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When the Going Gets Tough … Is Compassionate Leadership the Way Forward?

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The Art of Possibilities

Prologue

We live in strange times. The spectre of Covid-19 still looms and a phalanx of new challenges are looming on the horizon. This discussion paper began as my attempt to make sense of the implications of these challenges for school leaders and led me to ask: *When the going gets tough, isn't it time for leaders to hone their skills and re-appraise their approaches to leadership?*

I drew on the paper for my contribution to a symposium at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI) 2023. The other contributors were Professor José Weinstein from Chile and Professor Karen Seashore Louis from the US, and the title of our symposium was 'Building Social Capital that Matters: Trust, Compassion, and Positive Leadership'. Our aim was to understand something of the differences and similarities between the system responses in our three countries, to the challenges to schools created by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The paper also shaped my keynote presentation on Compassionate Leadership at UCL's Centre for Educational Leadership Conference, 'Leading into the Future' (January 2023). I had the wonderful experience of listening to a panel of experts, chaired by Professor Seashore Louis, responding to my paper and presentation. The panellists were Professors Gemma Moss and Mel Ainscow, Dame Christine Gilbert and Roger Pope. The wide-ranging audience of researchers, practitioners and policymakers also had their say.

These interactions have given me much food for thought about:

(i) *The balance of powers*: School leaders in England appear to have been subjected to particularly close supervision and scrutiny from national government during Covid-19, compared with their peers in other democratic countries.

(ii) *The untapped potential in the system*: In many localities in England and elsewhere, Covid-19 led to a significant - and positive – changes in the relationships between schools and communities.[1]

(iii) *The language of leadership*: Approaches to leadership still seem to be shaped by what James MacGregor Burns (writing in the 1960s) described as his 'X' and 'Y' theories. Theory 'X' represents a view that close supervision is required to ensure that the 'unwilling' deliver what is required of them: and theory 'Y', that broadly speaking, while people have different needs, they want to contribute and be part of an enterprise.

However, before I rework this paper, I would love to hear from you! Please feel free to share the paper and do send me your responses by **Monday April 24th** < kathryn.riley@ucl.ac.uk>

Kathryn Riley, February 2023

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[1] See Appendix I for a discussion about some of the issues to be considered in developing these alliances and relationships.

The Author

Professor Kathryn Riley

Kathryn Riley is Professor of Urban Education at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society. With the late DancePoet TioMolina she co-founded The Art of Possibilities. She is also an Associate of the Staff College which supports Education and Children's Services. Kathryn 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.

As an international scholar whose work bridges policy and practice, Kathryn has been engaged in research, policy and development work on educational reform and school leadership for many years, partnering with many schools, organisations and colleagues around the world. Her international work has included heading up the World Bank's Effective Schools and Teachers Group, as well as projects with the OECD and UNICEF.

Over recent years, Kathryn's primary focus has been on place and belonging, community collaboration and partnership, and new forms of leadership in uncertain times.

Her work is supported by books, practitioner materials, videos and podcasts. See page 16 and **www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk**

The 'Story' so far!

The discussion paper, **When the Going Gets Tough … Is Compassionate Leadership the Way Forward**? is divided into three parts, 'Riding the Leadership Wobble Board; 'When the Going gets even Tougher; and' Letting Compassion have its Day'.

Riding the Leadership Wobble Board reports on research which looked at how sixteen headteachers weathered the Covid-19 storm. In the wake of Covid, both they – and no doubt colleagues elsewhere - found themselves in a *liminal* space - a space of uncertainty - and asking: 'Where should I step now?' Back into established patterns of leadership which offer the comfort of familiarity and known structures and rules, or forward into less structured, relational and more compassionate approaches?

Part II **When the Going gets even Tougher** brings the 'story' up to date. The immediacy of the pandemic may have waned in the UK. However, the ramifications for young people and are only now beginning to unfold. Social commentators report that disconnection, disengagement and disillusionment are in the air and political analysts that poverty and insecurity are growing.[2] The challenges for leaders are becoming even more complex. The leaders of the future need to be able to lead through uncertainty and with wisdom.

In Part III **Letting Compassion have its Day'**[3] I step into the choice arena to examine the scope and possibilities for different forms of leadership to emerge. What happens if we look at leadership through the lenses of compassion and belonging? What obstacles lie in the way? And where might more compassionate forms of leadership take schools: the young people within them, their families, the staff, the communities?

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[2] Nandy, L. (2022) *All In: How we Build a Country that Works*. Manchester: Harper North.

