Their world is deliberately separated, with adults gatekeeping what knowledge enters it. Academic achievement is framed as the sole priority; other lessons can wait.

As a product of China’s education system, I owe much of my success to its rigor. Yet witnessing Torridon’s model revealed alternative possibilities, leadership that nurtures social awareness alongside intellect. Perhaps that’s the true value of visiting schools abroad: not to judge which system is ‘better,’ but to expand our imagination of what education can be. This experience has been profoundly enlightening.



The Leadership Learning Scheme: Where Ideas Meet Action

By Neil Li, Qianyun Wang and Yuxi Li



Neil Li, UCL Postgraduate Teaching Assistant, Qianyun Wang and Yuxi Li, UCL MA Educational Leadership students

Each year, postgraduate students at IOE, UCL, arrive with a deep interest in educational change and a desire to lead with purpose. But leadership is not something that can be fully grasped through theory alone, it must be lived, observed, questioned, and tested.

The Leadership for the Learning Community module, taken by 120 students this year, draws a mix of pre-service professionals and experienced educators. Through lectures, seminars and tutorials, students explore leadership theories, interrogate case studies, and examine the structural forces shaping educational institutions. But what sets this module apart is its practical integration with the Leadership Learning Scheme, which brings students face to face or online, with the complexities of leading in the real world.

Designed by Dr David Godfrey, module leader for Leadership for the Learning Community, and supported by a dedicated

teaching team, the scheme offers students of the MA Educational Leadership programme a chance to step beyond the classroom and engage directly with the people and institutions shaping education today.

This year's cohort was joined by 47 educational practitioners: headteachers, policy advisors, consultants, school improvement officers, and NGO leaders, from London, across the UK, and international settings ranging from Asia to Europe. Of these, 38 were deeply engaged throughout the scheme, participating in dialogues, reflections, and mentoring activities that became a core part of the learning journey.

The origins of the scheme lie in a shared commitment: to ensure that students not only learn about leadership, but also actively engage with it. It stands as a powerful example of UCL's role as a global leader in education, one whose impact extends far beyond the university campus, forging meaningful partnerships and contributing to the wider educational landscape.

The scheme unfolded over several weeks, beginning with a series of structured encounters. Following nearly six months of preparation ahead of formal teaching, and with a carefully tailored introduction to how the scheme would operate, participating practitioners attended an initial meeting where they introduced their professional contexts, ranging from urban academies undergoing reform to community-led initiatives in under-resourced areas.

Students were grouped and matched with practitioners whose leadership challenges reflected the themes explored in the module. Within these small learning circles, students conducted structured

interviews, analysed organisational issues, and co-developed ideas grounded in academic research. One student described meeting a headteacher from a school in East London who was working to rebuild staff morale following a challenging Ofsted inspection.

Other groups engaged with school leaders in Pakistan and Qatar, including those leading inclusive education programmes in post-conflict areas and developing international curricula in global school settings. For many students, these conversations transformed abstract concepts, such as distributed leadership and cultural responsiveness, into vivid, practical realities.

Yet the learning was reciprocal. Practitioners consistently commented on how the students' questions challenged their assumptions and invited fresh reflection. Some practitioners were introduced to research articles they had never encountered. Others commented on how the students' international perspectives shed new light on long-standing institutional issues.

The scheme culminated in a series of reflective presentations and written analyses, where students shared insights from their collaborations. Some identified tensions between leadership vision and day-to-day constraints. Others explored how values-based leadership can be practised in resource-strained settings. One standout project proposed an evidence-informed strategy to support staff wellbeing in schools facing high staff turnover, drawing both on academic literature and insights from the practitioner partner.

The Leadership Learning Scheme has become more than a module component, it is a living network. Students remain in

contact with practitioners after the module ends, and many have later reported that the relationships built through the scheme helped shape their professional paths.

At its heart, the scheme reflects IOE's commitment to engaged, socially responsible education. It is a space where research meets real-world complexity, where emerging leaders are nurtured not just through textbooks but through trust, dialogue, and experience. In a sector facing ongoing pressure, uncertainty, and change, the scheme reminds us that the future of education will be built not by theory alone, but by the people willing to come together and ask difficult, honest, and hopeful questions.

Students generally remarked that the immersive initiative provided invaluable opportunities for them to engage in close communication with practitioners, serving as an eye-opening experience to expand their learning on leadership expertise. They believed that this interaction significantly enriched their understanding of themes like "leadership perspectives within organisations", "the practical challenges school leaders face when implementing leadership strategies", "the complex nature of leading a learning community", and "the rationale behind decision-making to improve the school's operation".

A pre-service student recognised how her practitioner counterpart mobilised leadership to enact and implement the quality assurance policy, simultaneously taking teacher quality and staff's well-being into account, under the febrile accountability culture. In this sense, the scheme operated as a starting point for students with no prior management experience to explore the complexities of authentic educational settings.

Based on the newfound insights into leadership dynamics, students worked to contribute substantially to the dialogue.

For instance, a student group collaborating with an East London high school principal appreciated the scheme for transforming them from knowledge receivers to active co-creators, as they applied the theories of distributed leadership and people-oriented change management to rebuild team morale and improve efficiency, and the principal ultimately adopted their proposal as part of the improvement plan for the following academic year.

Ziyi, a Chinese student actively conversing with the leader from a Catholic school near London, found value in experiencing cultural diversity and developing a global leadership perspective. Their meaningful dialogue gave her a nuanced understanding of British educational policies, teaching and learning paradigms, and the role of Catholicism in inspiring more connections with local state schools in the diocese.

The scheme thereby helped students transcend cognitive boundaries imposed by cultural differences, mirroring the rich tapestry of learning communities worldwide. Two students noted that the exercise stimulated deep exchanges of cultural values and educational concepts. When listening to the practitioner discuss how he promoted curriculum flexibility to support students' agency and autonomy, they shared a strong emphasis on discipline and standardisation within the education system they were part of.

This exchange greatly expanded cross-cultural horizons through the collision of ideas. Moreover, some students added that they had initially made assumptions

about the "challenges" faced by educational leaders without validating them.

During the scheme, they recognised that these assumptions and their proposed solutions lacked critical and rigorous connections between theory and practice. What is particularly encouraging is that many students continued to engage with practitioners following the scheme, showing keen interest in fostering deeper cross-national collaborations in future initiatives.

Students expressed sincere gratitude to practitioners for dedicating time to these enriching discussions and expressed a desire for more opportunities to engage with them. Some students were at first bewildered due to the busy schedules of practitioners, which made timely communication difficult. However, they also recognised the importance of planning ahead to address their needs within limited time frames.

References

- Bush, T. (2008) *Leadership and Management Development in Education*. SAGE Publications. Available at: <https://sk.sagepub.com/book/mono/leadership-and-management-development-in-education/toc> (Accessed: 24 June 2025).
- Leithwood, K. and Mascall, B. (2008) 'Collective Leadership Effects on Student Achievement', *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), pp. 529–561. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08321221>.
- Shields, C.M. (2002) 'Cross-Cultural Leadership and Communities of Difference: Thinking about Leading in Diverse Schools', in K. Leithwood et al.

(eds) Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, pp. 209–244. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0375-9_9.

Democratising Education Through Peer Learning: A Conversation with Zubair Junjuna

By Tina Wang, UCL MA Educational Leadership student



Zubair Junjuna,
founder of ZNotes

Zubair Junjuna is the founder of ZNotes, an award-winning EdTech platform that has reached over six million learners worldwide with free, high-quality revision resources [1]. As a UCL alumnus, recipient of the prestigious Commonwealth Youth Award, Diana Legacy Award, and a Forbes 30 Under 30 honouree, Zubair's leadership is reshaping how students across the globe access equitable education opportunities [2], [3].

In this interview for Leadership

Connections, he shares how ZNotes began, the values driving his work, and why AI is key to bridging educational inequality in the years ahead.



Zubair Junjuna leading a group of student ambassadors in a session on leadership

From Student Notes to Global Movement

ZNotes come from humble origins—it all started as a personal project. At 16, Zubair was preparing for his IGCSE exams at a British international school in Saudi Arabia when he started writing condensed revision notes to help him study more efficiently. His friends found them useful, so he began sharing them online.

“It started off as a project at school because of a reality that I witnessed first hand,” he recalled. “I could go to great schools and have access to good teaching and support, but not everyone had [that]. That was not a level playing field, so that was the spark in realisation that we need to do something to make that experience more equitable.”

What started as solo effort evolved into a global peer learning community. Over time, people from around the world began downloading the notes. Without funding or institutional backing, ZNotes grew organically through word of mouth. During his time at UCL, Zubair began to see the platform's deeper potential: not just as a collection of notes, but as a community-driven solution to global education inequality.

“It went from a solo project, to a small group effort and today, a global student movement driven to support each other through content creation and peer learning for a more equitable educational system.”

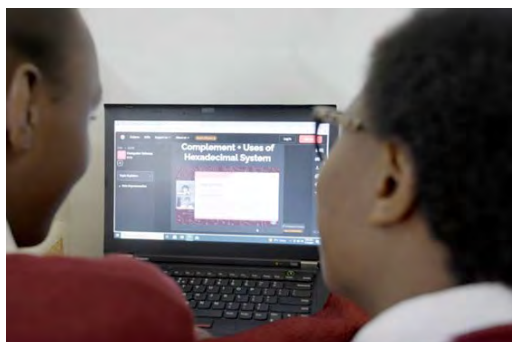
A driving force behind this peer-led ecosystem is the ZNotes Fellowships Programme, which offers young people the chance to contribute meaningfully as content creators, ambassadors, moderators, and peer mentors. Open to students worldwide, the programme is designed to develop leadership, communication, and digital skills — while also giving the youth a sense of ownership in the global mission.

