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Transforming Leadership Learning: Designing for Sustainable, Systemic Change A Research Paper

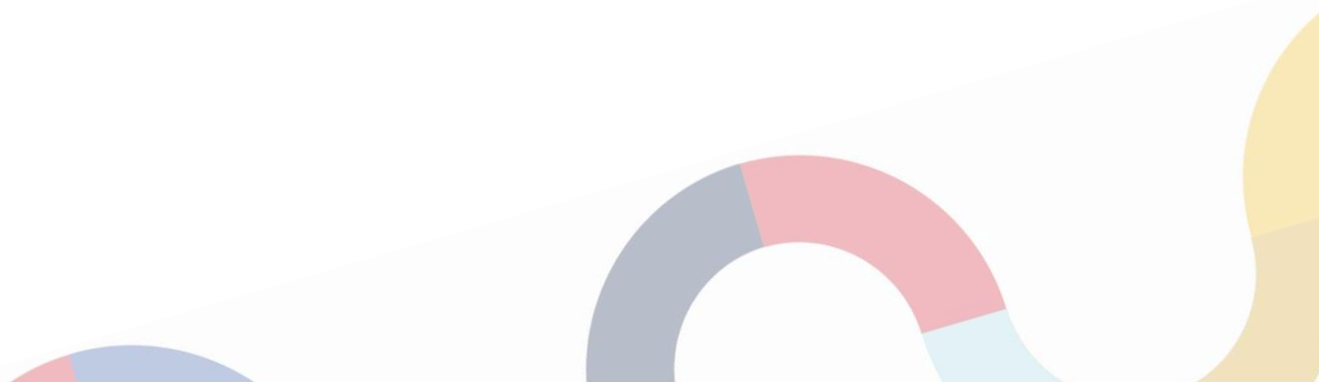
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Executive summary

Introduction

Powerful leadership learning is fundamental to creating the kinds of schools and educational environments where students, educators, and communities can thrive. In an era of compounding global challenges and increasing educational complexity, school leadership must evolve to prepare learners not just for today, but for an uncertain future. Yet, many leadership development programmes remain transactional, overly technical, and detached from the realities of leading deep, sustained change.

This research paper presents findings from a cross-case analysis of five innovative leadership development initiatives from England, Canada, Austria, New Zealand, and the health sector in England. These programmes share a commitment to transformative, sustainable leadership learning and offer valuable insights for designing future-ready leadership learning.

Methodology

We undertook a purposive cross-case analysis of five initiatives: the Big Leadership Education Programme (England), the Transformative Educational Leadership Program (Canada), the Austrian Leadership Academy, the National Aspiring Principals' Program (New Zealand), and the Darzi Fellowships in Clinical Leadership (England). Evaluation methods included document analysis, interviews, participant surveys, direct observation, and analysis of internal evaluation data. Our goal was to understand design intentions, impacts, and the learning processes that support sustainable change. We supplemented these findings with further relevant international examples and important emerging themes.

The five initiatives

Each programme and associated activity was designed by a combination of policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and NGOs. While some are ongoing and others concluded, all share an intentional departure from traditional models. The design of each was intentionally, in form, content and structure, oriented towards developing leaders capable of shaping whole-system change.

Impact

Evaluations reveal substantial impact: paradigm shifts in leaders' thinking, increased authenticity and self-efficacy, and innovative practice across schools and systems. Participants frequently initiated bold, future- and equity-focused changes in pedagogy, curriculum, and culture. Alumni often exerted broader influence, contributing to wider systemic reform.



Seven principles for transformative, sustainable leadership learning

From our analysis, we identified seven interconnected principles that are foundational to effective leadership learning. These principles have design implications for curriculum, facilitation, and evaluation.

Principle 1 – Systemic future-focused transformation

These initiatives aim beyond school-level improvements to cultivate leadership that transforms entire systems. They prepare leaders to address entrenched inequalities and future uncertainties, emphasising adaptive learning and systems thinking. Participant selection often targets those ready to promote and lead systemic change, and associated structures support deep, ongoing learning.

Principle 2 – Transformative personal growth

Leadership for system transformation demands deep personal change. Programmes foster competencies such as humility, curiosity, courage, creativity, and vulnerability. Participants explore educational purpose, engage with diverse philosophies, develop a strong ethical compass, and consider implications of more holistic perspectives on student learning for curriculum, pedagogies and assessment.

Principle 3 – Foregrounding deep, networked relationships

Relational learning is central. All initiatives build strong peer and alumni networks, supported by coaching, collaborative inquiry, underpinned by high levels of psychological safety. Structures such as professional learning communities, cohort connections, ecosystem learning partnerships and alumni engagement extend learning and impact. Technology is used judiciously; while online formats provide access, face-to-face interaction is preferred for depth and meaningful connection.

Principle 4 – Interrupting assumptions and ‘activity traps’

Transformative learning requires disrupting default patterns and assumptions. Dissonant experiences – such as shadowing leaders in different sectors, engaging with Indigenous perspectives, or tackling real-world dilemmas – are used to provoke reflection. Leaders are supported to explore tensions, question values, and rethink their mental models within safe, facilitated spaces.

Principle 5 – Prioritising diverse perspectives

Intentional diversity enriches learning. Initiatives recruit participants from varied roles, sectors, and backgrounds, and draw on interdisciplinary content – from psychology to design thinking. Culturally responsive leadership, inclusion, and equity are not add-ons but embedded throughout. Practical measures, like financial support for underrepresented groups, enhance access and relevance.



Principle 6 – Interweaving evidence, stories and practical experience

Effective leadership learning integrates research, inquiry, lived experience, and practice. Programmes and associated activities combine evidence-informed frameworks, inquiry cycles, peer coaching, compelling narratives, living case studies, and opportunities to practise skills. Leaders develop their own stories, reflect on practice, and apply learning to real-world challenges. Structured bridging tasks and projects ensure relevance and continuity.

Principle 7 – Adaptive facilitation and modelling

Exceptionally skilled facilitation is vital. Facilitators model the very competencies leaders are developing: humility, adaptability, relational trust, and inquiry. Design is intentional and theory-informed, often evolving through rapid evaluation cycles. Leaders' agency is respected; opportunities are created to co-construct learning, influence content, and contribute to programmes' ongoing development and associated activities.

Conclusion

The five initiatives analysed here offer compelling evidence that leadership learning can be transformative, sustainable, and system-focused. Their design principles are applicable beyond the original contexts and have relevance for educational leaders and policymakers globally. As education systems confront complexity and change, it is vital to invest in leadership learning that prepares leaders not just to cope, but to lead transformation.

Questions for learning conversations

The paper ends with some reflective questions to stimulate reflection, dialogue and action.



Introduction

Powerful leadership learning is fundamental to creating the kinds of schools and educational environments in which children, young people, their teachers and even their communities can flourish. While teachers have the greatest influence on their students' educational outcomes, leaders significantly can enable staff to do this¹. Improving leadership has consequently become a major focus internationally; this includes leadership development².

Global social, technological, environmental, economic and political changes over the first quarter of this century – and particularly the last few years – now present a coalescence of crises³. Adding these to previously unresolved challenges, for example around equity and disengagement of adolescents⁴, raises profound questions about the purpose of schooling⁵. Alongside this, there is an increasing international move toward broader curricula⁶ and assessment of different competencies, for example PISA's 2022 creative thinking skills⁷. Together, this context requires a rethink of leadership⁸, its competencies and associated development.

Meanwhile, many countries' and jurisdictions' leadership development activities are oriented toward recognised school effectiveness and improvement leadership processes and student outcomes, frequently underpinned by associated research findings. A transactional view of leadership often exists, along with associated technical approaches to leadership development. Large programmes are segmented and scaled, facilitated with heavily scripted slides and notes, limiting flexibility and reducing the human element of change. Increased use of individual online learning, often preferred by overworked and stressed leaders, may suit reduced budgets, but does it lead to deep change and impactful practice? Are past approaches adequate to new and relentless challenges that bombard schools daily? Have we been designing learning for people who are designing the future but who are stuck in the past? Is the existing research evidence base sufficient?

¹ Leithwood, K., Harris, A. and Hopkins (2020) Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited, *School Leadership & Management*, 40 (1): 5-22.

² Pont, B., D. Nusche and H. Moorman (2008), *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264044715-en>.

³ Stoll, L. and Sinnema, C. (2024) Leading curriculum realisation through schools as learning organisations in and beyond times of crisis, *Leading & Managing*, 30 (2): 1-21.

⁴ Anderson, J. and Winthrop, R. (2025) *The Disengaged Teen: Helping Kids Learn Better, Feel Better, and Live Better*. London: Penguin Random House.

⁵ See, also, Hannon, V. and Peterson, A. (2021) *Thrive: The Purpose of Schools in a Changing World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ OECD (2023) OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030: OECD Learning Compass 2030 – A Series of Concept Notes. OECD publishing: https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/e2030-learning_compass_2030-concept_notes

⁷ OECD (2024), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume III): Creative Minds, Creative Schools*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/765ee8c2-en> See, also, Lucas (2021) Rethinking assessment in education The case for change. CSE Leading Education Series. No 2. Jolimont, Victoria.