[3] This section draws on Riley, K. (2022) *Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging.* London: UCL Press. Download for free at https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/171324

Part I: Riding the Leadership Wobble Board

When Covid Came

At the beginning of 2020, Dr Manuela Mendoza and I were setting up a new project on school belonging with schools in three English local authority areas. As the Covid-19 pandemic pushed schools across the UK into lockdown, in collaboration with those local authorities, we reconfigured that project. And so began the research inquiry, 'Leading in a New Era'.[4]

Sixteen headteachers were involved from a range of types of schools. Our aim was to gain insights into their leadership journey during Covid and create safe spaces for them to share that journey with their colleagues.[5] We met online over a five-month period beginning in March 2020, in three locality-based groups. Our discussions were framed around the personal and professional issues emerging for them. In December 2020, we came together again to take stock.

By the summer of 2020, we could see something of the physical and emotional toll of Covid-19 on those leaders. Their experiences included a sense of loss of the school as a vibrant community; grief at the deaths of staff, family members, local parents; ongoing doubts about the future and the wellbeing of families and staff. Nevertheless, there was another side to the Covid roller-coaster experience. This was manifested in the many reciprocal deeds of love and compassion witnessed every day; the acts of kindness of staff and young people towards each other; the tokens of appreciation from children and families, captured in drawings and videos.

Daily reality for these headteachers had also been shaped by their encounters with national government, through the Department for Education (DfE). They experienced information overload, futile directives, lack of clarity, ever shifting priorities. In contrast, interactions with their local authorities were significantly more enabling.[6]

The headteachers told us about the many late nights they had spent trawling through ever-changing DfE guidance. They were angry about the lack of acknowledgement of their professionalism and came to conclude that the DfE's response to the Covid-19 pandemic was technocratic and devoid of any vision of education. Within it lay an implicit

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[4] The research was sponsored by Telford and Wrekin Council and the London Boroughs of Hackney and Islington.

[5] Riley, K. and Mendoza, M. (2020) *Leading in a New Era: Compassionate leadership for place and belonging, A Research Inquiry.* https://www.ucl.ac.uk.ioe-place-and-belonging-in-schools and https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk

[6] The headteachers welcomed the support of their local authorities in tackling the Covid-19 challenges, and in 'translating' government directives into practice.

deficit model about young people which failed to take account the social, emotional, or practical consequences of the pandemic on them and their families.[7]

We reached two broad conclusions at this stage of the research. Firstly, that participation in an inquiry which was a group endeavour had helped this group of headteachers to build their resilience, to grow through mutual support and to recognise their own professional agency. The following comment from one of the participants captures this experience:

> *Just to hear other voices of really experienced heads and how they have mitigated has been incredibly useful, instrumental in my mental health to survive this. I am feeling confident because I am listening to these voices and thinking about strategizing, and I have legitimacy. ….. These connections have been really helpful (in making me) feel competent.*

Secondly, that the stresses and pressures of the lockdown phase of the Covid-19 epidemic had led them to reject the DfE narrative of 'business as usual'. They were adamant that they had no intention of returning to a status quo which had failed so many young people. First and foremost, children and young people needed to be seen for who they are, rather than as the grades they are projected to achieve.

An articulation of 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 had begun to emerge. These leaders saw their role as making connections,

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[7] International evidence of the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on young people is growing. Three examples are offered here.
(i) A European-wide systemic review concluded that Covid-19 had increased young people's sense of loneliness, boredom, fear and stress.
Panchal, U., Salazar de Pablo, G., Franco, M. *et al.* (2021) The impact of COVID-19 lockdown on child and adolescent mental health: systematic review. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* (2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01856-w
(ii) Reviewing events in Australia, a team of psychologists concluded that a pressure-driven system approaches had placed little trust in teachers and had also undermined system resilience. Nevertheless, with the right support, children could build their resilience.
Reupert, A., Greenfeld, D., May, F., Berger, E., Morris, Z.A., Allen, K., Summers, D., and Wurf. G.(2022), *COVID-19 and Australian school psychology: Qualitative perspectives for enhancing future practice.* (https://doi.org/10.1177/01430343221091953)
(iii) Researchers examining the English school system identified a range of system-wide failures: fragmented and overstretched services; short term catch-up funding, rather than longer-term strategic investment; pressures on staff health and their sense of well-being; a testing and inspection regime in need of radical overhaul.
Moss, G., Bradbury, A., Braun, A., Duncan, S., and Levy, R. (2021), *Learning through Disruption: Using schools' experiences of Covid to build a more resilient education system*, London: UCL Institute of Education.(https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10136102/1/Learning%20Through%20Disruption%20Main%20Report.pdf).
[8] Smylie, M. A., Murphy, J., and Seashore Louis, K. (2020) *The Practice of Caring School Leadership*. California: Corwin Press.

bringing others on board, and providing the spaces for the unheard voices to be heard. The language of compassion, connectivity and belonging had come centre stage.