“We have over 100 young people who are part of the program at any given time — as interns, as ambassadors, as contributors, as expert reviewers — supporting ZNotes from all over the world,” said Zubair. “They’re volunteering their time, they’re spreading the word, they’re shaping the future of education.”

Today, ZNotes serves over six million learners and educators in more than 190 countries, offering resources aligned to major international curricula including CAIE, Edexcel, AQA, and the IB [1]. But for Zubair, it’s not about numbers. “The mission has always been about democratising education,” he emphasised. “At the heart of it, we never lose the spirit of students.

They’re part of the contributions, they part of the community and they make a big impact on how we develop and scale our work. That keeps us relatable, and that keeps us still at the heart of the learner’s journey.”

Peer-Led, Globally-Rooted



One of the core innovations behind ZNotes is its student-driven ecosystem. Unlike traditional top-down publishing models, ZNotes is built and sustained by students — young people supporting other young people.

This peer-driven structure enables ZNotes to remain dynamic, relevant, and inclusive. Contributors — often current or recent students themselves — keep the resources aligned with changing syllabi and real exam needs. More importantly, this model empowers learners to become active creators of knowledge and agents of change, not just passive recipients.

“I want to make sure that a 17-year-old student who is contributing notes to ZNotes should be as easily able to share feedback with me as an EdTech expert who has been in the industry for two decades,” Zubair explained. “That relationship, that openness to criticism, feedback, ideation is a big part of our culture.”

Research supports this ethos. A 2020 study by Tullis and Goldstone demonstrated that peer instruction—where students explain concepts to one another—not only helps clarify challenging concepts but also fosters a collaborative classroom culture, leading to greater engagement

and long-term retention [4]. Similarly, Mama, Owusu, and Wiysonge (2024) found that structured peer tutoring programmes in STEM significantly improved students' academic outcomes, participation, and confidence [5]. "At the end of the day, a student who has done well in their examinations is taking their experiences and synthesising it in a way for [other] students to take away and learn. At the same time, they are improving their own understanding and likely to achieve better results in future exams."

These findings also align with long-established educational theory. Topping (2005) defines peer learning as "the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals," noting its role in deepening understanding and building learner confidence. [6]. Vygotsky's theory of the "zone of proximal development" further highlights how students learn best just beyond their current capabilities, particularly with guidance from more knowledgeable peers [7].

"Self-motivation is key driver for students when it comes to the platform. They are proactively discovering and engaging on the platform for their own revision and upskilling," he added. "That dynamic has been a big part of how we've continued to evolve — even as the organisation has grown, the sense of community and belonging is key to our ethos. Even today, our global reach of millions has been purely through word of mouth."

By giving learners the opportunity to create, review, and lead, ZNotes transforms students from recipients of knowledge into educational changemakers. This grassroots, collaborative movement flips the traditional paradigm — dismantling hierarchies and

empowering young people to shape their own learning ecosystems.

Bridging the Digital Divide

Beyond pedagogy, ZNotes is grounded in its mission of fighting inequality— ensuring that every learner, regardless of geography or background, has access to quality education. Yet, as he acknowledged, the global digital divide remains a pressing barrier. "Not every young person has a laptop to continuously learn. But through partnerships, we can do more."

To tackle this, ZNotes is developing partnerships with organisations like LiteHaus International, which refurbishes donated laptops for students in underserved regions such as Papua New Guinea [8]. "They're setting up labs where students have never seen a computer before," he noted. While ZNotes focuses on delivering high-quality open content, these partnerships help bridge the infrastructure gap by improving access to hardware and connectivity.

Crucially, Zubair is also turning his attention to language and curriculum localisation. "As we move forward, we see big opportunities to expand our content into new curricula and new languages," he explained. "For example, transitioning from the British curriculum to the Pakistani curriculum — there will be certain overlaps and certain differences. The challenge is how can you bridge those gaps as quickly as possible and accelerate the configuration process?"

For the full article, click [here](#) to continue reading. Coming up: Discover how Zubair is leveraging AI to enhance peer learning, foster inclusion, and advance ZNotes' bold vision for reimagining student-led education on a global scale.

Building a school that works hand in hand with the community in Japan: The journey toward "One Team"

By Atsuya Ito, UCL MA Educational Leadership student



Mr. Tadayuki Tsukamoto
Chairperson of Itabashi 10th Elementary School
Community School Committee
Representative of ONE TEAM Luv

In the Japanese education sphere, there is a community leader who is driving the deepening of collaboration between communities and schools. His name is Tadayuki Tsukamoto, chairperson of Itabashi 10th Elementary School Community School Committee, located in Tokyo, Japan. Community School (CS) is a system in which school staff, local residents, and other stakeholders formally participate in school management through a school management council. (See [1] for further details.)

Mr. Tsukamoto's initiatives transcend the conventional boundaries between schools

and communities, aiming to nurture children in collaboration with the community, and show one ideal form of CS. This article will introduce his leadership and his efforts to realise the "ONE TEAM" concept, which unites communities and schools.

A Personal Journey to Community Leadership

Mr. Tsukamoto's involvement in educational activities is deeply rooted in his own experience of raising children. He was once a corporate employee who was results-oriented, but when his eldest son caused problems at school, he saw the support from the teachers and classmates around him and realised that he had been neglecting the process. This experience was a turning point for him to participate in PTA activities and community schools (CS).

Having experienced a lack of love from his parents in his childhood, he did not want his child to experience the same thing, but he realised that he had only sought results and ignored his son's feelings in his approach to raising him, and he apologised to his son. He started PTA activities because he wanted to know how his son was doing at school.

He has been the CS chairperson since 2019, and left his company to fully devote himself to school activities. Based on the support of his family and the value of prioritising human connections over financial gain, he is currently engaged in a variety of activities in parallel, such as CS committee member and advisor at other schools and graphic recording (Gra-Reco) instruction, in addition to his role as CS chairperson.

Collaborative Activities at Itabashi 10th Elementary School CS

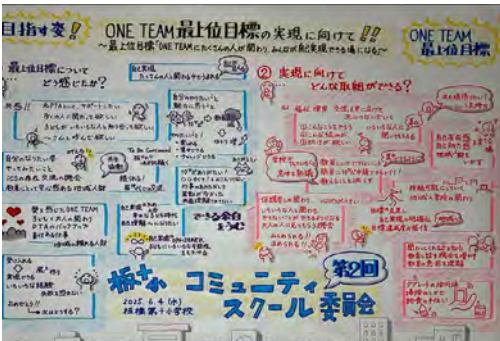
The CS system at his elementary school is collaboratively managed by two key entities working as two wheels: the "CS Committee," comprising the school, parents, and local residents, which serves as the decision-making body for school management; and the "Headquarters for Collaboration of Community and School," consisting of local organisations, which acts as the primary operational arm for community activities.

This collaborative structure supports children's learning throughout the community. The CS Committee and school administrators jointly formulate the school management policy, and based on the principal's draft proposal, they hold "jukugi" (a dialogue aimed at resolving issues through repeated "deliberations" and "discussions" by many parties involved [2]). This allows the diverse perspectives and expertise of the community to be reflected in the management, and fosters a sense of autonomy and collective responsibility among local residents as they take ownership of school issues.

The premise of jukugi is the sharing of the top goal "for the children's learning" and the ground rule "mutual understanding". External observers such as high school students and business people also participate in jukugi, and the children themselves express their opinions as "stakeholders in learning" through questionnaires and direct participation in jukugi. The activities are made visible and more transparent by using "Gra-Reco".

Based on the concept that "all stakeholders involved with children function as 'ONE TEAM,'" CS serves as a hub for cooperation between school-related

organisations such as PTA, alumni associations, and neighbourhood associations. The community-led approach to CS activities reduces the burden on teachers, enabling them to focus on teaching, which increases the sustainability of activities, regardless of transfers of teaching staff. In addition, by viewing the community not only as "local" but also as "global," CS in his school is proactively developing activities that respond to children's desire to learn, such as inviting experts from outside the school district.



Gra-Reco of a CS committee meeting

Guiding Values and Principles: Fostering Connections Through Dialogue and Altruism

Mr. Tsukamoto values "human connections" and "dialogue based on humility and attentive listening." He believes in building trust by understanding the other person's true intentions and deriving constructive solutions. When dealing with new stakeholders, he first listens attentively.

He has started providing a safe place for children within the school, which he calls a "secret base." He is close to the children from a "middle position" different from teachers and parents, conveys the message that "Even if you fail, you can try again," and encourages them to have

the courage to ask for help. This place also doubles as his own office, and is the foundation for cultivating trusting relationships through daily interactions with not only students but also teachers.

At the root of his leadership is the spirit of "paying it forward." This is the idea that "changing yourself will have a positive impact on those around you." He strongly believes that when one acts from intrinsic motivation, doing what they genuinely want to do, it naturally resonates with others and becomes a catalyst for them to also embrace change.

Future Vision: Realisation of “ONE TEAM” All Over Japan

In order to ensure the sustainability of the CS activities, Mr. Tsukamoto plans to build a fundraising system (establishment of a fund, etc.) that does not rely solely on the goodwill of volunteers, taking into consideration the cost. He aims for the school to ultimately go beyond being a place of learning for children and become a "true learning community hub" for lifelong learning and solving local issues.

