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Leadership

What's Your Model Of Leadership? Does It Work – And Does It Matter?

Drawing on findings from a research project with headteachers from three local authorities, Kathryn Riley writes about how the Pandemic changed their minds about the nature of leadership.

Introduction

Leadership has always been an uncertain and messy business, and no more so than today. In the wake of Covid-19, old certainties have gone. Young people's lives and expectations have been shaken in ways that we are yet to fully comprehend. Join me on a short journey that begins as the pandemic erupts. It's a journey that explores the demands on leaders at the toughest of times, and the leadership needed in the future.

In our increasingly uncertain world, young people struggle to find a sense of belonging. Schools are one of the few points of stability in their lives of many young people, yet they are not always places of belonging. Belonging is that a

sense of being somewhere you can be confident you will fit in and feel safe in your identity. It's about being connected to a place and being at home.

'Not Belonging' and 'Belonging'

A sense of belonging is an intensely personal experience, shaped by what we bring to it, what we encounter, and what others expect of us. Across OECD countries, young people's sense of belonging is declining, more than 1 in 4 now feel they don't belong[2]. Children from disadvantaged communities are twice as likely as their more advantaged peers to feel they don't belong. The outsider may experience being 'ostracized ... ignored and excluded.... not looked at or listened to'.[3] Some – arguably those with the greatest needs – find themselves presented with the ultimate' red card' of exclusion.[4]

However, when belonging is a school's guiding principle, more young people at all levels experience a sense of connectedness and friendship, perform better academically and come to believe in themselves. Their teachers also feel more professionally fulfilled and their families more accepted.[v][5] Addressing a sense of school belonging has been found to close the achievement gap by between 50-60% and has benefits that stretch into adulthood. [6][ii]

Leaders have choices about how they lead. Whether a school becomes a place of belonging (as the left-hand side of Figure 1: What kind of school do I want to lead?), or a closed place where young people are ostracised by a clique and staff feel unappreciated (the right-hand side of the image), is shaped by the leadership of the school.
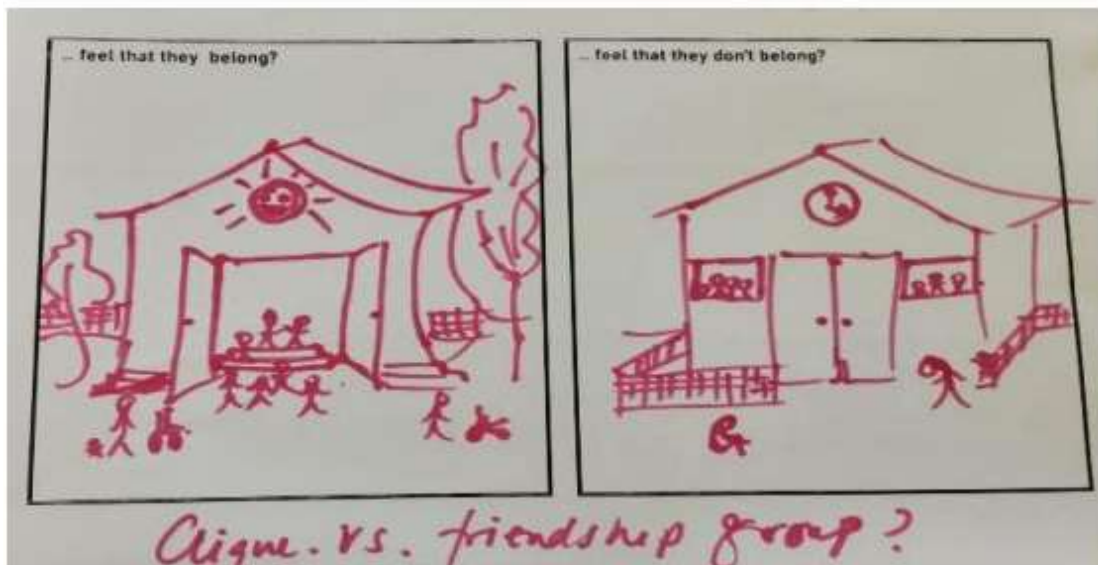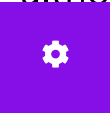
Figure I: (from Riley, Mendoza and Gonzales, 2020)

The Journey Begins

And now to our journey …… Let me take you back to early 2020, that moment when Covid-19 crashes into our lives. Schools are forced into lockdown, although a small number of young people remain. With my co-researcher …ela Mendoza, I begin working with sixteen headteachers from three local authorities in England. The aim of our project, 'Leading in a New Era' is to bring them together to share their learning, and to understand something of the impact of Covid-19 on them as leaders: the personal and professional challenges; how they 'walk' their leadership [7]

Many of the experiences of these headteachers will be familiar to you. As anxiety, fear and uncertainty grow in their local communities, they find themselves holding the ring, struggling to manage the emotional overload and. the requirements of government. They worry about their staff, the children and young people in their schools and their families, and somewhere within this, there is their own personal reality.

