UCL

Thinkpiece

Coming back stronger: leadership matters

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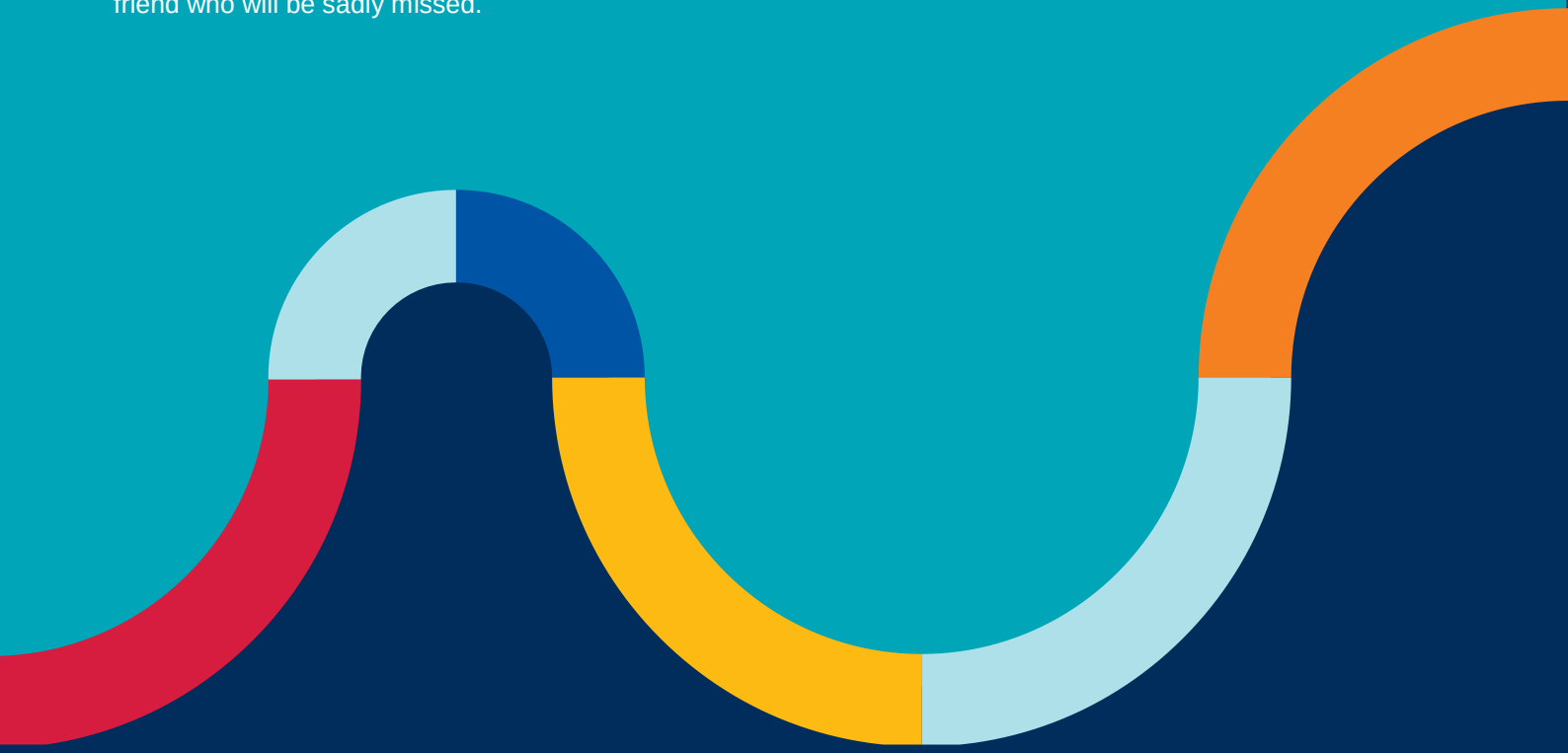
UCL Centre for
Educational Leadership

Dedication

We would like to dedicate this thinkpiece to Peter Matthews, who sadly died in summer 2020. Peter was a towering influence on education policy, thinking and practice over many decades, in particular through his research and work for Ofsted and the National College for School Leadership. He was also a kind and generous colleague and friend who will be sadly missed.



UCL Centre for Educational Leadership

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We are a world-leading centre for knowledge creation, exchange and application to promote high quality leadership, management and learning in education in London, the UK, and internationally.

