



Thinkpiece

Transforming Leadership Learning: Designing for Sustainable, Systemic Change

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Introduction

Powerful leadership learning is fundamental to creating flourishing educational environments. While teachers have the greatest influence on their students' educational outcomes, leaders significantly can enable staff to do this. Improving leadership has consequently become a major focus internationally. Constant social, technological, environmental, economic and political changes, though, now present a coalescence of crises. Coupling these with persistent, unresolved challenges – for example around equity and adolescent disengagement – raises profound questions about the purpose of schooling. Such a complex, fast moving educational context requires a rethink of leadership, its competencies and associated development.

Meanwhile, many jurisdictions' leadership development activities remain oriented toward recognised school improvement processes and a narrow focus on student outcomes. A transactional view of leadership often exists, and large programmes are delivered to leaders with heavily scripted notes, limiting flexibility and reducing the human element of change. How can this lead to deep change and powerfully impactful practice? Are past approaches adequate to new challenges? Have we been designing learning for people who are designing the future but who are stuck in the past?

As authors, our collaborative work brings together our histories and experiences of research, practice, development and working with international, national and local policymakers. Reflecting on these questions has posed uncomfortable truths for us as leadership learning designers. In this thinkpiece, based on a more detailed [research paper](#)¹, we reframe how leadership learning might be thought about in light of the need for greater future orientation, including considering the design of curriculum, learning and assessment approaches. 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.

Five successful, innovative leadership development cases

We have chosen to explore leadership development purposely designed and facilitated to bring about transformative, sustainable change in schools and across systems. Predominantly, we have brought together findings from evaluations of five successful, innovative leadership development programmes and associated activities, two from England, and one each from Canada, New Zealand and Austria. These have been designed and facilitated by various combinations of policy makers, practitioners, researchers from education and beyond, and NGOs. One is a health leadership development initiative². Some are ongoing; others were selected for their insights³. They all intentionally differ from predecessors or many others currently available, though elements may be found in other leadership development programmes or activities. Indeed, some of these cases have influenced other national and international leadership development initiatives in their field. Vignettes of the five cases can be found at the end of the thinkpiece.



The five cases

Big Leadership Adventure (BLA), now known as the Big Leadership Programme (Big Education, UK) 2019-ongoing

Transformative Educational Leadership Program (TELP) (BC, Canada) 2015-ongoing

Austrian Leadership Academy (LEA) (University of Innsbruck and Ministry of Education, Austria) 2004-2018

National Aspiring Principals' Programme (NAPP) (New Zealand) 2011-2016

Darzi Fellowships in Clinical Leadership (NHS London, England) 2009-2024

Transformative impact

Importantly, external evaluation findings⁴ highlight the impact of these innovative leadership learning cases. 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.

Participating leaders' and alumni's influence can also be seen in the culture in their organisations. Leaders' projects, carried out during and after the development experiences, frequently highlight bold and innovative change initiatives. Different tools and processes become, as one leader described it, "the gift that keeps on giving". The leadership learning experiences also stimulate, encourage and support participants in creating new tools, prototypes, and capacity building programmes to support others. And, where opportunities arise and have been created, they weave themes and processes into national initiatives, exerting their influence more widely.

Our method

Our approach aimed to capture and explore designers' intent and impacts they aim to achieve, using formal or informal theories of change. The evaluation orientation, including our own, has increasingly moved to one of evaluation for learning, drawing on evaluative thinking to support teams in decision making around adaptations in moving forward, as well as iteratively sharing findings and perspectives on impact and participants' experiences. Other research methods and evidence collection frequently involved document analysis, interviewing 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.