Government handling of the Pandemic contributes to the challenges. They experience frustration – about information overload, futile directives, lack of clarity and constantly changing information. They tell us about the many late nights spent trawling through ever-changing guidance notes. They are angry

about an implicit deficit model about young people and lack of recognition of their professionalism. They experience the national climate as a political vacuum and ask who should step into the leadership space:

We are operating in this world of incredible frustrating unclarity. And the context keeps changing. That is very exhausting [...] collectively creating community is challenging, and it is even more challenging when there is no clear information. In (this political vacuum) we need to create (our own) certainty and community.

Despite these feelings of stress and frustration experienced in the first phase of the pandemic, as time moves on, a revitalised articulation of what schools are about, and how leaders can lead begins to emerge. First and foremost, these headteachers affirm, children and young people need to be seen for who they are, rather than as the grades they are projected to achieve. The language of belonging comes to the fore, as does a recognition of the importance of their role as leaders in building place and creating the conditions for school ...nging. Their daily leadership practices of 'compassion', 'connectivity' and ...munication' come to reflect this important driver.[v]

The practice of compassion

Researchers have argued that we are 'hardwired' for compassion and that the journey to kindness and compassion has benefits for all. For these school leaders, compassion became a reoccurring theme: a language they chose to draw on.

The pressures and anxieties of the pandemic had led them to think about their own leadership and to recognise that to be truly compassionate to other people, they had first to be compassionate to themselves. Acknowledging their own pressures (It's a relief to say, 'I don't know all the answers') enabled them to find their voice and recognise the concerns of others. The school needed to be a space of compassion: a place where members of the school community could support each other.
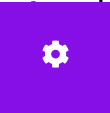
The practice of connectivity

Connectivity is about collaborating and recognizing the importance of making connections. Connectedness and belonging are closely aligned. School belonging begins to emerge when young people feel connected to their school.

These leaders and their staff messaged, phoned, visited at a distance to drop off books, created interactive video loops. Connectivity was expressed in many ways. It was not only about direct connections but also about connecting ideas, joining up the dots, and beginning to address important matters:

There is a moment in our lifetime (and this is it) where we can have open conversations about things that matter, such as race, and people can feel safe in expressing their opinions.

The practice of communication

A school is just a building. What matters is what goes on inside that building. School leaders set the tone by who they talk and listen to; what they talk about; and how they communicate. Meaningful communication is about openness and building trust within school and between schools, families and communities.

Communication becomes the enactment of connectivity: a recognition of the important role schools can play in creating community.

The point where compassion, connectivity and communication intersect represents the essence of what it means to lead with compassion: see Diagram 1, The Three 'C's Model.

Over time, the headteachers involved in 'Leading in a New Era' came to articulate leadership as a moral endeavour – a dynamic ministry as others have argued[8] – and a highly relational and place-based activity, driven by deep wells of compassion. Compassionate leaders are compassionate to themselves and

others, highly relational, genuine, and work to create the conditions for school belonging.

Journeying into the Unknown

In this final section of the article, I reflect on the significance of this model for the future and the prevalence, and implications of other leadership models. In the light of contemporary realities, what kinds of leadership do we need?
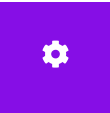
:: **Compassion**

:: **Communication**

:: **Connectivity**

Research on how schools have fared during the pandemic provides insights into a range of system-wide problems. A study of English primary schools has highlighted the many weaknesses in the current education system: fragmented and overstretched services, particularly for those with the greatest needs; short catch-up funding, rather than strategic investment; pressures on staff h and wellbeing; a testing and inspection regime in need of radical overhaul. System resilience needed to be built, the authors have argued.[9]

Across the Globe, Australian psychologists have analysed the impact of Covid on young people, arguing in terms similar to their 'English' counterparts that pressure-driven system approaches that place little trust in teachers undermine system resilience. They conclude that, with the right support, children can build their resilience. It is the compassionate leader who steps into the space which can unleash that spirit of possibilities.[10]

The future is always unknown. However, in today's uncertain world, it seems even more unknowable. What we do know is that the rapid increase in recent years of exclusion, alienation and a sense of 'not' belonging in school has led to mounting concerns about the mental health, well-being, and life chances of young people. The Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of this critical social policy issue.