We provide research-informed advice and guidance for educational leaders, managers and policy makers, focused on the impact of their strategies and actions.

UCL CEL thinkpieces

UCL CEL research-informed thinkpieces focus on the pressing global challenges facing educational leadership in a changing world.

They are designed to extend criticality and activate knowledge, stimulate dialogue, promote further inquiry and learning, and encourage new and shared thinking that promotes innovative approaches to practice and policy.

Each thinkpiece concludes with questions to aid reflection on current practice, challenge assumptions about the status quo, and encourage deep and meaningful learning conversations that will lead to purposeful and intentional change to enhance policy, practice and students' and stakeholders' learning and wellbeing.

Introduction

The nature and scale of the pandemic mean its impact has already been profound. No one can be sure what any further changes will be or how permanent they will prove.

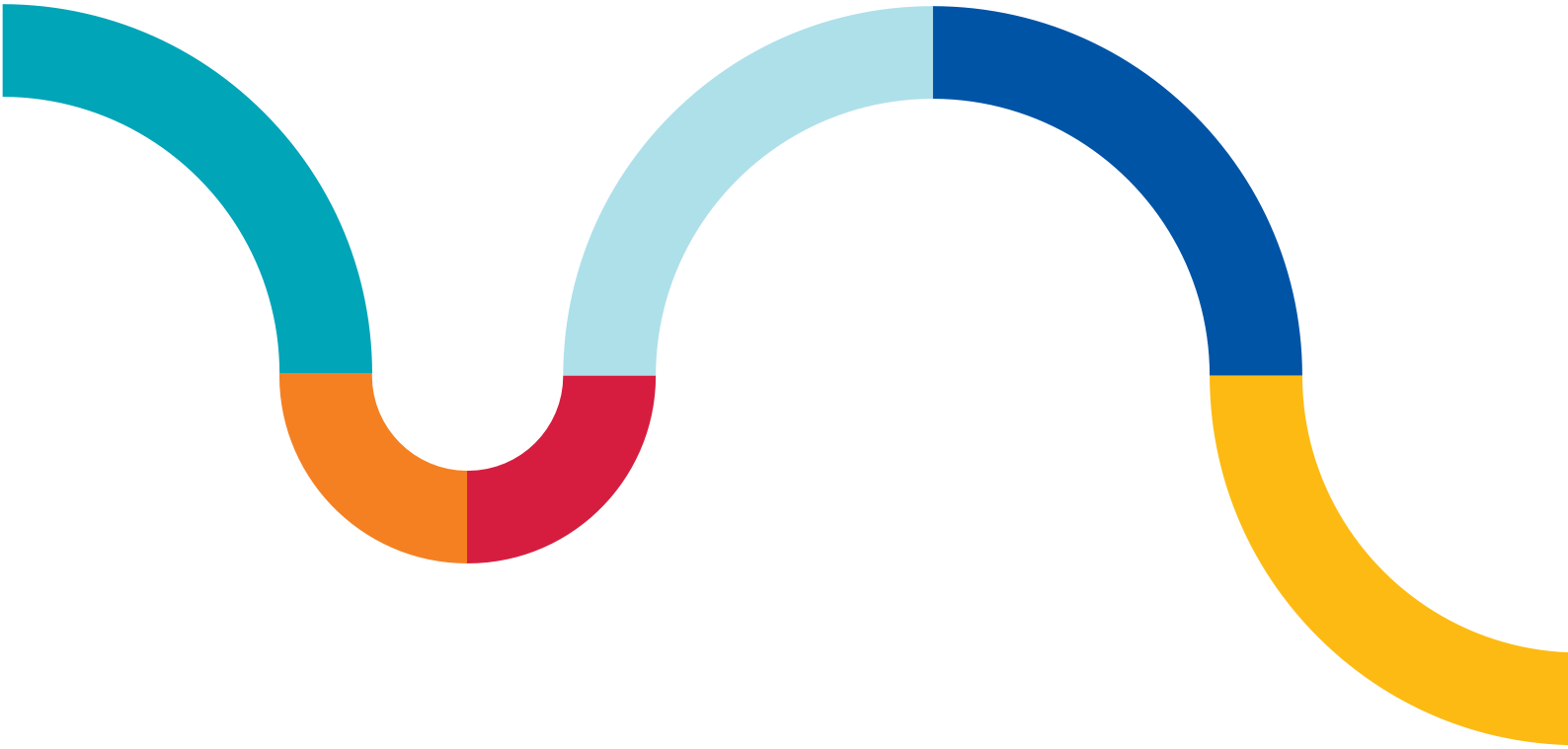
Pressures on schools have been relentless and leaders are understandably focusing on managing schools' immediate problems. But whatever the current demands, thinking about the future has to be a priority. Waiting for solutions is a luxury our children, especially those most disadvantaged, cannot afford. Schools' creativity in managing the disruption and complexities of the crisis provides important learning. Finding time for reflection on that learning is critical and requires leadership. This is an opportunity for schools to come back stronger by building the learning into collaborative thinking, planning and action. If leaders find time to lead this learning, keeping a focus on 'professional and pedagogical matters' (Earley, 2021), the benefits could be immense.