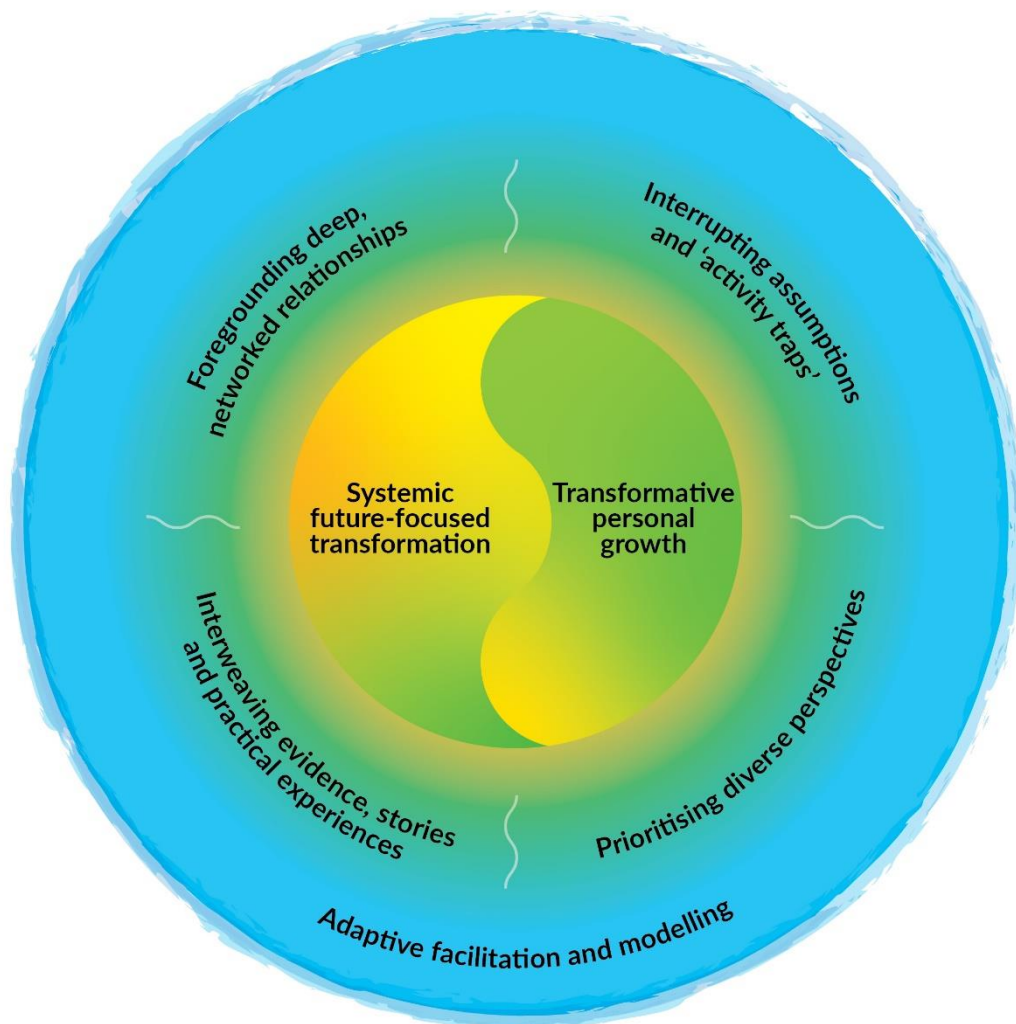
Throughout the thinkpiece, our learnings from the five cases are supplemented with other international examples and with helpful insights from activities which may not be described as leadership development. We have also integrated rapidly emerging trends and themes.

Some words about language

Careful and intentional consideration is needed of the language used to design and describe this type of leadership learning. We use the term leadership learning – rather than development – to reflect better the deep engagement necessary for transformative changes. Leaders, like students and teachers, have to see themselves as learners. The word ‘programme’ can also imply that learning and experiences are finite whereas this effective professional learning is continuous and ongoing. Our use of the expression ‘associated activities’ also highlights the carefully orchestrated and multi-faceted design of connected learning opportunities, extending learning for participants and to others.

Seven principles for transformative, sustainable leadership learning

Despite different contexts, a number of strong interconnected themes emerged. These are captured below and framed as seven principles.



Principle 1 – Systemic future-focused transformation

An explicit intention to develop capacity for the wider system means the learning is not just oriented towards leadership of individual institutions, nor on management of the current status quo. The cases are unapologetically and boldly pitched beyond technical and management aspects of school or system leadership. Curricula have a systems orientation, including explicitly – and often uncomfortably – considering challenges in the system, and largely involving a commitment to addressing inequalities. They also look outwards, paying attention to shifting global trends. Their orientation is consequently more adaptive, one in which those in schools and whole school systems need to learn their way into the future.

