

**What**

**Leadership**

**Do We Need**

**Now?**

**Voices From the Teach For All Network  
on How We Can Shape a Better Future**

**What Leadership Do We Need Now?  
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on How We Can Shape a Better Future**

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# What Leadership Do We Need Now?

Voices From the Teach For All Network  
on How We Can Shape a Better Future

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**Teach For All**  
A Global Network

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# Introduction

WENDY KOPP

In October 2021, thousands of people across Teach For All's network came together in a virtual conference to consider a timely question: What leadership do we need now?

This felt like an important question in a pandemic era that has generated so much suffering across the world and during a time of such dramatic change that has opened up new opportunities and possibilities.

This question also seemed imperative for a network whose purpose is to develop collective leadership to ensure that, in turn, all children develop as leaders who can shape a better future for themselves and all of us.

The conference left us enriched by the depth and diversity of perspectives shared. If anything was clear, it was that this question—What leadership do we need now?—must be one of constant learning and inquiry within our network. Both to extend the conversation within our network and to share some of our network's insights with the world, we set out to publish Teach For All's first book—a collection of essays on this topic.

This collection puts forth views of teachers, students, alumni, and staff members from across 18 countries and six continents. Collectively, they speak to the work we need to do on ourselves and the

leadership we need from everyone in order to navigate uncertainty and realize our shared aspirations.

In the run-up to our Global Conference on this topic, I consulted some of the world’s most extraordinary leaders—from across and beyond our network—to hear their views on this topic. What they shared reinforced for me the importance of developing leadership that is collective and focused on perhaps the most important purpose—developing today’s young people holistically so that they can build a future that is just, peaceful, and sustainable. I also heard a loud affirmation that we need leadership rooted in the core values that bring us together as a network—sense of possibility, locally rooted & globally informed, diversity & inclusiveness, constant learning, and interdependence. These same themes shine through in this collection of essays.

Teach For India’s Sandeep Rai calls upon us to cultivate a generation of people who each act with agency to shape our communities so that they work for everyone. Dewina Leuschner, a student of Teach First Deutschland, reinforces this point with the message that we all hold within us the ability to lead, as does Teach For Ukraine student Yelyzaveta Shelestova, who calls on us to act with courage. As we exert leadership, we must move beyond resilience and focus on the possibility of transformative change, challenges Teach For Lebanon’s Salyne El Samarany. “I need to find solutions for the short term to survive,” she says, “but I shouldn’t lose track of my bigger vision for change.”

Teach For All’s Vongai Nyahunzvi challenges us to decolonize education as a path to the leadership we need. Michelle Johansson and Jay Allnutt of New Zealand’s Ako Mātātupu call for co-conspiracy—diverse leadership teams comprised of individuals

from privileged and marginalized backgrounds who work together to dismantle inequities built into the system. *Ensina Brasil*'s Elisa Adler writes that we need for the kind of leadership that got us through the pandemic itself—leadership that is local and collective. *Enseña Perú*'s Franco Mosso shares this perspective, calling for leaders from the community itself working to develop even more leadership from within.

*Teach First*'s Oli de Botton writes that recovering and transforming in the wake of the pandemic requires developing students as leaders and points the way to doing this, as do many other contributors. We read a call to dismantle “adult-centrism” in education from *Enseña por México*'s Juan Manuel González Barajas. *Teach For India* students Rutuja Bhoite and Raghvendra Yadav, as well as *Teach For All*'s Sanaya Bharucha, call upon teachers to believe in students' potential as leaders and to work with them in genuine partnership. *Teach For Malaysia*'s Emily Neoh Gaik Kin calls for teachers who assume “extreme ownership” for their students' achievement and development as a path to the leadership and world we need, and *Enseña Perú*'s Alexandra Vassalo writes that the foundation for succeeding in this is building trust and relationships with students. Bright Unata and Esther Remilekun Odekunle, *Teach For Nigeria* students in Grades 5 and 12 respectively, share from their vantage point what it looks like for teachers to view students as leaders.

Adults need to work on their own leadership to foster students' leadership, writes *Teach For Portugal*'s Natali Martins. Similarly, Radha Ruparell, who leads *Teach For All*'s Global Leadership Accelerator, calls on each of us to do the inner work necessary to change the system. “If we wish for peace, compassion, and justice in the world, we must begin by first cultivating these qualities within ourselves,” she writes in an essay that points us towards understanding ourselves

more deeply, unlearning our limiting beliefs, and unleashing our full potential by focusing on the strengths of ourselves and others.

Teach For America student Ava Ward calls for climate-conscious youth leadership so that there will be a future to lead. “The journey to the year 2050, or more likely 2025, will be full of uncertainty, change, crisis, and new normals,” she writes. “With this in mind, I ask you ... What do you eat? What have you done to help preserve the planet we live on?”

Margarita Sáenz from Enseña por Colombia calls for an antidote to the polarized state of the world today in the form of leadership that sustains dialogue, engages others, goes deep, and inspires. She notes that this kind of leadership will counterbalance prevailing leadership models and help us build a more cohesive and peaceful society.

The essays call for leadership that values all of us. Teach For Cambodia’s Moni Siv calls for leadership that recognizes our interdependence and taps into the contributions of everyone. Marwa Farouq writes that navigating uncertainty depends on this, and that we can develop collective leadership through centering those who are most proximate to the challenges, leveraging collective wisdom, and creating space for a diversity of voices and perspectives. Enseña por Colombia’s Darlin Ibargüen Asprilla shares a powerful example of how change can happen when diverse community members exert their leadership and work in partnership with leaders at every level of the system. Teach For Nigeria alumna Nene Ibezim calls for fostering communities among our students as a path to fostering the collective ownership and shared sense of responsibility we need. Teach For Sweden’s Ida Karlberg Gidlund and Sara Heinrich, Teach For Austria’s Toni Kronke, and Teach For Armenia’s Armine

Gevorgyan unpack what it takes to foster collective leadership at this precarious juncture in our society.

At the close of the 2021 Global Conference, I noted that for me, the theme that was the most striking throughout the conference was about the need to center love. We had begun the conference with a charge from 2016 Global Teacher Prize Winner Hanan Al Hroub. “We need to learn how to love each other,” she said, “because we need a world that has more justice, that is free of oppression, free of disease. We need a world with more love and less hatred.” The theme then reverberated through the virtual conference walls throughout the three days we spent together.

Now, reflecting on all the beautiful contributions in this book, I’m struck once again that perhaps the most salient point is about the need to do the inner work and the systemic work necessary to build a world that puts love at the center. Thank you to all the contributors who helped us reflect on what’s needed from each and all of us to move forward in this way.

*Wendy Kopp is the CEO and Co-founder of Teach For All*



# We Can't Afford To Merely Observe the World Anymore

**SANDEEP RAI**

**We each need to spend our time and energy working to tackle society's biggest problems—and we need to reshape our education system to prepare students to do just that.**

**O**ur world is sitting amidst multiple phenomena that are, together, remaking the very fabric of our society. These global events are forcing us to not only rethink future priorities but to also confront rapid and disruptive change across educational systems that, for centuries, have been the stabilizing bedrock upon which future progress is built.

We are, across the world, continuing to witness levels of suffering and poverty that are unparalleled. We're on the heels of a pandemic that has killed 6.3 million people (a number that will be outdated by the time this article is published). A global crisis, accompanied by school closures, employment losses, and painful economic cuts, pushed more than 150 million people into poverty in 2021. That virus was subsequently followed by war, rising costs, and a myriad of competing crises. Truthfully, though, we haven't just been battling with a pandemic and war. We're also grappling with changes that are rapidly redefining a generation's relationship with work and, more largely, life itself.

At the heart of that evolving relationship is the world's seemingly ubiquitous quest for purpose. We are entering an era, moreover, where meaning and purpose are paramount. According to one prominent survey, 94% of millennials want to utilize their skills to benefit a cause. 63% believe that the primary purpose of a company should be to improve society (not to generate profits). Young people, across the globe, are searching for ways to make the world a better place.

Underlying it all, again, is the recognition that we live in an interconnected world; that my happiness and liberation depends on my neighbor being happy and free too. That renewed discovery, however, carries implications that are disruptive. Across the world, it's leading to mass resignations. According to another survey, 71% of employed millennials are passively and quietly looking for new and better opportunities.

What does all of this, though, have to do with education?

Both these phenomena are remaking our educational system in ways that few would expect. They are forcing us to rethink the very purpose of the education we provide our children. In India, that remaking is starkly acute, carrying implications that will be far-reaching and staggering.

Hundreds of millions of Indian children, because of pandemic-induced school closures, lost access to midday meals this year; for many, in-school lunch was their primary source of nutrition. Local governments and nonprofits, at the same time, witnessed a 490% increase in child-rescue requests. Teenage suicides and cases of depression are at all-time highs.

Our largest losses, however, are those that, to most of us, are unseen. Several studies—from Institutions like the Asian Development Bank, Azim Premji, and UNESCO—are collectively predicting that students are experiencing a learning loss that, soon, will never be reversed. The implications of 650 days of lost learning are bleak. Future earnings for today's children are expected to decrease by a little less than 8%. When aggregated across the 320 million children in India today, those earnings will eventually result in more than 7% of our GDP disappearing. And, perhaps most starkly, they'll lead us to a rising generation with a lower life expectancy. If this crisis continues, today's children will, simply put, live fewer years.

Underlying all of that, in India and across the world, we're seeing teachers grapple with purpose, too. They're now walking away from classrooms, while schools struggle to find the talent needed to take on the gargantuan task of getting students back on track. Indian teachers, many of whom were pulled into front-line COVID response efforts by local governments, are now confronting the after-effects of trauma. Sitting in the background of all of this, albeit no less notable, has been an emerging realization: we're feeling the pain of schools being shut, but we're also realizing that they weren't all that effective when they were open.

Here's the bottom line: our current state of affairs, perhaps more than ever, is demanding our society to step up and lead. The futures of our children—and the world we hope to become—are at stake. We need, furthermore, leadership that has the courage to reimagine education, the compassion to deliver for children and teachers alike, and the consciousness of thought to remain clear and steadfast when needed. That leadership is arguably the single most important ingredient to not only rescue our current state of education, but to remake it into one that is transformative for future generations.

We need leadership like Eshwar's. The son of a farmer, Eshwar grew up in a small town in the south of India; he was the first in his family to graduate and attend college. When, three years later, his parents discovered that he got an unexpected job at IBM, they were both ecstatic and hopeful. Within his first six years, he was promoted on four different occasions. The newfound security and higher salary enabled him and his family to take risks that were once unthinkable. He took out loans to pay for his sister's wedding. He bought his parents a house. And his father quit farming.

After a few years, though, Eshwar began questioning his surroundings. He knew that his time at IBM, while intellectually fulfilling and financially secure, was incomplete. A few months later, without telling any of his friends or family, Eshwar resigned and applied to Teach For India.

Eshwar spent the next two years teaching in one of Hyderabad's low-income government schools; he simultaneously sent money back home every month. He turned his classroom into an oasis of creativity. Every day, for one hour, his children would spend time innovating and designing real-world solutions to community problems. Today, five years later, Eshwar runs an organization called InquiLab. Their mission is to transform India's schools into havens that will promote innovation and reimagine education. They serve 3,500 low-income children across the city of Hyderabad.

Arzoo and Soumya were teaching in a Mumbai classroom hundreds of kilometers away from Eshwar when the pandemic first closed schools. As they migrated classroom instruction online, a small fraction of their 120 students were showing up. With every additional call to parents, they discovered needs that were unmet but highly solvable. Children needed access to data for internet

solutions, to medical supplies, and more. Families, many of whom were inundated by a pandemic, were simply unable to attend to their children's learning needs.

Soumya and Arzoo were trying everything, but they were also exhausted. They quickly concluded that their best shot at success was to mobilize more people. Within 72 hours of the pandemic's onset, they began scouring online volunteering websites like Internshalla. They ran widespread recruitment campaigns for free talent. Three weeks later, they hired and trained 31 volunteers. Each day thereafter, adults began calling students and families to not only ensure learning was happening, but to also check on their well-being. That community of volunteers, furthermore, subsequently started to support each other.

Compassionate and courageous leadership hasn't just been restricted to adults. In Ahmedabad, a city in the northwest of India, impoverished communities immediately began feeling the economic effects of the pandemic. Lockdowns, coupled with a dearth of assistance for citizens, left communities searching for both medical supplies and food.

13-year-old Rehan, a resident of one of the city's hardest hit communities, grew acutely aware of how much his neighbors were struggling. With the help of his teachers, he started an online fundraising campaign to buy supplies. Within days, he began mobilizing food and medical equipment; his campaign would ultimately serve hundreds of families.

India, along with the rest of the world, will likely continue to battle the implications of this pandemic for years. In the backdrop, rising generations will also continue to grapple with purpose and, along the

way, we'll see our collective relationship with work and life evolve. Stories like those of Eshwar, Soumya, Arzoo, and Rehan remind us that we don't have to be mere witnesses to the state of the world. We have the power, furthermore, to shape our communities so that they work for everyone.

But realizing that power will demand leadership, perhaps it's the courage to believe that students can solve the world's problems; the clarity of consciousness to leave a high-paying job; or the compassion to spring into action as schools shut down.

Our education system, and the world around us, will likely be fundamentally better because of these four individuals. India, however, has the world's fastest growing young population (there are 320 million citizens under the age of 18). They will confront a rapidly growing list of global problems; as a result, they can't afford to merely observe.

Imagine instead—even for a moment—all that's possible if we can cultivate this rising generation to make the shift from hopeless passivity to courageous production.

That perhaps is our most pressing and most urgent question.

How do we all step up and lead?

*Sandeep Rai is the Chief Operating Officer at Teach For India and Founder at The Circle*

# Healing the World

## It Starts From Within

**RADHA RUPARELL**

**To transform systems around us, we must begin with the inner work—if we wish for peace, compassion, and justice in the world, we must begin by first cultivating these qualities within ourselves.**

It's Wednesday morning. I'm sitting on a Zoom call with 60 leaders from 22 countries. As I scan the first screen alone, I see faces from Ethiopia, India, Lebanon, Mexico, South Africa, Sweden, and Ukraine. While we all come from different contexts, we're united by a shared commitment to create a world where all children have a chance to fulfill their true potential, no matter what circumstances they're born into or what hardships they face.