Coming up for Air?

Towards the end of 2020, we met again. Schools were due to fully reopen in early 2021. We wanted to know: *How were they doing? Were they coming up for air?*

These headteachers were looking forward to welcoming the return of all their students and staff. They acknowledged that they had become proficient in 'riding' the leadership wobble board and reflected that they had learned to be more compassionate to themselves and others.

The experience of the pandemic had reinforced their commitment to creating the conditions for school belonging. In a period of profound stress and confusion, these school leaders had dug deep into their reservoirs of compassion. They had forged stronger bonds with their local communities and deepened relationships. They had also learned to recognize other important aspects of their role, such as initiating the important but sometimes difficult conversations that schools typically skate over. They thought it was 'time' to:

- 'Find ways to make education fit for the 21st century';
- 'Get away from teaching children to read to pass tests, to encouraging them to read to make sense of their reality';
- 'Seize this moment... a one in a lifetime opportunity to.... have the conversations that matter.. (and) collectively create community'.

However, they were exhausted. They had learned much along the way but had found little time or space to capture their learning, or to plan how to incorporate what they had learned into what was to come. Their energy had gone into competing the Covid-19 sprint in record time. Now they realised that were facing a 'Marathon' and baulked at the implications for their time and energy.
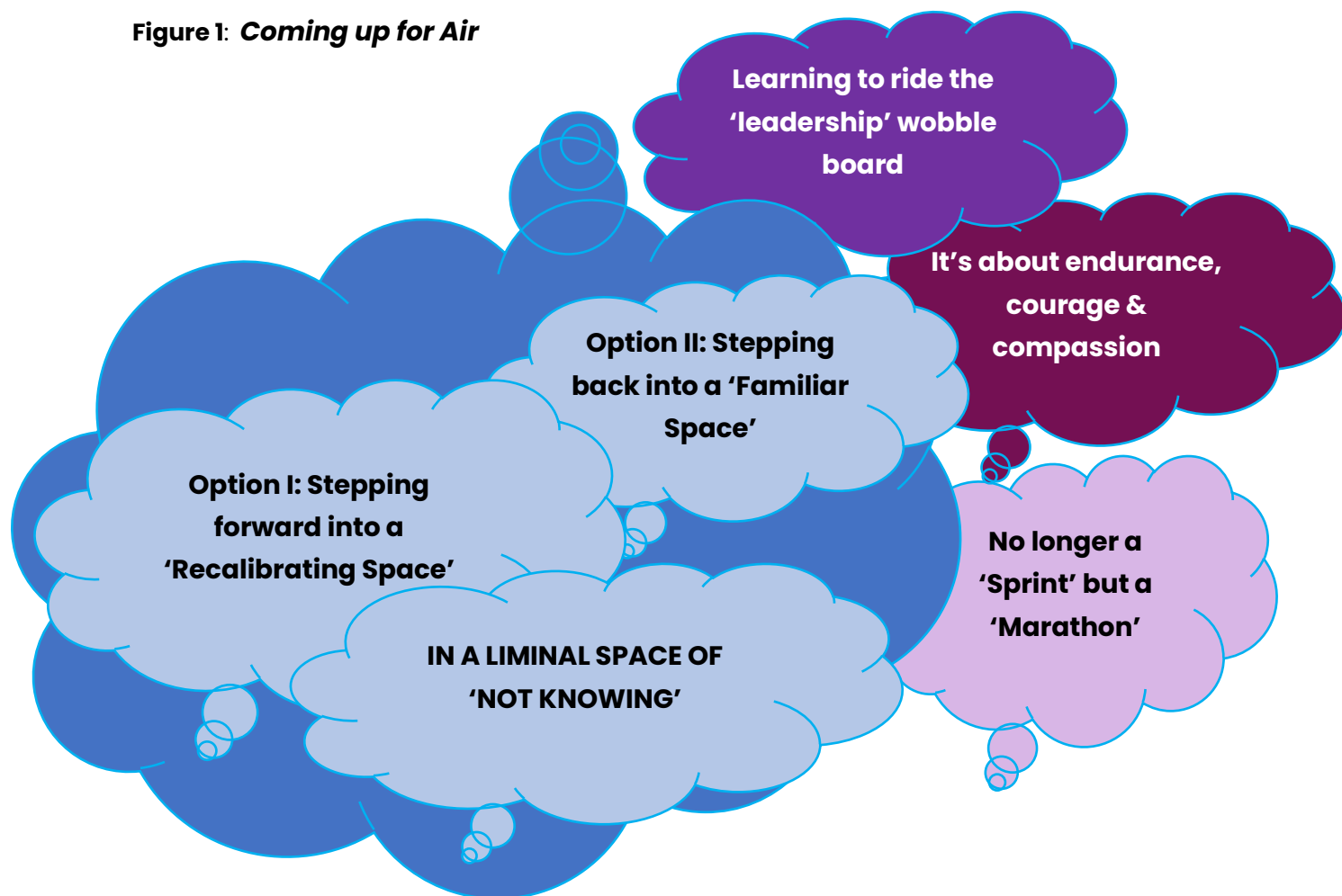
These leaders – and no doubt many others across the Globe – found themselves in a liminal space. Liminal spaces are places of disturbance and uncertainty: in-between space of not knowing what to do next, something which many leaders struggle with. Nevertheless, liminal spaces are also spaces of ambiguity which offer the potential for new thinking, new learning and new practices.[9]