In order to ensure that the model of Itabashi 10th Elementary School does not become an individual success, he is identifying common issues and the essence of CS in various regions through CS support at other schools and through his visits to CS nationwide. He emphasises that the essence of CS is not an event-like excitement, but an activity that gradually changes the region through steady dialogue like "charcoal fire". He recognises that human resources capable of connecting systems with on-the-ground realities and flexibly adapting to diverse local situations are essential for the sustainable promotion and meaningful expansion of CS nationwide.

For this purpose, he launched "ONE Team Luv" (<https://oneteamluv.org/>), a voluntary organisation that supports the sustainable functioning of CS nationwide. In addition to providing a CS launch support guidebook, he plans to expand the network of "accompaniers" who have the knowledge and experience to provide support that is close to each region and school.

Mr. Tsukamoto's ultimate goal is to realise "ONE TEAM" throughout the country, with schools at the core, where children, teachers, and local residents support and learn from each other, and realise themselves.

References

[1] MEXT (n.d.) Community School (The School Management Council System)] https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/community/index.htm (Accessed at: 25 June 2025)

[2] MEXT (2017) [Community School 2017 - Aiming to build schools together with the community]. https://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/_icsFiles/afiled-file/2018/09/03/1408715_03.pdf (Accessed at: 25 June 2025)



Building Bridges Through Partnership: An interview with Prof. Metin Ozkan

Aida Tinayeva, UCL MA Educational Leadership student



Prof. Metin Ozkan,
professor of educational administration at
Gaziantep University

In an era where collaboration is reshaping the educational landscape, school partnerships are emerging not merely as cooperative arrangements but as powerful catalysts for systemic change.

In this edition of Leadership Connections, we have interviewed Prof. Metin Ozkan, professor of educational administration at Gaziantep University and a visiting scholar at UCL Centre for Educational Leadership (CEL), whose work focuses on how collaborative leadership and teacher empowerment can be cultivated through intentional and meaningful school partnerships.

Currently based in the UK and supported by the Turkish Scientific

Council (TUBİTAK), Prof. Ozkan is working closely with organisations such as the Education Development Trust (EDT) and UCL CEL to explore cross-national approaches to educational improvement. In this interview, we explore his leadership journey, vision for empowering teachers, and the insights emerging from his research on school partnerships as a transformative force.

Personal leadership journey

AT: Could you share your journey into educational leadership?

MO: My journey began as a teacher in a socio-economically disadvantaged area. Those early experiences were the deep roots that continue to inspire me today. They taught me the power of connection and growth, prompting me to expand my reach. I became a head teacher, striving to make a broader impact. Later,

I transitioned to academia to contribute to the development of future leaders, carrying forward the strength of my beginnings to inspire and empower others. My leadership practice has been shaped by my roles in state schools and as a founding leader of an academic centre.

I believe in fostering connection, seeing each team member as a whole person with unique social and cultural dimensions. This people-first approach led to remarkable achievements. I often ask: 'How can I understand their message, needs, and potential?' For me, leadership means making a difference, one that resonates with individuals and communities.

School Partnerships & Teacher Empowerment

AT: Building on your people-first leadership philosophy, let's explore how this translates into your interest in school partnerships and teacher empowerment.

I've always believed that schools can only truly improve from within. The real power lies in the hands of educators themselves. Teaching is a highly qualified profession, and when teachers reflect on their practice and make informed decisions, genuine development occurs.

I see peer learning as one of the strongest forms of professional growth, teachers' learning from each other within their own context. School partnerships make this possible, creating spaces where collaboration sparks internal change and nurtures a shared culture of growth.

AT: Why do you believe school partnerships are essential for strengthening leadership and empowering teachers?

MO: I see school partnerships as the scaffolding that supports both leadership development and teacher empowerment.

They create opportunities for shared practice, mutual learning, and collaborative problem-solving which are the key elements for professional growth.

When schools work together, leaders gain fresh perspectives, and teachers feel valued as active contributors to their school's journey. These partnerships also break the isolation that educators can sometimes feel, connecting them to a larger community of practice and fostering a sense of shared purpose and responsibility.

Current Research and Collaboration

AT: From theory to practice, your beliefs in collaborative leadership and teacher agency now inform your research. Let's explore how these ideas are being investigated through your current work in England?

MO: My research focuses on how school partnership programmes impact leadership capacity and teacher empowerment. I am exploring the idea that these partnerships, by fostering trust and equality, might distribute leadership beyond a single person or group, potentially creating a more collaborative and empowered school culture where teachers feel more confident and involved.

I'm exploring the central question of how school partnership programmes might enable distributed leadership and strengthen teacher agency. One key challenge is understanding how these partnerships, grounded in trust and professional collaboration, can shift leadership from a top-down model to a shared one.

My motivation stems from my belief that schools grow from within and that teachers' voices are essential in creating meaningful, sustainable change.

Early observations suggest that schools in partnerships often act as mirrors for each other in their journey of self-discovery. This collaborative reflection creates a space for sharing practices without fear of judgement.

I've noticed that when the environment is built on knowledge-sharing rather than power, everyone feels safer and more open to collaboration. Schools with strong relational cultures tend to engage more

deeply in partnership activities, fostering wider participation and dynamic leadership practices.

AT: What impact do you hope your research will have on leadership practices or school improvement in Türkiye and internationally?

MO: I hope this research can highlight how collaborative school partnerships may foster sustainable, trust-based leadership models. By demonstrating how shared leadership and teacher agency can strengthen school culture,

I believe the findings can inspire schools in Türkiye and beyond to embrace more inclusive and participatory approaches to school development. Ultimately, I envision a more connected and reflective practice, where schools grow from within through peer collaboration and the strengthening of teacher-to-teacher relationships.

AT: How has your experience across Türkiye and the UK shaped the way you design or interpret this research?

MO: In Türkiye, where we have a vast education system with a young population, I've seen the need for schools to take more ownership of their development.

Traditionally, external evaluations were used to check if we were on course, but we are now shifting towards internal, continuous self-assessment, adjusting the ship's course from within rather than relying on outside observers.

My exposure to the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) during this period introduced me to an integrated approach combining school self-evaluation and peer collaboration. This, along with my belief in the essential role of teachers in

driving change, has shaped how I design and interpret this research.

When it comes to similarities between two country's approach to educational leadership and teacher development, the approaches stem from deep cultural foundations. Drawing from Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Türkiye tends to exhibit higher power distance and uncertainty avoidance compared to the UK, which helps explain the more hierarchical and authority-based school structures.

However, this also brings high levels of dedication. The challenge lies in balancing these cultural traits—leveraging their positive aspects while addressing limitations. Organisational behaviour literature reminds us that unlocking the full potential of every individual requires building on cultural strengths while transforming constraints. In Türkiye, this may involve flattening internal power hierarchies, while in the UK, the focus could be on nurturing greater teacher commitment and collective purpose.

AT: You're exploring a potential collaboration with Dr. David Godfrey and the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership on a project in Türkiye. Could you share more about this initiative?

MO: We are envisioning a pilot project in a culturally diverse region of Türkiye, where local schools will embark on a journey of self-determined development through school partnerships. The idea is to create a context where schools identify their own improvement needs, supported by peer collaboration and reflective practices, with the added dimension of partners from England. This initiative could pave the way for a larger international project, blending

local strengths with global insights. I see this as an exciting step towards creating a truly global meeting point for educational collaboration.

AT: You've shared valuable insights from both research and experience. As we wrap up, what guidance would you offer to emerging leaders navigating cross-cultural educational landscapes?

MO: While I've had the privilege of reaching a senior academic position in my home country, my journey is far from over my passion for learning, growth, and cross-cultural understanding continues to drive me forward.

My previous research at DCU in Ireland and my current experience at EDT and UCL CEL have both deepened my desire to explore, learn, and embrace diverse cultural perspectives.

My advice is simple yet powerful: keep your mind open, cultivate curiosity, and push your horizons further. Leadership, especially in cross-cultural settings, is not just about leading others, it's about constantly expanding your own understanding, learning from those around you, and co-creating meaningful change.

The Transforming Leadership: Key insights and lessons learnt from the NPQs

By Liam Anderson



By Liam Anderson, Head of Department of Design and Technology, Trinity school, Newbury, England

My journey as a school leader through the National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), has been a transformative experience, shaping my approach to leading teaching and senior leadership. The NPQs have equipped me with enhanced practical leadership skills, a deeper understanding of educational leadership theory and a broader perspective on what it truly means to lead with impact.

This leadership learning process has given me the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to navigate complex challenges in schools, support my team and understand how to ultimately improve outcomes for all pupils. In this article I reflect on the most significant lessons I have learnt about leadership that have shaped and developed my approach.

The face-to-face delivery of NPQ sessions facilitated by experienced school leaders, enabled learning from drawing on real scenarios from their own leadership experiences. These shared experiences brought leadership theory to life, contextualising and integrating this with practice and practical strategies when leading in schools.

This has supported my own practical leadership skills and how to lead on areas such as developing a vision, creating and implementing practical and realistic plans for improvement and how to be flexible and adaptable in an ever changing context.

Practical skills for leadership in schools

A key element of successful leadership is evidence informed decision making, particularly when introducing change. The early stages of exploring the need for change and engaging stakeholders such as staff, pupils, parents and governors is crucial for building trust and getting buy-in. As a leader, I have seen how when this step is missing, it can lead to fragmented implementation.