One by one, members of this group come off mute to share their current realities. Some are dealing with war and civil strife that is completely ravaging their countries. Others are facing school closures that have kept millions of children out of school, including entire cohorts of girls who, forced into early marriage or work, may never return to school again. Most continue to reckon with the challenges of poverty, violence, and discrimination against children that existed far before this time and have only been exacerbated in this moment.

Yet week after week, this diverse community comes together because we believe in a revolutionary idea. That our work is not just about education. It's about healing. And that if we wish for peace, compassion, and justice in the world, we must begin by first cultivating these qualities within ourselves. *It starts from within.*



We need leaders to do the “inner work” on themselves. Why? Because how we show up in everyday moments has a profound ability to transform systems around us. We think that it's our big, bold actions that make a difference, and yet so often, it's the small things that truly matter.

As leaders, it's not just what we're *doing* that matters but also who we're *being*.



So, what kind of inner capacities must we build for transformative system change? As a starting point, we need to grow our ability for: understanding, unlearning, and unleashing.

## **1. Understanding**

We must begin by understanding ourselves. This sounds so simple, and yet so few of us truly know ourselves. The first step is being willing to stop long enough to ask ourselves some deep questions:

- Through what lenses do I see the world? What am I able to see? What am I missing? What are my blind spots?
- How do I relate to others? What was I socialized to believe about groups of people who are different from me? What prejudices might I hold?

- How did my early systems shape me? What trauma or stress did I face? What wisdom and assets did I inherit? How does this all show up in me today?
- What unique strengths, passions, and gifts can I offer to the world?
- How am I being in every moment? Am I showing up closed or open-hearted? What helps me move from one state to another?

The challenge with beginning to know ourselves is that in our go-go world, we often do not create space to pause and reflect. Why not? There are so many reasons. It takes discipline to pause in a world that prioritizes the urgent over the important. It takes courage to sit with difficult questions that might awaken turmoil within us. It takes resilience to turn toward stillness and uncertainty when it's far easier to numb ourselves with distractions.

And yet, when we do take time to pause, we can discover so much.

For example, one day, with this group of 60 leaders, we sat down and drew out maps of our early systems. We wanted to explore how our family units, early communities, and first years in school shaped us. After just one hour of reflection, the discoveries were profound.

“I see now that my early systems are affecting me today more than I ever realized.”

“My early systems made me who I am today. But I also realize that's not fixed.”

What these leaders realized was that a lot of their past shows up in their actions today. While some of these behaviors serve them, others may no longer serve them. Without intentionally pausing to reflect on all this, they were running on autopilot.

The magical thing is that once we begin to see ourselves more fully, and understand all that has shaped us, we begin to see others in a new light as well.

For most of my life, I never understood how people could commit violent and atrocious acts against others, especially against children. But now, when I come across these people, I ask a different set of questions: What must life have been like for them when they were just small children themselves? How did their early systems shape them? What fear, anguish, and anger did they face in their formative years that now shows up in their present-day actions?

While I don't condone behaviors that perpetuate injustice, I have found that coming from a place of understanding and curiosity, rather than from a place of blame and righteousness, opens up space for something new to emerge. Sometimes, this simply means that we find it in our hearts to engage in dialogue, when previously, we would have kept up our guard.

## **2. Unlearning**

We spend a lot of time thinking about what we need to learn, but often, for truly transformative change, we need to unlearn things. For example, as we reimagine education, we may need to:

- Unlearn the idea that adults have all the answers and children must simply obey or follow them.

- Unlearn prejudices that we inherited about people who are different from us.
- Unlearn notions of success that keep us focused on individual achievement even over values such as human dignity and justice for all.

I was recently speaking with an incredible teacher leader from Pakistan, one who is committed to a world where all children thrive. Yet, as a woman who grew up in a middle-class home, she shared with me that when she began working in a low-income community, she found herself scared to go into her students' homes. Why? Well, like many people, she had been socialized to believe that poverty was connected with violence, and for many years, had never questioned that belief.

However, when she began to get clear about the world she wanted to create—a world where all children could thrive—she realized that she could never truly be a partner to the communities she was working in if she was also scared of them. And so she began a courageous personal journey of unlearning beliefs that no longer served her and what she was committed to in the world.

Unlearning happens when we start getting clear on what really matters because it leads us to question why things are the way they are, what world we wish to create, and what beliefs we might need to let go of in service of this new way forward.

### **3. Unleashing**

The third inner capacity that matters for transformative system change is the capacity to unleash our own untapped potential, and that of others as well.

The first step in unleashing our own potential is cultivating self-compassion, which means coming to terms with our own humanity, with a little generosity.

Most of us are extremely hard on ourselves. In fact, one scientific study illuminated a shocking fact: that we have up to 60,000 thoughts a day, and that 80% of these thoughts are negative, with 95% repeating themselves from the previous day. It's daunting to reflect on how negative our "self-talk" is and how much we judge ourselves.

When we obsess about what's not working or feel the need to always be perfect or be fully in control, we waste so much energy.

Instead of aiming for the unachievable, what if we learned to accept ourselves, perfectly imperfect, just as we are? Unleashing our full potential means learning to embrace our limitations with a little laughter and a recognition that we are simply human, just like everyone else.

Unleashing our full power also means discovering our unique strengths. I'm amazed at how many leaders can rattle off their weaknesses but struggle to talk about their strengths. If we yearn for a world where all of us live into our highest possible contribution, shouldn't we become adept at knowing and owning what makes us great?

When we focus more on our weaknesses than on our strengths, we risk perpetuating the deficit thinking that is ever-present in today's world. And this is so dangerous.

One morning, when I was with these 60 incredible leaders who are reimagining education around the world, I asked them to reflect

on a moment in their lives when someone approached them with a deficit-based lens, looking for what was wrong in them, or trying to fix something about them. It was heartbreaking to hear how they felt about these experiences: disempowered, ashamed, unsafe, worthless, unsure, stupid, small, not enough...

Then, I asked them to reflect on a person in their life who approached them from an asset-based perspective, who saw the strengths in them, and who accepted them just as they were. The energy shift was palpable, as they shared their feelings: confident, powerful, alive, inspired, worthy, strong, safe, capable, beautiful, brave...

It's profound how different these experiences are, and how different our world would be if we intentionally created one instead of the other. How liberating would it be if all our organizations and classrooms were set up to look not for what's wrong, but rather for what's right; not for what's missing, but for what assets already are there; not to dim a child's dreams, but rather, to ignite their inner light?



Some people believe that focusing on “inner work” is self-indulgent. I couldn't disagree more. And it's because of one simple yet powerful idea—that we are all deeply interconnected.

When we truly internalize this concept, we begin to realize that every interaction we have has a profound effect on the systems around us.

When we understand ourselves more deeply, unlearn our limiting beliefs, and unleash our full potential, we emit light into the world. And through this deeply personal journey, we begin to learn how to support others in shining their light as well.

If enough of us take on this courageous inner work, these small ripples can turn into big waves. And together, we can transform the systems around us, and uncover the depths of our collective human potential.

*Radha Ruparell is the Head of the Global Leadership Accelerator at Teach For All*

# Leadership in Times of Polarization

MARGARITA SÁENZ

**In this polarized era, we need leadership that sustains dialogue, engages others, goes deep, and inspires.**

It has become very clear that we are living in times of polarization. Leaders in all corners of the world are mobilizing and influencing citizens to take extreme positions and align themselves to opposing views.

Although there are a wide variety of factors that can explain this social and political polarization, there is no doubt that a big explanation lies in the way leaders have been exercising their roles. Sadly, it seems that the predominant leadership models today are those of the politician who writes the most explosive tweet and responds the fastest, or the social media influencer who creates the most popular TikTok video.

However, is this real leadership? And more importantly, what type of leadership do we need now to counterbalance these predominant models and help us build more cohesive and peaceful societies?

**We need leaders who engage in and sustain dialogue**

People exercising leadership today are not engaging in dialogue with others. Instead of short and immediate exchanges of words through

social media, we need leaders who have the capacity to both engage in authentic conversations among themselves and be open to real and deep dialogue with others. The Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue defines dialogue as “a way of communicating which aims to deepen and challenge our understanding of ourselves and our relation to ‘the other,’ rather than trying to convince or win others over with arguments and facts.”

Traditional leaders are communicating with each other through social media. We cannot describe these exchanges as conversations or dialogue, as they are short and succinct and their goal is to make statements for a broader audience rather than to engage in a symmetrical conversation with another person. The deeper exchanges between leaders that once occurred through correspondence, debates, and face-to-face meetings have largely become a thing of the past. Why is this shift problematic? Because in the absence of authentic conversations, positions are simplified, and the space to find points in common is reduced. This fuels polarization, as no intermediate ground seems to exist between positions, and there is no place to identify points in common. Instead of communicating through social media, we need leaders to engage and sustain dialogue among themselves and model dialogue for all of us.

The impact of polarization on our families, organizations, and communities has been severe, as we mirror the social dynamics we experience in the world. Instead of being safe places where we can have dialogues to understand each other, our families and communities have become battlefields where polarization has caused our positions to become more extreme and fixed. The impact of polarization in our social lives has been deep and disruptive. Thus, we need people exercising leadership to show us that a different way to communicate with each other is possible, that dialogue is

about building relationships based on mutual trust, that we have the capacity to create spaces where all people feel included, that listening actively to each other is key, and that empathy, respect, and curiosity are at the heart of the work.

### **We need leaders who communicate differently and hold space for others**

There is a tension between traditional models of leadership that set clear limits around how much leaders need to communicate or engage in dialogue and the demands of younger generations who are more inclined to question the status quo and are channeling their energy into holding others accountable. Thus, leaders need to adapt and participate in more open conversations where they are vulnerable and empathetic. It is not merely about filling a conversation vacuum, it is about understanding that dialogue builds trust in relationships. It is also about being ok with not having all the answers, and other people understanding that you don't have to.

This adaptation requires more than superficially changing one's communication style or strategy. It is about understanding that the leadership we need to exercise and develop today is different, and that it implies a different way to communicate, build relationships, and support others in developing their own leadership. Leadership is no longer about followership, where the majority of people just follow the views and opinions of a few leaders. To solve the complex problems that we face in our contemporary societies, we need a broad spectrum of people exercising leadership, with diverse backgrounds and in different positions. Thus, communicating is not merely about providing information. It's about supporting others to develop their own leadership and helping them understand that we all have a responsibility in the work that has to be done.

Today's leaders need to develop the capacity to create a space where people with diverse views and perspectives can engage in difficult conversations. This type of space has been described as a "holding environment," where people feel safe and have the structure to surface and discuss different points of view. The holding environment has to be strong enough to contain the forces that pull them apart and away from the conversation. The dialogue that takes place when you have built a strong holding environment can be authentic and empathetic, and allow for vulnerability and transparency. And in polarizing times, these dialogues can be oases of humanity where people can see and feel that what we have in common, what binds us together, is much more than what drives us apart.

### **We need leaders who go deep**

The issues that polarize us are not simple. On the surface they might seem like they are just opinions about a decision or a policy, but when you scratch the surface, you see that what they reflect are different viewpoints about what a society or a community believes is just or good.

Leaders who polarize stay in a superficial discussion about events, instead of surfacing what is really at stake, asking the tough questions, and engaging people in reflection about their priorities, values, and beliefs. Now, more than ever, we need leaders who engage us in this adaptive work, in having the hard discussions about what is just and what is good, and in helping us understand that the issues that drive us apart reflect deeper differences that we need to address. And maybe, if we go deep, it will be easier to identify the beliefs we have in common and build from there.

Going deep seems very difficult when leaders communicate through social media. We need a contemporary version of the Platonic Dia-

logues where leaders have the time and space to share their views and discuss them. The recent increase in podcast listenership might be opening a new channel for this type of conversation to take place. Although it seems difficult to imagine Presidents Biden and Putin recording a podcast conversation together right now, the medium does facilitate conversations that can be heard by many people in which the participants can discuss deeper issues, hear each other out, and explore the nuances of each topic.

We have to think about how we can engage more people in this type of communication, and how we can use technology to create new ways to bring people together in in-depth discussions.

**We need leaders who inspire positive emotions and create narratives of possibility and hope**

In the 17th century, the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza described that there are a group of emotions that are “sad emotions,” such as anger, envy, fear, vengeance, and regret, among others. He describes them as sad because they lead to an afflicted life, a life without real joy, a life away from true wisdom. Spinoza believed that wisdom is not only achieved by reason, but also by positive emotions that can help us to appease anger or rage, for example. Although Spinoza did not categorize them as “positive,” he did identify happiness, joy, and enthusiasm as emotions opposed to the “sad emotions.”

Leaders who polarize use “sad emotions” to mobilize people. They use their fear and appeal to their anger and desire for vengeance.

Thus, the leadership we need now is a leadership that does precisely the opposite. We need leaders who inspire positive emotions and create narratives of possibility and hope. When we are filled with positive emotions, there is more room for empathy, more room for

seeing what we have in common with others, and more openness to trust. Also, there is room for hope, for working towards a better future. Narratives that polarize make it hard for people to see the future with hope. Narratives of hope present the challenges ahead but offer optimism about how to face them, and most importantly they state that a future is possible for all of us.

### **We need to continue to embody the kind of leadership we want to see**

At Enseña por Colombia we have experienced the challenges of leading in these times. We are still learning, both in how we exercise our own leadership and in how we support our fellows, alumni, teachers, and students to develop their leadership. We have embraced many of these learnings, no matter how uncomfortable they are and how much tension and uncertainty they can bring.

We have built a strong culture on the team where we all feel safe to share our views, opinions, and feelings. No matter our role or experience, we always have a safe space to share our thoughts and be vulnerable. We have created holding environments for our staff, teachers, and alumni when we have faced tensions within our movement or in our country. Moving the conversations away from social media and Whatsapp and instead coming together in small, synchronous virtual spaces has allowed us to be more empathetic and vulnerable.

We have embraced sensitive topics related to diversity, privilege, power, and social justice. We have not only addressed them sporadically, but have integrated them into our training curriculum and our values. And no matter how difficult things are, we have kept our narrative of hope and sense of possibility.

In spite of our efforts, we realize that we still mirror many of the polarizing dynamics that we see in the world, but we believe that what binds us together is stronger than what divides us.