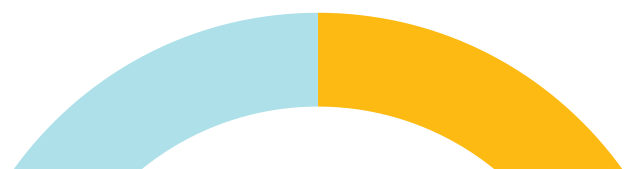
Future-focused learning environments are emphasised, and BC's TELP includes a learning organisation focus, as does the Edu Caixa and UCL Centre for Educational Leadership (CEL) programme Liderazgo para el Aprendizaje (Leadership for Learning). The emphasis on flourishing is also reflected in an OECD initiative arising out of its PISA High Performing Systems for Tomorrow work. In most of the cases, political and policymaker commitment is also a fundamental enabler of the kind of system change this leadership learning supports. Elsewhere, initiatives such as England's former National College for School Leadership (NCSL) annual Fellowship gave school leaders the opportunity potentially to influence policy through an intensive policy development project.

Commitment to whole system transformation means a necessary focus on the transformative personal growth and deep learning needed to lead such change with skill. It also has implications for identifying appropriate participants to engage in the learning. These set expectations toward those committed to 'going beyond'. Approaches also include bringing together leaders from different parts and levels of the system to support wider system-level understanding.

Sustainability is frequently designed in by explicitly developing capacity within cohorts to grow the work and ideas in and beyond their own settings, and giving them opportunities to support facilitation of future cohorts and wider groups. Evaluations of some of the cases and examples elsewhere highlight how alumni frequently take on system leadership, policymaker or other leadership roles, fundamental to changing education systems in communities. This highlights the need for networked leadership and its development in whole system transformation.

Principle 2 – Transformative personal growth

Focusing on system transformation in times of complex challenges requires deep personal growth, shaped by the question 'What kind of leadership do we need?' 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 increasingly being promoted for students in the changing world. These, and connected qualities, commonly focus on:



- developing a sense of urgency for change,
- courage –to go beyond current practices and incentives
- curiosity to new ideas and thinking, linked to a mental model of ‘we don’t have all the answers’
- humility – to discover what we don’t know
- creativity – to explore possibilities
- self-awareness – to deeply reflect on practice
- vulnerability – to be open to challenging ideas and creating psychological safety for all

Many, within and beyond education, are now working to understand and articulate the range of mindsets, competencies and capabilities leaders need in complex environments⁵. Orienting learning towards these competencies has design implications. The cases generally encourage creating and exploring content, rather than ‘receiving’ a set curriculum, in a way that goes beyond simply applying knowledge to their own context. The sustainability of leadership is also critical. Challenges encountered by leaders involved in deep transformative change also require them to ensure they attend to their own and others’ wellbeing. In the cases, this has been increasingly emphasised through relational aspects, including the nature of social time leaders spend together. Mindfulness is featured in other examples we have encountered, including The Center for Systems Awareness programmes focused on compassionate systems.

In the illustrated framework, these first two principles sit in the centre, setting the foundational context for those that follow. These are all underpinned by implications of committing to system transformation through deep personal growth.

Principle 3 – Foregrounding deep, networked relationships

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

Social learning and networking are key elements in the cases, with an intentional focus on developing and emphasising the importance of authentic, deep relationships. Coaching, beneficially featured in other leadership development, is emphasised, for example through Austrian LEA’s collegial team coaching (a form of action learning sets) and New Zealand NAPP’s three forms of coaching. Explicit commitment is also designed in to ensure learning with, from and as a cohort. Significantly, attention is paid to ensuring high levels of psychological safety and trust in the group – the social ‘glue’ supporting learning – with humility, openness, and ongoing learning modelled from facilitators and intentionally built into the culture.

Notably, leaders are open to engaging fully in different forms of deep, challenging learning conversations that help them make meaning together and jointly come up with new

insights and knowledge leading to intentional change to enhance practice and student learning and wellbeing.

The power of networks and ecosystems

Systems are designed for peer buddies and mentors, and for 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 Network and the Rethinking Assessment movement, and British Columbia TELP's leaders and alumni frequently join up with Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education (NOIIE).

Cases also acknowledge the increasingly interconnected nature of learning ecosystems. 'Schools as hubs' and moves to greater collaborative partnerships have significant implications for leaders and influence leadership learning design through including participants from the wider educational ecosystem. Other cases exist, for example CCE, an English charity aiming to transform education globally through creativity, orchestrates networking of ecosystem leaders in 'system coalescing' around leadership for creative thinking.

Technology and social connection

Our analysis suggests that developing and maintaining the kinds of relationships needed for deep work relies on judiciously balancing face-to-face and online learning, the latter being overall less effective for practical skill development. While online sessions work for some aspects of leadership learning, this requires significant intentionality about building relationships, often after initial face-to-face sessions. Our evaluations highlighted that face-to-face is preferred overall. We return later to AI's potential for professional learning design and processes.