The NPQs have taught me the importance of 'soft' leadership skills such as building trust, clearly communicating the "why" behind new changes and initiatives and grounding decisions in evidence. This is more likely to get buy-in from stakeholders as the change you are wanting is more credible and builds your credibility as a leader.

Being evidence informed means more than applying research. It is about triangulating research, professional experience, and contextual understanding of your school. Leaders

must know their schools deeply, knowing their school community, pupils and its challenges, to shape the strategy accordingly. This is about acknowledging the nuances of your school and its context alongside evidence of what works, to set out a clear and ambitious vision for a new change or initiative that is right for the school.

However, a strong vision must be supported by a carefully crafted and robust plan. Leaders need to account for numerous factors such as resources, costs, staff training and ways to measure impact. This is where a leader needs to consider the 'active ingredients'. Leaders need to plan for how this might need to be adapted and be flexible to changing circumstances such as staffing changes or evolving pupil needs from data.

It is vital to distinguish between non-negotiables (for example, core teaching principles) and areas that allow for more flexibility (such as subject-specific adaptations) when formulating a plan. Continual monitoring and review using real-time data and stakeholder feedback are also essential for leaders to use for adjusting and sustaining plans effectively.

Deepening knowledge of leadership practices

A transformative insight I gained during the NPQs was understanding the balance between operational and strategic leadership. Middle leaders often juggle both; implementing day to day actions, whilst guiding their teams with the broader strategy.

This balance is often blurred for leaders due to time constraints and other school pressures, but distinguishing between the

two is critical. Without strategic direction, the vision can become unclear, but without operational effort, the vision might never be realised. This is where building capacity and skills in your team is crucial to support effective implementation of the plan to provide more balance while also being able to think strategically. But, as mentioned earlier, this relies heavily on buy-in from your staff.

As a senior leader, I have realised the focus needs to shift even more towards strategic thinking and leadership. Senior leaders must maintain an overview that ensures plans align with the vision, whilst working through and alongside other leaders and staff to delegate and distribute leadership. Building sustainable change and improvement involves developing your team, building trust, and ensuring that staff have the resources and confidence to implement change.

Implementing and sustaining change

The Education Endowment Foundation's A School's Guide to Implementation [1] is a key thread used throughout the NPQs, providing a valuable and practical framework for managing change. It outlines four stages: explore, prepare, deliver and sustain. Whilst all stages are important and rely on one another, the 'sustain' phase is often most overlooked and can also be the most challenging for leaders to get right.

In the past, I had assumed that once change was implemented, it would continue on its own. However, sustaining change requires intentional planning and momentum over time. Through the NPQs and my own leadership practice, I have learnt that successful and lasting change relies heavily on staff readiness, where staff feel prepared, trained and supported.

Trying to implement too much at once can overwhelm staff and cause new initiatives to quickly be forgotten about and fail. But, focusing on one or a very small number of central initiatives, integrated into the school's existing systems, language and training, helps to keep everyone aligned and maintain momentum.

When leaders can align change with what staff are already familiar with and build on this, it can feel more manageable and more likely to be sustained. Sustaining change also involves recognising progress, sharing success and using 'early adopters' to keep up enthusiasm and pace amongst your staff team.

Leaders need to ensure that they regularly and continuously engage with staff, drawing on expertise and embed change into the daily fabric of school life. As a leader, I have quickly realised through using the EEF framework in my own implementation projects in the NPQs, makes a huge difference to the likelihood of successful implementation.

I titled this article "transforming leadership" reflecting on what has changed in me as a leader. In my reflections in this article, it is clear there have been a series of changes in my thinking and approach as a leader, shaping (or re-shaping) my leadership of change in schools:

- 1. Culture is key:** for any new change to be successful and sustained, leaders must make sure that the culture is right and the right conditions are in place. This includes making sure staff are equipped and ready for change and that there is a clear vision, with a motivated and supported staff body behind this.
- 2. Your staff team are the engine room:** ensure those who are going to

be putting the change into practice on the ground feel supported, knowledgeable and prepared. Build on successful work that is already happening, this helps gain buy-in from the people who will be the key drivers of the change.

3. **Integrate into the everyday:** align changes with established systems in the school. This increases the likelihood of it being sustained by drawing on an infrastructure that is already in place and using existing staff knowledge.
4. **Evidence based decisions:** ensure approaches are evidence based, have credibility and are likely to be impactful. But – do ensure that these decisions are considered through a context specific lens that will suit your school and pupils – key to planning and preparation of any change and new initiatives.

(Liam is a secondary middle leader in a large, mixed comprehensive academy located in Newbury, West Berkshire and currently head of department for design and technology and an early career teacher (ECT) induction tutor and facilitator. Liam completed the NPQ for Leading Teaching in November 2022 and NPQ for Senior Leadership in September 2024 and is currently completing the NPQ for Leading Teacher Development with UCL and Teaching School Hub Berkshire).

References

[1] Education Endowment Foundation, 2024. A School's Guide to Implementation. 3rd ed. London: Education Endowment Foundation. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/implementation> [Accessed 21 June 2025].

Sustainable Leadership through Altruistic Mentoring

By Elke Greite



Elke Greite
IB Educator, Middle Leader and Educational Consultant

Mentorship as a Transformative Leadership Tool

Mentorship is not just about guidance. It is a powerful tool for transformation. Studies show that mentored individuals are significantly more likely to thrive in their careers, underlining the lasting impact of effective mentoring on leadership development (1).

Being mentored can be life-changing. Everyone can benefit from the support of a mentor at different stages in their lives and careers (ECIS, 2023).

The experience of mentorship shapes professional growth, strengthens self-advocacy, and reveals the essential characteristics of altruistic leadership.

Mentoring for Empowerment and Growth

Joining the ECIS Mentoring Programme

initially created a sense of both eagerness and uncertainty about how to move forward with diverse aspirations and long-term projects. Meeting with a mentor every four weeks over a year provided valuable space for reflection and guidance. Through her empathy and active listening, my mentor created a trusting environment where challenges and aspirations could be shared openly.

One particularly impactful moment was to recognise potential during a time when inflexible structural conditions appeared to block further development. This guidance supported taking new, courageous steps toward professional growth.

What Makes an Effective Mentor?

Mentorship becomes most transformative when it is deeply personalised. Feeling seen, valued, and understood (as a professional and as an individual) makes a significant difference. The trust placed in me, along with the growth and insights gained through impactful mentoring and exemplary leadership, has been profoundly rewarding.

Key qualities of impactful mentors include:

- **Active Listening and Understanding:** Acknowledging the mentee's commitments, contributions, and insights.
- **Empathy and Approachability:** Building a trusting environment where open communication can flourish.
- **Integrity and Consistency:** Providing reliable, regular support and guidance.
- **Vision and Advocacy:** Encouraging the mentee's aspirations and creativity.
- **Empowerment and Encouragement:** Inspiring belief in one's abilities and fostering growth.

At first, climbing the dunes without a wooden ladder may seem more challenging, as there is a tendency to focus on reaching the top quickly and comfortably. However, relying on the ladder means missing out on the opportunity to explore and learn from the shifting sand beneath our feet. Understanding that there are multiple paths over the dune, each shaped by external factors, provides a sense of empowerment. This perspective encourages valuing the process and interim goals, leading to new, often unexpected, perspectives

Leadership Lessons from the Classroom

Inquiry-based classrooms with identity-centred learning processes offer a living model for mentorship in action. Within these environments, students are empowered to navigate their own learning journeys, while teachers step back and act as mentors who guide and support rather than direct.

In my Visual Arts classroom, students define personal themes for their projects, culminating in an exhibition that reflects their individual growth rather than the teacher's influence. The teacher's role becomes one of facilitator—providing the necessary structure and support while allowing students' voices and visions to lead. This approach demands a high degree of selflessness. Teachers must act as altruistic benefactors, foregrounding student agency and creativity.

Leaders who maintain a direct and authentic connection to teaching continue to refine these mentorship qualities. Hands-on experiences in the classroom foster leadership that is reflective, empathetic, and empowering.

Why Altruism in Leadership Matters

In my experience, altruism in leadership is rare, yet it is crucial for long-term success. In a culture that often prioritises performance metrics and results, leaders who focus on empathy, compassion, and the genuine growth of others build trust and create environments where people can thrive. Such leaders cultivate organisational cultures that elevate individuals and teams, creating a shared commitment to sustainable growth.

By fostering altruistic leadership, educational institutions can move beyond traditional hierarchical structures, focusing instead on building inclusive learning cultures centred on belonging, identity, and agency.

Mentorship Qualities and their Connection to Sustainable Leadership

Adapted from Usanmaz (2023), the following mentorship characteristics directly contribute to sustainable, altruistic leadership:

Clarity	Vision and Focus	Communicates clear goals and supports mentees in defining a purposeful direction.
Commitment	Reliability and Consistency	Builds trust through ongoing, dependable support.
Compassion	Empathy and Inclusion	Creates safe, supportive spaces that honour diverse needs and perspectives.
Competence	Role Modeling	Demonstrates skill and reflective practice that inspire professional growth.

In an environment where performance metrics often dominate, leaders who prioritise empathy, compassion, and the genuine growth of others foster trust, respect, and long-term organisational success.

Such leaders create cultures that elevate not only individuals but entire teams, amplifying a shared commitment to sustainable development.