This thinkpiece is intended to support schools in opening conversations to lead that learning. Its genesis is in a longer thinkpiece written for Camden, a London borough, where I saw how impressively the local education community worked together to manage the many challenges of the pandemic (Gilbert, 2020). Schools elsewhere in the world have had similar experiences and are beginning to reflect on lessons learned (Rogers and Ishimoto, 2020).

This thinkpiece identifies five leadership opportunities for building a stronger future:

- Rooting schools at the heart of their communities
- Tackling growing inequalities
- Harnessing the power of technology
- Preparing children better for life and learning
- Strengthening capacity through collaboration

Opening conversations to lead the learning, within and beyond schools, will stimulate other ideas too.



1 Rooting schools at the heart of their communities

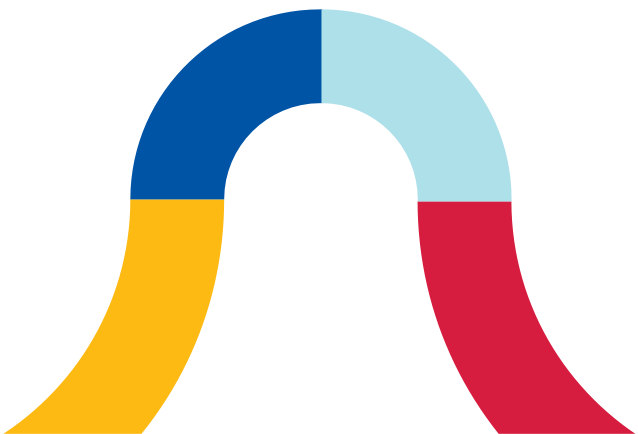
It is clear that the vulnerable and disadvantaged have struggled most with the social and economic impacts of the pandemic. The last year has seen increasing poverty and stress for these families. But we have also witnessed a great deal of community support and solidarity, often leveraged with and through schools.

Schools' vital role at the heart of their communities has been brought into sharp relief. In many places they became an anchor, providing support and some stability. We saw inspiring examples of schools working closely and practically with families as pressures mounted at home. Leaders understood there was no point in focusing on home learning if children were hungry or subject to the stresses of domestic violence. They became more socially involved in their families' problems and issues, often acting as brokers with the local council or other agencies. They often influenced local action in response to needs and concerns. Responses to this crisis have highlighted a leadership role for schools in building a more place-based approach across their local community. This role is about making connections, sometimes acting as a convener, but all the time building relationships and trust. A joined-up, collaborative response, integrating access, support and services for those most in need, supports children and families to lead better lives.

This role is important but schools' contribution to their local communities goes further. It involves helping young people develop agency to contribute to their local communities and society. Big issues confront local communities. These require schools, and particularly young people within them, to think holistically in caring for their 'common home' and the communities within it. This entails individual and collective engagement locally, and thinking that leads to action. Riley et al (2020) stress the importance of young people feeling a sense of belonging in school, of being part of a community where they feel accepted and safe. This positively affects both their approach to learning and their outcomes. Riley (2021) argues that leaders who are place-makers understand their students and build trust by 'making meaningful connections to families, and locating the school within the wider archipelago of surrounding communities'. The pandemic has underlined the importance of these relationships.

We want young people to feel a sense of belonging and pride in their local school and to behave as stewards within their community. They need to feel agency and to have the confidence and will to use that well to make a difference. As Higham (2021) argues, they should be given opportunities 'to learn through a cycle of thinking, investigating, acting and reflecting on real-world problems that affect their present and future'. The community should function too as a source of practical support for young people, for example providing safe spaces for digital access, study and learning. It should offer experiential opportunities to learn about the world of work or social action, including volunteering.