*Margarita Sáenz is the CEO of Enseña por Colombia*



# Courage in Leadership

YELYZAVETA SHELESTOVA

**We need daring leadership that can take us out of our comfort zone and make us believe in ourselves and our purpose.**

*“The brave always have good fortune.”*

– IVAN BAHRIANY, *THE HUNTERS AND THE HUNTED*

Once upon a time, there was a Leader who had an idea of how to change their community for the better. Putting it into practice was the biggest dream for the Leader, but they thought the idea was too complicated and required too much effort. To make sure, the Leader shared the idea with others, and they said it was not good enough. The Leader decided to give it a try and take some action, but the first steps were unsuccessful. After all the challenges, the Leader made the best and most reasonable decision—to do nothing. Eventually, the Leader stopped making mistakes and being upset by the words of others.

Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But for some reason, we often tend to behave the same way. Even experienced leaders sometimes doubt whether their initiatives are worth it to go through various difficulties for the sake of a small probability of success.

Is leadership that difficult and dangerous? Of course not. The point of leadership is to create change, but a positive outcome is usually not guaranteed because no one can predict the future. Therefore,

staying in our comfort zone is a safe option for most people. After all, why take the risk?

Doubts... Uncertainty... Fear of failure...

You are afraid to present a promising project because the audience is likely to be skeptical about the idea. And you are even more afraid to imagine that the project will finally be approved and you will not succeed in its implementation. Making mistakes is your biggest fear because you are afraid of being blamed for it. Let me guess: you believe good leaders do not make mistakes at all, don't you? I know, because sometimes, so do I.

When I happen to think this way, I try to keep in mind the story of a team that faced the same difficulties. This team was inspired by a brilliant global project, so they wanted to implement it in my country, Ukraine, which is a challenging country for public projects due to a lack of funding and support from the government and society. Because of that, it would seem that the dream of change-making, together with the story itself, could end here. But not this time.

In spite of the obstacles, the team decided to take action and established an organization. However, few wanted to help them, and even fewer people believed in the idea. The organization faced many challenges while proving to everyone that the result was worth the effort, so they knocked on all the doors—and then the doors began to open. The more people joined the project, the more people realized how important this idea is to society. As a result, with the start of the project, a lot of communities felt that this could be an exceptional opportunity to improve the future. Nothing but incredible tenacity and dedication made it possible.

This is the story of the formation of Teach For Ukraine, which aims to ensure equality in Ukrainian education. And yes, if it were not for them, I would not be able to tell you this story. I was lucky to be a student of a Teach For Ukraine fellow, who believed in the potential of the small-town schoolgirl I was back then.

For me, that is why we should seek courage in leadership. It challenges us, leads us through difficulties, and teaches us to make mistakes, but it always pays back in the end if we are open to such an experience. I am deeply convinced that what we need right now is daring leadership that can take us out of our comfort zone and make us believe in ourselves and our purpose. Without courage, leadership remains an untapped potential, and ideas do not stand a chance. Of course, courage does not guarantee success, yet without risk and action, the chances of success are utterly impossible.

And above all, courageous leadership reveals that we all are ready for change—because we are the change ourselves.

*Yelyzaveta Shelestova is a Teach For Ukraine student alumna and former member of Teach For All's Student Leader Advisory Council*



# Co-Conspiring for Change

**MICHELLE JOHANSSON AND JAY ALLNUTT**

**Authentic partnership means being  
unashamedly indigenous-led and having the  
courage to take powerful action together.**

**K**ei aku nui, kei aku rahi, kua hui mai nei ki raro i te mana o te  
whare e tū nei, tēnā koutou katoa.

This essay begins in Te Reo Māori, the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand, offering thanks and greetings to the readers, and acknowledging the collection that houses this work. The authors are the past and present kaitiaki (guardians) of Ako Mātātupu: Teach First NZ, a Teach For All partner, aspiring to work in ways that are “indigenous-led and world-class.” Aotearoa New Zealand is a bicultural nation, whose indigenous people (Māori) comprise 16.7% (and growing) of the population of just over 5 million. This necessarily means that we are a country used to the connections and the tensions represented in the double-naming. For the purposes of this essay, as in our day-to-day lives, we use the name Aotearoa. Our national commitment to living biculturally stems from Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the English version of which is known as the Treaty of Waitangi. This founding document of modern New Zealand was signed by a number of Māori Iwi (tribes) and the British Crown in 1840.

In Aotearoa, the COVID-19 crisis has called to arms our team of 5 million. We locked our borders and worked hard to protect our people. Now we are working to grow our economy whilst learning to live in a world changed by the virus. The problem is that many of our people were living in crisis, facing poverty, high morbidity and mortality rates, incarceration, and educational inequalities, long before Coronavirus hit our shores. For that reason, in so many ways the leadership we need now is the leadership we have always needed.

What we saw was that our early effort protected all of our whānau (family) in the same way, holding back the virus from anyone, young and old, rich or poor, of all ethnicities, by closing our doors and asking us all to stay home. But over time our protections have had unjustly different effects on people. Those already oppressed and marginalised have been affected more by the social and economic impacts of the virus and of the lockdowns put in place to keep us safe. It is these people living on the lowest incomes, in the most unstable work, unable to work or study from home, who continue to be failed by government policies, as they have throughout history. In addition, it is also often those whose ways of navigating uncertainty like COVID are different from the “mainstream” who understandably, and through their own or their families’ lived experiences, do not trust the state to protect them. This raises the question of how our reaction to COVID could have been, and can now be, responsive to the ways of thinking, doing, and being of these members of our whānau, who are unjustly served by the basic structure of our society.

This essay explores the importance of leadership as co-conspiracy to affect just such a change. The notion of “co-conspiracy” was introduced to us by our Native Alliance sister, Josie Green, (Waawa-  
nglake—Head of Region, Teach For America, Lakota Nation, Oceti

Sakowin Makoce—South Dakota) whose team has developed a framework for co-conspiracy outlining principles for working by and with indigenous peoples in battling, building, and bridging with critical hope. Importantly, they cite Activist Alicia Garza, who argues that “co-conspiracy is about what we do in action, not just in language, it is about moving through guilt and shame and recognizing that we did not create none of this stuff. And so what we are taking responsibility for is the power that we hold to transform our conditions” (Move to End Violence, 2016). Indigenous researchers often identify Pākehā (non-Māori, non-indigenous) “allies” who advocate for and amplify their work. However, inherent in the notion of co-conspiracy is the imperative for not only advocacy, but action, and the importance of taking indigenous-led action together.

Over the last three years, the authors have co-conspired with indigenous communities to design an initial teacher education programme rooted in Mana Tangata (which we understand roughly as “the inherent dignity and prestige of our people”) and driven by a re-indigenised curriculum. We have grown our staff and have a Teacher Education Team who are 80% Māori and Pacific, and we proudly use our Māori name first and increasingly on its own, accepting that this can create dissonance for others. We have embedded fail-safes in our ways of working, our governance policies and processes, and our Trust Deed that ensure the ongoing representation of Māori at all levels of the organisation. The current senior leadership team of our organisation is 60% Māori and Pacific, and we are guided by our ‘kaihautū’ (Navigators) who are senior members of our whānau. Our Board Charter begins with a statement on the importance of the kaihautū role:

Kaihautū of Ako Mātātupu serve as the compass that holds us true to our vision, with a particular commitment

to growing our Māori participants and taura. Their voices will have significant influence on all decisions made by senior leadership at Ako Mātātupu.

And the Charter further reflects that:

The Trustees commit to ensuring the composition of the Board reflects the purpose of Ako Mātātupu: Teach First NZ and the communities that we serve. Specific emphasis is to be placed on Māori and Pasifika representation in Board leadership roles to ensure that full effect is given to the Treaty of Waitangi principles of partnership, participation, and protection. This approach is also to be considered in alignment with the values of Ako Mātātupu: Teach First NZ.

In our work, we have actively positioned Te Reo Māori (the indigenous Māori language) and Te Ao Māori (the indigenous Māori worldview) at the forefront of teacher education and prioritised the use of Māori and Pacific (relating to the people and cultures of the Pacific islands close to Aotearoa) knowledges, languages, customs, and values within the programme and in the classrooms beyond.

By taking such an approach, we have worked to change the DNA of Ako Mātātupu to be working actively towards becoming a truly indigenous-led organisation, acting in authentic partnership and co-conspiracy with others. We aim to remove the barriers to teacher education for those who are otherwise excluded from the profession, by working with schools and the community to identify the people already tied to them and who will stay and help make change there. The cohort of participants is now 60% Māori and Pacific, compared with 13% and 4% for the overall teacher workforce in Aotearoa, and

the programme operates in both the English and Māori-medium school sectors with young people across the country.

We understand that any talk of racism and historical oppression will inevitably surface feelings of anger, shame, guilt, fragility, blame, and maybe even denial that oppression is a reality in the Western world in the 21st Century. However, we also understand that those feelings *are not useful here*. Whilst they are valid and must be worked through, in the space of co-conspiracy, it is not useful for non-indigenous people to be ashamed of the colour of their skin or the deeds of their distant ancestors. We frequently articulate that while more Māori and Pasifika teachers are needed, the best teacher for a brown kid is not necessarily a brown teacher. Instead, it is the person who loves that child and will work gently alongside them to make the world better. Thus, we are determined to grow and support indigenous teachers, but also co-conspirators who have the heart for our young people and who will work purposively towards justice in education. Graduates of our programme are critical and purposive agents for change, deeply committed to making a long-term difference in the lives of individuals and communities through education. Our graduates understand the position they take up as co-conspirators together, not just allies, whether indigenous or non-indigenous.

We all tend to think of the world using certain implicit or explicit frameworks, and by taking as given certain facts about the way the world is and therefore how it ought to be. This means that we tend to replicate some social facts, including many of the unjust inequalities that we externally espouse to abhor. The authors argue for the importance of co-conspiracy, especially as we navigate these COVID times. We are now co-conspiring to create research settings and a community of action that will disrupt the pernicious and pervasive injustices that exist, mostly invisibly, throughout our lives.

For us, reindigenisation is a positive process of breathing an indigenous worldview into our work. It differs from decolonisation by shifting our thinking away from the colonial and toward an indigenous framework for understanding the world. As we are non-indigenous, this requires us to accept our place, allowing space and, when necessary, removing ourselves, whilst always being active participants in change and being accountable for making it happen, side-by-side with our whānau. Sometimes we make mistakes, for which we seek and offer forgiveness and work hard to learn and change. Such leadership differs markedly from the predominant one we see modelled in business, politics, and NGOs, often marked by a focus on charismatic individuals with a drive for results, regardless of the cost. Reindigenisation for us means striving to be able to walk in both worlds, not rejecting our own history, and often taking the long way round, because the way you get there is sometimes more important than when you arrive.

However, is this real leadership? And more importantly, what type of leadership do we need now to counterbalance these predominant models and help us build more cohesive and peaceful societies?

## Glossary

Whilst we have provided simple common translations of some Māori words throughout the text, we encourage readers to investigate further what is captured by these words since, as with all languages, direct translation is rarely truly able to capture all that is meant, or the term's history. We can recommend <https://maoridictionary.co.nz> as an excellent resource.

**Aotearoa:** originally the name of the North Island of New Zealand, but now used as the Māori name for the whole of New Zealand

**Hauora:** health, vigour

- Iwi:** extended kinship group, tribe, nation, people, nationality, race. This most often refers to a large group of people descended from a common ancestor and associated with a specific territory in Aotearoa
- Kaihautū:** the person who gives the time for the paddlers in a canoe, leader
- Kaitiaki:** trustee, minder, guard, custodian, guardian, caregiver, keeper, steward. This is the preferred name used by the CEO of Ako Mātātupu, as it is in some other organisations for leadership with this kind of responsibility
- Mana Tangata:** literally, “human rights, mana of people,” but also one of Ako Mātātupu’s five organisational values, along with Brave Thinking, Teu le Vā, Serving Community, and Practising Excellence
- Māori:** indigenous person of Aotearoa/New Zealand— a new use of the word resulting from Pākehā contact in order to distinguish between people of Māori descent and the colonisers
- Pākehā:** New Zealander of European descent— probably originally applied to English-speaking Europeans living in Aotearoa/New Zealand
- Tauira:** student(s)
- Te Ao Māori:** the Māori world view, which acknowledges, for instance, the interconnectedness and interrelationship of all living & non-living things
- Te Reo Māori:** the indigenous Māori language, an official language of Aotearoa
- Whakapapa:** genealogy, genealogical table, lineage, descent - reciting whakapapa was, and is, an important skill and reflected the importance of genealogies in Māori society in terms of leadership, land and fishing rights, kinship, and status. It is central to all Māori institutions

**Whānau:** extended family, family group, a familiar term of address to a number of people—the primary economic unit of traditional Māori society. In the modern context, the term is sometimes used to include friends who may not have any kinship ties to other members

*Michelle Johansson is the CEO, and Jay Allnutt is the former CEO of Ako Mātātupu: Teach First NZ*

# Going Further Together

## Community-Driven Leadership

**FRANCO MOSSO**

**We need leaders from the community itself working  
to develop even more leadership from within.**

It's February 3rd, 2022. I am having a virtual coffee with some colleagues. They are regional and local educational leaders, all from a beautiful, primarily rural, region in the highlands of our country, Peru. We have come to meet from 7 to 8 p.m.

The meeting starts with three of us: Feliberto, Sonia, and myself. It has been months since we have seen each other. Back in the summer of 2021, they and 250 local educational leaders sat with me through Zoom sessions almost every day for three months, trying to build a shared sense of how to transform education in the region to have students as leaders for their communities and how to learn together to manage the change process of such a large-scale transformation. Those 250 leaders are a multi-role coalition of principals, teachers, and local policymakers across thirteen districts, writing a new chapter about education in their region, based on the principles of collaboration, courage, and community leadership.

To get a sense of our conversation, you should know that one of them shares that their Achilles tendon broke and they had to go under surgery. I tell my story about how, in 2014, I had a back surgery that prevented me from movement in my right leg. We laugh about episodes that happened in the sessions back in 2021. We say what we are grateful about, remembering but not knowing exactly how we crafted such a trusting relationship. We lovingly say “hi” to some of our children, who curiously approach the camera.

At the closing of the hour, Delia comes to the call. Delia, an early childhood educator born in this region, is now one of the leaders of the regional team in education, in charge of a collective effort—involving a coalition of more than 20 organizations—to transform in-service teacher training for 28,000 teachers, impacting over 300,000 students. Delia starts remembering her journey as an educational leader in Cajamarca.

Delia started as a school principal in 2016. Her students openly deal hard drugs; there is a network of female student prostitution, with several of her students participating; and learning levels are through the floor. After 6 p.m., it’s “no man’s land” around the school because bands of students come out to rob people. Anemia attacks 32% of her elementary students. The 51 teachers there have come to normalize the state of this community. A group of hopeless parents have become actionless.