Engaging in mentorship, whether as a mentor or mentee, offers an avenue to cultivate these values. Through fostering altruistic leadership, educational institutions can move beyond hierarchical structures toward learning cultures centred on belonging, identity, and agency.

True active listening challenges self-motivated leadership and demands emotional intelligence. Without a commitment to reflection and relational growth, leaders risk limiting their potential to inspire sustainable, transformational change.

References:

(2) Clutterbuck, David. Everyone Needs a Mentor: Fostering Talent in Your Organisation. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2014.
Clutterbuck, David, and David Megginson. Making Mentoring Work. Harvard Business Review, 2016.

(2) ECIS. "Being Mentored Can Be Life-Changing – Everyone Can Benefit from Having the Support of a Mentor at Different Stages in Their Lives and Careers." Educational Collaborative of International Schools (ECIS), 2023. www.ecis.org/mentoring.

website: <https://www.elkegreite.com/>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/elke-greite-inspire-growth/>

Children's "Invisible Backpacks": A Family-Centered Approach in Early Childhood Leadership

By Jackie Becher



Jackie Becher,
Early Years Principal at Beijing City International
School

Children bring their family to school, and all their experiences that have shaped

their many evolving identities. The children's family and their experiences are often described as the child's "invisible backpack". Focusing on children's funds of knowledge, and particularly their family, enables the early years to be responsive to who children are and understand their complexities leading to more personalised learning.

This article examines how leadership strategies of noticing, awareness and action were implemented in one school to cultivate a family-centred approach.

Context

This article is being written in downtown Beijing, China. The school is an international school serving Toddler children to Grade 12 students across two campuses. The Early Childhood setting, one kilometre away from the Elementary and Secondary Schools, serves approximately 300 children and their families (aged 2-6 years of age) most of whom are of Chinese descent. The school is deeply committed to a progressive education that is empowering, inspiring, challenging, rigorous and fosters compassion for the community and the planet. The Centre

has its own, dedicated leadership team of a Principal, Deputy Principal and Curriculum Coordinator. The leadership team is intentionally cross-cultural, including both Chinese and expatriate members, ensuring the community's diverse perspectives are heard and responded to.

Funds of Knowledge and a Family-Centred Approach

Funds of knowledge are defined as “the knowledge, skills and experiences acquired through historical and cultural interactions of an individual in their community and family life and culture through everyday living” (1) Barblett, Boylan and Ruscoe, 2023, p.3.

Central to effective leadership in early childhood education is the recognition and utilisation of young children's funds of knowledge. While relationships with children are essential, equally important are relationships with their families, as these connections build children's sense of safety, security and provide us with further insight into the child's funds of knowledge.

Therefore, we might say, a leader of an early childhood setting has a responsibility not only to the children and staff of the setting, but also the children's families. Effective leadership requires listening and noticing to draw upon the community's funds of knowledge, rather than imposing one's own cultural expectations, experiences and culture.

Noticing and Listening

Noticing and listening are fundamental skills for school leaders. Listening and noticing goes beyond the auditory to include watching, sensitivity for connections, awareness of intuition (2) Rinaldi, 2004. Or as the traditional Chinese character, (ting), embodies

this holistic approach encompassing listening with our eyes, mind, heart and ears with presence and undivided attention to seek connection. This type of embodied listening asks us to suspend judgement, notice our children and community and identify patterns and connections.

In practice, many leaders will greet the children and families as they enter the building in the morning. This is the perfect time to listen. When commencing my position, I noticed many of our families, when bringing their children to school, were present with their phone, rather than their children and our staff. And despite it being mid-year, some children were still unsettled during arrival time. This observation prompted our leadership team to reflect on whether a different community could be fostered that values greeting one another and enjoying their children.

In response, the leadership team intentionally greeted children and families each morning. This simple action led to phones being put away, families sharing stories, children bringing comfort toys to share, and families playing games with their children on arrival. Consequently, children appeared more settled at arrival time, allowing for different kinds of learning. The importance of listening and noticing cannot be overstated. A key part of listening and noticing is seeking other perspectives and suspending judgements.

Open-minded and Suspending Conceptual Understanding

Engaging with children's funds of knowledge requires an educational leader to be open-minded and suspend preconceived notions of fundamental institutions of society. Valuing children's funds of knowledge entails recognising diverse perspectives on family structures.

In our context, family means something different to every child; for some children grandparents are the primary carer; for others, an Ayi (nanny) an aunt, or even a pet may be central to their concept of family. Listening attentively involves not only family composition but also the influence and connections among family members and their implications for working with young children.

In our context, in many cases, grandparents are not only primary caregivers but also key decision makers in relation to education, extra-curricular activities and health practices. Our leadership team has listened carefully to these family dynamics, including tensions arising from generational differences.

The generation gap in China is reportedly pronounced due to rapid societal and economic changes over the past three decades (3) OECD, 2016. When parents choose a progressive education, that is offered by our school, tensions often arise between the generations regarding educational choices. In response to these 'noticings', our leadership team developed "Grandparents as Learners" workshops that are conducted in Mandarin, by our Chinese Director, a grandparent herself, and our Curriculum Coordinator, who is a parent of a child at our school.

This intentional choice reflects the dynamics of our children's homes. These workshops have been well-attended, often by grandparents and parents together, and have transformed tense family conversations into opportunities for curiosity and harmony. Being open to diverse views while being open-minded is key to developing a family-centred approach.

Understanding Community History

Listening extends beyond awareness of the school community to include understanding the wider community's recent history and impact on families and education. China's one child policy shaped family structures and child-rearing practices (3) OECD, 2016. The policy change in 2016 has introduced new opportunities and challenges as families navigate raising more than one child.

Many parents and grandparents have limited experience with more than one child in the family, leading to questions about sibling rivalry and family harmony. By listening to our families, we have responded by offering book clubs, where families read a book and then analyse together regularly; parent workshops; and individual counselling to support families in managing these new dynamics.

Developing Trust

Families who choose progressive education often experience moments of doubt. Educational leaders must acknowledge this and continuously build trust. Transparency is critical (4) Epstein, 2010, especially in a societal context where trust in institutions has diminished (5) Steinhardt, Gong and Delhey, 2024.

Fostering trust, our leadership team, implemented a transition program allowing families to stay with their child in the classroom for up to three weeks. This presence helps form relationships between families and teachers while allowing families to witness the care and professionalism of staff. It is also used as an opportunity to discuss child development and strategies for separation anxiety with the family. The

strategy fosters trust as families can see and experience our program in action. Additional supports, such as a coffee cart and noodle bar, enable families to leave their children for short periods, reinforcing the child's understanding that their family will return. These strategies strengthen trust and introduce families to diverse child-rearing perspectives.

Conclusion

Effective educational leadership in early childhood relies on deeply knowing the school community through listening with your heart, mind, eyes and ears while providing undivided attention.

It involves recognising connections and responding thoughtfully. Employing these strategies fosters early childhood programs that are family centred resulting in true partnerships between home and school ultimately enhancing children's learning outcomes.

With thanks for Wang Yan, Chinese Director and Dan Zhu, Early Childhood Center Curriculum Coordinator, Beijing City International School, for supporting us to create a cross-cultural learning space.

1. Barblett, L., Boylan, F., and Ruscoe, A., (2023). *Transforming Transitions to School*: Association for Independent Schools of Western Australia. Perth, Australia: Association for Independent Schools of Western Australia.

2. Rinaldi, C. (2004). "The Relationship between Documentation and Assessment," *Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Exchange*, vol. 11, no. 1.

3. OECD, (2016). *A Snapshot of Education in China*. Paris, France: OECD Publishing.

4. Epstein, J. L., (2010). *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving School*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

5. Steinhardt, H., Gong, X., and Delhey, J. (2024). "Chasing a phantom: a re-evaluation of China's 'trust crisis'," *Chinese Sociological Review*, pp. 1–27. doi: 10.1080/21620555.2024.2430265.

The Power of Storytelling: Connecting through Human Libraries

By Anne-Marie Ohene-Kena and Lauren Kelley



Anne-Marie Ohene-Kena and Lauren Kelley from ACS Schools

"Engrave this upon your heart: there isn't anyone you couldn't love once you heard their story." Mary Lou Kownacki

'Positively Terminal: Living positively with a terminal diagnosis', 'What happens when you don't jump.'

and on a lighter note: 'The day I caused pandemonium at the 2012 Olympics' and 'To the top of the world – almost! Everest Base Camp trek.'

These are some of the titles of the 22 'Living Books' who recently shared their stories at the fourth Human Library event at ACS International School Egham in Surrey. Each story described the unique personal experience of the storyteller, and all of the 'Readers' and Living Books were members of our own staff community.

The original Human Library movement started in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2000 as a social experiment aimed at promoting dialogue, reducing prejudice, and challenging stereotypes. The idea was to create a space where individual, referred to as 'Living Books', could share personal stories related to experiences of marginalisation, discrimination, or misunderstanding, while 'Readers' could ask questions and engage in meaningful conversations, fostering empathy and social change through human connection. (1) The Human Library Organization, 2024; BBC News, 2020).

The Human Library works just like a normal library. Visitors can browse the catalogue for the available titles, choose the book they want to read, and borrow it for a limited period of time. After 'reading', they return the book to the library and, if they want, borrow another. The only difference is that in the Human Library, books are people, and reading consists of a conversation.