A stronger focus on place and belonging can shape the values of future generations to create a fairer, more inclusive and sustainable society. A key part of leading this learning is exploring how schools can operate creatively beyond their walls, better equipping and empowering young people to become socially responsible change-makers, with ideas and impact in their local communities (UNODC, 2019).



2 Tackling growing inequalities

The crisis has exposed the many inequities in our education system and underlined the fragility of children struggling with a concentration of disadvantages. Children vulnerable for economic or other reasons often need a range of support.

It is right that our expectations for disadvantaged children are as high as they are for their better-off peers. But the pandemic has made it clear that expectations can be realised only if more resources are provided by the state. This is made more urgent by the real possibility of a global economic slowdown that will affect the poorest in society most. A high degree of correlation exists between countries with wide income inequalities, such as the UK, and a range of serious social and environmental problems (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010)

The pandemic exposed another glaring inequality. Once schools closed, the digital divide between families came into stark relief. Unequal access to devices, broadband connectivity, space to study at home and access to adults with time and skills to support children in their learning have contributed to widened inequalities (IFS, 2020). If we are to close the gap that has widened this past year, poorer children must have opportunities and the skills to access learning.

Targeting resources at the poorest children and their families is not an optional extra. It is an investment in social justice and creating a fairer society that benefits all. Capturing key elements of what a good education for all looks like, perhaps in a local charter or pledge, could provide a focus for discussion about what resources all children – particularly those most at risk – should rightfully have. This conversation might usefully encompass consideration of how such resources should be provided. Should some be given directly to families to enable an element of choice about spend, for example, buying additional tutor time through the National Tutoring Programme? This could build on parents' recent investment in home learning, creating a greater sense of agency in their children's education.

A focus on poverty encompasses disadvantaged children from all ethnic backgrounds but inequalities cannot be tackled without addressing racism. The Black Lives Matter movement gave voice to deep inequalities and raised issues about the racism Black people continue to face. Education should be at the forefront of breaking down barriers established by racism.

Many schools believed they had already built a strong focus on equalities, human rights and social justice into all aspects of school life. But recent conversations have shown how school culture can unintentionally embed racism into policy and practice. Even with the pandemic's complexities, tackling racism and discrimination has risen to the top of many schools' priority lists. An early focus has been on the curriculum. Miller (2020) has highlighted the crucial importance for schools of Black, Asian and minority ethnic teacher progression. He also argues (Miller, 2021) that given educational leaders' power, they are uniquely placed to demonstrate leadership in action for anti-racism and social justice. A crucial issue for leaders will be ensuring that this opportunity for accelerating change does not lose prominence as life returns to a 'new normal'.

3 Harnessing the power of technology

We live in a digital world but, until this past year, conversations about technology's potential to reshape education – often illustrated with differing scenarios about artificial intelligence and automation – did not result in widespread changes in schools.

The OECD's 2018 PISA survey showed England scoring highly on availability of devices, software and the internet but ranking lower than other countries on discussions with teaching staff about their use 'for pedagogical purposes' (DfE, 2019).

At the beginning of the crisis, many teachers lacked expertise, not only in using digital technology but also in how to design remote learning for pupils. Nor did many know how to engage parents in supporting home learning. The pandemic changed all that. Teachers' skills and confidence in planning and providing remote learning have grown week by week. Many schools are convinced that blended learning will become a feature of education in the future and many parents argue that it should. They see the possibilities of digital technology as an enabler of learning, both complementing and enriching teaching.

Schools report that, even with all its technical difficulties, remote learning has worked well for some students. For example, some school refusers are now engaging online. This resonates with research in one Norwegian municipality where 'digital communication seemed to provide new opportunities for all pupils to be seen and heard' (Bubb and Jones, 2020). Two thirds of the pupils felt they received better feedback from their teachers. Digital technology has the potential to help break down barriers to learning, to better meet needs of individual students and raises questions about more imaginative models of inclusion (UNESCO, 2020).

At its best, technology can provide access to a huge range of resources; it can support teaching that encourage learners' more active participation, individually and in small or larger groups. Schleicher (2019) comments that the role of teachers shifts in this technological context more to that of coach, mentor and evaluator. The human connection between teacher and learner remains essential. Indeed, the EEF's (2020) review of remote learning emphasises the importance of teaching quality. Just as the quality of teaching has improved over the years, teachers' use of digital technology is developing quickly with many forensic, professional learning conversations evident on-line.