Accepting that we do not know what is to come – across the world, in our country and in our neighbourhoods – is hard for us all, and particularly uncomfortable for those leaders who trade in certainties. The leadership challenge is how to lead others into, and through, the unknown. Attempts to find certainty when there is none, adds to the stress. However – and this an important 'however' – we may not know the future, but we do know the expectations, beliefs, practices and relationships that can help create the conditions for school belonging. We also know that a sense of belonging is as important for staff as young people.

Findings from an inquiry, undertaken with colleagues, into the practice of school belonging indicate that in schools where adults and young people experience a strong sense of belonging, there is little about 'tough' sanction-based behaviour policies which depend on exclusion and social isolation. The red card of exclusion is rarely used. Staff and students report that their voices are heard and that they enjoy school life. There is a shared language and understanding about is important. Interventions are intentional and purposeful, and designed to generate a sense of agency and belonging for young people and staff.[11]
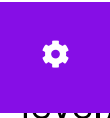
Compassion and Belonging or Command and Control?

We live in strange and uncertain times. Scanning the contemporary leadership landscape, approaches seem to be converging around two widely different models. The first reflects the relational and compassionate approach discussed earlier, with its focus on connectivity and belonging. The second is not unfamiliar, it is what has come to be described as a command-and-control approach – often expressed in terms of a 'zero tolerance' – characterised by a reliance on branding and little attention on belonging.

Reflecting on what I see today across this fragile landscape, I find myself drawn back to the work of social psychologist James MacGregor Burns who in the 1960s put forward his 'X' and 'Y' theories of leadership and management. His 'X'

theory represented 'leaders' with a predominantly authoritarian perspective who held the view that close supervision was required to ensure that the 'unwilling' delivered what was required of them. The 'Y' theory epitomised those 'leaders' who took the view that people have different needs, and want to contribute and be part of an enterprise.[12] Broadly speaking, the model you hold reflects how you view people.

In a new Podcast series on Belonging, to be launched in June 2020, you can listen-in to a discussion about these different types of leadership between headteachers, Dave McPartlin from Flake Fleet Primary School Fleetwood (A 'Dare to Dream' School) and Jo Dibb, one time head of Elizabeth Garret Anderson School, Islington (a school which won Michelle Obama's heart). Their cards come down firmly on the side of kindness and compassion. 'Zero tolerance' behaviour management approaches, they argue, do not work in the long-term and can be dismissive of young people and their lives.[13]

ever you are in the system as a leader (at national, intermediate or school), you have choices. For the headteachers involved in the 'New Era' project, the Covid-19 experience has led to a positive affirmation of how they can enact their agency to create a sense of connectivity and belonging. Across the leadership 'piste', others appear to be more hesitant to go down this track, anxious about the testing and inspection regimes, reluctant to leave the familiar and believing that the 'control' ski run will get them across the finishing line.

The research evidence which I have drawn together in 'Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging' – from many sources and parts of the world – has led me to conclude that when young people have a sense that they belong in school, they feel connected and safe. Their confidence grows -and they dare to dream. I end by returning to my opening questions:

What's your Model of Leadership? Does it work – and does it matter?

Professor Kathryn Riley is an international scholar whose work bridges policy and practice. Born in Manchester, she began her work in education as a volunteer

teacher in Eritrea, later teaching in inner-city schools, before holding political office as an elected member of the Inner London Education Authority ILEA) and becoming a local authority Chief Officer. She is Professor of Urban Education at UCL Institute of Education and with DancePoet TioMolina, co-founded The Art of Possibilities.

Kathryn has recently been appointed as an Associate to the Staff College, which supports the development of leadership capacity in local authorities and the improvement of locality services for children, young people and families. Over recent years, her focus has been on place and belonging, community collaboration and partnership, and new forms of leadership. She has published widely and her latest book, 'Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging' is available online at UCL Press. Kathryn.riley@ucl.ac.uk www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk https://twitter.com/@kriley_prof

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12. Materials and Resources The Podcast Series, 'Let's hear it for School Belonging' will be available from June 2022 at https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk

13. The Art of Possibilities website also contains a series of videos on school belonging, as well as a range of articles and resources.