

# FUTURE SCHOOLING

## THINK PIECE 3

# NEW LEADERSHIP FOR TRANSFORMING SCHOOLING

## 5 SIGNPOSTS FOR THE FUTURE

In this third of the futures-focused think pieces, I turn to the issue of the new educational leadership that is needed if we are to realise the future we need and want. It is clear that leadership across the UK public sector including in schooling, is entering a new phase. Leadership is more important than ever but is faced with profound challenges centred on:

- **the legacy of health-related disruption,**
- **unacceptable and unsustainable growth in inequality,**
- **mental health problems amongst learners and teachers;**
- **leadership burnout and difficulties in recruitment.**

Leaders in public sector educational provision feel heightened responsibility to their pupils, students and local communities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as I outlined in the first think-piece in this series, that should be seen as the warm-up act as humanity faces a set of literally unprecedented challenges, some of them existential.

Hence it seems critical now to re-set our leadership culture and to ignite the energy and commitment of a new generation of leaders – and those existing leaders who are looking for new sources of inspiration. I want to propose 5 signposts as to what this should like.

### THE CONTINUITIES

In proposing this agenda for change and development, I emphasise that much of the contemporary thinking that has characterised leadership development over the last decade still stands.<sup>1</sup> There have been multiple insights, fundamentally highlighting the human dimensions of leadership. I suggest that these may be captured as:

- **The emphasis on education leaders as leaders of learning, and as *learners***
- **The notion that leadership must be inclusive, distributed and co-creative**
- **A focus on personal qualities such as honesty, authenticity and humility**
- **Demonstrating moral integrity**
- **Underpinning social-emotional competencies, such as empathy**

These are qualities easily described but acquired and exercised only with great effort. In the circumstances we now face however, I believe they are no longer enough.



## LEADING IN THE AGE OF DISRUPTION AND HYPERCHANGE

The Covid pandemic is the first of a likely succession of zoonotic healthcare emergencies caused by an egregious failure of environmental stewardship.<sup>2</sup> Yet a further indicator of the new phase into which humanity has entered is growing contestation around what constitutes truth or factual knowledge. The tragedy for education systems is that they have not recognised the implications of this new phase of human existence for their own purposes: and for what and how children learn.<sup>3</sup> In the new circumstances we face, I suggest that there are 5 signposts to guide the work of those charged with developing the next generation of leaders.

### SIGNPOST 1: LEAD THE CREATION OF A NEW EDUCATION NARRATIVE

In the second think piece in this series, I argued that the creation of a new public narrative about the purpose of education was a fundamental prerequisite to achieving the practical changes we need to make to how education is conducted. Arguably, the creation of a collective story – a public narrative – has always been a fundamental element of what great leaders do. Such leaders are capable of constructing (or assembling existing elements of) answers to the questions: who are we? What do we stand for? What are we trying to do? To choose contemporary examples: in the context of US politics, both Obama and Trump did exactly that, with diametrically opposing answers to the questions offered.

This point is particularly relevant in relation to education. School leaders frequently engage in narrative around their *institution*. They try to convey its history, its norms; what it means to be a part of that community. In doing so, perhaps they also create a story around its culture and aspiration toward ‘excellence’.

Without an explicit, communicable narrative, there is a tendency for the status quo to prevail. Tacit understandings, assumed to be ‘common sense’ are taken-for-granted. These are particularly strong around what schooling is for; what counts as ‘success’; and therefore, what learning goals are adopted (with the ensuing implications for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment).

But *change*, by which I mean *real* change, depends on the creation of a new public narrative – one that extends beyond individual schools and thinks about schools in a wider societal context. Without it, the pervasiveness of the old narrative remains deeply entrenched and often hidden, permeating thinking and assumptions regarding the purpose of schooling. The old paradigm of learning is locked in through a tacit narrative of ‘success’. A new narrative about the purpose of learning – one which is expansive, informed and profoundly moral is now the central business of leaders. I have proposed that it should centre on *learning to thrive in a transforming world*.

The Age of Disruption and pivotal change means that it is the duty of education leaders to understand its contours and its implications. This means being prepared to bypass or leap- frog institutional arrangements that hold on to the old grammar of schooling; being instead focussed on building political will, the will of stakeholders, the public will and crucially the will of young people.



2 International panels are now starting to address this. See [https://earth.org/a-panel-to-address-zoonotic-diseases-has-been-launched/?gclid=CjwKCAiAtouOBhA6EiwA2nLKH9bRhIVQRyXsSrSLm5tnPI592VbTnGGYxC8O012kJsHBw2-WmcgTpBoCASYQAvD\\_BwE](https://earth.org/a-panel-to-address-zoonotic-diseases-has-been-launched/?gclid=CjwKCAiAtouOBhA6EiwA2nLKH9bRhIVQRyXsSrSLm5tnPI592VbTnGGYxC8O012kJsHBw2-WmcgTpBoCASYQAvD_BwE)

3 For an extended discussion of this see Hannon and Peterson 2021

Of course, by its very nature, the future cannot be predicted. However, we surely now know enough to recognise that permitting ‘business as usual’ in schools and colleges is also a failure of (educational) stewardship. A new story is in process of being constructed and leaders are needed who can contribute to and communicate it.

Such skills have not been a part of the usual leadership repertoire. They entail, first and foremost, an understanding of what it is we face and the implications for schools and systems. But beyond understanding comes the communication, the storytelling.