Principle 4 – Interrupting assumptions and 'activity traps'

'Activity traps', a term first introduced in the field of management, fits well in education when people quickly move to 'doing', being busy and feeling productive, while giving insufficient time or depth to their decision making. This can result in surface-level engagement on mundane tasks, and missed opportunities for deeper learning experiences. The cases emphasise a particularly deep form of reflection. Learning processes intentionally open participants up to the habit of suspending ingrained, habitual patterns of action and thought, to think about their context and leadership in fresh and adaptive ways. In pushing for deep learning, they intentionally interrupt participants' assumptions by creating cognitive dissonance, and 'disequilibrating experiences'.

Encounters with stories told by Indigenous leaders in the New Zealand and BC programmes are examples of such dissonant experiences leading to profound shifts for participating leaders. For clinicians involved in the Darzi Fellowships, experiences of bringing about service change working with a diverse range of partners promoted a 'mind shift' in many. Austria's LEA design incorporated Otto Scharmer's Theory U and



‘presencing’, challenging participant leaders to engage in deep ‘inner leadership work’ in their self and systems change journey. And elsewhere, the AISNSW Leadership Centre in Australia has carefully selected the 360 degree feedback it uses for its Flagship Program to “get into participants’ operating system – what might be the stories we tell ourselves?”⁶ Such experiences provoke deep self-reflection in exploration of profound questions, such as ‘who am I as a leader?’, ‘what really matters to me?’, that open participants up to new possibilities, and promote powerful change. Scaffolding supports individual learning and meaning making, including:

- using journals
- ringfencing reflective time within sessions
- leaders giving and receiving candid feedback
- leaders challenging each other’s assumptions
- holding the space for emotional processing
- leaning into areas of conflict and contradiction

This type of experience 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.

Principle 5 – Prioritising diverse perspectives

‘Going beyond’ what often becomes received knowledge and intentionally highlighting different perspectives is fundamental to programme design. Where possible, recruitment is deliberately targeted for diversity, roles, perspectives, experiences and cultural backgrounds. The Darzi Fellowship brought together general practitioners with doctors working in community mental health, local community hospitals and teaching hospitals. These doctors also covered many specialisms. Such diversity is also a strategic decision to promote greater systemic impact and, in the case of the Austrian Leadership Academy, ensure that “the whole system is involved in a joint learning process”⁷.

Including interdisciplinary processes is integral, reflecting an eco-systemic understanding of schools and learning. Insights from a range of disciplines infuse the cases. For example, leaders on the BLA learn about cultural transformation from senior leaders in the London Metropolitan Police Service. Examples of bringing in under-represented and marginalised voices, such as the learning of Indigenous peoples, are fundamental to the programmes in British Columbia and New Zealand, and exploration of power relations is featured in several cases and other leadership learning programmes, including AISNSW’s Flagship Program.

Examples of interdisciplinary and diversity-oriented content include the teaching and use of iterative and user-centred design methodologies, based on a fundamental necessity for listening and engagement with leaders’ communities. And frequently, important underpinning priority issues are woven through the entire content to ensure embeddedness throughout the learning experience, for example diversity, inclusion and wellbeing.



Constantly emerging insights about the brain have further implications for leadership learning, with examples of executive management programmes being informed by and/or built around neuroscientific research findings. Changing attitudes, drivers and norms of different generations also have significant implications for the education sector. Intergenerational leadership learning examples exist outside of education. Better understanding and attending to changing demographic contexts might helpfully inform leadership learning design, both in considering the wider workforce and communities, and also the leaders themselves.

Principle 6 – Interweaving evidence, stories and practical experience

Intermingling of inquiry evidence, research, theory, practice opportunities and stories highlights the holistic nature of such leadership learning. It goes beyond the ‘what’ and ‘how’, to address emotional and motivational aspects of the ‘why’. Head, heart and hand are all engaged in such learning, as in pedagogical experiences connected with a more expansive view of student learning⁸.

Significantly, inquiry is critical as a powerful element of professional learning demonstrating fundamental curiosity. Designers and developers skilfully integrate both being inquiry-based AND evidence-informed. Sophisticated learning processes help leaders combine evidence and substantiated literature with inquiry and problem exploration. Cycles of learning are commonly used, for example TELP’s Spirals of Inquiry, design thinking used in BLA, and iterative design. Leaders are thus supported to get better at navigating complex environments.