⁸ For examples, see Hannon, V. and Mackay, A. (2021) *The future of educational leadership: Five signposts*. CSE Leading Education Series, Paper 04, Centre for Strategic Education, Melbourne, August; WISE (2023) *Education Reimagined: Collaborative Leadership for Transforming Education in Learning Ecosystems*. WISE/CSE, Centre for Strategic Education, Melbourne; Godfrey, D., Higham, R. and Mincu, M. (2025) School leadership in the Anthropocene: Four pillars of an intelligent, humane response. *The Educational Forum*, DOI: 10.1080/00131725.2025.2490934



As authors, our collaborative work brings together our histories and experiences of research, practice, development and working with international, national and local policymakers. In different ways, both of us view ourselves as pracademics⁹, integrating our different backgrounds and insights. We facilitate, evaluate, and support others in understanding and offering leadership learning experiences that are meaningful and appropriate to time and context. Considering the questions above has posed uncomfortable truths for us as leadership learning designers, challenging both practical and evidence-informed thinking about what learning, training and programmes do and might look like.

In this paper we explore how thinking about leadership development might be reframed and what the associated design of curriculum, learning and assessment approaches might be. We aren't arguing that development opportunities should only be future oriented – of course they must attend to the here and now, and existing 'basics' such as leadership for children's literacy and numeracy. But leadership development, and ways of determining its quality and impact, has to enable leaders to prepare children and young people to successfully navigate and take charge of their future.

For this reason, in this paper we have chosen to explore leadership development purposely designed and facilitated to bring about transformative, sustainable change in schools and across systems. We have predominantly brought together findings from evaluations of a purposive sample of five successful, innovative leadership development programmes and associated activities in four countries, also infusing and supplementing them with insights from other relevant international activities and emerging trends. Our fundamental aims are:

- to understand what might make for successful leadership learning in and for the future
- to share our learning with others to support them in developing successful leadership learning in their own contexts.

Our exploration of evaluated cases is intended to sit alongside and complement others' efforts to explore changes needed in leadership development that is focused on a more rounded and future-oriented understanding of human development¹⁰.

Innovative activities explored

The five leadership development programmes and associated activities explored in detail in this study are:

- Big Leadership Adventure (BLA), now known as the Big Leadership Education Programme¹¹ (Big Education, UK) 2019-ongoing
- Transformative Educational Leadership Program (TELP) (BC, Canada) 2015-ongoing

⁹ Hollweck, T., Netolicky, D.M. and Campbell, P. (2021) Defining and exploring pracademia: identity, community and engagement, *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 7 (1): 6-25.

¹⁰ Hannon, V. (2024) Towards an education workforce dedicated to human flourishing: What professional development do our leaders and teachers need? CSE Leading Education Series. No 23. Centre for Strategic Education, Melbourne, March.

¹¹ <https://bigeducation.org/big-education-leadership-programme/>; <https://bigeducation.org/>

- Austrian Leadership Academy (LEA) (University of Innsbruck and Ministry of Education, Austria) 2004-2018
- National Aspiring Principals' Program (NAPP) (NZ) 2011-2016¹²
- Darzi Fellowships in Clinical Leadership (NHS London, England) 2009-2024

Short descriptions of the cases can be found in the Annex. The five have been variously designed and facilitated by different combinations of policy makers, practitioners, researchers from education and beyond, and NGOs. Several involve participant leaders from within and outside schools. One is a health leadership development initiative¹³. Some are ongoing; others aren't current but we specifically chose them for potential insights¹⁴. Louise has been involved in all but one case as an evaluator¹⁵ and has had a design and facilitation role in many leadership learning activities. Liz is a lead designer and facilitator of one of the programmes and connected activities, and has experienced and encountered many others. All of these cases are or were intentionally different from predecessors or many others currently available. Inevitably, some elements may be the same as those in other current leadership development programmes or activities. Indeed, some of these leadership learning programmes have influenced other national and international leadership development initiatives in their field. This is due, at least in part, to their impact.

Selected for their impact

Importantly, external evaluation findings highlight the powerful impact of such leadership development on participants, schools, districts and middle tier organisations, with examples of and potential for wider influence locally, regionally, nationally and, in some cases, internationally. The word 'transformative' is apt. Frequently participant leaders and their colleagues or sponsors describe dramatic changes in their patterns of thinking, reframing of beliefs, paradigm shifts or mind shifts. This is accompanied by a much deeper understanding of themselves as leaders, greater authenticity, confidence and self-efficacy. Increased curiosity, delving deeply into issues without rushing to action, thereby ensuring that they are doing the right things given their context, is balanced with an urgency and determination to make changes that will have a powerful positive effect on the children and adults they serve.

¹²This program will recommence in 2026, developing up to 200 aspiring principals a year for four years, and will include several key original elements from the original design.

¹³ The implications for health are not addressed in this paper.

¹⁴ We have generally chosen to write about them in the present tense because, as a collective, key elements emerge that tie them together across time.

¹⁵ Stoll, L. (2023) Big Messages from the Big Leadership Adventure Evaluation: Developing Bold Change Makers. Big Education; <https://bigeducation.org/big-education-leadership-programme/a-different-kind-of-leadership/>; Stoll, L. (2021) Unleashing the Power of Transformative Educational Leadership: An independent evaluation of the University of British Columbia's Transformative Educational Leadership Program. <https://telp.educ.ubc.ca/impact-report-2021/>; Stoll, L., Moorman, H. and Rahm, S. (2008) Building leadership capacity for system improvement in Austria, in B. Pont., D. Nusche and D. Hopkins (eds) Improving School Leadership. Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership. OECD. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2008/07/improving-school-leadership-volume-2_g1gh8553.html; Earl, L. and Robertson, J. (2013) Learning Leadership: Insights from the National Aspiring Principals Programme. Cognition Education, Core Education, University of Waikato, NZCER and Waikato Tanui; Stoll, L., Swanwick, T., Foster-Turner, J. and Moss, F. (2011) Leadership development for junior doctors: What can we learn from "Darzi Fellowships" in Clinical Leadership? *The International Journal of Leadership in Public Services*, 7 (4): 273-286; Stoll, L., Foster-Turner, J. and Glenn, M. (2010) Mind Shift: An Evaluation of the NHS London "Darzi" Fellowships in Clinical Leadership Programme, Institute of Education and London Deanery, London.



Career aspirations and changes, highlighted in several cases, show moves into positions of greater influence and further opportunities to enact their own transformative agenda more widely.

The influence of participating leaders and alumni can also be seen in the culture at organisational, district and trust levels, with changes in communication style, language use, dialogue and conversations, orientation to and engagement in inquiry, coaching, problem solving and designing thinking, being more outward facing, and more. Leaders' projects, carried out during and after the development experiences, frequently highlight bold and innovative change initiatives at school/organisational, local and regional levels. Different tools and processes which participants used and applied, many of these lasting over time became, as one leader described it, "the gift that keeps on giving". An example of lasting impact can be seen in the latest Austrian school awards (at the time of writing) being won by graduates of LEA. Participants' bold efforts resulted in redesign of pedagogies and assessments, integrating Indigenous perspectives and worldviews, and creating new ways to enhance the experiences of vulnerable pupils and those with special educational needs and disabilities. The leadership learning experiences also stimulated, encouraged and supported participants in creating new tools, prototypes, and capacity building approaches and programmes to support colleagues, and – where enabled by their seniority – significant structural changes. Where opportunities arise and have been created, participants and alumni weave themes and processes into national or Ministry initiatives, professional association working groups and leadership development programmes, with examples in some countries or jurisdictions of changes to policy and/or service orientation¹⁶.

Methodology

In designing the research framework for our cross-case analysis and wider evaluation approach, we were aiming to capture and explore designers' intent and impacts they aim to achieve, using formal or informal theories of change¹⁷. Design and development teams' responsiveness to global and contextual changes and to their internal evaluations has often led to iterative design and facilitation adjustments. The evaluation orientation, including our own, has increasingly moved to one of evaluation for learning. This draws on evaluative thinking¹⁸ to support teams in decision making around adaptations in moving forward, as well as iteratively sharing findings and perspectives on impact and participants' experiences (we

¹⁶ Further details can be found in the evaluation reports. See, also, Swanwick, T. (2017) Leadership Development for Doctors in Postgraduate Medical Training, NHS Leadership Academy, Health Education England for further information on the rise in health service leadership development and associated qualifications. An update for this paper, provided by the former Director of Clinical Leadership Development for NHS England, highlights the wide-ranging impact of the Darzi Fellowship, while not claiming causality.

¹⁷ Weiss, C. H. (1995) Nothing as practical as good theory: Exploring theory-based evaluation for comprehensive community initiatives for children and families. In J. Connell, A. Kubisch, L. Schorr and C. Weiss (Eds) *New approaches to evaluating comprehensive community initiatives* (pp. 65-92). New York: The Aspen Roundtable Institute.

¹⁸ Earl, L. and Timperley, H. (2015) *Evaluative Thinking for Successful Educational Innovation*. Education Working Paper No. 122. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/evaluative-thinking-for-successful-educational-innovation_5jrxtkljtdwf-en; Bennett, G. and Jessani, N. (2011) *The Knowledge Translation Toolkit, Bridging the Know-Do Gap: A Resource for Researchers*, International Development Research Centre, <http://ajpponline.org/resources/downloads/04-TheKnowledgeTranslationToolkit.pdf>.



return to this later). Research methods and evidence collection frequently involved document analysis, interviews with originators and designers, participant surveys, follow up interviews of selected samples, sponsors and colleagues reported to have been influenced, plus observations of physical and online sessions and participant videos, and analysis of design teams' own evaluation data. One review process involved a study visit, with document analysis, interviews with a range of those involved, school visits and observation of cohort and small group sessions. Outcomes of several include published case studies and stories of change and the leadership of change, in written, auditory and visual forms.