Figure 1: *Coming up for Air* illustrates some of the elements of this Covid-19 liminal state for the headteachers we worked with. Learning to ride the leadership wobble board had

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[9] The concept of liminality has been explored from a number of perspectives including psychology and spirituality, for example, in the work of the theologian Richard Rohr.

been no mean feat. The leadership sprint may have reaffirmed their core values and beliefs but how would they - and their peers elsewhere - fare during the marathon which lay ahead? *What next?* - Stepping back into established and familiar space with clear rules and patterns, or forward into a recalibrating space with the possibility of adopting less structured, relational and more compassionate leadership approaches?

Figure 1: *Coming up for Air*

Learning to ride the 'leadership' wobble board

It's about endurance, courage & compassion

Option II: Stepping back into a 'Familiar Space'

Option I: Stepping forward into a 'Recalibrating Space'

No longer a 'Sprint' but a 'Marathon'

IN A LIMINAL SPACE OF 'NOT KNOWING'

Part II is by way of a stock-taking exercise. It begins by dipping into the past, reviewing some of the pre-Covid issues about exclusion and a sense of not belonging in school and identifying the consequences for individuals, their families and society. Data about the positive impact of a sense of belonging on staff, as well as young people is also included. I go on to highlight new and emerging leadership challenges, and examine what we know, so far, about the extent to which Covid-19 and the current economic crisis have had an impact on particular groups of children and young people.

Part II: When the Going gets even Tougher

Taking stock of the past

The concepts of belonging and compassionate leadership - as a form of leadership which helps create the conditions for school belonging - have been central to my research for some time.[10] Drawing 1: 'I don't belong here' is taken from research carried out some years ago with young people who had been excluded from school. At the center is a small child looking distraught. The caption reads: *You're thick.. You're stupid.. You don't belong here.. Get out of my school.*[11] It is an abject depiction of the experience of being excluded which has both haunted and galvanized me into action for many years.

Drawing 1: *I don't Belong Here*

Across many countries and contexts, a rapid increase in 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. Exclusions are growing and some - arguably those with the greatest needs –find themselves handed the ultimate 'red card' of exclusion from school. Children and young people from low-income families are four

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[10] Book publications include Riley, K: *(2013) *Leadership of Place: Stories from Schools in the US, UK and South Africa*. London: Bloomsbury. * (2017) *Place, Belonging and School Leadership: Researching to Make the Difference*. London: Bloomsbury. *(2022) *Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging*. London: UCL Press. Download at https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/171324

[11] 0riginal source: Riley K & Rustique-Forrester E. (2002) *Working with Disaffected Students: Why children lose interest in school and what we can do about it*. London: Chapman Sage, p 28.

times more likely to be excluded than their more affluent peers.[12] Those from disadvantaged groups, such as children with special educational needs, are also disproportionately excluded from school. Racial disparities in exclusion rates are particularly acute for Black Caribbean pupils.[13]

The consequences of being excluded from school are profound for individuals, their families and for society. We know, for example, that the disaffected and excluded search for 'belongingness' elsewhere, finding it in many ways, including extremism, self-harming and gang membership. We also know that the excluded frequently become the exploited.[14]

The outsiders looking in

Belonging and 'not' belonging are highly differentiated experiences, as research in a number of fields, including psychology and the sociology of education has demonstrated [15]. Sociologist Carol Vincent, for example, has identified the ways in which belonging in England is shaped by a raft of inequalities which frequently intersect. These include race, ethnicity and social class.[16] She draws on the work of Bridget Anderson to illustrate how national belonging has been constructed as being 'composed of people who share common ideas… and patterns of behaviour … through their ethnicity, religion culture or language, in ways that can exclude … the migrant, the refugee, the outsider.[17]

This process of creating outsiders occurs daily and is often linked to the barriers and stigma associated with having low levels of formal education.[18] If as a parent, your own school experience has been one of rejection, then your child's school may become a place of trauma and shame.