Use of technology has other significant benefits, not least in its potential for reducing teacher workload and in engaging parents. Many multi-agency meetings focusing on individual children and families have been easier to organise and often better attended. Schools report that both parents and teachers welcome the many advantages of virtual meetings. Parents have sometimes set up virtual peer learning groups. Some schools have even created opportunities for parents to observe and participate in lessons. Joining meetings from home has often resulted in stronger attendance, with many schools indicating that some form of remote participation will continue into the future.

It is clear that education must prepare children for a future of universal digital access. A focus on developing digital competence for students, teachers and even families is central to this. Examples of the past year offer much to draw on. In leading this learning, it will be important to develop children's skills in developing independent learning and critical thinking.

Leading the learning in future use of technology will generate opportunities for children learning together across schools, localities and even countries. Such an approach offers potential for greater efficiency and opportunities in terms of enrichment, giving some students access to learning and collaborative networks they might not otherwise have had.

However, as Gu et al, (2019) indicate, in leading change no single model or intervention guarantees success. Change needs to take account of organisational factors and specific contextual conditions of the school community. Nevertheless, the experiences of using digital technology to support learning and communication during the pandemic will have a lasting impact on the way schools work in the future.

4 Preparing children better for life and learning

A major concern throughout the pandemic has been its impact on GCSE and A-level examinations. Important though academic results are, they are neither the core purpose of education nor the chief reason for a young person's success in life after school.

However, examinations dominate school life in many English schools and this needs to change. The Rethinking Assessment group (2020) provides rich resources to lead conversations in this area.

Almost all countries have some form of examination system as young people near the end of their statutory schooling. But few have the sort of intensive testing regime England has twice – at 16 and then again at 18. At age 16, many GCSE students undertake over 30 hours of written GCSE examinations. Testing and examinations have a grip on education, particularly in secondary schools, not mirrored in most other parts of the world. This contributes to an unproductive culture of high stakes accountability in England. The current crisis provides the opportunity to think about what is tested, how and when.

The seeds for change have been sown for some time. Even before the pandemic, Robert Halfon, the Education Select Committee Chair, called for a radical rethink of the current education system, including scrapping GCSEs (Halfon, 2019). At the same time, a YouGov poll (Edge, 2019) indicated that 73% of parents thought there was too much emphasis on examination grades in secondary schools. That same poll found that 82% of parents believed that pressure to perform well in GCSE exams is bad for children's health and well-being. Other surveys suggest employers value qualifications as indicators of achievement and ability but they identify attitudes, behaviours and skills as the biggest drivers of success in work (CBI/Pearson, 2018; 2019).

A more recent YouGov poll (Edge, 2020) signals considerable appetite for change. Both parents and teachers want a broader and more rounded education which helps children develop a range of skills and values, rooted in practical opportunities and real-world examples. Over 90% of both groups believe education should develop skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and communication. 86% of parents and 96% teachers think education should help develop values such as kindness, empathy and community cohesion.

The pandemic has heightened concerns about children's well-being but they have been around for a while. The 2018 PISA survey (DfE, 2019) reported that pupils in England were more likely to feel miserable, worried and less likely to think that their life has meaning than pupils across the OECD countries. Most worryingly, in the three years since the previous PISA study in 2015, measurement of life satisfaction of 15-year-olds in England had fallen faster than in any other country with comparable data. Well-being needs to be built into the ethos, curriculum and practices of school life and is part of wider discussions about the purpose of education.

Immense changes to the world of work, mainly as a result of technological change and innovation, have been predicted for a long time. Longer life spans (Gratton and Scott, 2017) will see not just new types of work but new ways of working too. While we cannot be certain exactly what those changes will be, we know that the future won't be like the past. Educating young people for this level of uncertainty cannot all be done inside classrooms.

The current crisis is a catalyst to think more fundamentally about what education is for and the knowledge, skills and dispositions young people need to thrive and create a shared future. The OECD Learning Framework 2030 (OECD, 2018) offers a powerful vision and principles for the future of education systems. This framework is a helpful stimulus for leading conversations but others would work equally well. The key opportunity is to lead the learning to re-imagine our education system and create the changes needed.

5 Strengthening capacity through collaboration

The pandemic has underlined the need for leaders and teachers to connect with each other both within and across schools, and indeed with the wider community. Stoll and Sinnema (2020) argue that schools which operate as learning organisations create the conditions for responding effectively to change.