I’m listening and thinking about movies; I have seen similar cases, but never from Peru. Her depiction is as much a sharp reminder of the kinds of extreme realities that still exist within our country as it is an invitation to look deeper into the greatness that lives in that community. “So, what happened?” I ask.

Delia shares that she created secret meetings with a coalition of parents. I am thinking, Secret meetings? This is crazy! Why? She adds that the meetings have to be secret at first because the people who manage the drugs, robbery, and prostitution networks could retaliate. In these spaces, faced with the lack of hope, Delia tries her best to energize those parents, and devises plans to end the networks, and replace them with workshops focused on the arts and other extracurricular activities.

Every night, she has to be escorted out of the school. She stays long hours, way past 6 p.m. The death threats start coming in. Somehow, others learned about the meetings. But this doesn't stop Delia. She then reaches out to community-based organizations, and allies beyond the community, to extend the coalition to change students' lives.

After the secret meetings with a core group of parents, Delia presents with colorful images a four-year vision for the school and leads different symbolic gestures to promote co-ownership: "There was one time I asked them to write their dream for the school on a small paper. Both parents and teachers drew or wrote something down. Then we went to the soccer court, and I told them, 'This end of the court is where we are now, the other end is where we will be in four years. Let's run to the other end holding that part of our dream, and pasting this card on the other end'. At first they laughed, but I saw those parents and teachers running."

After a few months, at a parent meeting, one or two parents start taking responsibility for the plan itself. Some of them help change how the school looks physically, donating cement or repainting the walls themselves. Some of them help clean a brick dump area to turn it into a reading project. Others contribute with the after-

school dance and art project. They stop waiting for anyone to do it. Delia is one of them now.

And then things start to turn around.

By the end of the second year of Delia's tenure, anemia goes down from 32% to 14%. By the end of the fourth year, it has dropped to 4%. By this point, those art-dance-reading workshops are a regular part of many students' lives; drug dealing and prostitution largely leave the school and its surroundings; learning levels go up; significantly more students reach university or work; and by the end of the fourth year, UNESCO comes to learn from the case, and school leaders from across Cajamarca and Peru do the same. By the end of this year, Delia is preparing to leave: "I made a promise to myself to stay four years." Delia's worried family also asks her to move on, now that the transformation is happening in the hands of the community itself, and to avoid the risk of getting killed in retaliation.

I am still listening. Delia adds jokingly with Feliberto, "Feli, we managed to convince all but six of those teachers, didn't we? Haha, those were really tough to convince to change their ways." Feliberto laughs. The rest of us laugh with heavy, marveled hearts.

Then she kind of closes her eyes and says, "That is why I believe blindly in the community."

The meeting between friends ends a few minutes later.

Today, Delia works as the proud General Director of Pedagogy of all Cajamarca, where over 400,000 students go to school every day across 13 districts. The DECO plan (schools that develop communities) is probably one of the most promising educational strategies

among the 26 regions in Peru, and in my view, the one that most represents the value of collective leadership and transforming education with the community, not for them. It was created, and it is constantly adapted, by surveying and having focus groups with thousands of teachers. It is supported by a coalition of more than 30 organizations nationwide who each support in different ways. Some organizations help with teacher and principal professional development, others with setting up their blended learning systems, and others with re-imagining the learning evaluation system. They are setting up for success in the coming years by focusing on discovering the greatness in the leaders of the region themselves and investing in developing that leadership from within the community.

What leadership do we need? I don't think I need to say that much more about what I think or share why I chose to write this article as an homage to this extraordinary leader who lives in my country. We need more leaders like Delia: leaders from the community itself working to develop even more leadership from within; unstoppable at creating collaboration; humble but extraordinary at believing in and energizing others, especially in the parents, teachers, principals, and students; wise in crafting flexible teams that work across different groups of people; leading with an open heart and mind and an infinite ability to grow.

And also very loving.

I have never been in a meeting with Delia that doesn't start with "amigo bello" (beautiful friend), or "Franquito." Even in the first meeting, she had this quality of helping me be of service to her region. And not once has she compromised the quality of what we are doing together, even whilst bringing so many allies, like us, alongside her.

We look to a hopeful future. And of course, we always look for ways to make our strategy even better. But I'm hopeful because we are creating collective action to hold up our dreams about Cajamarca, with trust, thirst for absolute quality, and hand-in-hand with the community.

I can't help but think about that proverb that so often eludes us in the work of international education: "If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together." Are you going fast or going far?

*Franco Mosso is the CEO of Enseña Perú*

# Authentic Youth-Adult Partnership

**RAGHVENDRA YADAV AND  
SANAYA BHARUCHA**

**Developing the leadership we need requires shifting the roles of both students and teachers and moving forward together in authentic partnership.**

**A** stick in one hand, chalk in the other; a frowning face; facing the blackboard, with their back to the class; a rigid body and a closed heart—this is the perception of a good teacher.

Silent, seated, obedient, unquestioning—this is the perception of an ideal student.

When Raghvendra was 11 years old, he asked his father, “Why can’t a student and a teacher be caring friends?” and his father replied, “That’s impossible! A teacher and a student can only have a formal relationship.”

This narrative is what is stopping us from having classrooms that can be laboratories for growth for students and teachers alike. Shifting the role of teachers from authority figures to facilitators and co-learners is vital. And shifting the role of students from passive absorbers to co-owners in their own and each other’s learning is the need of the hour. That is where youth-adult partnership comes alive.

In an authentic partnership, both youth and adults have roles to play based on their unique strengths, and they work together to reach common goals. The partnership reflects a balance between youth and adult voice and a mutual understanding of shared power and responsibility. Such partnerships create change with youth as opposed to to and for them.

Imagine a classroom where the role of the “teacher” and the “learner” are fluid. Roles shift based on needs, expertise, and experience; learning is mutual and flows both ways; and diverse opinions are respected and valued. What magic can be created in a place like this!

But what does it take to bring this vision to life?

1. A safe and brave environment where there are deep relationships, a focus on strengths, a sense of belonging, and the courage to challenge and support one another.
2. Opportunities to work on real-world issues which youth and adults care deeply about, where youth have real decision-making powers and deal with the very real consequences of their decisions alongside the adults.
3. Systems for shared decision making and shared responsibility between youth and adults.
4. The capacity to deliver on goals—where youth and adults have the willingness, competence, and belief to achieve the desired goal.
5. Robust systems for continuous learning where youth and adults provide ongoing feedback to each other and engage in meaningful reflection.

6. Opportunities for youth and adults to build a positive personal and cultural identity, deeply rooted in their individual and shared history, culture, and context.

Along with these conditions for fostering authentic partnership, it's important to acknowledge the challenges the process presents.

One of the biggest challenges is eliminating deep-rooted power dynamics and the stories that youth or adults might tell themselves about each other or about their own roles and abilities.

For example, Raghvendra's tenth-grade teacher offered his students opportunities to collaborate in designing lessons for the class. However, none of the students took the opportunity. It took a lot of effort on the teacher's part to get students to begin to own their own learning and to support each other. It took almost six months for the students to understand and begin to internalize the ideas and values the teacher was trying to convey and break out of their perceptions about what they were and were not capable of.

When this challenge is overcome, youth-adult partnership can be like a bow and arrow. The teacher being a bow and the student being an arrow work together to reach a common aim and vision in the classroom. The further the bow stretches, the further the arrow goes. Similarly, the more a teacher is willing to bend like a bow—to learn and unlearn; to question and expand their beliefs and perspectives; to be open to new ways of seeing, being, and doing—the better the arrow (or students) will reach the target, or shared end vision.

Authentic youth-adult partnership is not limited to the classroom. There are numerous benefits to organizations and institutions

working in meaningful partnership with youth. Programs that work in partnership with young people often make more informed decisions and have improved outcomes as they identify and act upon true needs on the ground. By providing opportunities for youth and adults to solve real problems together, the organization develops compassionate leaders who have the skills to contribute to improving society in the present and future. The organization also embodies principles of inclusiveness and equity by ensuring that young people have the opportunities to influence decisions that affect them.

Given the fact that millions of children around the world aren't able to access the kind of education they need to thrive in today's world, we need to put all of our energy, hearts, and minds towards fighting this inequity and creating a better world for all. But we often forget that our students can and should be our partners in this fight. Our students experience the inequities and injustices of our systems daily and are uniquely positioned to be our partners and guides in our shared quest to create a better future for all. Our students are capable leaders, changemakers, and partners—not just in the distant future, but today.

*Raghvendra Yadav is a Teach For India student alumnus and Sanaya Bharucha is the Global Director, Student Leadership and Participant Impact at Teach For All*

# Leading by Example

TONI KRONKE

**Leadership requires each of us to take responsibility for acting in a way that creates change and inspires others to do the same.**

In the microcosm of Central Europe, we find ourselves grappling with many of the same challenges people face around the world. We stare at live tickers sharing minute-by-minute updates on the pandemic, and we look in disbelief at pictures of a war we thought would never come back so close to us. The question about how to deal with refugees and migrants leads to big disputes between EU countries and polarization within the population. The consequences of climate change are becoming visible and tangible for everybody. The democratic system and its representatives are regarded with suspicion, and conspiracy theories are spreading like wildfire. The growing gap between rich and poor, privileged and not privileged, educated and not educated, is undeniable. People of all social levels are plagued by fears for the future in an unstable world. And a never-ending flow of information from thousands of channels pelts down on us. Crisis seems to be everywhere.

It's a paradoxical situation: faced with very dynamic, fast-changing, even revolutionary trends and developments, there are political and administrative systems in place that are slow moving and quite hesitant about innovations and new developments. Europe has been called "the old continent" for good reason—systems have been built over centuries, with large numbers of civil servants, stable processes,

and services in place. On the one hand, this contributes to political stability; on the other hand, it makes it hard for actors in the system to think outside the box and take actions that lead to necessary change.

### **Education is key**

Dealing with constant change is what leadership is all about. To tackle and move ahead of the above-mentioned current and future challenges takes courage and leadership on every level that is truly aiming towards equity, sustainability, and peace.

What does education have to do with all of this? Everything!

The shared vision of the Teach For All network is that all children have the education, support, and opportunity to shape a better future for themselves and all of us. So in our view, education is key to tackling most of the problems mentioned above. In order to do so, we need to equip the next generation with the necessary skills and mindsets so that they are able to shape a prosperous future for themselves and to deal with constant change in an agile world. It goes without saying that this effort can only be successful if we leave no child behind.

### **Contradictory Austria**

Let's take a look at quite an interesting case in the heart of Europe. In Austria, beneath the veneer of beautiful mountains, Mozart, a strong economy, and a social welfare system that is the envy of much of the world, many children are still not getting the education they need to live a self-determined, fulfilled life and participation in society. The educational system is designed in a way that students whose parents have less income and fewer educational qualifications are being left behind. Even though the proportion of GDP spent within the education system in Austria is higher than in most other coun-

tries, the outcomes are absolutely unsatisfactory. Changing that will require a huge amount of leadership and willingness to change for everybody involved in organizing and running the education system.

### **Everyday leadership**

What role can an NGO like Teach For Austria play in bringing about change? Compared to the size of the system, the organization is a grain of sand within the big wheel of public education. Nevertheless, over the last ten years, Teach For Austria has been able to play an important role in opening up the system to new energy and new approaches, which are becoming increasingly visible to others in the system.

The leadership approach applied by Teach For Austria could be described as “leading by example.” Following this approach requires everyone in the organization to show responsibility, take action, and create good examples of the change we want to see directly at the grassroots level. Our leadership development program is designed in that way, and our Fellows are working to live up to this approach every day in schools and kindergartens.

One example of this is the story of Bibi. At the age of 12, Bibi goes to school for the first time in her life. Her mother fled Afghanistan with her four sisters and her. Bibi doesn’t know a word of German, but she has a teacher who believes in her. This teacher is a Teach For Austria Fellow and she does everything she can to set Bibi on a better path in life. Bibi has a hard time in school, but with the help of the Fellow, she manages to graduate and transfers to a polytechnic school. Here she meets another Fellow, who immediately provides her with a mentor and nominates her for Teach For Austria’s student council to help her start her career and open up new perspectives. Bibi’s dream is to become a doctor. She gradu-

ates from polytechnic school with high grades and transfers to a further education college to study health care and nursing. In the meantime, she gets her driver's license, takes care of official business for her parents, and helps her family to settle in Austria. Bibi has become a self-confident young woman who takes charge of her own life, assumes responsibility for her family, and helps to shape the society around her. She is becoming a role model for her peers and has just launched a project to encourage other young people in similar situations. Considering the circumstances she comes from, Bibi is taking a path that seemed improbable. But in this case, everyone has taken responsibility and gone the extra mile to make this happen, especially Bibi herself.

Showing leadership on a personal level and leading by example every day is a key factor in order to be heard and taken seriously and to drive change on a larger scale. Leading by example and collecting good examples in a system where many actors are frozen in the face of major problems can even put us in a situation where we are invited by the system to help shape it.

### **From the good example to system change**

By showing everyday leadership and creating examples of what is possible in their daily work in the classrooms and beyond, Fellows and students like Bibi pave the way for Teach For Austria to advocate for the most disadvantaged students and to develop into a respected partner of institutions and stakeholders in the field of education and the Ministry of Education.

As a result, Teach For Austria alumni are now working in senior roles in an organization the ministry contracts to drive new initiatives, and alumni have led the development of an initiative that catalyzes innovation in education, as well as the effort to digitize learning in

the wake of COVID. Alumni are working in the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Education in roles in diversity, science transfer, and teacher education. Fellows and teaching alumni are running school development projects and involve the community at their school sites. The Ministry of Education sees Teach For Austria as a pipeline for senior staff, given their positive experiences with those who are already there. Based on Teach For Austria's example and advocacy, the ministry has developed a career pathway for others from non-traditional backgrounds to enter teaching. The willingness of the education system to adopt such examples into its own strategy is a testament to the strong examples that fellows and their students are creating in their classrooms.

Given the enormous challenges in the different contexts mentioned above, these may only be small steps in bringing about change. But if we lead by example wherever we are and enable and inspire others to do so, entire systems can change. Bibi is already doing her part.