Other sources and emerging themes

Other international examples have offered further insights, as have several activities which may not be described as leadership development but contain elements that might helpfully be considered in designing leadership learning. Throughout this paper, we've supplemented our learnings from the five cases with these insights¹⁹. Rapidly emerging trends and themes should also be considered in future planning and design, and so we have also integrated them.

Some words about language

We think that leadership learning is a better phrase than leadership development, in the same way that research suggests that professional learning rather than professional development better reflects the kind of ongoing, serious and deep engagement necessary for the transformative changes that will make a difference for children and young people²⁰. Leaders, like students and teachers, have to see themselves as learners. Most especially in times of uncertainty, leadership itself is learning.

In addition, some leadership activities are offered and described as 'programmes'; others aren't. The word 'programme' can send out a message that learning and development experiences are finite; they last a short period of time, then they're over. Evidence on effective professional learning highlights that it is continuous and ongoing²¹. This is clearly the intention of these examples, as our findings below highlight. Programmes are also usually facilitated, as all of the five are, at least to some extent. While we are interested in self-directed learning, encouraged by all of these cases at various times and in different ways, our specific focus is on those who want to encourage and support other leaders' deeply transformative and sustainable learning (see Principle 7). Our use of the expression 'associated activities' is intended to highlight the carefully orchestrated design to ensure that momentum is maintained and learning is extended for 'programme' participants and to others. Completely abandoning

¹⁹ We heard about some of the activities we highlight from participants at our symposium at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI) in Melbourne – please see Acknowledgements.

²⁰ Timperley, H. S. (2011) *Realizing the Power of Professional Learning*. Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw Hill; Stoll, L. (2020) Language for learning leadership, Occasional Paper 167. Jolimont, Victoria, Centre for Strategic Education. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10109744/1/Occasional%20Paper%20167-August%202020.pdf>. Updated in 2023 for publication by Fundación Europea Sociedad y Educación in Spanish, Catalan and Portuguese.

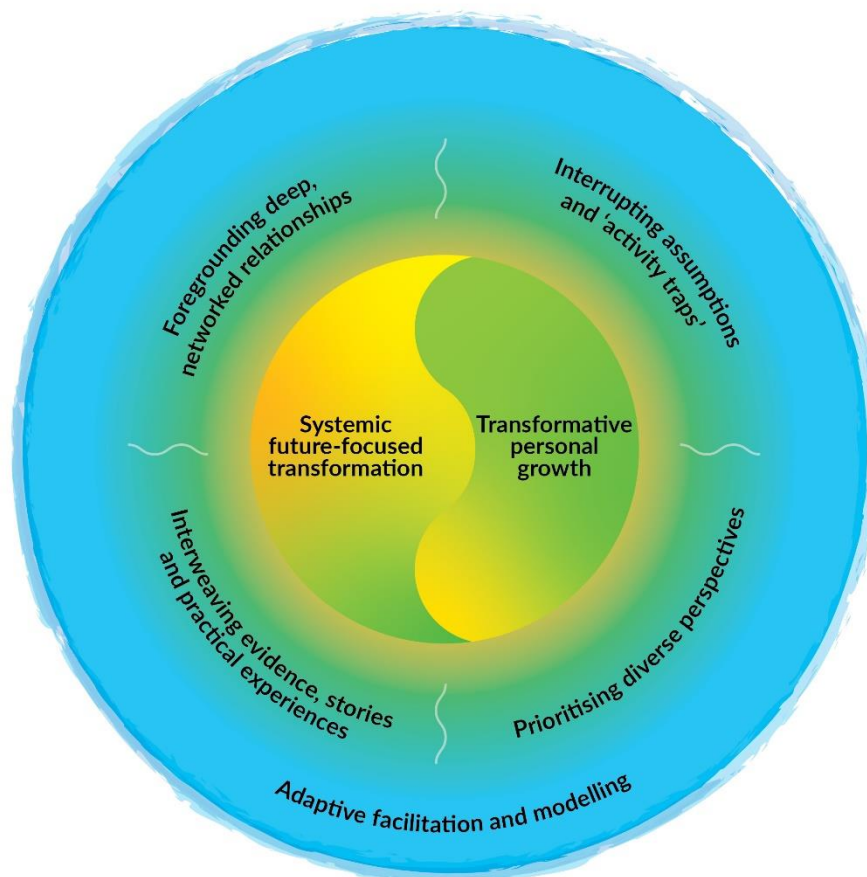
²¹ Desimone, L. M. (2009) Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Towards better conceptualisations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38 (3): 181-199; Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., and Gardner, M. (2017) *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

the use of the word 'programme' may not be practical or even desirable. Our findings suggest that careful and intentional consideration of the language used to design and describe this type of leadership learning is important.

Seven principles for transformative, sustainable leadership learning

Our findings are captured below and framed as seven principles. Here, we outline these principles and implications for the design of leadership learning, including curriculum content, learning processes, facilitation and evaluation. In the illustrated framework below (see Figure 1), the first two principles, systemic future-focused transformation and transformative personal growth, sit in the centre and set the foundational context for those that follow. They highlight the central challenges in such learning of the enormous change needed in both systems and individual leaders and how these are interconnected. Such leadership learning demands that participant leaders need to be working in the system, on the system and on themselves – they must be the change they want to see. The next four principles – foregrounding deep, networked relationships; interrupting assumptions and 'activity traps'; prioritising diverse experiences; and interweaving evidence, stories and practical experience – represent four key aspects of the leadership learning experience crafted through the design and integrated as appropriate. The final principle – adaptive facilitation and modelling – surrounds and holds the others. While drawing out these themes in order to examine and articulate them, it's of course true that the principles, and associated design, curriculum content, learning processes and facilitation implications are frequently intertwined.

Figure 1: Seven principles for transformative, sustainable leadership learning





Principle 1 – Systemic future-focused transformation

A key distinguishing feature of these programmes and their associated activities is their deliberate aim for and support of profound, sustainable system change. To promote system change, an explicit focus is developing capacity for the wider system – not just for individual institutions. Significantly, in the face of current and emerging global and local challenges, their emphasis is not just management of the current status quo. They are unapologetically and boldly pitched beyond the technical and management aspects of school or system leadership. Curricula have a systems orientation, including explicitly – and often uncomfortably – consideration of challenges in the system, and largely involving a commitment to addressing inequalities. They also look outwards, paying attention to shifting global trends and taking a range of perspectives and ideas about current reality and future possibilities. Their orientation is consequently more adaptive, one in which those in schools and whole school systems – individually and together – need to learn their way into the future²².

Here, a vital role of leadership is in ensuring that significant innovations in curriculum, teaching and learning can thrive in strong, vibrant learning cultures where everyone – children and adults alike – can flourish. The innovative cases emphasise future-focused learning environments. BC's TELP also includes a learning organisation focus, as does the Edu Caixa and UCL Centre for Educational Leadership (CEL) programme Liderazgo para el Aprendizaje (Leadership for Learning) in Spain. The emphasis on flourishing is also reflected in an OECD initiative arising out of its PISA High Performing Systems for Tomorrow work²³. Political and policymaker commitment is also a fundamental enabler of the kind of system change this leadership learning supports²⁴. Initiatives such as England's former National College for School Leadership (NCSL) annual Fellowship gave experienced, successful school leaders the opportunity potentially to influence policy through an intensive, facilitated collaborative policy development project.

The commitment to whole system transformation means a necessary focus on the transformative personal growth and deep learning needed to lead such change with skill. The result is a new set of definitions of what leadership looks like and learning design matched to developing the particular mindsets and capabilities identified (see Principle 2).

It also has implications for identifying appropriate participants to engage in the learning. Notably, this is highlighted in several application processes. These set expectations, and orient themselves toward those interested in and committed to 'going beyond', sometimes with an associated, demanding and selective recruitment process. Approaches also include encouraging participation from several members of a team and bringing together leaders from

²² Kools, M. and Stoll, L. (2016) What makes a school a learning organisation. Education Working Paper No. 137. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/what-makes-a-school-a-learning-organisation_5jlwm62b3bvh-en; OECD (2016) What makes a school a learning organisation? A guide for policy makers, school leaders and teachers. OECD.

https://www.academia.edu/68371570/What_Makes_a_School_a_Learning_Organisation

²³ <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/pisa-high-performing-systems-for-tomorrow-hpst.html>; <https://ncee.org/quick-read/education-for-human-flourishing/>

²⁴ Hannon, V. and Mackay, A. (2023) A new politics for transforming education: Towards a way forwards. CSE Leading Education Series No. 14. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education. Other international initiatives focusing on expansive, systemic transformation involve political leaders and/or policy maker; for example, The Atlantic Rim Collabatory: <https://atrico.org/>



different parts and levels of the system to support wider understanding of what has been described as systemness²⁵: the necessity for and commitment to being part of a whole system.

With their emphasis on sustainable change throughout the wider educational system, the leadership learning programmes and their associated activities aim both for deep learning of individual leaders and for broader engagement with and influence on others, deepening and extending learning over time. While some lead to or offer accreditation and further study, involving completion of an applied learning ‘project’, developing a plan to apply the learning subsequent to the development initiative’s completion has been increasingly emphasised. Importantly, this signals that these leadership development experiences are just the start of a continuing and never-ending learning journey, as the evaluators of New Zealand’s NAPP²⁶ explained: “for these leaders to be able to continue their leadership learning in this way throughout their careers”.