Collaboration is central to this approach, within and beyond the school, and so too is investment in individual and collective learning at all levels. Schools with these sorts of relationships were able to use them well during the pandemic.

Teachers who participate in impactful professional development tend to display higher levels of self-efficacy and job satisfaction (OECD, 2019). Many professional networks have continued to flourish through online collaboration. Virtual professional learning opportunities have attracted large numbers. Growing confidence and expertise in using video calls and virtual meetings have generated interesting examples of teachers thinking and planning together within and across schools, flexibly and without much cost. Improvement and even innovation can stem from small scale initiatives or research focused forensically, and now virtually, on the detail of practice and pedagogy. As Sahlberg (2017) argues, focusing on details can uncover important relationships between teaching and learning. Collaboration both solves problems and stimulates teachers' motivation. It gives them confidence and pride in their work.

The pandemic has underlined the importance of teaching as a skill and profession. Most parents have found it much harder than they initially thought to teach their children at home and anecdotes suggest that their respect for teachers has grown. However, the 2018 TALIS survey (OECD, 2020), reported that twice as many teachers in England said that that their work causes them stress compared with the international average. Higher numbers of teachers than the average indicated that they want to leave the profession within five years. Loss of teachers to the profession is a serious risk to the quality of education that we want in all schools.

High-performing systems value their teachers (OECD, 2020). They ensure they are well supported professionally throughout their career. Greater collaboration between schools, particularly involving teachers, has the obvious value of increasing collective capacity. Peer learning also has the benefit of enhancing the quality of teachers' own development. Teachers enjoy the creativity of working collaboratively to establish better practice and this builds social and professional capital. Leading the learning to build capacity needs a focus on greater support for peer learning.

In bringing together a number of international accounts of peer review, Godfrey (2020a) draws attention to outstanding leadership development gained from taking part in the process. He highlights its value in encouraging cooperation and empowering practitioners. He also points to the untapped potential of using other partners as part of a collaborative peer enquiry process, perhaps even students as 'reviewers/researchers working alongside teachers' (Godfrey, 2020b).

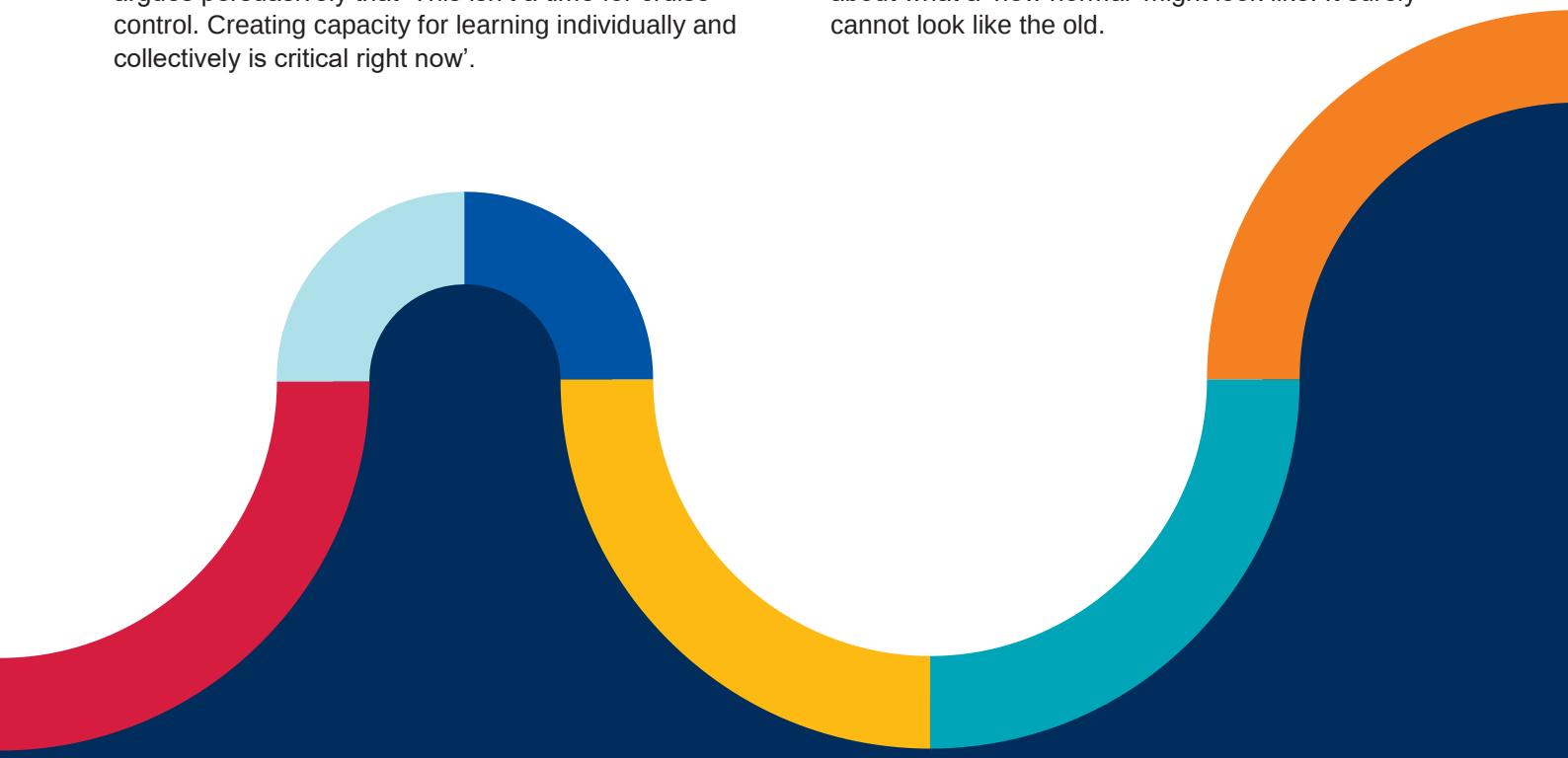
Research shows that the impact of collaborative approaches for students is consistently positive (EEF, 2018). The leadership opportunity is to develop teachers' collaborative professional learning more systemically to underpin this. For example, in Shanghai, each teacher's appraisal focuses not only on how well children have been taught and what they have achieved but on the teacher's contribution to the profession or wider education system. This approach to accountability recognises the importance of individual professional responsibilities in driving change and innovation at system level (Schleicher, 2020).