*Toni Kronke is the Chief Program Officer at Teach For Austria*



# Why Decolonising Education Will Provide the Leadership We Need

VONGAI NYAHUNZVI

**We will only see young people in every country of the world thrive and become the leaders who are able to solve their own problems if we begin by decolonising our education systems.**

**A**s few years ago, my children and I visited my country of birth, Zimbabwe. One of my intentions for that trip was to ensure that my older son got some experience of school life in my home country. To this effect, I took him to a local high school, and after a week of him attending a few lessons, he had one reflection that really hit me hard. He asked, “Mum, how come the history books here say a lot about Europe and not much about Africa?” He continued to share how the content in history, in particular, was not very different from what he was studying back in the United Kingdom, where he was born and raised. This was huge for me, coming from such a young teenager. His statements reminded me that the texts were not so different from what I had been taught as a student in Zimbabwe, studying over 30 years ago. We learned about the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria that set off World War I; we read about playing in the snow; the

Berlin Wall; and we also learnt a lot about the British monarchy. While there is much to appreciate in learning about other cultures and histories, it's striking how we were taught almost nothing of African or Zimbabwean history, language, or culture. The few stories of African history we were exposed to were about nefarious African guerilla fighters in failed rebellions, which perpetuate a negative and pessimistic narrative about African culture and capacity.

This is not an example limited to Zimbabwe or Africa. Most education systems across the world have not radically changed in over a century. There is broad agreement that, even in developed countries, students are not being educated in the skills and mindsets they need to flourish in a postcolonial world.

But the issue goes deeper than students not being prepared for today's economic realities. The history, culture, and systems of knowledge that are taught and considered valid and normative leave no doubt that predominantly white colonial values are prevalent in most education systems worldwide. Through unchanged curricula, institutional structures, and power hierarchies, colonial mindsets continue to propagate. We see this in the many ways in which leadership perpetuates coloniality.

What does a colonised mindset look like, and how do its values become entrenched into the mindsets of educators? Forced to be submissive to "outside powers," one dared not take any form of initiative; personal will was thwarted and punished. Communities competed against one another as they strove for scarce resources, and power distributed down from above. It is an internalised mindset of lack: lack of capacity, value, or wisdom—except for those superimposed by the outside forces. Losing a sense of agency, one comes to the belief that oneself and one's culture lack potential and capacity.

There is a growing recognition that to have the leadership we need to unlock the potential in every child across the world, we need to dismantle the legacy of colonialism. We must expose and dismantle colonialist power within institutions of learning. This includes the knowledge, language, and institutional culture that sustain schools across the world. We must do this in order for education to serve as a liberating tool and deliver on its promise to nurture positive development for all.

To have the leadership we need, we need to decolonise our education systems worldwide so that:

**1. All children across the world reach their potential.**

Every child is born with enormous potential. The future of education must enable every child to become aware of the unique gifts that he or she has to offer the world. It must also guard against propagating narratives where students continually see themselves represented in negative and pessimistic lights in their curriculum.

The role of schools will need to shift to support students to exert leadership and claim agency, rather than training them to be passive recipients of a teacher's lecture. At Teach For All, we've seen that in the communities where learning outcomes are improving and education systems are changing, diverse actors are working together at every level of the system. In these communities, students and their families have recognised their agency to address problems, to take action, learn continually, and support each other to advocate for and enhance their education. Additionally, we have seen over and over again how important it is to encourage learning across borders, to learn from teachers and school leaders in other communities who have demonstrated that something better is possible.

In the future, we will regard safe spaces as essential components of schools, where students can unpack negative experiences with people who look like them and learn the critical thinking tools that allow them to deconstruct colonial narratives. This is exemplified by Wisdom Amouzou, a Teach For America alumnus who engages his students on their lived experiences of oppression and inequity and explores ways to comprehend and address their painful experiences.

## **2. Local solutions drive local problem-solving.**

I listened to Charles Obore recently, an alumnus of Teach For Uganda, who shared that in order to transform a society, everyone must be involved, everyone has a contribution to make. His words remind me of how the colonial powers were always positioned as being the solution bearers and as those with superior knowledge and skills. We can no longer perpetuate this mindset that only one person or group is a solution bearer. Not only do we need leadership at all levels, we need education which fosters leadership in others.

Supporting local people along in their leadership development journey means that those closest to the problems can embrace their power and know that they are the solution bearers—that they have the ideas, resources, and vision to solve their own problems.

Now, more than ever, we need to nurture leadership that acts to amplify and put in the driving seat community voices and values, supports inclusive communication practices, and builds collaboration across diverse constituents. Leadership that values reestablishing links to the community. We must also foster young people's capacity to identify, prioritise, and solve their own problems.

### **3. There is leadership at all levels of the system.**

When I look at the current education systems across the world, I tend to wonder about the extent to which they are promoting leadership at all levels versus perpetuating colonial mindsets. To really effect system change, we need leadership across the whole ecosystem around children. We need leaders at all levels who question the broader purposes of educational systems and who are willing to champion concrete local policy changes. Such leaders can change whose knowledge and ways of knowing are given priority in curricula and classrooms by choosing, for example, to teach the history of their people, culture, or neighbourhood and to disrupt narratives that erase indigenous people's identity.

When you look at how current teachers are trained to lecture at the front of the class, to be obeyed and not challenged, it is clear that this classroom structure is a “hidden curriculum” that invisibly reinforces colonial mindsets, training children to stifle their voices and be obedient throughout their lives. Whereas, in indigenous African communities, working together is the norm, in most classrooms across the continent, students are forced to sit in rows and not allowed to cooperate. Instead, the very design of learning systems need to be questioned and redesigned so the systems are rooted in the assets of local culture, customs, and community. The current approach continually reinforces the idea that leadership lies in “one person”—the teacher—rather than seeing our students as whole and intelligent leaders who are capable of shaping their own lives and the world around them.

### **4. There is leadership that maximises the potential and happiness of young people.**

These teachers support mindset shifts through ensuring a range of voices and perspectives are represented in every topic that is pre-

sented in class. They also re-conceptualise the curricula to reflect wider global and historical perspectives. Such classroom leaders can be found all across the world, but they need support from all levels of the education system—from schools, communities, governments, and policy makers.

There is a long way to go, but I'm encouraged by those showing exemplary leadership towards decolonising education and driving local solutions. Kaija Keski-Nummi, a Teach For Australia alumna, has worked closely with the indigenous community of Tennant Creek to create the first Aboriginal Studies course at the local high school. We need leaders like Kaija who see their surrounding communities as relevant to schooling and as wells of knowledge.

If we continue with a colonised education system, we will never get this kind of leadership needed for students to be successful. Ensuring that this generation and those beyond can thrive will require extraordinary efforts and leadership exerted across all levels—on the part of students, parents, teachers, and system leaders. This also includes the role each one of us must play in being part of this work.

My invitation to you is to ask yourself to what extent you are willing to take on the difficult internal work of dismantling your own biases. We need ongoing and intentional focus on new purposes and mindsets: those that support agency and leadership. We all have a responsibility to decolonise leadership and education—and we all have this opportunity.

*Vongai Nyahunzvi is the Chief Network Officer and Head of Region—Africa at Teach For All*

# Harnessing the Power of Communities

**NENE IBEZIM**

**We can build powerful communities by being open, listening actively, fostering local ownership, developing student leadership, and taking action.**

*“Our histories cling to us.  
We are shaped by where we come from.”*

– CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

**T**he leadership we need now needs to be rooted in the idea of communities—which are built on collective ownership and a shared sense of responsibility. Communities create a sense of belonging and ensure the sustainability of a child’s education. Collaboration within communities allows students to form and maintain positive relationships and helps teach them social skills, the importance of collaboration, and a sense of responsibility towards others. As a teacher and community engagement expert, I have explored creating communities through five key foundational actions: being open, listening actively, local ownership, student leadership, and taking action.

## **Being open and actively listening**

An open mind is foundational for building new relationships. To be open-minded involves asking questions and actively searching for information that challenges your beliefs. When I started teaching in

an underserved community in a small village in Nigeria, I discovered that the majority of the students in my classroom would show up to school without any learning materials and in school uniforms in terrible condition. Amongst the teachers in the school, the assumption was that the parents of these students did not care about their education. I was deeply concerned about this and questioned this assumption—by asking questions, establishing relationships with the students, and extending the same to their parents. I learned that the parents wanted the best for their children, but they struggled with how to provide that for them, given their limited resources.

When we choose to actively listen to people, we can better understand what they are saying and reflect on it before responding. Active listening can also galvanise local community support. In a bid to improve learning outcomes for my students, I chose to actively listen to the vision of success parents had for their children and co-create a plan of action to make the vision a reality. Parents were willing to provide a safe place for learning in the village, some others supplied learning materials, and others showed up as volunteers to work with the children. Intentionally listening to my students' families helped to build trust and strong relationships and inspired them to be invested in our shared vision of success.

### **Supporting local ownership**

We can also inspire action through local ownership, which can be a catalyst for sustainable growth and development. The people who experience a problem first-hand are in the best position to drive its solutions. In October 2018, when I first told my students about the International Day of the Girl Child, they all gave me blank stares. They wondered aloud why we had to celebrate the girl child. Then, I started to explain. I knew they finally understood when one of the boys quietly shared, “Sometimes, my mummy asks my younger sister

to stay at home to take care of my baby brother, and she will tell me to go to school.” Afterward, we created an awareness campaign for the school about the importance of valuing and celebrating girls.

In 2018, I designed all the inscriptions on posters that we used for the campaign. The next year, when my students showed up at my desk asking how we were going to celebrate the International Day of the Girl Child, I looked around at their excited faces and I got an idea. I said to them, “Why don’t we take a campaign to the community?” They took a minute to process what I said, and then they started jumping and clapping in excitement. The next thing I knew, they began listing resources that they would need—cardboard, coloured pencils, gum—and they requested that I note down each item. It was amazing to watch them take ownership of the campaign. They designed the advocacy materials. They chose representatives to speak on their behalf in the community, and they decided they would show me the way. Their very words to me were “don’t worry, just follow us.”

### **Student leadership and taking action**

It is truly exciting to see students lead their learning. Learning as it should be practised requires the active, constructive involvement of the learner. I started to study the dynamics of my students’ relationships with one another outside the classroom. I observed my students on the playground and just watched how they interacted. I saw them in clusters, some in groups of ten, some in threes, and I noticed a small group standing on their own away from others. It was a light bulb moment for me—there was no teacher on the playground that had to say repeatedly, “Come together everyone and play together, this is how you play, this is what you play.” At that moment, it was all the students.

I started to think, If students can come together to play on their own, why can't they come together to learn and teach each other on their own? That is when the idea of creating communities in my classroom first struck me. Because literacy was such a struggle for my students, it became our starting point. I took note of the interests of my students—the ones who always enjoyed a good song, the ones who are always dancing and acting, the ones who liked writing, the ones who love to draw, and the ones who love to make things. Then we formed communities. Every week, for mastery of learning content, I would ask each community to create something that reflected what they had learned and to present their creation to the class. After we continued this routine for a while, I noticed that each community started to create things without me asking them to do it or assigning topics to them.

Creating communities in the classroom fulfills students' need for belonging because they know they can both contribute to the community's success and benefit from its rewards. It also provides a way for all students to be included and allows them to form and maintain positive relationships. It helps teach students social skills, the importance of collaboration, and a sense of responsibility towards others. It was amazing to see how my students began to encourage and motivate each other to do more. Creating communities in my classroom gave my students a sense of ownership of their learning and created an atmosphere for diverse expression. When you walk into my classroom, you will see an array of different creations—a wall full of drawings and paintings, books with written poems and stories, science creations—all done by the communities in my classroom.

The students have taken the communities beyond our classroom, too. In the village, you will often find them in groups working on a science project, exchanging stories, or rehearsing a drama. The cre-

ation of diverse communities in the classroom has given my students the opportunity to explore their interests, develop skills, and have a support group both within and outside of school. When students lead their learning, it makes for an inclusive learning environment, prioritises their choices, and builds their problem-solving skills.

There is a lot we can all learn from my students. If we are to ensure that we have a better future, then our idea of leadership needs to be rooted in creating communities like the ones they've created in our classroom. Desmond Tutu said, "Bringing people together is what I call 'ubuntu,' which means 'I am because we are.' Far too often, people think of themselves as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity." I believe we can make a difference for the whole of humanity with the choices we make today. We can choose to leverage the power of communities in driving sustainable systemic changes in our villages, towns, cities, states, countries, and across the world in order to give ourselves a better future.

*Nene Ibezim is an alumna of Teach For Nigeria*



# Student Power

## Leadership After the Crisis

OLI DE BOTTON

**Our post-pandemic education system  
must view learners as leaders.**

**Y**oung people have battled the odds over the past few years. Less time in school, more responsibility at home, fewer opportunities to experience childhood. In poorer communities, health and economic disparities combined to make things even harder.

As we seek ways to help these young people bounce back, there are two contradictory impulses. There is the urge to get back to “normal” and re-impose the apparent certainties of what went before. There is also the desire to re-imagine and build a better system. Meanwhile, educational disadvantage remains the blight of our times. On most measures, the rich-poor divide has worsened during the pandemic.

In this context, the challenge for leaders in schools and communities is acute but clear. We need to capture the urgency of the moment and find practical ways to help young people learn and thrive now and in the future, particularly those in under-resourced communities. Change tempered by just enough realism.

Learning to lead?

Part of the answer starts with recognising this is not a lost generation. Far from it. Throughout, young people have shown a grit and ambition that is instructive. The students I saw caring for sick relatives and managing their siblings whilst still getting through school were inspirational. Huge power comes from viewing these learners as the leaders who will help us rebuild. In a sense, they are the extra capacity.

What might this mean in practice?

### **1. Building independence**

An education for life—and its challenges—involves the development of skills and attributes that carry us beyond our time in school. The pandemic has underlined the value of this. When teachers beamed into overcrowded homes via intermittent internet access and shared devices, children were often desperate to engage. A lesson in resilience from students to their teachers.

At School 21, we emphasised the practices that encouraged independence. Tasks were set, teachers provided one-to-one feedback at set times, online collaborative tools allowed for paired writing and group discussion. We restructured our curriculum so students could choose courses that extended learning. An in-depth study into depictions of science in the media—10 hours' learning with set lectures and a presentation at the end. A community “adopt a grandparent” project with local older people to tackle loneliness. A study of racial injustice to inform our approaches to equity, inclusion, and diversity.

The outcome was a new set of practices that placed more ownership into the hands of our students. Of course, when the young people came back on site, we returned to some of the structures of school

life, but the courses remained as part of a broader offer. More importantly, we carried forward a sense that with trust and support, students were hugely capable of not only leading their own learning but also leading beyond the school walls.