Another way in which sustainability is designed ‘in’ is explicitly developing capacity within cohorts to grow the work and ideas in and beyond their own settings, and giving them opportunities to support the facilitation of future cohorts and wider groups. And, significantly, very intentional design for and development of peer, networked and alumni learning is a part of their systemic design to embed relationships and connectedness (see Principle 3 for elaboration). Even among the programmes not running at the time of writing, alumni continue to connect. For example, numbers of the LEA still meet in their collegial team coaching groups (see Principle 3) years after graduating, as do groups of NAPP peer coaches and entire cohorts, sometimes inviting the lead facilitator to join them. Evaluations elsewhere highlight how alumni frequently take on system leadership, policymaker or other leadership roles, fundamental to changing education systems in communities²⁷. Indeed, increasing understanding of the intrinsically networked nature of leading within education further highlights the need for networked leadership and its development in whole system transformation in today’s world²⁸.

Principle 2 – Transformative personal growth

The focus on system transformation in times of complex challenges brings an intrinsic implication of the need to work deeply with individuals to reorient them to a new and emerging future where what many take for granted as the purpose of education is no longer sufficient. This requires deep personal growth, closely focused on an agreed set of competencies and qualities. The question ‘What kind of leadership do we need?’ is at the heart of the five leadership development programmes’ and associated activities’ designs. Acknowledging the complex, adaptive nature of schools and school systems, the cases identify a broader set of competencies, some of which are similar to those being increasingly promoted for students in

²⁵ Fullan, M. (2021). *The Right Drivers for Whole System Success*. CSE Leading Education Series No 1. Jolimont, Victoria.

²⁶ Earl, L. and Robertson, J. (2013) op cit. Quote p7.

²⁷ Eg Rosner, J. and Smerdon, B. (2024) *Using Social Network Analysis to Explore Alumni Networks*. Teach for America.

²⁸ Greany, T and Kamp, A. (2022) *Working with complexity: leading school networks in Aotearoa, New Zealand and England*, *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, 52 (5): 1047-1061.



the changing world²⁹. This learning relates both to the leaders *and* their capacity to develop these in others. These, and connected qualities, commonly focus on:

- developing a sense of urgency for change, often focused around equity and emerging futures
- courage – a need to go beyond current practices and incentives
- curiosity and being open to new ideas and thinking, linked to a mental model of ‘we don’t have all the answers’
- humility – being open to learn and knowing what we don’t know
- creativity – being imaginative and exploring possibilities
- increasing self-awareness and deep reflective practice
- vulnerability – being open about things we find challenging and acknowledging the importance of modelling this to create psychological safety³⁰ for others.

Many, within and beyond education, are now working to understand and articulate the range of mindsets, competencies and capabilities leaders need in complex environments³¹.

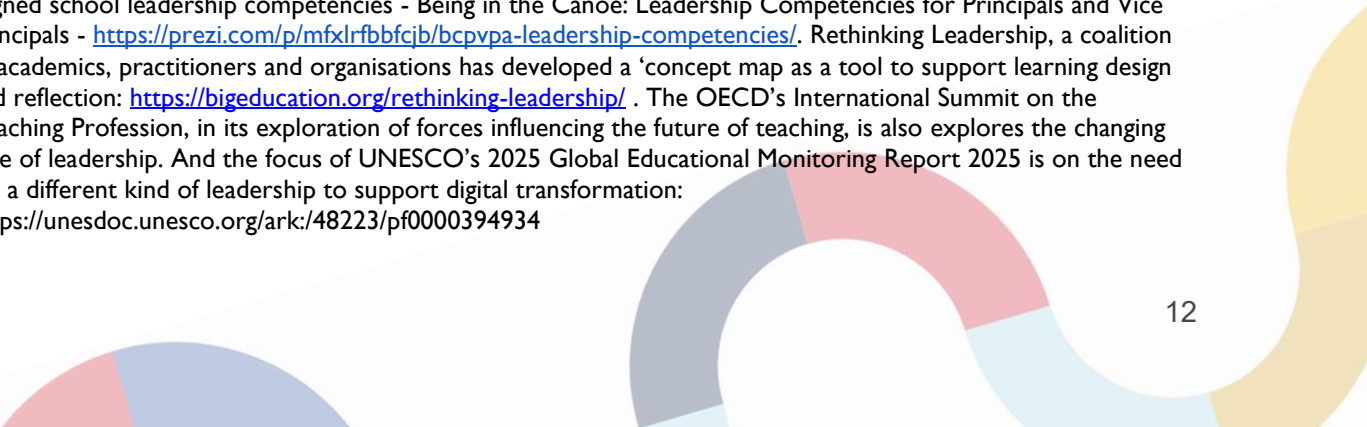
Orienting the learning towards these competencies and capabilities has significant implications for the learning design. All cases encourage re-thinking, creating and exploring content, rather than ‘receiving’ a set curriculum. In the four educational examples, this manifests itself in actively considering and exploring the purpose of education, a range of philosophies, and implications for curriculum, pedagogies and assessment. All of the educational ones highlight leadership for learning, with differing emphases based on specific models and frameworks explored, while all aligning with more holistic perspectives on student learning.

Challenges encountered by leaders involved in deep transformative change also require them to ensure they attend to their own wellbeing as well as that of their communities. In the cases, this has been increasingly emphasised through relational aspects, including the nature of social time leaders spend together (see Principle 3). Elsewhere, leadership development increasingly includes a specific focus on wellbeing. In England, Maggie Farrar embeds the understanding and practice of mindfulness in her approach to leadership learning, underpinning this with questions about how mindfulness can help leaders flourish and thrive, strengthen the ethical and moral basis of their leadership and help those committed to do so become the leaders they

²⁹ OECD (2023) OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030: OECD Learning Compass 2030 – A Series of Concept Notes. OECD publishing: https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/e2030-learning_compass_2030-concept_notes.

³⁰ Edmondson, A. E. (2019) *the fearless organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

³¹ Examples of such leadership competencies can be seen in British Columbia where BCSSA (2022) has developed system leadership competencies - The Spirit of Leadership - <https://bcssa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/The-Spirit-of-Leadership-20220824.pdf> - and BCPVPA (2024) has developed closely aligned school leadership competencies - Being in the Canoe: Leadership Competencies for Principals and Vice Principals - <https://prezi.com/p/mfxlrbbfcjb/bcpvpa-leadership-competencies/>. Rethinking Leadership, a coalition of academics, practitioners and organisations has developed a ‘concept map as a tool to support learning design and reflection: <https://bigeducation.org/rethinking-leadership/>. The OECD’s International Summit on the Teaching Profession, in its exploration of forces influencing the future of teaching, is also explores the changing role of leadership. And the focus of UNESCO’s 2025 Global Educational Monitoring Report 2025 is on the need for a different kind of leadership to support digital transformation: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000394934>





want to be³². Mindfulness is also a feature of leadership learning emphasising compassionate systems, with Peter Senge and Metta Bohl from MIT and The Center for Systems Awareness in the US among its leading proponents and facilitators. These approaches, significantly, all highlight the sustainability of leadership which is critical, especially where significant numbers of leaders report that they are merely surviving or even sinking, rather than thriving³³.

The following principles are all underpinned by the implications of the commitment to system transformation through deep personal growth.

Principle 3 – Foregrounding deep, networked relationships

The rationality of much educational change has led to inadequate attention to human elements, including the importance of meaningful connections and relationships. Developing positive relationships is frequently described in national leadership standards and is increasingly highlighted as fundamental to social network leadership³⁴. Their emphasis within the leadership development process, though, can often be underplayed.

Social learning is fundamental, for children and for adults, and is considered a major feature of professional learning in high performing systems³⁵. In the cases, social learning and networking are key elements, with an intentional focus on developing and emphasising the importance of authentic, deep relationships. Coaching, a familiar and beneficial feature in much leadership development³⁶, is a key element, including and often moving beyond use of external expert coaches. For example, New Zealand's NAPP incorporated three levels of coaching: the lead facilitator coaching coaches; these coaches coaching aspiring principals; and aspiring principals coaching each other – all face-to-face and online and through reflective journal entries written about the transformative change they were leading in their school. Social learning is exemplified elsewhere in: explicit commitment to learning with, from and as a cohort, including using feedback and group coaching; and varied size and mixed subgroupings (forms of professional learning communities³⁷, learning partners, action learning sets – or collegial team coaching as named in the Austrian Leadership Academy) for diverse purposes, including relationship building and peer coaching. Significantly, these cases pay attention to ensuring high levels of psychological safety³⁸ and trust in the group – the social 'glue' which supports learning – with humility, openness, ongoing learning modelled from facilitators and intentionally built into the culture.

³² Farrar, M. (2022) *Leading with Presence: It's an Inside Job*. London: Cadogan Press.

³³ See, for example, ongoing research in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland by Toby Greany, Pat Thomson and colleagues on sustainable school leadership, eg Perry, T., Greany, T., Collins, M. Thomson, P. and Goodacre, T. (2025) *Sustainable School Leadership: UK Survey Report 25*. Sustainable School Leadership Project. Available: <https://sustainable-school-leadership.uk/>

³⁴ Liou, Y-H and Daly, A. J. (2024) *The Relational Leader: Catalyzing Social Networks for Educational Change*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

³⁵ Jensen, B., Sonneman, J., Roberts-Hull, K. and Hunter, A. (2016) *Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems*, National Center on Education and the Economy, <https://www.ncee.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/BeyondPDWeb.pdf>

³⁶ Robertson, J. (2020) Coaching leadership through peer partnership as supervision for educational leaders, in U. Leo and E. Amundsdotter (Eds) *Perspektiv på handledning*. Malmö: Gleerups Publishing.

³⁷ Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M. and Thomas, S. (2006) Professional learning communities: a review of the literature, *Journal of Educational Change*, 7 (4): 221-258.

³⁸ Edmondson, A. C. (2019) op cit.