"The Human Library is the most impactful activity we have engaged in to build community. It develops trust, builds relationships, and exemplifies our values; all of which help to create the open, equitable and inclusive culture we aspire to."

Mark Wilson, Head of School

The four Human Libraries we have held at ACS Egham since 2023 have each brought our core values to life in a

powerful and authentic way. The events offer a rare opportunity to explore different perspectives, break down stereotypes, and foster genuine connections within our school community.

As a result, those who participate often find themselves forming new relationships and continuing conversations long after the event ends—helping to create a stronger, more inclusive sense of belonging across the school.

Moreover, when teachers connect more meaningfully with each other, it strengthens the fabric of the whole school community. Certainly, stronger relationships among staff will translate into greater collaboration, improved communication, and a more supportive atmosphere—something students can feel in school every day.

After each Human Library event at ACS Egham, participants are invited to share their reflections and suggestions via a survey. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the event's deep emotional impact and value.

"The Human Library has helped us to decide and stand by who we want to be as a school. If we want to inspire students to be changemakers and do things differently, then we need to do that in all areas of our school. This type of focus does that--change happens at those inflection points of emotional unease. The number of people that have said they were moved, that this was the best staff meeting they'd ever had and that they want to do it again, proves just how ready we actually are to move forward with heart and true connection." **ACS Egham Teacher**

Hosting a Human Library event is less about logistics and more about creating a space where real stories can unfold. It all starts with a staff presentation that sets the tone, sharing the heart behind the initiative and inviting volunteers to step into the role of Living Books. We emphasise that the experience will be a relaxed, open conversation rather than a formal presentation.

Those who choose to become Living Books are asked to craft a title and a short 'blurb' describing the essence of their story; just enough to intrigue potential Readers and help them choose the narratives they feel drawn to. Once the collection of Books is complete, a digital catalogue is shared, complete with titles, summaries, and photos, so staff can "reserve" the stories they want to explore. From there, it's all about creating the right atmosphere.

A time and place are set, a venue is booked, and some simple refreshments are arranged. Chairs are placed in circles, intentionally designed to break down barriers and spark dialogue. We have had great success holding our Human Libraries during scheduled staff meetings, which further confirms the school's commitment to intentionally celebrating diversity and fostering a strong community. With all of this in place, the school becomes a space not just for learning, but for understanding.

"There is such purpose in and necessity for holding Human Libraries in order to see people as more than their role in school. Sharing our stories helps us make connections and meet each other on a deeper level. It is the bridge to meet each other as humans. **Alison Carl, Lower School Principal**

What have we learned and where are we going from here? The Human Library now has a permanent place in our school culture. It has shown us that the power of storytelling is truly limitless. When personal stories are met with empathy and care, they become not just a bridge between people—but also a pathway to healing, self-discovery, and deeper connection.

The positive buzz around our Human Libraries has led to additional storytelling initiatives, including a community podcast titled *My First, My Last, My Everything* and an upcoming *Spaces that Welcome* campaign, which will highlight our experiences with how our physical spaces impact learning and wellbeing.

"...Through sharing, you develop relationships with people at a level you wouldn't otherwise. It has been wonderful to really get to know colleagues, who I've worked with for years, on a much deeper and more authentic level, to see the world from their perspectives and life experiences is so valuable. You feel a warmth and closeness towards them that wouldn't otherwise be possible." **Rachel Gonin, Teacher**

As Elif Shafak wisely noted during the 2021 Nobel Prize Summit, "Stories bring us together, untold stories keep us apart." Her words capture the very heart of the Human Library. Shafak emphasised that storytelling has the power to dissolve fear and challenge the isolation that often stems from misunderstanding.

"The Human Library is a bold, brave and compassionate initiative that can only help build a stronger community through deep, personal understanding. Let's make it a permanent bi-annual fixture." **ACS Egham Teacher**

Additional titles from our ACS Living Book Collection:

- Gender Non-Conforming Children: A Parent's story
- Not White: Not Black Enough
- Why Don't We Talk About Grief?
- Living with Autism: My Daughter and Me
- Stories of A Counsellor--Learning to always expect the unexpected!
- Navigating my Life as an Adult Child of an Alcoholic
- Being Adopted: Breaking Biases
- Growing up as a Third Culture Kid
- White Privilege: Should I feel guilty?
- Living with a Hidden Disability

Sources:

[1] The Human Library Organization. (2024). About the Human Library. [Online]. Available: <https://humanlibrary.org>

[2] BBC News. (2020). Human Library: 'Borrowing' a person to challenge prejudice. [Online]. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-53892847>

[3] Council of Europe, "Living Library," Council of Europe - Youth, [Online]. Available: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/living-library>

Belonging by Leading: Giving All Students a Role in School Culture

By Rachael Thrash and Mustafa Alshihani



Rachael Thrash, CEO and Co-Founder of Belong Hub, and Mustafa Alshihani, Creative Director and Co-Founder of Belong Hub

Belonging is foundational to adolescent development, yet many students, particularly those navigating language, cultural, or academic barriers, struggle to see their significance in the life of their school. Research in developmental science underscores that young people are biologically attuned to seek status, respect, and connection within their communities (1). When students don't feel seen or valued, they may withdraw or seek alternative pathways to assert their agency, sometimes in ways that further their marginalisation.

This article explores a leadership response to that challenge. At Baxter Academy, a public charter school in Maine, a small group of multilingual learners was struggling to engage with the school's collaborative, project-based culture. In partnership with their ESL advisor and using the tools of the Belong

Hub Student Leadership Kit, the students began to reimagine their role in shaping school life. What followed was not a top-down intervention, but a shift—from isolation to initiative, from invisibility to impact. The case invites us to consider how educational leadership can make space for belonging not just as a feeling, but as a function of purposeful contribution.

Identifying the Challenge

Wendy Toole, an ESL teacher and advisor supporting a group of newcomer students with limited English proficiency, reached out in the autumn term with growing concern. Within the safe environment of her advisory and support classroom, she saw her students' talents, ideas, and warmth. But outside of that setting, she observed a pattern of withdrawal. In mainstream classes, many of which were built around collaborative, real-world group projects, her students shut down.

Baxter Academy's curriculum is designed to foster deep collaboration and creative problem-solving, but these students weren't experiencing those benefits. While the wider school community often made genuine efforts to include them, the students consistently retreated into their small cohort. They weren't just left out; they opted out. The reason wasn't a lack of interest or ambition, but a persistent sense that their presence didn't matter, and that participation would only deepen their discomfort.

This dynamic is not unusual. Research on adolescent social behaviour suggests that students from minority cultural or linguistic backgrounds often form close bonds within their own group as a protective response to perceived exclusion (3). While these bonds can be supportive, they may also reinforce social separation, particularly in environments where students struggle to

see their own relevance or value in the broader community.

Framing the Developmental Need

Adolescence is a time when individuals are not only acutely sensitive to their social standing, but biologically driven to seek out meaningful roles within a peer context (2). As Dahl (2022) argues, this drive to “matter” can lead in either direction, toward prosocial engagement or toward disengagement, self-silencing, or even harmful behaviour, depending on the structures and opportunities available. Schools, therefore, play a pivotal role in shaping the direction of this developmental trajectory.

For Wendy's students, there was no question they had the capacity to lead. What they lacked was a sense of permission and a pathway.

Co-Creation Begins

We introduced the students to the Belong Hub Student Leadership Kit, a set of tools designed to help students and educators co-create more inclusive school environments. The kit offers a sequence of structured tools that guide students through a collaborative inquiry process (identifying needs, developing ideas, planning actions, and reflecting on outcomes) with adult partners acting as facilitators rather than directors.

Using the Everyone's Voice survey tool, students reflected on their experience of school life. Their responses revealed a shared feeling of marginalisation: they reported rarely speaking in class, dreading group work, and assuming that their perspectives were not valued. One student explained, “I don't speak the same language. People act uncomfortable around me, and it makes me

uncomfortable around them. Group projects are the worst. It makes me feel bad and sometimes stupid.”

This moment of shared vulnerability became a turning point. In surfacing their frustrations—and realising they were not alone—the students began to connect over their common experience. One even reported that the exercise gave her the confidence to ask a clarifying question in math class for the first time.

From Shared Struggle to Shared Vision

With the groundwork laid, we shifted into a design-thinking process using a tool from the kit called What Needs to Be Done. The students identified three clear challenges they wanted to address:

- Create more opportunities to connect students across groups.
- Ensure classroom environments feel welcoming and supportive.
- Improve access to academic support across subjects.

Next came What We Can Do, a second design tool that helps students brainstorm projects and initiatives aligned to their goals. As the students explored possible ideas, they began to consider that others beyond their cohort might also feel disconnected. This widened their lens and sparked new ideas for community-building.

Interestingly, they chose not to directly pursue the academic support angle in their projects. However, their candid discussions helped Wendy gather valuable insights that she later shared with colleagues to inform broader pedagogical adjustments.

Students Lead Community Action

Students grouped themselves by interest

and used the Collaborate to Co-Create project planning tool to move from idea to action. One group, disappointed by the lack of a formal school soccer team, established a student-run soccer club. Their project included a fantasy league, connections with a local pickup soccer group, and a plan for a school-wide match to build spirit.

Another group organised a checkers tournament during advisory, introducing classmates to the Angolan rules they had grown up with. They secured a prize donation from a local store, coordinated scheduling with staff, and promoted the event. The tournament was such a success that students requested it become a recurring activity. In that moment, Wendy noted, her students experienced peer affirmation in a way they hadn't before.