Partnership working and collaboration within, across and beyond schools are essential elements of leading change. Place-based education partnerships can provide powerful support (Gilbert, 2021). School leaders are at the heart of this change but, as Higham (2021) argues, 'adults must still lead but in new and inclusive ways'; that includes involving young people themselves.

In conclusion

The huge learning from the disruptive experience of the pandemic signals the potential for radical and positive change. Public understanding of inequalities in the system and the impact of poverty is stronger than ever before. Stoll (2020) is right when she argues persuasively that 'This isn't a time for cruise control. Creating capacity for learning individually and collectively is critical right now'.

This thinkpiece identifies five areas where leadership of the learning could help build a stronger education system, but they are not predictions. They are intended to support conversations, many already underway, about pathways out of the disruption and about what a 'new normal' might look like. It surely cannot look like the old.



Questions for reflection and conversations to lead learning

- **Q** What resonated with you?
- **Q** How could schools reconnect with their communities and contribute to making each local eco-system stronger?
- **Q** What learning would support young people to become agents of generational change?
- **Q** What more could we be doing to ensure school leaders and teachers enjoy their jobs, have the skills to do them well and feel more appreciated?
- **Q** Could or should the current crisis spur us on to re-imagine our education system and create the changes needed?
- **Q** How could the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership support this leadership of change?

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About the author

Christine Gilbert is a Visiting Professor at UCL Institute of Education.

Christine has been a teacher, a secondary headteacher and a director of education- first in Harrow and then Tower Hamlets- and a chief executive in two London districts. Between 2006 and 2011, Christine held the post of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, when she brought three different inspectorates together to create a new organisation.

She is currently involved in a range of education projects, including supporting the development of place-based, education partnerships. She is the independent chair of Camden Learning, a local partnership and co-chairs the national organisation (AEPA). As chair of the education charity Future First, Christine is an advocate for establishing a thriving alumni community in every state school.

About this thinkpiece

In this thinkpiece, Christine Gilbert argues that the pandemic forces leaders to find time for reflection and prioritise thinking about the future. This is an opportunity for schools to come back stronger by building learning about schools' creativity in managing the disruption and complexities of the crisis into collaborative thinking, planning and action. The thinkpiece identifies five leadership opportunities for building a stronger future.

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