With psychological safety and trust, leaders are more open to engaging fully in different forms of deep ‘learning conversations’³⁹, that challenge their thinking and help them “make meaning together and jointly come up with new insights and knowledge. . . lead[ing] to intentional change to enhance practice and pupil learning.” Developing coaching capacity within the group to support peers is emphasised, and coaching leadership⁴⁰ is at the basis of NAPP in New Zealand, each leader having both an experienced leader coach (kaiarahi) (see also facilitation within Principle 7), a peer coach and access to group coaching through regional online professional learning communities and nationwide communities.

The power of networks and ecosystems

Network building is a fundamental strategy, establishing networks and alumni groups, oriented toward sustaining support and learning beyond the leadership development experience itself. This includes systems for supporting new cohorts of learners through peer buddies and mentors, and strategically orchestrating alumni connections to other related networks and associated activities. For example, Big Education’s BLA leaders can connect into its Big 8 Practitioner Network⁴¹ and the Rethinking Assessment⁴² movement, and British Columbia TELP’s leaders and alumni frequently join up with Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education (NOIIE)⁴³.

Notably, participants consider networking one of the most valued elements in all of the explored cases. The networked approach is intrinsically linked to many of the other principles, as an embodiment of a system-informed view of change, building sustainable capacity, creating agency and diversity of experience into a lifelong learning mental model and practice.

The importance of networking can’t be overstated, and can be seen in many different forms internationally. TELP strategies have been gleaned from connecting with Stephan Huber, leader and initiator of the World Education Leadership Symposium and International School Leadership Symposium⁴⁴. Over 20 years, experts from different fields of research and practice join together in Zug, Switzerland to discuss, reflect, present papers, explore complex contexts, pursue and exchange ideas with national and international experts, extend networks and maintain relationships. Elsewhere, the Brookings Institution’s Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST)⁴⁵, a global network co-led by Global South civil society organisations, aims to transform education systems locally and globally. And Teach for All’s Global Institute is designed to “connect, challenge, and inspire a diverse network of classroom, school and system leaders”⁴⁶, offering a range of related development opportunities.

³⁹ Stoll, L. (2012) Stimulating learning conversations, *Professional Development Today*, 14 (4): 6-12. Quote p6.

⁴⁰ Robertson, J. (2016) *Coaching Leadership: Building educational leadership capacity through partnership*. Second edition. NZCER Press.

⁴¹ <https://bigeducation.org/product/big-8-practitioner-network/>

⁴² <https://rethinkingassessment.com/>

⁴³ <https://noiie.ca/>

⁴⁴ <https://wels.edulead.net/en/>

⁴⁵ brookings.edu/projects/network-for-education-systems-transformation/ - this was formerly known as the Knowing-Doing Network Leadership Coalition (KDNLC)

⁴⁶ teachforall.org/global-institute



The cases also acknowledge the increasingly interconnected, place-based nature of working and learning ecosystems⁴⁷. ‘Schools as hubs’ and moves to greater collaboration have significant implications for leaders and what is expected of them. How we support leaders who can work in inter-, cross-and beyond-institutional ways is becoming increasingly important. A group of international researchers are using and applying social network theory and analysis to leadership of educational change to help understand the complex, connected and intertwined nature of relational patterns that support or inhibit change⁴⁸. One way in which this understanding influences the leadership learning design is through including participants from the wider educational ecosystem beyond ‘just’ school leaders (see, also Principle 5). CCE, an English charity aiming to transform education globally through creativity, orchestrates and facilitates networking of leaders from schools and school systems, including policy makers, with a wide range of ecosystem leaders in ‘system coalescing’ around leadership for creative thinking, alongside other development activities and online community offerings⁴⁹.

Technology and social connection

Over the years that the selected programmes were or have been offered, using technology for online learning has massively expanded, and many leadership development programmes internationally are offered entirely, or almost completely, online including one of these. During the pandemic, technology was frequently the only option. Our analysis suggests that developing and maintaining the kinds of relationships needed for deep work relies on a judicious balance of face-to-face and online learning. Online learning is frequently, and increasingly considered as preferable from logistics and funding perspectives. It can be more convenient and gives leaders choice about the time of learning, including through synchronous and asynchronous online learning. Researchers exploring six international leadership programs expressed ‘cautious optimism’ about online learning based on its impact on personal growth and wellbeing⁵⁰, although acknowledged that other areas were beyond the scope of their study. Preference for face-to-face (F2F) sessions, though, finds endorsement in England’s Ofsted’s independent review of teachers’ professional development⁵¹. Our study also highlights that online learning comes through as less effective for practical skill development. It seems that online sessions can work for some aspects of leadership learning, though this requires significant intentionality about building relationships and engagement. The current selected programmes often use this after initial F2F sessions. Our evaluations highlighted, though, that F2F is preferred overall, even taking travel into account, despite this having budget implications. Choice of location is frequently integral to their philosophy. For example, the Austrian Leadership Academy deliberately located each of four forums (3-day learning experiences) in the Austrian mountains, away from all participants’ homes.

⁴⁷ Hannon, V., Thomas, L. Ward, S. and Beresford, T. (2019) Local Learning Ecosystems: Emerging Models. World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) and Innovation Unit; see, also, Greany, T., Noyes, A., Gripton, C., Cowhitt, T., and Hudson, G. (2023) *Local learning landscapes: exploring coherence, equity and quality in teacher professional development in England*. University of Nottingham.

⁴⁸ Liou, Y. and Daly, A. J. (2024.) *The Relational Leader: Catalyzing Social Networks for Educational Change*. Op cit.

⁴⁹ <https://www.creativitycultureeducation.org/services/how-we-do-it>

⁵⁰ Yemiscigil, A., Born, D. and Ling, H. What makes leadership development programs succeed? *Harvard Business Review* (February 28, 2023) <https://hbr.org/2023/02/what-makes-leadership-development-programs-succeed>

⁵¹ Ofsted (2024) Independent review of teachers’ professional development in schools: phase I findings: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-professional-development-in-schools/independent-review-of-teachers-professional-development-in-schools-phase-I-findings>



AI's potential for professional learning and educational change is also being demonstrated as it is being incorporated into learning design and processes⁵² (see Principle 7). Relational implications will need considering and factoring in.

Principle 4 – Interrupting assumptions and ‘activity traps’

The term ‘activity traps’, first introduced in relation to management⁵³, fits well in education when people quickly move to ‘doing’, being busy and feeling productive, while paying insufficient attention to their overall vision and whether they have made the right decisions about what to do⁵⁴. This can lead to surface-level engagement on mundane tasks, and missed opportunities for deeper and more meaningful learning experiences. The cases emphasise a particularly deep form of reflection, provoked within the leadership learning experiences. Materials and evaluations highlight how they intentionally open participants up to the habit of suspending ingrained, habitual patterns of action and thought⁵⁵, and to changing their mental models and assumptions of ‘the way it is’ to think about their context and leadership in fresh and adaptive ways. In pushing for deep learning, within the ‘safe space’ created in and among participants, they curate a wide range of experiences, sometimes from beyond the world of education. Notably, they intentionally interrupt participants’ assumptions⁵⁶ by creating cognitive dissonance⁵⁷, and disequilibrating experiences:

Disruptive, or dis-equilibrating, experiences are different enough from an individual’s day-to-day experience to promote an internal conflict. These conflicts can force individuals to reconsider their underlying approach...⁵⁸.

Encounters with stories told by Indigenous leaders in the New Zealand and BC programmes are examples of such dissonant experiences that have led to profound shifts for participating leaders (see Principle 6 for more on storytelling). Leaders on the Big Leadership Adventure shadow a leader from a radically different context and environment. For clinicians involved in the Darzi Fellowships, experiences of bringing about service change working with a diverse range of partners in a hospital trust, mental health service or general practice promoted a ‘mind shift’ in many⁵⁹. Elsewhere, the AISNSW Leadership Centre in Australia has carefully selected the 360 degree feedback for its Flagship Program to “get into participants’ operating system –

⁵² Steimler, S-E. S, Lindvig, Y, Skandsen, T., Wærness, J. I. and Faannessen, M. (2024) *Leading Educational Change in the Era of AI*. Norway: LearnLab and IMTEC Foundation.

⁵³ Odiorne, G. (1974) *Management and the Activity Trap: How to Avoid It and How to Get Out of It*. New York: Harper & Row

⁵⁴ Katz, S., Earl, L. and Ben Jaafar, S. (2009) *Building and Connecting Learning Communities: The Power of Networks for School Improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

⁵⁵ Scharmer, C.O. and Kaufer, K. (2013) *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-system to Eco-system Economies*. San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler.

⁵⁶ Katz, S. and Dack, L. A. (2012) *Intentional Interruption: Breaking Down Learning Barriers to Transform Professional Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

⁵⁷ Creating dissonance is highlighted in most major reviews of professional learning eg Timperley, H. et al. (2007), *Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*, Ministry of Education, <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/15341>

⁵⁸ Manners, J., Durkin, K. and Nesdale, A. (2004) Promoting advanced ego development among adults, *Journal of Adult Development*, 11(1):19-27.

⁵⁹ Stoll et al (2011) op cit.



what might be the stories we tell ourselves?”⁶⁰ In Norway, the design of Stifftelsen IMTEC’s Pratisk Internasjonal Leder Utvisking (Practical International Leadership Development) is underpinned by Otto Scharmer’s Theory U and ‘presencing’⁶¹, challenging participant leaders to engage in deep ‘inner leadership work’ as they engage in awareness-based systems change. Scharmer also influenced and supported Austria’s LEA’s emphasis on a journey through four phases: open mind, open heart, open will, and open future⁶².