Frameworks, tools and protocols help scaffold and structure leaders’ learning by giving leaders encounters with research in accessible and manageable units of meaning. Such knowledge animation processes 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. Leaders are supported in articulating and challenging tacit knowledge, beliefs, and theories of change. Active engagement and meaning making with ideas and materials empowers them to take action to enhance their practice. The variety of frameworks and tools also offer leaders a long-term and systemic view. Facilitated reading groups is a key strategy in TELP, using carefully curated readings and intentionally focused questions. Elsewhere, a research-informed playbook, now used in several countries, helps leaders work through what it means to lead for creative thinking.

Cases also 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). Case studies and scenarios help 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’ with suggestions of links with meaning making and empathy. Storytelling also helps avoid the dominance of ‘head only’ learning through their nature of being embodied, human and real. In emphasising storytelling in leadership, some cases devote considerable space to helping leaders



develop and articulate their own stories and narratives for change, a fundamentally important element for ensuring that parents and wider community are on board with their more expansive educational mission. For example, BLA requires leaders to work on their 'stump speech', articulating their values and vision, and honing this over time.

Practice can be underplayed in leadership learning design. 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 and are followed up, reflected upon and built on. Importantly, these tasks are practical, real work challenges, not separated or different from leaders' work. A project or context for application of all of the learning is generally seen as an important element. As a significant focus, the Darzi Fellows, for example, were leading two projects throughout their fellowship at the time of evaluation. And length of the experiences, highlighted in most reviews of powerful professional learning, are a minimum one school year, with regular meetings.

Principle 7 – Adaptive facilitation and modelling

Highly adept facilitation is a distinctive and critical feature of leadership learning. Such skilful facilitation promotes participation, ensures equity and builds trust as part of enabling deep learning. Through 'affective containment', it also provides "an environment that brings about effective and authentic receptiveness and reflection"⁹ – essentially, facilitators may need to 'hold' participant emotions during challenging moments of learning. The cases highlighted how the spaces for learning created in these leadership learning activities require exceptionally skilful facilitation that clearly and deliberately mirrors and models the desired outcomes and approaches, including humility, curiosity and an 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. Designers and facilitators are highly adaptive – quick in responding to feedback and need for change through being connected to the wider ecosystem and through ongoing scanning of the local, national and global environment. Rapid evaluation cycles enable precise and swift action. Designers integrate participant leader feedback and build on this transparently as part of modelling their own learning process.

Connected to this, the commitment to 'not having all the answers' is also reflected through designers' and facilitators' commitment to encouraging and working with leaders' agency. This is realised by actively cultivating and showcasing participants' expertise, a process which demands a deliberate design architecture that carves out dedicated space for rich, shared learning. Such an approach ensures that learning is bespoke to and guided by practitioners' increasing engagement and learning. In several 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 – facilitator learning and development is a key design feature,



as exemplified in several of the cases. In Spain, the Liderazgo para el Aprendizaje (Leadership for Learning) programme includes specific development for facilitators of leadership learning, using a facilitator coaching tool designed to link with UCL CEL's facilitator competency framework.

Modelling the rapidly changing opportunities and challenges of using technology is a fast emerging theme. With developments moving quickly, 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 and benefits for leadership learning.

Conclusion

A key starting point for this paper was an expressed need we have heard from many leaders for leadership learning that focuses on the ever-increasing challenges of preparing young people for a dramatically changing, complex world. Our analysis largely focused on a small, selective sample of impactful transformative leadership learning programmes and associated activities. The principles and findings contained within them, embellished by other innovative efforts we have encountered, offer insights and pointers to those interested in powerful leadership learning, and opportunities for further research of emerging themes.

These findings highlight that profound 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. Our findings underscore that investing in such leadership learning yields many benefits, manifested in more successful leaders, enhanced organisational and local system cultures and, ultimately, broader 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.



Questions for reflection and learning conversations

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

1. What resonates with you?
2. What examples of the principles do you have in your context?
3. What does the thinkpiece make you curious about?
4. What do you disagree with? What doesn't sit right?
5. 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?
6. What are the implications for leadership learning in your context?
7. How might you enact or share some of these ideas?