In the second of a series of Podcasts on school belonging Anita Berlin (General Practitioner and Professor of Community Medicine) and Janet Foster (Associate Professor of Criminology at LSE) discuss how the process of stigmatization and marginalisation can

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[12] The Fair Education Alliance (2017) *Third state of the nation report card, 2016-2017*. London: The Fair Education Alliance, http://www.faireducation.org.uk/report-card/ accessed 27/10/2017.

[13] For an overview of these issues see: Taylor, M. (2020), *Creating change for the 'pinball' kids*, RSA, London. https://thestaffcollege.uk/publications/creating-change-for-the

[14] For a deeper discussion of these issues see: Riley, K. (2019) 'Agency and belonging: What transformative actions can schools take to help create a sense of place and belonging?' *Journal of Educational & Child Psychology*; 36 (4), 91-103.

[15] See, for example, Reay, D. (2017) *Miseducation*. Bristol: Policy Press.

[16] Vincent, C. (2022) 'Belonging in England today: Schools, race, class and policy'. *Journal of Sociology,* Vol. 58(3) 324-341.

[17] Anderson, B (2103) *Us and Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 2.

[18] Easterbrook, M. (2022) https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/people-us

contribute to families seeing themselves as failures. Anita describes how she and her GP colleagues were puzzled by the increase in the number of mothers seeking medical help. The common trigger was their interactions with the headteacher of the local school which led them to see themselves as bad parents. The impact on these women was a downward spiral of depression, and on their children - a drop in attendance. The headteacher eventually left the school under a dark cloud.[19]

The newly disenfranchised

Taking stock of where we are now, Covid-19 has widened inequalities and increased a sense of dislocation for many young people and their families. Recent evidence indicates that those who have already experienced the greatest disadvantages in society are also now suffering the most from the health, social and economic consequences of Covid-19.

The Children's Society has contributed to our understanding of contemporary realities, arguing that the cost-of-living crisis is set to worsen the situation for the estimated four million children and young people living in poverty. Refugee and migrant children, young people at risk (including the growing number of young people with mental health issues) are most likely to experience the impact of this crisis.[20] The Prince's Trust reports on the wider picture: that Covid has left a third of young people feeling that their life is out of control; their education and social lives have been disrupted; and their opportunities for the future restricted.[21]

And yet…..

A growing body of evidence indicates that when belonging is a school's guiding principle, more young people 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.[22] 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. The presence of school belonging in adolescence is also linked to positive long-term outcomes for adult mental health and the likelihood of future education and employment opportunities.[23]

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[19] https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk/ (home/podcasts/Podcast 2, 'You are all in detention'.
[20] www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/impact-of-covid-19-on-young-people
[21]ttps://www.princes-trust.org.uk
[22] This is based on findings from research undertaken for the National Education Union (NEU) reported in Riley 2022 (see note 1) and in Riley, K., Coates, M., and Allen, T. (2020) *Place and belonging in school. Why it matters today.* London: National Education Union. https://neu.org.uk/place-belonging and www.theartofpossiblities.org.uk
[23] Allen, K. A., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J. and Waters, L. (2018) 'What Schools Need to Know about Belonging: A meta-analysis'. *Educational Psychology Review,* 30 (1), 1-34. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8.

Part III: Letting Compassion have its Day

'Marina' stands at the threshold of a new school day, eager to experience what is to come: see Drawing 2: 'I Belong Here'. This is another favourite image of mine and comes from research on school belonging (see footnote note 1). Marina's sense of school belonging is palpable and reaches down to the very tips of her fingers.

Drawing 2: *I Belong here*

Young people do not come to feel that they belong in school by accident. A sense of belonging grows through the strength of their relationships with their teachers and support staff, and the nature of their interactions with their peers. However, whether a school becomes a place of belonging or a closed place where young people feel ostracised and staff unappreciated is down to the leadership.

The practice of leadership

The practice of leadership has always been a messy, uncertain and challenging one – and no more so than today. The research on leadership during Covid, presented in part I indicates some of the pressures on school leaders. New challenges continue to emerge,

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For insights into the practice of school belonging also see: Allen, K. A. and Kern, P. (2019) *Boosting School Belonging in Adolescents*: *Interventions for teachers and mental health professionals*. London: Routledge.
Got to https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk/ (home/podcasts/Podcast 3, 'This is how you look. This is how you feel' to hear Kelly-Ann Allen discuss some of these important issues about what it means to belong in school.

such as increases in behavioural problems; deepening pressures on school budgets; growing numbers of young people living in poverty.