Such experiences provoke deep self-reflection in exploration of profound questions, e.g. ‘who am I as a leader?’, ‘What really matters to me?’, open participants up to new possibilities, and promote powerful change⁶³. Scaffolding supports individual learning and meaning making e.g. using journals, sufficient reflective time built into sessions, time to engage within small groups in difficult conversations where leaders are giving and receiving candid feedback, challenging each other’s assumptions and thinking, and holding the space for emotional processing. Sessions are also intentionally designed to lean into areas of conflict and seeming contradiction, by supporting participants to see beyond binary distinctions (both/and rather than either/or), and exploring the nature of disagreement, multiple perspectives and navigating within tensions and contradictions, including through using models and protocols.

This type of experience, when carefully supported and curated, is seen to be highly impactful in supporting deep reflection and personal growth, enabling leaders to see things from new perspectives, and asking bigger questions about their work. This requires the kind of highly skilled facilitation and modelling described in Principle 7. It is consistent with an understanding of schools as complex, adaptive systems and the need for leaders to engage with multiple, at times contradictory, perspectives and insights. Making space for this reality, and being able to ‘hold’ that as part of their meaning making, is supportive of leaders making increasingly sophisticated interventions and thinking differently about how they conceptualise problems and possible ways forwards.

Principle 5 – Prioritising diverse perspectives

‘Going beyond’ what often becomes received knowledge and intentionally highlighting different perspectives is fundamental to the design and development of these programmes and their associated activities. Where possible, recruitment is deliberate targeted for diversity, seen in the range of roles, perspectives, experiences and cultural backgrounds of participants. In some cases, national or regional policy makers, district leaders, educational NGO providers, and others learn alongside school leaders, senior leaders and, sometimes, middle leaders. The Darzi Clinical Leadership Fellowship brings together general practitioners with doctors working in community mental health, local community hospitals and teaching hospitals. These doctors also cover many specialisms. This supports participants gaining a broader perspective and range of insights. Such diversity is also a strategic decision to promote greater systemic impact on change and transformation and, in the case of the Austrian Leadership Academy, ensure

⁶⁰ Conversation with Penny Brown, Head of The Leadership Centre, Association of Independent Schools NSW, Australia.

⁶¹ Scharmer, C. O. (2008) *Theory U – Leading From the Future as it Emerges: The Social Technology of Presencing*. San Francisco: CA: Berrett-Koehler.

⁶² Schratz, M. and Schley, W. (2019) Leading system transformation from the emerging future, in O. Gunnlaugson and Brendel, W. (eds). *Advances in Presencing. Volume 1*. Vancouver. Trifoss Business Press.

⁶³ See, also, Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



that “the whole system is involved in a joint learning process”⁶⁴. The ecosystem surrounding schools offers a rich and diverse group of partners beyond education. With greater involvement of partners in learning ecosystems, scope for broadening participation in leadership learning programmes and activities may support ecosystem understanding and the development of wider partnerships⁶⁵.

Including interdisciplinary content, processes and tools is integral, reflecting an eco-systemic understanding of schools and learning. The cases draw on insights and evidence from a range of disciplines as well as more familiar educational content. For example, leaders on the Big Leadership Adventure learn about cultural transformation from senior leaders in the London Metropolitan Police Service and their focus on The Big 8 fundamentally draws on client-centred therapy and consulting, coaching psychology, positive psychology, neuroscience, behavioural science and organisational psychology⁶⁶. Elsewhere, leaders participating in the Creative Leadership Learning Programme⁶⁷ in England learnt through composing music and writing poetry. Examples of bringing in under-represented and marginalised voices, such as the learning of Indigenous peoples⁶⁸ are fundamental to the programmes in British Columbia and New Zealand, and exploration of power relations is a feature of several of the cases and other leadership learning programmes, including AISNSW’s Flagship Program. These experiences can support intentional disequilibrating approaches (Principle 4).

These examples of interdisciplinary and diversity-oriented content are matched with processes and tools supporting such an integrated approach to learning. Examples include the teaching and use of iterative and user-centred design methodologies, based on a fundamental necessity for listening and engagement with the leaders’ communities (see Principle 6). This is especially critical in ensuring that leaders are responding to the specific contextual needs of their local communities.

Frequently, important underpinning priority issues are woven through the entire content to ensure embeddedness throughout the learning experience e.g. diversity, inclusion and wellbeing. This intentional integration within the design avoids tokenistic engagement with these fundamental and challenging themes, and supports decisions about visible representation of presenters, content covered and other practical considerations about being part of the solution rather than perpetuating the problem, e.g. financial subsidies for those from underrepresented groups who may be less likely to be supported with professional learning within the specific current system.

Insights about the brain are also constantly emerging, with implications for education⁶⁹ and

⁶⁴ Schratz, M. and Schley, W. (2019) *op cit*. Quote p141.

⁶⁵ For further discussion of leading for ecosystems, see Hannon, V. and Mackay, A. (2021) *op cit*.

⁶⁶ Lucey, C., Lister, E., Robinson, L. and Parry, L. (2021) *Big 8 Leadership Foundations: The Research*. Big Education and Cornelia Lucey Positive Leadership.

⁶⁷ Stoll, L. and Temperley, J. (2009) Creative leadership: a challenge of our times, *School Leadership and Management*, 29 (1): 63-76; Stoll, L., Temperley, J. and Creasy, J. (2011) Developing Creative Leadership Teams. Paper presented at ICSEI 2011, Limassol, Cyprus, January.

⁶⁸ First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) (2008) First Peoples’ Principles of Learning. <https://www.fnesc.ca/first-peoples-principles-of-learning/>

⁶⁹ See, eg, the work of The Centre for Educational Neuroscience at Birkbeck and UCL.



leadership learning⁷⁰. Beyond education, a number of executive management programmes are informed by and/or built around neuroscientific research findings⁷¹. Changing attitudes, drivers and norms of different generations⁷² also have significant implications for the education sector. Better understanding and attending to these changing demographic contexts is an important component of future leadership learning, both in thinking about the wider workforce and communities, and also the leaders themselves. Outside of education, intergenerational leadership learning examples exist⁷³.

Principle 6 – Interweaving evidence, stories and practical experience

Intermingling of inquiry, evidence, research and theory, stories and opportunities for to practise highlights the holistic nature of such leadership learning. It goes beyond the ‘what’ and ‘how’, to address the emotional and motivational aspects of the ‘why’. Head, heart and hand are all engaged⁷⁴ in such learning, as in pedagogical experiences connected with a more expansive view of student learning.

Designers and developers skilfully bring together theory and evidence-informed approaches with powerful examples of leadership in practice and opportunities to test out and develop skills and approaches. They integrate both being inquiry based AND evidence informed; drawing on research evidence and using collected data are common features of many. Significantly, inquiry is seen as critical – as a powerful element of professional learning that demonstrates fundamental curiosity⁷⁵. Sophisticated learning processes help leaders integrate evidence and substantiated literature with inquiry and exploration of problems. Cycles of learning are commonly used e.g. the TELP spirals of inquiry⁷⁶, ‘design thinking used in BLA⁷⁷, and iterative design⁷⁸. Leaders in New Zealand’s NAPP develop an inquiry question as a focus

⁷⁰ For a recent example, see Riddell, P. and McDermott, I. (2025) *NeuroEffective Leadership: Leading Yourself and Others*. Abingdon: Routledge.

⁷¹ eg At Wharton Business School, drawing on Platt, M. L. (2020) *The Leader’s Brain: Enhance Your Leadership, Build Stronger Teams, Make Better Decisions, and Inspire Greater Innovation with Neuroscience*. Philadelphia, PA: Wharton School Press; Tobias Mortlock, J. and Coghlan, C. (2025) *The art and science of next-generation leadership development: bridging neuroscience, storytelling, and surprise*. *Global focus: The EFMD Business Magazine*, 19 (02).

⁷² Duffy, B. (2021) *Generations: Does When You’re Born Shape Who You Are?* London: Atlantic Books; Twenge, J. M. (2023) *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – and What They Mean for America’s Future*. New York: ATRIA Books.

⁷³ MAVA (2023) MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy Impact Report. MAVA, mowgli and commonpurpose. <https://humanedge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/MAVA-Impact-Report-final.pdf>

⁷⁴ This orientation to learning was first introduced in relation to ecological sustainability, eg. Orr, D. (1992) *Ecological literacy: Education for a post-modern world*. Albany, NY: State University of New York; Sipos, Y., Battisti, B. T. and Grimm, K. A. (2008) Achieving transformative sustainability learning: engaging head, hands and heart, *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 9(1): 68–86.

⁷⁵ Many reviews of powerful professional learning highlight this, often drawing on Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barr, H. and Fung, I. (2007) *Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration*, Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education and University of Auckland.

⁷⁶ Halbert, J. and Kaser, L. (2022) *Leading Through Spirals of Inquiry For Equity and Quality*. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Portage & Main Press. Based on Timperley, H., Kaser, L. and Halbert, J. (2014) *A Framework for Transforming Learning in Schools: Innovation and the Spiral of Inquiry*. CSE Seminar Series Paper 234, Centre for Strategic Education.

⁷⁷ <https://www.ideo.com/>

⁷⁸ Referenced in Breakspear, S. (2020) *Developing agile leaders of learning: school leadership policy for dynamic times*, WISE.



for studying leadership of change and how people can address the inequities in New Zealand education related to Maori students, Pasifika students and those with special educational needs. They also keep a reflective online inquiry portfolio. In different ways, leaders are thus supported to get better at navigating complex environments and ‘learn their way forward’.