The five cases - vignettes

Big Leadership Adventure, Big Education, England (2019-ongoing)

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. 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. During BLA, leaders are supported through diverse learning processes, including an innovation project to effect positive change within a participants' own organisations. Several alumni support future cohorts' learning.¹⁰

Transformative Educational Leadership Program (TELP), UBC, Canada (2015-ongoing)

The University of British Columbia's (UBC's) Transformative Educational Leadership Program started in 2015. 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. Teacher, 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. 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, with the aim of positively influencing discourse among practitioners and scholars.¹¹

Leadership Academy, Austria (2004-2018)

The Austrian Leadership Academy (LEA) was designed by 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 to create educational change. 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. 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. Participants were assessed, those successfully completing the training and assessment being certified and admitted into graduate ranks of the Leadership Academy. LEA alumni played key roles in mentoring and networking.¹²



National Aspiring Principals' Programme (NAPP), New Zealand (2011-2016)

The New Zealand Government commissioned a consortium – Te Toi Tupu (CORE Education, The University of Waikato, Cognition Education, the Waikato-Tainui College for Research and Development) to design and deliver a national programme for 220 aspiring principals each year 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. 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 facilitated through a range of mediums, with curriculum themes 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 an expert coach. The programme will recommence in 2026, developing up to 200 aspiring principals a year for four years, and including key elements from the original design.¹³

Darzi Fellowship in Clinical Leadership Programme, England (2009-2024)

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. Initiated in 2010, the NHS Leadership Academy and South Bank University subsequently led and evolved the programme until 2024. Around 40 Fellows per year from various clinical backgrounds took one year out from their specialty training programmes, maintaining part time clinical practice. They worked with a mentor, the Trust and local community on clinical improvement projects. A leadership development programme blended academic study with a range of learning experiences and networking. Post-graduate accreditation was available. Since the Fellowship's inception, other similar programmes have been developed, with leadership becoming a key component in the postgraduate curricula for many clinicians.¹⁴



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About this thinkpiece

In this thinkpiece, Louise Stoll and Liz Robinson argue that a complex, fast moving educational context requires a rethink of leadership, its competencies and associated development. Through a cross-case analysis of evaluations of five successful programmes and associated activities, they explore leadership development purposely designed and facilitated to bring about transformative, sustainable change in schools and across systems. They identify seven principles, distilling something of what is distinctive about these learning opportunities. The insights pose questions for all those supporting leaders and emerging leaders.

Endnotes

¹ This thinkpiece is based on a research paper that contains a detailed description of the study, its findings and a full list of references. See Stoll, L. and Robinson, L. (2025) Transforming Leadership Learning: Designing for Sustainable, Systemic Change – Research Paper. UCL Centre for Educational Leadership.

² Implications for health leadership learning are not addressed here.

³ 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.

⁴ For further detail, see evaluation reports and associated writing.

⁵ Examples of such leadership competencies can be seen in British Columbia's, BCSSA (2022) system leadership competencies - The Spirit of Leadership - <https://bcssa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/The-Spirit-of-Leadership-20220824.pdf> - and BCPVPA's (2024) aligned school leadership competencies - Being in the Canoe: Leadership Competencies for Principals and Vice Principals - <https://prezi.com/p/mfxlrfbfcjb/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/> . OECD's International Summit on the Teaching Profession, in exploring forces influencing the future of teaching, is also exploring the changing role of leadership. The UNESCO's 2025 Global Educational Monitoring Report 2025 focus is on the need for a different kind of leadership to support digital transformation: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000394934>

⁶ Conversation with Penny Brown, Head of The Leadership Centre, Association of Independent Schools NSW, Australia.

⁷ Schratz, M. and Schley, W. (2019) Quote p141.

⁸ 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.

⁹ James, C. (2010) Quote p.61. James writes of the term 'affective containment', noting its origins in the field of psychoanalysis.

¹⁰ <https://bigeducation.org/big-education-leadership-programme/> Evaluation report: 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/>. Also, Lucey, C., Lister, E., Robinson, L. and Parry, L. (2021) *Big 8 Leadership Foundations: The Research*. Big Education and Cornelia Lucey Positive Leadership.

¹¹ <https://telp.educ.ubc.ca/> Evaluation report: 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/> . Also, Halbert, J. and Kaser, L. (2022) *Leading Through Spirals of Inquiry For Equity and Quality*. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Portage & Main Press.

¹² 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.

Review report: 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

¹³ Evaluation report: 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. Also, Robertson, J. (2026 forthcoming) *Coaching Leadership: Building educational leadership capacity through partnership*. Third edition. NZCER Press.

¹⁴ 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. 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

¹⁵ An extensive list of references is available in the research paper.