Scanning the contemporary leadership landscape, widely different views about what it means to be a school leader seem to prevail.[24] At one end of the spectrum, there is an approach which has come to be described as command-and-control. This is often expressed in terms of a 'zero tolerance' and seems to emanate from a view that close supervision (of students and staff) is required to ensure compliance. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the more relational and compassionate approach which I illustrated earlier in this article. The leadership focus is on connectivity and belonging and the approach reflects a view by the school leaders that most people want to contribute and be part of a school community.

In these difficult times, it is understandable that across the leadership 'piste', some leaders are hesitant to go down the compassionate leadership 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. Equally too, the leadership road ahead is far from easy for those headteachers who want to create schools which are spaces of belonging and compassion yet recognise that they face the structural constraints of a strong national accountability system.

Neuroscientists report that we are hard-wired for compassion.[25] In the context of the impact of Covid-19 on young people and on the ongoing issues of exclusion and alienation isn't the time ripe for education leaders to hone their compassionate leadership skills? What's getting in the way?

Stepping into compassionate leadership

In an exploration of compassionate leadership in the health and care sectors, Michael West describes the barriers and enablers to compassionate leadership.[26] The many barriers include - what he, and others have described as - the shackles of routines; the complexity of regulations, protocols and demands; the fear of making mistakes in organisations that are bureaucratic and demanding; the complexity and difficulty of some tasks; demanding performance targets; stress and overload. These barriers are all too familiar in the English school system. Drawing on the experience of the health and social care sectors, West

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[24] Riley**,** K. (2022) What's Your Model of Leadership? Does It Work – And Does It Matter? *Teaching Times* https://www.teachingtimes.com/whats-your-model-of-...

[25] https://charterforcompassion.org/defining-and-understanding-compassion/our-brains-are-hardwired-for-compassion

[26] West, M. A. (2021) *Compassionate Leadership: Sustaining Wisdom, Humanity and Presence in Health and Social Care*. The Swirling Leaf Press.

identifies four behaviours which characterise compassionate leaders. These can be readily translated into the education domain as follows:

Attend: They are present and focussed on young people and adults.

Understand: They listen and 'see' people for who they are.

Empathise: They are aware of the needs and feelings of others and are committed to responding to those needs.

Help: They draw on their wisdom (their skills and knowledge) to identify purposeful and intelligent actions.

Today's challenging environment reinforces the importance of compassionate leadership at all levels of the education system, starting with national government. Government actions, inactions and regulations set the climate of what is expected and what is judged to be important. At the intersection of schools and national government lies the local authority/municipality/local system lies. Through their strategic intent and leadership, intermediary authorities can have a significant impact on expectations and beliefs about what is possible and expected in a locality. Telford and Wrekin's authority-wide school belonging strategy (which is based on research findings about school belonging)[27] provides one example of such an approach.[28]

At the school level, headteachers and school principals are the mediating force whose actions shape the culture of a school, determining whose voices are heard and whose are overlooked. A compassionate approach encourages ingenuity, flexibility and a 'can do' culture. I like to think of the compassionate leader as someone who possesses the enviable skills of an eagle: that capacity to look in two directions at the same time. Their vision crosses boundaries, reaches out to communities and takes account of the internal world of the school, as well as the world beyond the school gates.

Compassion brings out the best in people. It helps make connections and unites us. Compassion is the superglue that binds communities together: the ingredient that has the potential to redress some of the imbalances and inequities accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Compassion enables leaders to acknowledge their own limitations and bring joy and fulfilment into the lives of others.

Looking ahead, we can see many new leadership challenges emerging. Others remain hidden in the horizons of many tomorrows. Not all leaders will relish learning to ride the leadership wobble board. However, they will need to recognize that leading is about

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[27] Riley, K. (2017) Place, Belonging and School Leadership: Researching to Make the Difference. London: Bloomsbury.
[28] Telford and Wrekin Council (2019) *Belonging Strategy*, Available at: https://www.google.com/search?client =safari&rls=en&q=telford+and+wrekin+belongin g+

accepting uncertainty: that sense of 'not knowing' what is to come but knowing the relationships and expectations that matter. It's all about compassion and wisdom.[29] Wisdom enables leaders to use their knowledge to identify the purposeful and intelligent actions that matter. Wisdom enables them to step into the liminal moment of uncertainty and ask the questions that matter:

'What holds people together?' 'What builds communities?'