Employing research-informed frameworks and tools to promote ‘knowledge animation’ also supports this kind of learning. Knowledge animation⁷⁹ focuses on making knowledge accessible and mobile to help leaders connect new knowledge, ideas and practices to what they already know and do, reshape their existing knowledge, and discover new meaning and ways of understanding. It also supports them in taking their learning forward and applying it in practice. Frameworks and tools in the leadership learning cases help to scaffold and structure leaders’ learning by giving leaders encounters with research in manageable units of meaning and in accessible, varied formats, along with supporting protocols. These also stimulate deeper thought, reflection on their practice, consideration of new perspectives and exploration of topics and issues through learning conversations, inquiry, collaborative learning and problem solving.

Leaders are helped and help each other in articulating tacit knowledge, beliefs, and theories of change and to challenge these. Active engagement and meaning making with ideas and materials empowers leaders to take action to enhance their practice. A further benefit of the frameworks and tools is in offering leaders a long term and systemic view – not just a solution to a ‘now’ problem, but an approach which can be applied to different contexts in the future. Using frameworks and tools takes many forms. Facilitated reading groups is a key strategy in the BC TELP programme, using carefully curated readings and intentionally focused questions. In Spain, a Between Schools programme supports pairs of school leaders, working in triads to use research-informed frameworks to learn observational and peer coaching skills in peer reviewing each other’s schools. Peer review⁸⁰, as a form of collaborative learning to support school self-evaluation, is increasingly used internationally. Elsewhere, a research-informed playbook, now being used in a number of countries, helps leaders work through what it means to lead for creative thinking⁸¹, and a set of cards supports them in considering how they embed self-regulated learning in their school(s)⁸².

The cases also variously highlight how stories and their underpinning narratives – especially those offered with humility and in spirit of ongoing learning – are valuable in exemplifying ‘enacted theory’ (what it looks like in reality at a human level). Compelling stories and case studies are carefully used alongside research and policy readings, quantitative data and evidence sets, with a recognition that all are needed. Case studies, including scenarios, help the leaders explore and reflect on unfolding situations. Stories are powerful in eliciting a human connection, including to the emotional components. Indeed, research has found that listeners’ brain activity mirrors that of storytellers’ – known as neuro-coupling – with suggestions of links

⁷⁹ Stoll, L. (2009) Knowledge Animation in Policy and Practice: Making Connections. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association as part of the symposium Using Knowledge to Change Policy and Practice, San Diego, April 2009.

⁸⁰ Godfrey, D. (2020) From external evaluation, to school self-evaluation, to peer review, in D. Godfrey (ed) *School Peer Review for Educational Improvement and Accountability: Theory, Practice and Policy Implications*. Springer.

⁸¹ Lucas, B., Spencer, E., Stoll, L., Fisher-Naylor, D., Richards, N., James, S. and Milne, K. (2023) *Creative Thinking in Schools: A Leadership Playbook*. Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.

⁸² Mannion, J., Stoll, L., Spence-Thomas, K. and Ross, G. (2023) *Activate: A Professional Learning Resource to Help Teachers and Leaders Promote Self-Regulated Learning*. Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.



with meaning making and empathy⁸³. Storytelling also helps avoid the dominance of ‘head only’ learning through their nature of being embodied, human and real. Significantly, it offers visual representation of diversity, with role models, and highlights oral traditions – Indigenous communities and/or voices of other lived experience. This is extremely powerful, although facilitators are mindful of the importance of using it in appropriate and non-exploitative ways. In emphasising the importance of storytelling in leadership⁸⁴, some of the cases devote considerable space to helping leaders develop and articulate their own stories and narratives for change. This is fundamentally important for ensuring that parents and the wider community are on board with their more expansive educational mission. In this, they are leading the external community to be conducive to change. The Big Leadership Adventure requires leaders to work on their ‘stump speech’, articulating their values and vision, and honing this over time. Elsewhere, in Norway, techniques from drama are an integral part of the Practical International Leadership Development (PILU) programme.

While the importance of practice is known⁸⁵, it can be underplayed in the design of leadership learning. Alongside evidence and stories, structured application, practice and support for integration of learning means that leaders have opportunities to practise skills, using mechanisms such as peer coaching. ‘Bridging tasks’ are often included between sessions which are then followed up, reflected upon and built on. This has implications for the time available for ‘new’ content in sessions. The most effective tasks are practical, real work challenges, not separated or different from leaders’ challenges. A project or context for application of all of the learning is generally seen as an important element. Despite challenges of timing and workload it is included, sometimes – as previously described – taking the form of a follow-on project, with an additional ‘final celebration’ task presented, in TELP’s case, to key stakeholders. Some of the cases use this activity to build towards formal accreditation or qualification. Notably, though, many leaders do not participate in this kind of leadership learning for a qualification; the learning experience, and often its reputation, are more important. Length of the experiences, highlighted in most reviews of powerful professional learning⁸⁶ are a minimum one school year, with regular meetings. Some are longer (2 years), though depth of commitment is sometimes impacted. Recognition of ongoing learning is explicit and exemplified in various forms.

Principle 7 – Adaptive facilitation and modelling

Learning designs are highly intentional, drawing on the maxim ‘form follows function’. Designers think deeply about what the learning needs to be like to achieve the intended outcomes. How participant learners experience the content is part of the learning itself, and the range of leadership learning approaches has to be appropriate to the intended learning. Creative approaches, for example, are frequently involved in interrupting assumptions. All of this has significant implications for facilitation.

⁸³ Stephens, G.J, Silbert, L.J. and Hasson, U. (2010) Speaker-listener neural coupling underlies successful communication, *Psychological and Cognitive Sciences*, 107 (31): 14425-14430.

⁸⁴ Mead, G. (2014) *Telling the Story: The Heart and Souls of Successful Leadership*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

⁸⁵ Stobart, G. (2014) *The Expert Learner: Challenging the Myth of Ability*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill; Ericsson, A. and Pool, R. (2016) *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

⁸⁶ Desimone, L. M. (2009) Improving impact studies of teachers’ professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures, *Educational Researcher*, 38, 181-199.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08331140>; Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., and Gardner, M. (2017) *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.



Highly adept facilitation is a distinctive and critical feature of leadership learning. It can make a fundamental difference to the extent of engagement and learning. Such skilful facilitation promotes participation, ensures equity and builds trust⁸⁷ as part of enabling deep learning. And, through ‘affective containment’, it provides “an environment that brings about effective and authentic receptiveness and reflection”⁸⁸ – essentially, facilitators may need to ‘hold’ participant emotions during challenging moments of learning. Looking across the cases has highlighted how the spaces for learning created in these leadership learning activities require exceptionally skilful facilitation, often from a number of facilitators – even if there are one or two lead facilitators. This facilitation clearly and deliberately mirrors and models the desired outcomes and approaches, for example humility, curiosity, openness to learning, productive management of disagreement, building of deep relationships and giving and receiving feedback.

Design and facilitation fundamentally reflect a belief that ‘we do not have all the answers and will need to learn our way into the future’. Consequently, they are deliberately set up with an inquiry and complexity-informed mindset. Facilitators also model adaptive expertise⁸⁹ – they have “the knowledge and skills to make productive in-the-moment decisions about how best to promote leadership learning and to evaluate what difference their actions [were] making”, and are able to model that explicitly.

Designs are underpinned by an explicit or implicit theory of change focusing the intended impacts on the values, competencies and associated skills for transformative leadership for system change. Designers and facilitators are highly adaptive – quick in responding to feedback and need for change through being connected to the wider ecosystem and ongoing scanning of the local, national and global environment. Rapid evaluation cycles, including evaluation for learning approaches described previously, also enable precise and swift action. Designers integrate participant leader feedback and evaluation and build on this – keeping the best and keeping on learning – and are explicit with participants about this, as part of modelling their own learning process. They are also modelling ‘being in it for the long term’. In service of sustainable system change, several of the cases have been going for a decade or more. The Darzi Clinical Leadership Fellowship started in 2009 and was facilitated by different providers until 2024, although Fellowship activity continues; Austria’s Leadership Academy was offered for 14 years and alumni continue to connect; and BC’s Transformative Educational Leadership Program is starting its 11th year at time of writing. Over this time, many alumni in these and the other cases have moved into influential leadership roles in their countries and jurisdictions, continuing, promoting and extending what they have learnt and continue to learn through their participation.

Connected to this, the commitment to ‘not having all the answers’ is also reflected through the designers’ and facilitators’ commitment to encouraging and working with leaders’ agency. There

⁸⁷ McDonald, J. P., Mohr, N., Dichter, A. and McDonald, E.C. (2013) *The Power of Protocols: An Educator’s Guide to Better Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

⁸⁸ James, C. (2010) The psychodynamics of educational change, in A. Hargreaves, A. Lieberman, M. Fullan and D. Hopkins (eds) *Second International Handbook of Educational Change*. (Springer International Handbooks of Education; Vol. 23). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-2660-6_3. Quote p.61. James writes of the term ‘affective containment’, noting its origins in the field of psychoanalysis.