My thesis here is that the construction of public narrative (the story we tell ourselves about ourselves) is fundamental to any possibility of change in education. That narrative will take shape in conversations, in debates, in the messaging that is a part of daily life for a leader. Story-telling of the highest order is needed for changing hearts and minds through compelling new public narrative.

## SIGNPOST 2: LEAD PARTNERSHIPS AND ECOSYSTEMS

Leaders who are collaborative have long been valued. Moreover, the leadership skills of engaging deeply and in partnership with schools’ local communities (usually understood as parents and local businesses) frequently feature in the various UK national development programs for school leadership. However, the features of the new era which I am describing requires this mindset to be expanded further. The argument here is that the traditional silos of schooling are no longer adequate to the challenge of providing the range, diversity and personalisation of learning opportunities that young people now need if we are to all to thrive. Many more organisations and sectors need to be involved. One way to think about this is to reconceive our ‘education systems’ (usually top-down hierarchical managerial arrangements) as learning ecosystems.<sup>4</sup>



Learning ecosystems bring together *diverse* providers – not only schools and colleges – but also non-formal learning institutions, private sector organisations, the creative and cultural sectors, businesses and tech companies to create new learning opportunities for all. They often involve innovative credentialing systems, so that learning achieved in different contexts and settings can be recognised.

The majority of the extant and researched ecosystems involve schools but are not managed or led by schools.<sup>5</sup> So, I suggest our new leaders must learn collaborative and entrepreneurial skills of a quite different order.

In addition to the competences around management, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that are required, the new conditions point to the need for a capacity to build and participate in learning ecosystems. Unlocking the learning assets of communities, and extensive engagement with stakeholders beyond the education sector and schools in particular, are now the characteristics of the most forward-thinking educators across the planet, in both global north and south.<sup>6</sup> Put bluntly, if we are to thrive, education needs to be ‘everybody’s business’.

The prize is valuable. It enables those in leadership roles to mobilize a wider educator workforce, to create platforms, alliances and networks to accelerate and amplify powerful professional practices that will create new and richer pathways for learners.

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4 For a full discussion of the emergence of learning ecosystems, see Hannon et al 2018

5 ibid

6 See Luksha, P, Spencer-Keyse and Cubista, Joshua (2020) *Learning Ecosystems: An Emerging Praxis for the Future of Education*. Accessed at [learningecosystems2020.globaledufutures.org](http://learningecosystems2020.globaledufutures.org)



UNESCO defines futures literacy as follows:

*Futures Literacy is a capability. It is the skill that allows people to better understand the role of the future in what they see and do. Being futures literate empowers the imagination, enhances our ability to prepare, recover and invent as changes occur...The term Futures Literacy mimics the idea of reading and writing literacy because it is a skill that everyone can and should acquire. And it is a skill that is within everyone's reach.<sup>9</sup>*



If it is true that futures literacy is a fundamental competency for all, how much more is that the case for education leaders? As I pointed out in the first think piece, it is important not to conflate futures literacy with the narrow exercise of prediction. Rather, if it is understood as an effort to understanding the nature of change, of expanding the imagination, and strengthening people's capacity to shape change, then a different picture emerges. It is about overcoming fear and inspiring hope – issues at the very heart of any leadership agenda.

'Futures literacy' needs now to be an integral dimension of preparation for leadership – and there are processes and approaches (such as those set out in this series of think pieces) that can equip leaders with the necessary knowledge, skills and values.

As Andreas Schleicher has remarked:

*The scenarios of futures thinking can be used to dream and to transform. They can be used to future-proof systems and stress-test against unexpected shocks. Above all, they push us to move beyond complacency and easy solutions, presenting us with the tensions and paradoxes inherent in all our systems and which we must address.<sup>10</sup>*

## CONCLUSION

Leadership is a key societal lever for change. It is nowhere more so than in the case of education and schooling in particular where the urgency of the need for transformation is acute. I have suggested 5 new directions in which that leadership should head which I hope create a helpful road map for change and innovation. The stakes couldn't be higher.

### FURTHER READING

- Bason C. *Leading Public Sector Innovation* The Policy Press 2010
- Fullan M., *Nuance: why some leaders succeed and others fail* Corwin 2018
- Hallgarten J., Hannon V., and Beresford T., *Creative Public Leadership: how school system leaders can create the conditions for system-wide innovation* WISE/RSA 2017
- Hanon V., and Peterson AK., *THRIVE: the new purpose of schools in a changing world* Cambridge University Press 2021
- Hannon V., Thomas L., Ward S., and Beresford T., *Local Learning Ecosystems: Emerging Models* WISE 2018
- Munby S., *Imperfect Leadership* Crown House 2019
- OECD *Back to the Future of Education: four scenarios for schooling* CERI 2020
- Pont, B. *A literature review of school leadership policy reforms*. Eur J Educ. 2020; 55: 154– 168

<sup>9</sup> What is Futures Literacy? UNESCO 2020. <https://en.unesco.org/futuresliteracy/about#:~:text=It%20is%20the%20skill%20that,what%20they%20see%20and%20do.&text=As%20a%20result%2C%20humans%20are,becoming%20more%20'futures%20literate'> retrieved 19/01/2021

<sup>10</sup> OECD 2021