These student-led initiatives did more than build bridges—they shifted how the students saw themselves. They had not only identified problems; they had designed and delivered solutions that resonated with the community.

Conclusion: Belonging Through Purpose

Of course, these young people still face academic and linguistic challenges. But now, they meet those challenges with a greater sense of agency. They know their ideas are welcomed, their efforts appreciated, and their presence valued. They understand that leadership is not reserved for the loudest voices or the most fluent speakers—it's about contribution, care, and connection.

This case study reminds us that inclusive leadership is not something we do for students—it's something we build with

them. By giving students the tools, space, and encouragement to take initiative, schools can shift the experience of belonging from a passive feeling to an active process. And in doing so, they prepare all students—not just the most confident—for a life of contribution and impact.

The tools referenced in this article are part of the Belong Hub Student Leadership Kit, a co-designed framework developed by the author and Mustafa Alshahani to support inclusive student leadership through collaborative inquiry.



Figure 1. What Needs to Be Done Canvas

This design-thinking tool helps student teams surface community needs by exploring challenges and envisioning positive outcomes. It supports inclusive reflection by framing students' lived experiences—both positive and negative—as legitimate sources of insight for community improvement.

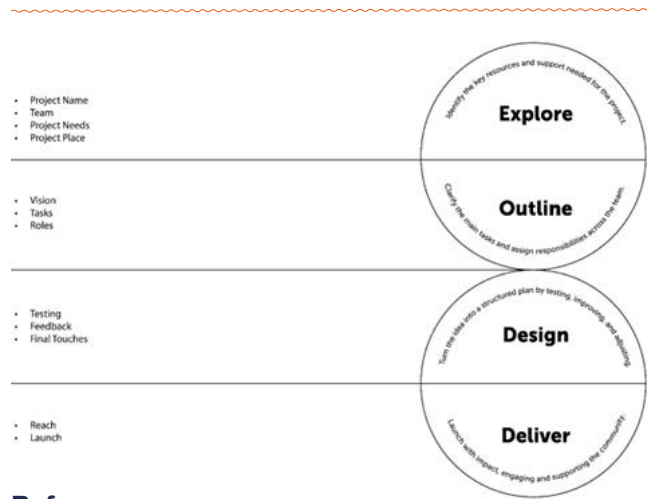


Figure 2. Collaborate to Co-Crete Planner

A four-step project planning framework that guides students from initial idea to implementation.

It supports distributed leadership by encouraging students to explore needs, outline tasks, co-design solutions, and deliver with community impact.

References

1. Dahl, R. E. (2022). The developmental science of adolescence: History through autobiography.
2. Yeager, D. S. (2017). Social-cognitive development during adolescence. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 68, 373–399.
3. Quillian, L., & Campbell, M. E. (2003). Beyond black and white: The present and future of multiracial friendship segregation. *American Sociological Review*, 68(4), 540–566.

Leading through Complexity: Why Wellbeing Intelligence is The Bedrock of Sustainable Success

By Steph Hawkins



Steph Hawkins
founder of Well Well Well. Positive Psychology
Expert & Coach

There is a powerful tension at play across international schools today.

On one hand, leaders and educators are deeply engaged with some of the most exciting and urgent conversations in education: AI integration, curriculum redesign, recruitment challenges, governance reform, student voice - the list goes on.

On the other hand, the weight of these conversations, layered one upon another, is creating unsustainable pressure.



Adapted from thought work by Fisher, Scott & Mohr (2025)

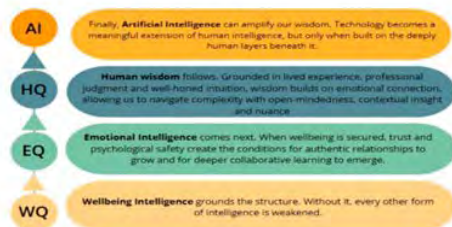
I've attended several exceptional education conferences recently where I found myself both inspired by the ideas and ambition present in every room yet concerned by the growing burden being placed on the people leading the work. The reality is that it's not a lack of care, willingness or leadership that schools are struggling with, it's the capacity to carry so much, for so long, without effective systemic support.

It is for this very reason that Wellbeing Intelligence has become the foundational skillset upon which everything else must rest if international schools are to continue performing in a way that is strong, human-centred and future focussed.

First Things First – No Wellbeing, No Wisdom

Maslow's well known hierarchy reminds us that fundamental human needs must be met before higher-order growth can occur [1] and, in a similar vein, Fisher, Scott & Mohr (2025) introduce us to the notion of The Intelligence Stack [2].

This emerging concept is built on the principle that each layer of intelligence supports and strengthens the next and it is grounded by the belief that sustainable growth comes from positioning these layers in the right order, starting with what matters most.



Without wellbeing laying the foundations, authentic emotional connection struggles to form, wisdom is harder to access and innovation cannot effectively take root. The Intelligence Stack offers a blueprint for designing stronger, more human-centred organisations ready to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Foundational Wellbeing Intelligence acknowledges that wellbeing is a precondition for human sustainability and organisational success [3]. It allows for the development of well-designed work and wellbeing-forward systems, without which the foundations of our workplaces remain unstable and we begin to play a dangerous game of Jenga with our organisational health.

Why Wellbeing Intelligence Matters More Than Ever in International Schools

International schools today operate in complex, fast-changing environments. Shifting student and staff demographics, evolving parental expectations, global instability and increasingly competitive recruitment markets all contribute to an almost constant flow of change and uncertainty for leaders and staff alike and we should not be underestimating the human cost of this.

When leaders and their teams are operating from a place of depletion, their capacity for the complex work of innovation and improvement is compromised and, all the while, the demands continue to mount. It's like trying to lay the foundations of a house after construction has already begun - crucial work is happening everywhere, but the structural stability is missing.

As service-driven educators, we often succumb to the subtle narrative that when things feel overwhelming, we should double

down on our personal capacity: manage our time better, become more efficient, build our bounce-back muscle. But in truth, this isn't a call for more individual resilience, (and nor should it be); it's a call for better foundations, because without systems and practices that protect and promote staff wellbeing, even the most dedicated teams will eventually be stretched too thin.

What I witnessed in those recent conference sessions was far from a failure of resilience; it was a test of capacity, playing out across schools where people care deeply but are struggling to find solid ground.

Building The Foundations for Managing Complexity

One of the most powerful shifts leaders can make today is to move from asking "How do we help our people carry more?" to "How do we build foundations that allow us to manage the complexity?"

Achieving the desired stability doesn't mean achieving the impossible and removing the steady stream of challenges faced by the education sector, it means creating environments in which wellbeing is systemically embedded. It's about designing work for human sustainability – from the bottom up.

Wellbeing Intelligence in leadership can look like:

- Embedding wellbeing principles into strategic planning and decision-making.
- Prioritising psychological safety within team culture.
- Creating systems that monitor workload and allow meaningful recovery.

- Recognising that purpose, meaning and connection are all essential for high performance.
- Protecting time for reflection, collaboration and simple human interaction, especially when things feel busiest.

Wellbeing Intelligence is strategic in the way it compels leaders to get curious about the patterns beneath the pressure. Are appraisal systems supporting growth or inducing burnout? Are we measuring impact purely through performance or also through sustainability? Can we use patterns in absenteeism to better understand staff needs and strengthen leadership support?

Schools rich in Wellbeing Intelligence tend to demonstrate certain commonalities: a bias toward collaborative decision-making, a culture of permission where rest and reflection are seen as vital and productive and feedback mechanisms that make the invisible strain visible. There's nothing radical here, simply a recalibration towards deliberate choices, made consistently.

Immediate Action for Leaders

If you're wondering where to begin building Wellbeing Intelligence in your school or organisation, a simple but powerful starting point is to audit your wellbeing foundations.

Take an honest look at the systems and practices currently in place and approach it with the same seriousness and rigour as curriculum, safeguarding or financial audits.

Start by asking:

- Are our wellbeing supports reactive

(only triggered when something goes wrong) or proactive?

- Where in our strategic priorities is staff wellbeing explicitly embedded, not just implied?
- Is our stated commitment to wellbeing matched by how we allocate time, budget and leadership focus?
- Are leaders at all levels equipped to recognise and respond to signs of team strain, not just individual struggle?
- Is wellbeing seen as a shared responsibility across the school, or is it siloed to individuals or specific roles?
- How do we evaluate the wellbeing impact of leadership decisions - do we consider the human cost as routinely as we consider financial or academic outcomes?

Wellbeing Intelligence is The New Leadership Intelligence

The future of education demands a new model of leadership, one that sees wellbeing as the bedrock of organisational strength and which understands that a focus on Wellbeing Intelligence doesn't slow strategic ambition, it strengthens and sustains it. Put simply, when we treat wellbeing as part of our essential infrastructure, we reshape what schools are capable of becoming.

The best international schools of the future will be those that recognise:

- Wellbeing is structural, not ornamental.
- Leadership at all levels must be empowered and supported to foster cultures of wellbeing.
- Sustainable success is built on human thriving, not just human time and effort.

So, as we reframe leadership for the future of education, the real question is no longer if we prioritise wellbeing, but how we embed it into the very architecture of our schools. As such, we must ask ourselves, what kind of systems are we building and do they truly sustain the people we rely on to carry them forward?