⁸⁹ eg Le Fevre, D., Timperley, H., Twyford, K. and Ell, F. (2020) *Leading Powerful Professional Learning: Responding to Complexity With Adaptive Expertise*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Quote p2.



is, especially the more recent/ current ones, an explicit intention to grow ‘agentic’ leadership, i.e. working with and growing the potency, knowledge, wisdom and experience in the group. This is enacted through nurturing and showcasing participant input to enrich shared learning and planned space within the design to enable this meaningfully to happen. A respectful and skilful approach to facilitation also encourages participation, created space for feedback and supported integration with other learning. Such an approach ensures that learning is ‘bespoke to and driven by practitioners’⁹⁰, increasing engagement and learning. In several of the other examples we explored, network members facilitated aspects of leadership learning. From our experience, to enable sustainable leadership learning and development – deep, involving the many and not the few, and long lasting – a key design feature, as exemplified in several of the cases, is facilitator development. Elsewhere, in Spain, the Liderazgo para el Aprendizaje (Leadership for Learning) programme includes specific development for facilitators of leadership learning. In this they are developing and modelling adaptive expertise and using a facilitator coaching tool designed to link with UCL CEL’s facilitator competency framework⁹¹.

Facilitating leadership learning using AI

Modelling the rapidly changing opportunities and challenges of using technology is a fast emerging theme. Creative methodologies are being used within post graduate educational leadership and management programmes. For example, Philip Hallinger in Thailand has, for some years, been designing and using online simulations to support leaders in change management⁹², most recently turning his attention to leading change for sustainability in schools⁹³. A younger generation of leaders have grown up with technology. With developments moving fast, the use of AI is increasingly appearing in leadership learning. The Teacher Development Trust in England has piloted TeacherVerse, using Generative AI, to create immersive simulated scenarios to support professional learning, supported by ‘invisible’ mentors within face-to-face learning experiences. The rapidly developing capabilities and implications of AI will have increasing significance for leaders and, potentially, for how we support and develop them. Further research can help to understand its use for flexible and personalised professional learning of teachers⁹⁴, and benefits for leadership learning.

Conclusion

A key starting point for this paper was an expressed need we’ve heard from many leaders for leadership learning that focuses on the ever-increasing challenges of preparing children, young people and entire communities for their future in a dramatically changing, complex world. Our analysis has largely focused on a small, selective sample of impactful transformative leadership learning programmes and associated activities, some of which have already influenced other

⁹⁰ Jones, K. (2022) Leading Professional Learning. National Academy for Educational Leadership Wales.

⁹¹ Long, E., Bellinger, H. and Dellagana-Campbell, N. (2025) UCL Facilitator Development Programme: Early Impact Report. UCL Centre for Educational Leadership.

⁹² Hallinger P., Wang R. (2020). The evolution of simulation-based learning across the disciplines, 1965–2018: A science map of the literature. *Simulation & Gaming*, 51(1), 9–32.

⁹³ Nguyen, V-T., Hallinger, P. and Showanasai, P. (2024) Evaluating the effectiveness of the Leading Change for Sustainability in Schools Simulation: A research and development project. *Simulation & Gaming*, 55 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10468781231219929>

⁹⁴ Tan, X., Cheng, G. and Lin, M. H. (2025) Artificial intelligence in teaching and teacher professional development: a systematic review, *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 8, June 2025, 100355



national and international programmes and activities. The principles and findings contained within them, embellished by other innovative efforts we have encountered, offer insights and pointers to policy makers, practitioners, researchers and others interested in powerful leadership learning, and opportunities for further research of emerging themes. These findings highlight that powerful leadership learning is not just about acquiring knowledge and skills; it's about transforming mindsets, developing strong relationships within and across networks and ecosystems, and empowering leaders to become adaptive learners and bold change-makers within complex, connected, evolving systems. Our findings underscore that the investment in such leadership learning yields many benefits, manifesting in more successful leaders, enhanced organisational and local system cultures and, ultimately, better outcomes for children, young people, and their communities. As countries and jurisdictions grapple with the coalescence of crises and navigate the increasingly uncertain world, we hope this work will provide support for commissioning and designing learning opportunities for leaders who will be better equipped to lead their communities in learning their way forward into an expansive and transformative future.

Below, we offer questions as starters for learning conversations. We imagine that you will have others.

Questions for learning conversations

- What resonates with you?
- What examples of the principles do you have in your context?
- What does the paper make you curious about?
- What do you disagree with? What doesn't sit right?
- How mainstream should this type of leadership learning be? Is this type of learning for 'the niche'? Can some 'opt out' of thinking about these big questions about the future? Or not?
- What are the implications for leadership learning in your context?
- How might you enact or share some of these ideas?



Annex – The five cases

Big Leadership Adventure, Big Education, England

Big Leadership Adventure (BLA), is Big Education's Multi Academy Trust's (MAT's) leadership programme, now renamed Big Education Leadership Programme. First offered in 2019, with a new cohort of around 30 participants starting each year, it has been designed as a 'what's next?' alternative to the national leadership qualifications offer in England. Initially a two-year programme, it was amended to one year, plus a flexible, modular second year. BLA is oriented towards those leading in schools, MATs, Local Authorities (LAs), third sector education organisations or other related organisations to help them drive change, develop a new paradigm for education and become more expansive leaders. BLA's design and facilitation aims to mirror the Head, Heart and Hand philosophy underpinning educational experiences in Big Education's schools. Four values – being authentic, brave, connected and curious – guide the programme. Leaders engage in a set of curriculum modules connected to a set of desired outcomes that also model the Head, Heart and Hand philosophy. During BLA, leaders are supported through diverse facilitated and self-facilitated individual, group and whole cohort learning processes, also including guest talks and an innovation project to effect positive change within a participants' own organisations. Several alumni support future cohorts' learning.

Transformative Educational Leadership Program, UBC, Canada

The University of British Columbia's (UBC) Transformative Educational Leadership Program (TELP) started in 2015 and now is serving the 11th cohort of educators. TELP is designed to equip current leaders with a willingness to and a capacity for changing the K-12 system to one that celebrates deeper forms of learning for all. TELP's blended program takes place over one school year, including seven sessions. Teachers, school and district leaders in various roles are both participants and inquiry partners. An active alumni group and provincial network support ongoing learning. Leaders have multiple opportunities to consider broader perspectives through dialogue, reading, small design groups, storytelling, reflective writing and through meeting with local and international change leaders who act as "living case studies". Honesty, courage, connection and curiosity are highly valued. The program's change process – the spiral of inquiry – starts by engaging in direct conversations with learners. Indigenous understandings provide a vital perspective to help to bring equity challenges to life. During the program, participants focus on learning new ways of thinking and leading as they consider their focus for informed actions over the next few years. Twice a year, the TEL journal publishes articles by graduates, sharing stories of transformative educational practices with the aim of positively influencing discourse among practitioners and scholars.

Leadership Academy, Austria

The Austrian Leadership Academy (LEA) was designed by colleagues at the Universities of Innsbruck and Zurich and supported by Austria's Ministry of Education. Its mission was to help develop leadership capable of meeting the social, technological, and political challenges creating change in Austrian education. Its graduates would constitute a critical mass of proactive, system-wise leaders capable of transforming the system in a time of significant new



educational reforms at national and provincial levels. Its ambitious purpose was to prepare leaders at all levels and in all types of schools to *work in and on the system* as an ecosystem. Trust, authenticity, openness, flexibility and connection were critical. From 2004 to 2018, a cohort ('Generation') of around 250 participants progressed through four forums each year, three-day learning experiences of presentations with group processing and of work in various learning partnerships between participants. They were supported to take a proactive, team-oriented, problem-solving stance to leadership for learning, also developing and implementing a project in their own institutions over the year. Partners met between Forums and came together in regional networks. Participants were assessed, those successfully completing the training and assessment being certified and admitted into the graduate ranks of the Leadership Academy. LEA alumni played key roles mentoring subsequent candidates and supporting the group networking.

The National Aspiring Principals' Programme (NAPP), New Zealand

New Zealand's Ministry of Education commissioned a professional learning consortium Te Toi Tupu, constituting CORE education, The University of Waikato, Cognition Education, the Waikato-Tainui College for Research and Development, and the New Zealand Council for Education Research providing evaluative support, to design and deliver a national programme for 230 aspiring principals from 2011 to 2016. Its emphasis was on hard to staff schools and embedding culturally responsive leadership practices, ensuring professional learning led to improved outcomes for Maori, Pasifika students and those with special education needs, and ensuring that potential principals were well prepared to lead change and improve teaching and learning for every student. The design of the learning and leadership experiences drew on extensive international literature about what makes for deep important learning and leadership of schools. The programme was built around five main curriculum themes: developing self, leading change, leading learning, 21st century learning environments, and the role of the principal. NAPP was delivered through a range of mediums, with all curriculum themes being interwoven throughout the learning experiences participants engaged in. These included online discussions and forums, professional learning groups, online and face-to-face hui and coaching sessions with peers and with an expert coach.

Darzi Fellowship in Clinical Leadership Programme, England

In response to the 2009 Darzi review of the NHS, the NHS London 'Darzi' Fellowship in Clinical Leadership Programme was designed to develop future leaders in England's health service who could relate to others, collaborate productively, and negotiate their way through the complexity and challenges of their organisational and system context, to bring about service change and quality improvement. The first cohort of around 40 Fellows took one year out from their specialty training programmes, maintaining clinical practice through a few weekly sessions. From various clinical backgrounds, they were mentored by a nominated sponsor, working closely with this person, the Trust and local community on work-based experience around clinical service change, improvement or innovation, and capacity building projects. A bespoke leadership development programme supported them, blending academic study with a range of learning experiences and networking. Post-graduate accreditation was available. Subsequently, the NHS Leadership Academy ran the programme, then South Bank University led and evolved the programme until 2024. Fellows are expected to share their



learning with colleagues within and beyond their host organisation. Since the Fellowship's inception, other similar programmes and frameworks have been developed, with leadership becoming a key component in the postgraduate curricula of all doctors and many other clinicians and increasingly in undergraduate education for all healthcare professionals.

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