## **2. Elevating student voice**

Moving from the status quo to a new way of doing things almost always requires an act of persuasion. A carefully crafted speech, a powerful conversation, a collection of voices with a compelling story to tell. Voice 21, a national charity founded through School 21, seeks to put speaking skills—oracy—at the heart of schools. This is good for learning—students need to reflect together on important questions like the impact of climate change in Science or the consequences of war in History. A dialogic classroom is full of questions, challenges, and prompts that extend thinking.

Oracy's real power, though, is in the way it helps young people find their voice. When young people are confident and have the words and techniques to marshal arguments, they have more agency. As a Headteacher I was faced with incredibly reasoned and emotive presentations about why our curriculum needed to be more representative or why we must do more for our local community. The arguments were irresistible. They didn't come from one voice and one student, but from the euphony that builds when many students are empowered to use their voice for practical change.

The same principle is true for teachers. A dialogic staffroom is one where the art of teaching is constantly debated and refreshed. And when teachers are empowered, discussion leads to clarity which leads to action. Speaking should be at the heart of any post-pandemic education system.

### **3. Helping students into the future**

Educational disadvantage is measured in schools, but its consequences are felt in communities and wider society. That's why educational models that make more porous the boundaries between the world of work and the world of education are crucial. Young people need to see how they can succeed and lead in the future, so they are inspired in the here and now.

During the pandemic, employers in England were hit hard and their work with schools was inevitably impacted. However, there was considerable innovation, which gives rise to real optimism. We saw new curriculum models emerge involving teachers working with employers to co-design different types of learning. Pinewood Studios, of James Bond fame, worked with a chain of schools to design Maths schemes of work that taught ratio and proportion in the context of the creative industries. Young people could link their learning to what might come next.

Schools like the London Screen Academy and East London Arts and Music show how students can gain social capital and employment skills whilst still in full-time education. The models combine classroom learning with industry placements and mentoring. Once the young people leave, they are ready to take on the world.

These sorts of partnerships highlight the power of institutions acting in concert in service of empowering young people.

#### **Change or transformation?**

The debate about education is often between those who want to build on what works and those who want to transform the system completely. Another way of thinking about it is to consider the practical ways we can help young people lead so they can decide. After

all, they have shown huge resilience and compassion throughout the past few years—who else is better placed to help us glimpse the future?

*Oli de Botton is a Teach First (UK) alumnus, former headteacher of School 21, and current CEO of the Careers and Enterprise Company*



# Developing Collective Leadership for an Uncertain World

MARWA FAROUQ

**We need to center those who are most proximate to the challenges, leverage collective wisdom, and create space for a diversity of voices and perspectives.**

**A**cross our global network, we are facing uncertainty like never before. This includes not only a global pandemic that came out of thin air and cruelly invaded our personal lives, classrooms, and communities, but also weekly environmental disasters, as well as global and local social, economic, and political adversities that continuously present themselves around the world.

Despite this uncertainty, our network is thriving and collectively learning, evolving, and innovatively responding to the diverse challenges that have emerged. When I reflect on why that is, I believe a lot of it comes down to a set of choices that we collectively made a long time ago and continue to commit to today. Teach For All's choices may look simple, but they were critical in setting us on a path to nurture the leadership and flexibility required for a world that constantly changes.

Our choices are anchored in our commitment to develop collective leadership as a key enabler to the progress we aspire to create in communities around the world. To live into our collective leadership aspirations, we made choices such as bringing decisions closer to the work; leveraging our collective wisdom; and ensuring the diversity of voices and perspectives.

### **1. Bring decisions closer to the work**

We fundamentally believe that those closest to the work are the ones who should lead it. This deep belief has informed our choices from day one. The earliest example of how this belief shows up in our work is our global network itself. Teach For All's network is composed of independent partners, all of whom are led by local leaders, who are in turn informed by members of the communities in which they work; they are the closest to their contexts and are best positioned to deeply understand their local realities and challenges. We are collectively brought together by a set of principles and our deep commitment to the world we want to create, but each partner leads the way in their local context, ensuring that the local perspective, understanding, and context is at the center.

Another concrete example of this is when, several years ago, within Teach For All's global organization, we decided to disband our senior leadership team. We realized this structure meant that too many decisions were being funneled through one small body of people, and often, these senior leaders were not the most proximate to the challenges. Instead, we developed a new approach to designing organizational initiatives and policies that enables those "closest to the work" to lead those processes and decisions with the advice and thought partnership of other stakeholders. We've found that this approach leads to strong decisions that better reflect the realities

on the ground, and enables flexibility and agility in responding to emerging dynamics.

## **2. Leverage our collective wisdom**

But bringing decisions closer to the work isn't enough. It goes hand in hand with another belief (and choice) that there's power in leveraging our collective wisdom. What this means is that, as we each lead the way in our own contexts, we are continuously and proactively reaching out to others to learn, grow, and adapt. We've seen the power of this choice show up across the last couple of years when our partners came together, globally and regionally, to learn from each other about experiences of responding to the pandemic. For example, as the pandemic unfolded, leaders across our network came together to share ideas on how to keep children safe and learning. It was powerful to see innovations shared across borders in multiple areas, from how to transition to distance learning, to how to engage parents in their children's education, to supporting teacher well-being. In such a difficult time, these were moments of bright light and profound impact on children in many communities around the world.

On an organizational level, this principle can have a transformational impact on culture and in shaping staff member experience. A few years ago, we noticed from our engagement survey results that our staff who fall into at least one of our target categories for diversity scored questions lower compared with their peers. So we connected with all of them through focus groups or one-to-one meetings and spent time learning more about what was shaping their experience. We also asked them what would transform their engagement and had them lead the work to create this transformation with support from the rest of the organization. We benefit from the results of this approach to this day, where the engagement of these groups of staff are now consistently above the overall organizational average.

### **3. Ensure the diversity of voices and perspectives**

Although implicit in the above two choices, it is important to explicitly name the value of having everyone's voice at the table. The perspectives of those who have experienced the inequities that we collectively are trying to overcome are key to ensuring that those who are closest to the work and those who are influenced by it are driving impact. Across our network, we've seen extraordinary examples of partners working to ensure that their organizations are representative of the diversity of their local contexts. For example, Teach For Thailand has made a big commitment to recruiting those with lived experience of injustices, who share the backgrounds of the children in the communities where they teach. As one effort to support this, Teach For Thailand engaged in a collective process with local community members, including students, parents, community leaders, local government, and local school leaders, in the Chiang Mai region to create a picture together of what successful education looks like for children in their community and what that means for the kinds of teachers needed in those communities. The local community members then played a key role in recruiting new teachers who fit this profile. Today, nearly half of Teach For Thailand's teaching fellows bring lived experience of the injustices they are working to address. In doing so, they are ensuring that, from its inception, their work is informed by everyone's voice and perspective, especially those that are closest to the challenges.

In the global organization, we have the same commitment and have worked tirelessly over the years to ensure that our staff member body is representative of our network. We track specific measures of diversity that are relevant to our work and network representation, such as the percentage of staff of non-Western descent and those who have experienced inequities similar to those of the students in network partners' classrooms, among others. Today, over 80% of our

staff member body meets at least one of the diversity measures we track. This level of diversity enables so much for our organization. It ensures that our work is led, informed, and executed by a myriad of voices, perspectives, outlooks, and ways of working. Having this level of diversity embeds local perspective, creativity, and adaptive ability into the fabric of our organization. We are able to evolve and adapt because many different voices are heard.

On a personal level, I continue to feel blessed to work every day with a diverse group of people from around the world. Today, like many days, when I virtually walked into my full day of meetings, people were different; each brought their own ideas, listened deeply to others, and challenged one another with care. Where they come from, their identities, and where they sit in the hierarchy does matter, but in the right ways—ways that honor our commitment to celebrate our diversity by being inclusive. I am grateful for an approach to the work that ensures that we are collectively able to withstand whatever the moment in time throws at us, whether it be a global crisis like a pandemic or the need to evolve our organizational structure to better support our network. Whatever the challenge, we each are bringing our voice and power to arrive at a shared solution.

*Marwa Farouq is the Global Head of People, Organization, and Culture at Teach For All*



# Deep Interconnectedness

## The Leadership We Need To Heal and Transform

**MONI SIV**

**We need to see the whole system, build relationships across lines of difference, and be vulnerable enough to seek support around us.**

**T**he civil war came to an end in December 1998. In 2000, decades after many devastating events, the country finally achieved a sense of peace and stability. However, challenges still remained. Neighboring countries were developing and progressing at a rapid pace, surpassing and leaving Cambodia behind to slowly heal from its tumultuous past. The education system was one of the main casualties of the country's instability. Due to targeted kidnappings and killings of teachers, lack of school infrastructure, and outdated curriculums, the teaching profession was intentionally destroyed, and Cambodians rising through this education system continue to suffer from intergenerational collective trauma.

The solution is to heal and then transform. We need to heal the wounded souls of everyone in Cambodia, rebuild the dignity of the teaching profession, and transform the entire system. Education must empower future generations to lead the nation forward.

For this to happen, we need collective leadership. I truly believe the leadership we need right now must recognize our interconnectedness. Leading a collective change cannot be accomplished alone. We must act as a community.

What does it take to nurture interconnectedness and lead collectively?

First, we must build our ability to see the whole system. We must stop selectively seeing parts of the whole and start seeing the whole itself and how different parts are connecting. Then we can organize ourselves and our communities to build systems that work for all. We need more leaders who assist other leaders to achieve collective aims. We need more bridge builders in the community: ordinary and extraordinary individuals who can weave the past into the future and build ladders for the next generations to climb. We need teacher leaders like Dara Sin who went house by house, from village to village, crossing rivers to bring his students back to school. Dara saw his role not just in the classroom, but also in influencing the whole school system. He engaged in all school leadership meetings, became a “core teacher” during the pandemic to train other teachers, built new systems to measure student progress, and supported school leaders in communicating this progress to parents. He also played a role in enabling the leadership of many others, for example, by supporting and coaching first year teachers. Dara’s example shows us what it means to see the whole system and how one can work collectively, with many different types of people, to change the system.

Second, to know and deeply connect with others, we must first know ourselves. We must connect with the energy of our own suffering, pain, anger, guilt, shame, and also the energy of our joy, courage, happiness, and peace. This helps us see how these energies

are deeply intertwined with our families, colleagues, neighbors, friends, and organizations, as well as the nation's history, reality, and shared future. This is why Teach For Cambodia's leadership development program focuses on building self-aware, reflective, and self-directed leaders. In our program, we actively support leaders to learn how to bond and build relationships with many different types of people who are different from them because we believe this is what is needed to transform systems.

Third, we must all build support systems around us. I believe leaders are only as strong as their surrounding support systems, which help us to survive, recover, renew, and build our resiliency. Resilience, to me, is not individualistic; it is shared and occurs when we are able to respond and adapt to disruptive changes together. As organizational leaders, we have a natural instinct to take care of our people and our community; however, we need to be taken care of too. Recognizing this and asking for help requires one to be vulnerable and humble. This vulnerability allows us to remember what truly matters the most and inspires us to discover new ways to make lasting progress. I think all of us need diverse support networks to provide empathy and reinforcement in difficult times. We need those who make us laugh, share our suffering, foster deep understanding, and provide unconditional love. Those who might have different perspectives from us are equally important to include, as they remind us to check our egos and challenge us to step up to be better people and stronger leaders.

Above all, we need to surround ourselves with those who deeply believe in our vision and will collectively work with us to make it happen. As leaders, we need to be willing to live authentically, in strength and vulnerability, and model how to work together to provide and accept essential support at all levels of our organiza-

tions, and in our communities, in order to heal and transform the systems around us.

*Moni Siv is the CEO of Teach For Cambodia*

# The Role of Youth in Environmental Change

AVA WARD

**Young people who are climate conscious and doing their parts to fight climate change are the leaders we need.**

**H**ow far away does 2025 seem? Not very far away, right? While many studies have questioned how long we have left to reverse the effects of climate change, several conclude that the date may lie between 2025 and 2050, which, in my opinion, is not very far away. In 2050, I will be 47, most elementary schoolers will be in their 30s, and my mother will be almost 80. How old will you be? The journey to the year 2050, or likely 2025, will be full of uncertainty, change, crisis, and new normals. With this in mind, I ask you: Who do you support? What do you eat? What have you done to help preserve the planet we live on? My name is Ava Ward, and I'm a climate activist. While my name may not be famous, and I have not held a substantial leadership title concerning the work of those aiding the climate crisis, I'm going to tell you how I do it, how I plan to save the world, and how you can too.

But first, what is climate change? Climate change is global or regional changes in the climate, with particular emphasis on the late 20th century onwards. This is attributed largely to high concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, which derives from the high usage of fossil fuels. The concentration of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere

was the highest it has been in human history as of July 2021, the same month that was recorded as the hottest month the world has witnessed since recording began in the 1800s. In addition to this, 800 million people are currently vulnerable to the effects of climate change, including severe weather disaster risk and life-threatening food and water shortage. So I ask you, what's stopping you from getting involved? What's stopping me?

The role of youth in environmental change cannot be defined by a single sentence. There is no singular blueprint on how to lead change or become a changemaker. Change is all about what you as an individual can do to improve the lives of yourself and those around you. Contrary to what you may see on TV, change is not only made by those who dedicate all of their time to the cause or shout the loudest, it's done by people like you and me. I haven't donated millions to charity or traveled the world to volunteer my time, but I aim to be conscious. I say "aim to be" rather than "am" because I continuously try to adapt my goals to best suit the changing world around me. As youth in a time of so much change and uncertainty, we have grown to be strong, resilient, intuitive, and ready for what's to come. To be climate leaders, we have to embrace change and celebrate all progress, no matter how slow it is.

I was inspired by a presentation dedicated to Earth Day I attended in elementary school to get involved in the fight against climate change. Since then, I've tried to contribute to the fight in multiple ways. I am vegetarian, and I don't own a car. In high school, I conducted an independent study to determine how aquatic plants can help battle rising acidity in our oceans from CO<sub>2</sub> and wrote a paper on the results. Today, I'm a member of an environmental organization at my university called the Washington Public Interest Resource Group (WASHPIRG), and I try to raise awareness of its

work—I pass out fliers, petition, get signatures from students, and attend meetings. I also plan to take an environmental leadership class next fall.