The educational rewards of compassionate leadership are rich and the costs minimal. The uncertainty which characterises today's world, and the world of the classroom, is unlikely to disappear soon. Schools stand centre-stage in the lives of young people and need to be places of connectivity and belonging. Compassionate leadership is about enabling that to happen.

Acknowledgments

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[29] For a rich discussion about what it means to be a school leader today, go to https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk/ (home/podcasts/Podcast 4, 'Zero Tolerance of a sense of Us?' and Podcast 5 'Belonging Becoming, Believing in our Global World' to hear some leading figures talking about these issues. These include Dame Mary Marsh, past headteacher and Chief Executive of the NSPCC; Jo Dibb, past Executive headteacher, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School, London; Dave McPartlin, headteacher Flakefleet School, Fleetwood; Jo Riley and pupils from Cremer Primary School, Hackney.

Resources & Further Information
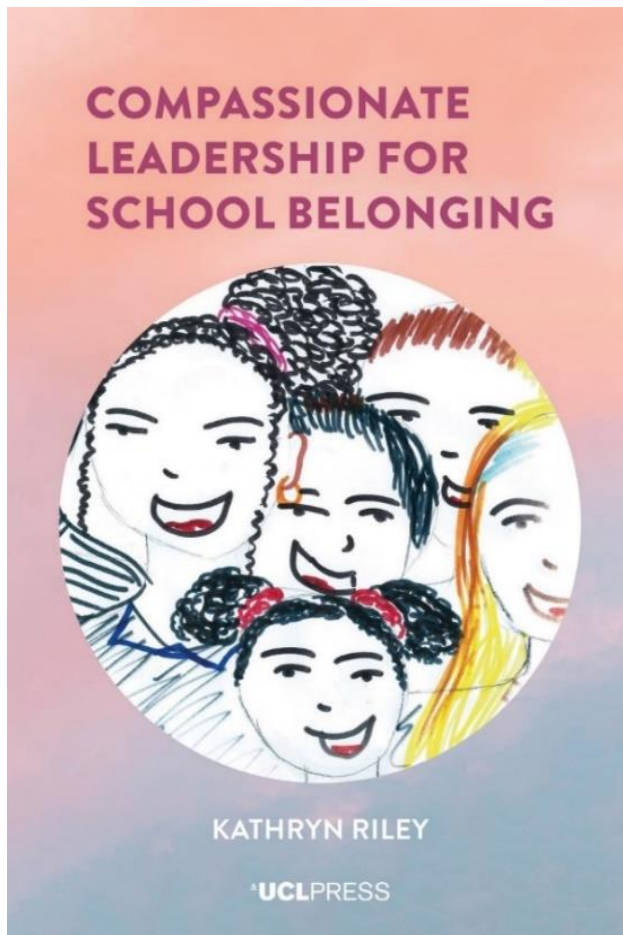
Kathryn has published widely. Her most recent book, *Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging* is published by UCL Press and is available free online:

https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/171324

For videos and materials (including a new Podcast Series on School Belonging, enriched by the sounds of Rapper Jamie Pyke & the vivid images of Kristy Campbell) go to **https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk**

For the first in a series of IOE, UCL Blogs on belonging go to: https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2022/06/22/belonging-part-1-the-red-card-of-exclusion/

Other blogs are available at blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe

APPENDIX I: Schools and Communities

This Appendix represents my contribution to an ICSEI 2023 Dialogic:[30]

Problematizing the Relationship between Schools,

Families & Communities

My Community or Yours? - Professor Kathryn Riley

The notion of 'problematizing' is an issue that has long fascinated me. It's that opportunity to put aside what you *think* you know (what you assume to be true) and to explore what you really know. The 'problematising' activity for this ICSEI Dialogic revolves around our understanding of the school-community relationship.

Let's start with the school. A school, of course, is just a building. What matters is what goes on in and around that building: the relationships, the connections, the learning. The important questions become: *Who feels part of the school community? Who feels connected and has a sense of belonging?* The images below give a flavour of what it feels like to 'belong' and be welcomed as a community member (the left-hand side), or to 'not belong': the right-hand side.[31]

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[30] The Dialogic was initiated by the ICSEI 3 PS Network (Policymakers, Politicians & Practitioners) https://www.icsei.net

[31] K. Riley (2022) *Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging, p84.* Download for free at UCL Press <https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/171324>

In this short input to our dialogic interchange, I want to pose three questions:

- *Why* should schools engage in strengthening school-community relations?

- *Who* are they connecting to: *who* is 'in' and who is 'out'?