References

- [1] A. H. Maslow, "A theory of human motivation," Psychol. Rev., vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 370–396, 1943.
- [2] This article was inspired by the recent thought work of Jen Fisher, Dr Cree Scott & Dr Kara Mohr: J. Fisher and A. N. Phillips, Work Better Together: How to Cultivate Strong Relationships to Maximize Well-Being and Boost Bottom Lines. New York, NY, USA: McGraw Hill Professional, 2021.
- [3] T. Roulet and K. Bhatti, "Well-being intelligence: A skill set for the new world of work," MIT Sloan Management Review, 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/well-being-intelligence-a-skill-set-for-the-new-world-of-work/>

Leadership Under the Algorithm: What School Leaders Need to Know About AI - Right Now

By Rita Bateson



Rita Bateson.

Author, Speaker, Consultant, Curriculum Developer,
Founder of Eblana Learning

There are times in leadership when everything comes at once. In my three decades in education this has been a constant. Between social media, geopolitical instability, mental health crises and educational lags due to lockdown, we already had very full plates.

AI is another one of those significant changes. A tidal wave of tools, promises, warnings, policies, opinions and pressure. And in the middle of it, there's you, the educational leader and here's the truth: you don't need to become an AI expert. In fact, the only experts that exist in this new space are people who have had more time to practice than you.

You remain the expert in leadership who needs only to understand the landscape well enough to steer your school safely. And to do that, you need to know where the real risks lie and what actually matters.

The Six Risks That Matter

At Eblana, we work with schools globally and one thing is always true: the noise

is overwhelming. So we created a map through this tangle, a way to cut through the hype. Here are the six risks that, if you're leading a school today, you can't afford to ignore:

1. Reputational Risk

As a school leader, one of my greatest concerns was the school's reputation. Initially, we were worried almost exclusively about student use in assessment. This year, it is increasingly more about teacher use. This new source of friction is surprising and shows how the students, and parents, still value human feedback.

When AI tools go wrong - whether it's fake citations in student work or dodgy chatbot responses the fallout lands on leaders. In fact, some teachers worry about their own legal position. We have seen this recently in Ireland, with teaching unions seeking indemnity for teachers on student use. [1].

2. Safeguarding Risk

Some generative AI tools produce disturbing content, others are being used for self-diagnosis or dangerous behaviours. The most urgent risks due to AI include the proliferation of AI-generated harmful content, being used for exploitation and blackmail.

AI also significantly amplifies cyberbullying and harassment by enabling the rapid creation of abusive messages, fake profiles and images. The goal here is not to be paralysed by fear but to proactively protect our communities. And in the unlikely, unfortunate event of a breach, how will we support and repair our community?

3. Societal Risk

AI could exacerbate existing inequalities by widening the digital divide, as students with better access to technology and support might gain an unfair advantage. This could lead to a disparity in educational outcomes, leaving behind those with limited resources.

4. Legal & Compliance Risk

The [EU AI Act][2] is changing everything, affecting schools operating in Europe, or neighbouring countries. This law has categorised AI use in education as high-risk, placing a responsibility on schools as AI deployers.

5. Environmental Risk

We know AI promises to solve all the world's sustainability problems but first it needs enormous amounts of energy to get there. By 2026, AI energy consumption is predicted to equal Japan's electricity usage, according to the MIT Technology Review (2025) [3]. To put that in perspective, it's estimated that one image generated can require the same electricity as charging a smartphone one to three times. 1 billion images were generated by ChatGPT in one week alone. The energy cost is eye-watering.

6. Pedagogical Risk

AI is brilliant at producing average. We see how quick students are to accept mediocrity as quality. Your job is to protect the craft of learning, to make sure curiosity, struggle and joy still have space.

The 6Ps: Your Leadership Framework

So how do you lead through this? We use the Eblana 6Ps Framework, developed

specifically for international school leaders navigating AI. It gives you a clear, values-aligned starting point.

- **Preparation:** What are your guiding principles? If we had had time to prepare for the onslaught of AI, what would we have done with that time?
- **Policies:** Have you updated your policies - beyond academic honesty and integrity? What about language, safeguarding and digital citizenship? Dynamic policies are impossible but what is the next best option?
- **People:** Who is being trained? Are your parents informed? Governors? How often and when does this happen?
- **Processes:** What mechanisms exist to monitor AI use in your school? What does approval or removal look like? What processes are newly needed and what is obsolete?
- **Protection:** From student data to manipulated images - what safeguards do you have in place? Who is responsible for AI deployment and who handles the vendors?
- **Pedagogy:** Are teachers empowered to use AI as a support and know when not to? Are students still building their voice, do they have time and the skills to do so still?

What You Can Ignore (For Now)

You do not need a 30-page AI policy, memorise legislation or to test every tool. You definitely don't need to fear you're falling behind. What matters most is that you are thinking clearly with decisions aligned to your values.

Where to Look for Clarity

- The international landscape is shifting fast but there are useful anchors:
- The [EU AI Act][1] classifies education as high risk. That means your systems need oversight, transparency and documentation.
- [ISTE Standards][4] now embed AI skills into teacher development. That matters for planning CPD.
- [UNESCO][5] has urged all schools to take a human-centred, ethical approach to AI.
- [OECD][6] is tracking how AI shifts governance, curriculum and skills - especially in global contexts.]

And of course, our own [Eblana 6Ps] remain rooted in practical strategy and ethical leadership, grounded in real-world school experience.

Leading with Cautious Trust

You don't need to have all the answers - they simply don't exist yet. Leadership here isn't about adopting the flashiest tool or time-saving promises. It's about asking harder questions: does this help our students become better humans and the world a better place?

If the answer is no, pause. If the answer is maybe, investigate. If the answer is yes, then support your team to do it right.

And breathe. You don't need to run faster than the storm. You need to look up, find your bearings and bring people with you into a future of cautious trust.

References

- [1] Irish Times, "Teachers seek indemnity over legal action". [Online]. Available: <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2025/03/15/teachers-seek-indemnity-from-legal-actions-over-students-improper-ai-use-in-leaving-cert/>
- [2] European Commission, "The Artificial Intelligence Act," 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/>
- [3] MIT "Technology review", 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2025/05/20/1116327/ai-energy-usage-climate-footprint-big-tech/>

Experiences of John Harris, MBA Educational Leadership graduate and EdD student, UCL Centre for Educational Leadership

**Interview by interview by Mamta
Ondhia MBA Educational
Leadership, UCL**



John Harris,
MBA Educational Leadership graduate and EdD
student, UCL Centre for Educational Leadership

Please give us a brief background of your current role and background, including what you studied at UCL.

I have worked in education for 25 years, in London, Sydney and the UAE, and have been a principal for the last 8 years. I have worked in challenging contexts to support rapid and sustained school improvement.

I am currently the Principal at Liwa International School, Falaj Hazza. This is a large K-Grade 12 school in Al Ain in the UAE. Liwa International is a well-established school in Al Ain, and is currently rated as Very Good.

I have completed the MBA in Educational Leadership at UCL and I am now about to begin my third year on the EdD programme at UCL.

What was your motivation for undertaking the MBA in Educational Leadership (International)?

Following my first year of teaching, I had always wanted to take a masters, but due to a number of new roles and international opportunities, I kept postponing this. However, after taking my NPQH with UCL, I decided to continue with a master's degree. I was drawn to the IOE's

reputation for excellence in research, and felt that the MBA would support in deepening my understanding of educational leadership and improve my practice.

How do you use what you learnt on the MBA in your current role?

My understanding of research, and how to better engage with it, has improved. During the MBA, I developed an in-depth knowledge base about important areas of educational leadership and enhanced key skills of criticality and application. For example, as part of one of the modules, I created a strategic plan for a struggling school, where I had just started as a principal.

I used a variety of analysis and evaluation tools to clarify areas of strength and areas for development and planned strategic intents and milestones to accomplish. The strategic plan supported us to facilitate rapid growth, in a school which moved from the lowest to highest performing school (based on comparative KPI performance in the group of schools), within two years.

What is your advice for students thinking about embarking on an in-service Masters?

Try to avoid simply focusing on the assessments. There are a range of thought provoking topics from HR to AI, try to cover the reading lists to ensure you get the full benefits from the course. The biggest challenge is time of course, but it's definitely a worthwhile return.

You studied as a mature student, how did this impact on your student experience?

Admittedly, I was a little apprehensive about being a mature student, I wasn't entirely

sure what to expect. However, I quickly learnt that this wouldn't be an issue. There were a range of people with different ages, roles and schools – it was a valuable opportunity to consider a range of perspectives.

I consider myself very lucky to have had the support of Dr Trevor Male as the MBA Lead and Dr David Godfrey and Dr Simon Camby as my EdD supervisors.

What has been your experience as an UCL IOE alum?

I was invited to publish a chapter in Educational Leadership in Challenging Times (Male, 2024). This book features a collection of entries from MBA staff and previous students. My chapter explored the change management process in implementing student competences in an international school. I also delivered a seminar to a new cohort of MBA students, in the Strategic Leadership & Resource Management module. I outlined my strategic plan and the practical realities in implementing this in an international school context.

The MBA has encouraged and enabled me to continue to grow professionally. I am just about to begin my third year as an EdD student at UCL. My EdD supervisors and course tutors have supported and challenged me to continue to grow as a research engaged leader.

I have further developed my understanding and skills as an insider-researcher and have carried out research in onboarding international teachers and implementing psychological safety within a senior leadership team. An academic journal has also expressed interest in publishing my first module on the course.



LEADERSHIP CONNECTIONS