It is my goal to inspire others to see what's out there beyond the resources available to me. My impact is small, but our impact as a generation can be huge. Everyone leads different lives with different impacts and needs, only we know what we can do best to reduce our impact on the world. We together need to take action to preserve the future we have started building for ourselves. We are the youngest facing the biggest challenge, and we aren't ready to let it win. The role of youth in environmental change is to be conscious, open-minded, and above all, act. The type of leadership we need now is action!

Looking forward, my next steps will be to advance the actions made by my immediate community at the University of Washington here in Seattle, in the United States. I plan to get involved in research with a specific focus on how to reduce waste in clinical settings. The University of Washington has made significant impacts in the studies of eco-engineering, marine biology preservation, clean energy leadership, eco-friendly human habits, energy-efficient building and city planning, and natural disaster response research. While my career goals are not climate related, I plan to take advantage of my University's resources and explore my interest in climate preservation. I hope to be able to achieve my climate goals of contributing to the research community's efforts and finding a sustainable and reliable way to make the medical community less wasteful in terms of single-use products. Until then, I will do all that I can to be a climate leader and a conscious activist. I will continue to make every and any small change I can until I can do more.

After reading this, you may still be wondering what can we as youth do now? As students, we are leaders. As youth, we are leaders. As people interested in change, we are leaders. Leadership is just a mindset put to action rather than experience or expertise. By reading what your peers have done and plan to do, you're already one step closer to making change happen. Without youth climate leadership, there will be no future to lead. It's time to take charge and be the change we need to see, so what's stopping us from saving the world?

*Ava Ward is a Teach For America student and former member of Teach For All's Student Leader Advisory Council*

# Leading Under Uncertainty

**SALYNE EL SAMARANY, GHINA RACHID,  
AND REEM MARTO**

**Leading through uncertainty requires humility,  
values-centeredness, decentralizing power,  
and operating with a sense of possibility and  
vision for transformation.**

**L**ebanon has moved from crisis to crisis over recent decades, enduring foreign occupations, a long civil war, and a refugee crisis. In October 2019, an unprecedented economic and political collapse rocked the country. In August 2020, soon after the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, Beirut was devastated by one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in human history. Teach For All's Reem Marto spoke to Teach For Lebanon's CEO Salyne El Samarany and second-year teacher Ghina Rachid about what leadership is needed in such challenging times.

**REEM:** Lebanon is undergoing a national crisis unlike any other in its recent history, and this has put extraordinary demands on leaders. What type of leadership is needed in these highly uncertain and complex times?

**GHINA:** We need wiser leaders with a clear vision that know how to bring people together, especially as we are so divided as a society.

We need leaders who are trustworthy, approachable, responsible, strategic thinkers, and, most importantly, good listeners.

**SALYNE:** I think we need humility and vulnerability. In a world that is so complex and full of uncertainty, we need leaders who are ready to be vulnerable enough to say: “I don’t know it all” or “This is too much to handle, and I need support.” We also need leaders who do things ethically and are accountable for what they do.

**REEM:** What new capacities do you have to build, especially on the point around having ethics and values?

**SALYNE:** The clearer your values are as an individual and as an organization, the more likely you are to stick to them. We cannot break the cycle unless we increase the number of people who genuinely live up to their values. It’s not enough to say you’re ethical. You need to practically refuse to join a corrupt system such as ours. Leaders will make mistakes, so it’s also important to set the right systems in place to pause and reflect so that we can hold ourselves and others accountable.

**REEM:** Leadership is not just learning new things. Are there things you think are important to unlearn to be the kind of leaders needed?

**SALYNE:** One thing leaders in the world need to unlearn is tying power to titles. CEO means you are the most powerful person in the organization. That’s not true. We need to unlearn and decentralize power and make sure that the people doing the work—the community or the team around you—are the essence of power. I want to give an actual example from the August 4 Beirut explosion. When the explosion happened, none of the local political leaders took any action. We felt how powerless they can be by witnessing their inac-

tion. Yet we saw the whole community and country come together, including Teach For Lebanon team members and fellows. People came forward hand in hand, took action, and exercised their power to help. Gradually, they brought relief in different ways, whether through food parcels, cleaning the streets, or supporting mental health. Everyone did their share. That to me is a perfect example of how much power there is in a community and how much less power there is in “leaders” by title alone. Radical change will also only happen when we give the chance to people who are qualified and support people to get into positions of power in the system who are ethical and have the leadership traits we want: leaders who think critically, accept diversity, and live their values every single day.

**REEM:** You always read about this idea that there is unmatched resilience of the Lebanese people. What are your thoughts on resilience and what it means in terms of Lebanon and the leadership that is needed?

**SALYNE:** We got to a stage in Lebanon where resilience is seen as a superpower, as if it’s a positive trait. That it’s ok to live with injustice and to have no electricity, water, or generators. It’s ok to have a failed infrastructure and state. And the Lebanese, because they are resilient, are going to find a way and continue to find solutions. We’ve conditioned ourselves to finding solutions but not solving the root-cause of the issue, and I feel this type of resilience is limiting the possibility of transformative change in the country. Yes, I need to find solutions for the short term to survive, but I shouldn’t lose track of my bigger vision for change and must work for it every single day.

**GHINA:** Yes, we need leaders who own the change they want to see and recognize that our country’s problems are all of our problems.

As a teacher who loves her country, it is important for me to teach my kids to love their country and recognize that it is up to us all to make the change. We should think about a bottom-up approach and work with students, their parents, and their teachers to develop this.

**REEM:** What have you learned about how to grow this type of leadership?

**SALYNE:** When you want to enable leadership, you need an enabling environment. We need to expose our fellows, kids, and community to the opportunities and solutions out there—in their country, region, and across the world—so that they can actually see what is possible and have the agency to act on these possibilities. Showing students how to learn from the challenges around them will build their leadership. When teachers show up and make an effort despite dire challenges, they are also showing what is possible. It is also helpful to know that there are others across the world supporting you, and there are solutions you can adapt from around the world.

**CHINA:** I've learned to be humble with my expectations, to be patient and understand my students, and to build good relationships in the community. Also, that mental health is so important, and taking the time off you need and knowing that some days are not going to be your best days, but you can still strive.

**REEM:** Is there anything else you would want to share?

**SALYNE:** I'm genuinely inspired by Teach For Lebanon as an organization and especially the alumni and fellows themselves. In these difficult circumstances, we've seen fellows going into classrooms, even in the most difficult situations, alumni in crisis raising funds,

employees driving their cars with broken windows. People come in every day and help in their own way. This is leadership.

*Salyne El Samarany is the CEO of Teach For Lebanon, Ghina Rachid is a Teach For Lebanon teacher, and Reem Marto is Teach For All's Head of Region—MENA*



# Our Little Ones Are Great Leaders

**JUAN MANUEL GONZÁLEZ BARAJAS**

**Unleashing their leadership from an early age will set up our children to be the leaders we need, now and in the future.**

*“Adulthood leads to a phenomenon of little adults, who are young people who are treated as adults-in-the-making. A non-discriminatory perspective would be to treat children and youth as whole and complete people right now.”*

— ADAM FLETCHER

In the Teach For All network, we believe that collective leadership is the pathway to empower every child to reach their full potential and that leadership must be developed at every level, including in students themselves. However, if I asked you to imagine a student leader, it's a fair bet that you would imagine a teenager—perhaps an activist who is leading in ways we would expect adults to lead. It's unlikely you would imagine a child under the age of six.

I would have imagined the same previously, but the implementation of Enseña por México's early childhood program has opened my

eyes to the fact that we live in a world where the leadership of our little ones is constantly underestimated and ignored. We live in an adultcentric world, where many of us believe that children under six require an adult making decisions for them, for pretty much everything they do. However, if we really want a world where every human is ready to tackle the challenges that world is confronting, and will confront in the future, there is no age that is too early to start preparing our children for the leadership will need them to exert—and there is no better way to develop leadership than to treat someone as a leader. We need to start realizing that even a young child under the age of six can be a strong leader, and we need to create programs that promote this kind of leadership.

As Haim Ginnot, pioneer researcher in the nuances of communicating with children, stated more than 50 years ago, “Responsibility is fostered by allowing children a voice and, wherever indicated, a choice in matters that affect them.” We must not continue believing that until a child is in elementary, middle, or high school, their opinion is not relevant or valuable, or that building a child’s sense of responsibility and leadership can wait until they are “older” and “understand what is happening.” If we continue assuming this, we run the very high risk that when “the child is ready,” it will be too late.

There are two key actions that we need to take to switch our mindset and boost the leadership in every young child:

First, we need to remove our adultcentric ideas:

The term “adultcentrism” refers to a paradigm of thought that leads adults to provide inadequate or distorted responses to children’s needs, despite the belief of acting in children’s best interest (Furioso). For many years, we have thought that children need a

decision maker for everything, but in reality, if we are making the decisions for them when they are young, it is hard for me to believe—and this is backed up by neuroscience—that we are creating in them the skills and mindsets needed to become courageous and critical thinking leaders in the future. It all starts with very basic things, such as telling them what clothes they should wear or what toys they should or should not play with. As adults, our job should be to engage with our children, observe them, listen to them, ask questions, and share the information that would allow them to make a decision on their own.

But it's not enough to just ask what they want for lunch or how they want to spend their time: children need to be asked and listened to about what they want for their communities, their countries, their world. Our societies are so adultcentric that we don't even think to ask them these questions, and we don't believe that they would be able to answer them even if we did—or they wouldn't answer them in ways which meet the standards of what adults consider to be the right way.

Of course, there is nothing new about this adultcentric behavior. For example, my mother decided that I would not attend preschool, without ever asking whether I wanted to go. She thought that I was too young to go to school before the age of five and believed that I would get bored at school. But from my perspective, I was a very curious child who is the youngest of eight siblings and who consequently received limited attention at home. If my mother had thought to ask me, I would probably have decided to go to preschool if I'd been given the option.

As my awareness of adultcentrism has grown, I have noticed just how often I catch myself defaulting to adultcentric behaviors. For

example, when I last visited my family in Guadalajara, I started to wrap Christmas presents, and my curious 2-year-old nephew Alex came and sat next to me, indicating that he wanted to help (a clear characteristic of a leader). My first response was to tell him that I was going to finish wrapping the presents on my own and then we would play. In my head, I was underestimating his ability to help with this activity, and I was thinking that my way of wrapping the present was going to be “better” than his way. However, as a true leader, Alex insisted on helping. He sat next to me and started to grab the wrapping paper. I started to explain everything to him, step by step, and that is when it clicked for me: I was doing something that the early childhood fellows of Enseña por México ask adults not to do, to overstep. I took a step back, and instead of explaining every step, I let Alex know that he could be in charge and that I was there to help, the same way he was there to help me. Through that process, we became two leaders wrapping Christmas presents for our family, an activity that would bring joy to our loved ones, a joy that would motivate Alex to continue to be a curious leader that seeks ways to help others.

Adulcentrism starts on a small scale, but it only becomes larger and larger. As Adam Fletcher says, “Most of society’s decision making for young people happens without young people.” Then, when they become of age, from one day to another, we ask them to be in charge of wrapping the gifts for their whole community, without help, because they are “adults now,” when we never let them participate in the wrapping process before, not even to choose the color of the wrapping paper.

Second, in addition to changing our perceptions of children, we also need to inform ourselves about what research and evidence tells us we can do to enhance children’s development of the cognitive and

socioemotional skills that every leader needs. The foundation for these skills are rooted very early in our lives.

According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, “In the first few years of life, more than 1 million new neural connections form every second”. Our early experiences, positive or negative, affect the development of our brain architecture, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health. Adverse experiences early in life can impair brain architecture, with negative lasting effects. Thus, as adults, it is our job to provide children with nurturing non-adultcentric environments where we listen and support them so that, later on, these children will become the adults we need to face and solve the crises the world is and will be facing.

The nurturing, non-adultcentric environment should go beyond the physical aspect and include an emotionally safe and caring environment too. Quality interactions between children and their parents or other caregivers are essential elements in any individual’s developmental process since they set the tone for the way in which children will relate with others in the future. We need to help parents, caregivers, and adults in general understand that “the way we talk to our children becomes their inner voice” (Peggy O’Mara). Let’s speak to our children with empathy, truth, and confidence, so that in the future, they become the honest, emphatic, and confident leaders the world needs.

To wrap up, I will use a wise man’s words: “A child’s voice, however honest and true, is meaningless to those who’ve forgotten how to listen” (Albus Dumbledore). Let’s not be the adults who forgot how to listen to children: let’s be the ones that give them back their voices

and their place in their world as the whole and complete human beings they already are now.

*Juan Manuel González Barajas is the CEO of Enseña por México*

# Coming Out of the Cocoon

RUTUJA BHOITE

**We need teachers who catalyze their  
students' leadership and voice.**

*“The potential within each child is limited  
only by the beliefs of those around them.”*

– SANAYA BHARUCHA

Imagine yourself sitting in a classroom where all you need to do is stare at your teacher. I did the same when I was 10 years old. Sit. Learn by rote. Write. Nothing beyond this. The highest marks were all that mattered.

Until one of my teachers made me stand in front of the classroom and asked me to talk about my dream job for a minute. I remember standing there without uttering a word. My teacher looked me in the eyes and said, “You can do it.” It took me another minute to encourage myself that I could do it. And finally, I spoke for 30 seconds. I remember this incident, even after nine years, because my teacher did not give up on me or ask me to go sit down after the silence. Instead, she believed in me, and that made me believe in myself.

And this was the first step towards creating change and igniting the spark of leadership in this shy, timid, but curious girl.

Later, I was selected for a musical called Maya, which was organized by Teach For India, wherein over 300 students auditioned and about 30 were selected. It was a two-year training program that demanded about three hours every day. Maya is the story of a princess who is cursed by the dark lords and she lifts the curses by demonstrating the values of courage, compassion, and wisdom. It was the journey of the little princess to discover her light.

When I joined the musical, little did I imagine that it would leave a long-lasting impression on me and change me forever in a positive way. I always had issues opening up to people and was conscious of how people would judge me. But the learning circles which accompanied the Maya process gave me a platform to show my fears and anxieties that were trapped deep down in me. I was able to become vulnerable around others, and soon, with a lot of mutual sharing, I started to realize that I was not alone. This was possible because every individual in the circle—whether it be a teacher or a student—made me feel safe, and we listened to each other’s stories with compassion. Later, when I was made the lead character in the musical, all the doubts that I had about myself vanished, and I started to accept myself the way I am.