- *What* helps the process of connection?

Let me touch first on the notion of 'community'. Community is a word that has many meanings and is used widely because it conveys that sense of individuals working together with shared beliefs and goals. The intrinsic value of community membership has become a cliché: something warm and 'cozy' that we all want to be a part of.

It is a truism to say that schools should relate to their community/communities. No one seriously suggests that schools should merely do their best to process the children who come through their gates every morning, while ignoring whatever goes on outside those gates. Truisms have the advantage of being true, but very often – as in this case - they also have the disadvantage of being imprecise generalisations. I hope that these questions will help us to develop more precision about some of the issues.

Q1. Why should schools engage in strengthening school-community relations?

Some years ago, Professor Karen Seashore Louis and I carried out a project on school-community relationships. We wanted to understand more about perceptions, practices and realities. Our exploration included a literature review. Broadly speaking, we concluded that there were five main reasons why schools sought to become more engaged with their communities. These were to:

- Improve student achievement;
- Become more accountable to communities and increase their involvement;
- Build social capital, by encouraging collaborative activities that would, for example, lead to healthier or safer communities;
- Develop the role of the school as a moral agent which had some responsibility for promoting issues for young people, such as social justice;
- Promote the school's self-interest, by developing good public relations.

Very different starting points, assumptions and end goals are embedded within these five drivers. Yet, schools rarely articulate their intentions and expectations about school-community engagement. To hear the views of one exemplary school leader, Jo

Dibb - until recently head of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School (EGA) - about school-community engagement follow the links below.[32] EGA is a great favourite of Michele Obama who visited the London School and wrote about it in her 2018 book 'Becoming'.

Q2. Who are schools connecting to: who is 'in' and 'out'?

This second 'problematising' question raises a raft of issues about who is 'in' and 'out': who makes up the student community/ the local community. These issues include:

Access: Is this school open to everyone? Is there a selection process (governed by ability to pay or to pass a test)? Is it a specialist school of some sort, drawing on a wide circle of young people from several localities? Is the school set up to serve a particular gender or community (e.g., a faith community)?

Locality: What's the school's catchment area? Does it serve a local population, or do the young people come from some distance? Is the community which the school serves relatively homogeneous or are there diverse and multiple communities? What are the social and contextual challenges within the neighbourhood?

Insiders and outsiders: Once entry to the school has been determined – what happens next? Schools can be places where students feel welcomed, or places of rejection and exclusion. Across OECD countries, young people's sense of belonging is declining, with nearly 1 in 3 now feeling they don't belong in school..

Whose voices are listened to and whose ignored? Some – and arguably those with the greatest needs – may find themselves being handed the ultimate 'red card' of exclusion. The excluded often become the exploited.

And what about the families of these young people and the communities in which they live?   Many researchers have argued that the ways in which schools engage with their communities frequently exclude particular groups, such as refugee and migrant families. UK organisations report that a number of young people from refugee families experience a sense of being 'the other': not being wanted in their school.[33]

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[32] https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk> explore/videos/S1 V2,'Student researchers show the way'

[33] https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk> Home Page, Podcast I: Shut up and leave me alone
 https://open.spotify.com/episode/3No1oVKIL0TWhxvUTKlfwe?si=80151cd4fca84df2

Q3. What helps the process of connection?

We know that for school-community engagement to be effective, it needs to be authentic and based on mutuality, connectivity, and trust. Trust is the super glue that binds schools and communities together. Trust does not appear out of the ether. It cannot be assumed. It has to be created, and it has to be earned.

When trust flourishes, it is manifested in relationships at all levels: *between* school leaders and classroom teachers; *between* teachers and young people; *between* school staff, families, and communities. To find out more about how headteacher Dave McPartlin, from Flakefleet Primary school England, built trust and community, follow the links below. These will even take you to Britain's got Talent! [34]

Endnote: When schools are attuned to young people and take account of families and communities, they succeed in creating a sense of school belonging. In schools where belonging works, young people tend to be happier, more confident and perform better academically. The staff feel professionally recognised and their families welcomed.

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[34] (i) For the school's strategy go to K. Riley 2022 (reference: footnote 1), p.64.'Seascape' school is Flakefleet Primary.
(ii) To hear Headteachers' Jo Dibb and Dave McPartlin in conversation go to the Podcast series:
https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk> Home Page, Podcast 4: Zero Tolerance or a Sense of Us
or https://open.spotify.com/episode/2ra427O5aFXScLIzYeUHih?si=f881feab335e4ef4
(iii) To see Flakefleet perform go to Britain's got Talent 2020, flakefleet primary