Maya helped me experience humility, happiness, and sorrow, and it gave me the necessary strength to face challenges and overcome barriers that prevented me from reaching my true potential.

Maya also helped me to build those everlasting relationships which have turned out to be my pillar of emotional support. Another student, Priyanka, was my senior, and she constantly motivated me and questioned my reasoning when I felt self-doubt. Tooshan was one of Teach For India’s teachers who helped me to look at the

bigger picture and put things into perspective. Maya has taught me to value relationships and the importance of reaching out to people.

Beyond Maya, my teachers believed in me, which led me to be confident about myself. United World College has been my dream college since grade 7. When it was time to apply, a lot of people were against it. At first, my decision was that I wouldn't apply, but when I told my teacher Karthik this, he said, "Rutuja, I have taught you for a year, and throughout, I remember every time we began thinking about what would come next after grade 10, you always spoke about UWC in a passionate tone. You need to believe in yourself and tell yourself that no one can stop you from doing what you want." His talk touched me and made me reflect on my decision. He was a ray of hope in a situation when I almost gave up. And I went on to study at UWC Thailand because my teacher believed in my potential and supported me.

All these changes have further humbled me and transformed my understanding of what leadership is. I don't have a precise definition, but my understanding of leadership comes from the actions of my teachers: When they asked me if I was doing fine. When they fought to create better classrooms for us. When they taught us the power of giving "free hugs" to strangers. When the Maya teachers took up the challenge of training kids to be in a musical—kids who did not speak fluent English and didn't know what a "musical" was. For me, leadership is when I express my gratitude to others for what I have. It is the awareness of myself and my surroundings. It is when I see a problem and begin thinking about how I can solve it by taking small steps. And it is when I see others smile.

*Rutuja Bhoite is a Teach For India student alumna*



# When a Flower Doesn't Bloom...

NATALI MARTINS

**Adults must work on their own leadership in order to create an environment which enables children to become the leaders we want them to be.**

“**W**hen a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.” This is a saying that often appears in the media, and it invites the reader to shift the way we look at children. When we take care of a flower and we want it to grow strong and blossom, we arrange the environment where it grows. We start by getting to know what kind of flower it is and what needs it may have, and we observe our house or garden and the levels of sunlight in different spots to see what the best location may be. We consider how much water it needs and how frequently, and we closely watch the flower grow. We take care of any distress or disease it may show. And we do it differently for every single flower and plant we may have under our responsibility. Since we understand that a tulip does not have the same needs as a rose or a daffodil, we look after each kind of flower independently. In doing so, we establish a connection with that flower (who has never talked to his or her plants?), and its growth and life makes us feel happy and fulfilled in our mission, in addition to creating a more beautiful environment.

We do it for flowers, how are we (not) doing it for children?

Every child is different, and in order for each of them to grow strong, they need adults who take care of them and their environment accordingly. The same way we make adjustments in the environment of a flower, we adults make the adjustments in our homes, classrooms, and communities to create the right environment for each kid.

And at some point, we realize that one of the environment's key elements is ourselves.

According to Maslow's pyramid, the theory in psychology of the Hierarchy of Needs, a better environment means a place where children have their basic needs covered: deficiency needs like food, shelter, safety, sense of belonging, and self-esteem, as well as growth needs like cognitive, aesthetic, or self-actualization needs. And this is exactly where adults can make the difference in creating the best possible environment for the children in their care, starting with themselves.

And still, we catch ourselves in our own traps, where we, as parents or teachers, blame children for their behavior and their upbringing. Does it cross our mind to blame the flower for not thriving? Are we not part of the system we are blaming?

This may seem overwhelming, so much responsibility. However, it is much simpler than we first reckon.

We are all human beings, no matter our age. We are growing stronger, and hopefully wiser, every single day as children and adults. If we believe this, it means that adults and children are on a similar path, and they are connected in their own processes of growing and ongoing learning. If this is so, they can learn from each other constantly.

It also means that teachers and children can teach each other what they are going through, what they are becoming, what they love, and what worries them, much more than what they have learnt by heart for a final test in a subject that someone somewhere decided everyone should know. A very well-known Portuguese educator that I personally admire, José Pacheco, writes, “O professor não ensina aquilo que diz, ele transmite aquilo que ele é,” or in English, “A teacher does not teach what he or she says, he or she passes on what he or she is.”

As parents, we frequently witness the impact of our behavior on our kids. One evening, when I mishandled a saucepan with our dinner and it ended up on the kitchen floor, my baby girl who was looking at me told me in her funny 2-year old voice, “Mamã, não faz mal. Acontece” (“Mum, don’t worry. It happens.”), something that I used to tell her every time she mishandled or broke anything unintentionally. That evening, I realized how much our children replicate what we do: our best and our not-so-good behavior.

I have some less cute stories about that last part too, of course. They remind me that I am part of the environment and so, the quality of the environment I provide my children and students with is my responsibility and can be improved. It is my choice to become a better element of the environment every day.

My point then is that we need to focus on ourselves as adults because in doing so, we are providing a better environment to our children. We need to become better adults around our children—confident, mentally healthy, and passionate about who we are—because this is what we are teaching, intentionally or not.

So, next time we may find ourselves demanding from kids things like “get to know yourself,” “set your goals,” “behave yourself,” “study hard to become someone,” “speak up,” or “follow your dreams,” we may want to pause, breathe deeply, and check whether we are living in alignment with what we are instructing and if we are listening and sharing enough with our students about our shared experience on Earth.

Because at the very end, we are the environment, and we are the flower.

*Natali Martins is a pedagogical tutor at Teach For Portugal*

# Learning Is Our Pathway to Greatness

**BRIGHT UNATA**

**Teachers should see their work as unlocking their students' potential for greatness.**

**A**s a student, I think that the leadership we need is teachers who understand that students' learning is their pathway to greatness. Living in a small village with my grandparents, my brother, and several cousins is sometimes very exciting and at other times it is difficult. I am lucky that my grandparents know the value of education and so they send me to school. Not all my friends are as lucky. A lot of children here have to work to feed their families—sometimes hawking in the village or working on the farm. So, when a child is born, as soon as the child is a little bit older, the child starts to fend for the family. No one would have thought that a child in my village, attending the only government primary school several kilometers away, would have access to an excellent education. But we do, and it was not always like this. Before, my teachers used to only show up to do their job—to teach and leave. They never paused to really focus on us—to listen to us. Until, when I got to Grade 2 and we had a new teacher in my school. The new teacher, Ms. N, as I like to call her, chose to do things differently. She started to introduce us to the joy of learning. For the first time, the school became different for me and my classmates. She was so interested in helping us learn. She reminded us every day that she believed in us and that we can do anything we put our minds to.

I remember that the first thing my teacher started to do when she came to our classroom was to listen to us. For the first time ever, an adult was asking us—children—about how we felt and what we thought. I found this really exciting because I could easily share my feelings with her, especially when I had fears or doubts. One time, my school was invited to an art exhibition fair hosted by a private school. Usually, when my school gets such an invitation, student representatives are selected from the most senior class (Grade 6), but this time, three of my classmates and I were selected to represent my school, and we were in Grade 2. I remember our school administrators insisting that we make the school proud and do really well in the exhibition. It was a lot of pressure. I remember us running to Ms. N to tell her how scared we were that the students in the private school would laugh at us if we failed to speak English correctly. Her response was everything. She listened to us and then said it did not matter. She asked us if we knew what we wanted to present, and we said yes. She asked us if we knew what we wanted to say, and we said yes. Then she said we should simply focus on the purpose of participating in the exhibition. On the day of the art exhibition, Ms. N was seated in the crowd, and we walked up to the stage to make our presentation. It was truly remarkable—we were so fluent in using the English language that the chairman of the event remarked that he had never heard students from a government primary school speak so excellently. It was a proud moment for us. I was so grateful for the role Ms. N played in getting us here.

I watched my teacher immerse herself in our community—I really like that she did. A lot of times, you would find her walking back home with us after school. I think it was a really good opportunity for her to learn a lot about us. She did a lot of home visits to our houses. She took the time to get to know us and our guardians or parents. She got to know where we lived and how we lived. She

came into our world to learn, and with a deep understanding of our background, she used that knowledge to expose us to a variety of options beyond our community—beyond what we were familiar with. My teacher did a lot of things differently from other teachers in the school. We had a lot of fun and interesting activities in our classroom. One of the things that my teacher did was to create room and opportunity for everyone in our classroom to explore their interests. For example, there were some of my classmates who really loved to make things using scrap materials, others who enjoyed writing, and others whose interests were singing or dancing. So we had different groups in our classroom, focused on using our different interests to facilitate learning. I am really proud that she ensured we took ownership of our learning. It was not about our limitations or our lack of resources; it was all about the potential that we all had, and she always reminded us of her firm belief in our abilities. My teacher challenged us a lot and pushed us beyond our comfort zone. I remember one time, she asked us what we wanted to do for our community to show what we were learning in school. My classmates and I came up with the idea of organizing a community art project in our village. You see, something like this had never been done before, and we were very excited about it. We wanted to teach our parents about the different art activities we had learned in school. So we made a plan. We got together our box of art supplies and decided on the activities we would do. We chose a date and went around the village, inviting all our parents to show up for the art project. I think a lot of them were really surprised and had no idea what we had planned, but they showed up. We crafted, drew, painted, and used local materials to create different art decors to be used in homes. It was the first time we (my classmates and I) had led learning for adults, and it was incredible.

I have not spent a lot of time in school, but in my experience, I have come to believe that all teachers should prioritize students' well-being—if we are not okay emotionally, there is no way we can learn. Teachers should teach students how not to be afraid, to be bold, and speak up for themselves. Teachers should be kind to students because, if not, students will be afraid to speak to him/her. Teachers should not negatively criticize students for getting sums wrong because students will not want to stand up again to answer questions. Teachers should not be wicked to students because such a teacher will never be appreciated by the students. Teachers should facilitate learning, where all students have the opportunity to engage their minds and hands. Teachers should be genuinely interested in students. If you understand that learning is our pathway to greatness, what will you do differently?

*Bright Unata is a Teach For Nigeria student*

# The Power of Community Leadership

## Overcoming Educational Inequalities in the Colombian Pacific Regions

**DARLIN IBARGÜEN ASPRILLA**

**To create equitable societies, we need collective leadership that brings together diverse voices, especially those who have experienced injustices, working together for social change.**

### **T**he context matters

In 2015, after finishing my fellowship at Enseña por Colombia, I began work at the Ministry of Education with a mission of developing strategies to enhance access to quality education in the Colombian Pacific region. I still remember the sceptical comments of colleagues, emphasising well-known misuse of public funds, widespread corruption, and the weak institutional presence that had shaped education systems in this region. In their minds, it did not matter what strategies were undertaken, the outcome would be the same: poor quality education and continued learning poverty for young people in this region. Against these odds, I decided to begin a journey to challenge this systemic and institutional exclusion of certain groups in our society, through a process of bottom-up collective action and community leadership.

Travelling across the region to work with parents, students, teachers, local leaders, and governmental actors, I began to hear their stories, hopes, concerns, and urgent calls for action. In particular, I remember a primary teacher in a small rural school telling me in a hopeless tone, “I do not know what to do. I am suffering from seeing no future for my children, and it seems that nobody cares about us. I feel very helpless, I wish I could change this reality, but I do not have strength after teaching under these conditions for over 25 years.” In the same way, a Secretary of Education expressed, “Transforming our education system could take generations, and we do not currently have the means to make this happen, but we have to ensure that our children and youth at least can attend school.” On the other hand, I interviewed a community leader who told me, “Our region has been ignored by the centre for years, our youth seem to be predestined to live without a fair chance to access better opportunities, and the education system is not giving suitable answers to it. However, we need to lead the change that we want to see in our territory.” Hearing such contrasting perspectives kept me up many nights, questioning what type of leadership this region truly needs.

For context, the Pacific region of Colombia is an intense and contradictory place, filled with cultural, natural, and ethnic wealth, but also entrenched with structural socio-economic inequalities and the lasting effects of internal conflict. These mostly ethnic black and indigenous communities have been affected by a lack of representation and decontextualised policies, perpetuating marginalisation and underdevelopment. The 2018 PISA results indicate a huge gap of 93 points in educational development and learning outcomes between the top 20% and bottom 20% of students. This reflects a particularly shocking reality in terms of educational and socio-economic development for black and indigenous ethnic communities. In analysing this reality from a historical perspective,

race emerges as a critical determinant of social status and access to opportunities for upward social mobility.

Vulnerable ethnic communities are also trapped in a cycle of systemic poverty, with 73% of students from rural households facing low educational attainment levels. From an institutional perspective, the plight of these communities has historically been justified by local and national governments with excuses such as remoteness, high cost of interventions, and the presence of illegally-armed groups. What is true, however, is that over the years, the country has forgotten those living beyond the borders of the urban world, ignoring their struggles, hopes, and needs.

We could now ask, what type of leadership is needed to reverse this structural exclusion and oppression? Who should take the lead to transform these socio-economic and educational inequalities within communities in the Pacific? I will try to shed light on what I have learned from working with these communities for almost five years as a young black leader in the Ministry of Education.

### **Leading the fight**

*Lesson 1: We need diverse leadership.*

Between 2016 and 2017, three main settlements of ethnic communities in the Colombia Pacific region (Quibdó, Buenaventura, and Tumaco) started setting up community-based organisations (civil committees) with the aim of mobilising people to draw national attention to the complex socio-economic situation in their territories. Who were these local leaders, and why did they decide to lead these massive mobilisations? These civil committees were comprised of teachers, headteachers, representatives of feminist and LGBTQ groups, higher education students, ethnic leaders, members of religious groups, young professionals, and entrepreneurs. This meant

that every section of society felt represented by these diverse groups, ignoring traditional politics and creating a strong sense of belonging, resistance, and collective power, with the rationale that: “We must mobilise our people around just demands of socio-economic and political transformations that can lead to redressing the social contract between the Colombian state and our communities, as a priority within a region where the persistence of institutional exclusion, violence, and illegal activities are a permanent threat for our children and youth.”

*Lesson 2: We need to be led by those who have experienced injustices.* This was not, unfortunately, the first time these communities had to protest to claim their basic rights, but this time, I could feel their determination, collective thinking, and reluctance to believe in the government’s empty promises.

Somehow, this endless battle for addressing historical inequalities found its place in the streets. Over several days, these civil committees led social protests and civic strikes where hundreds of thousands of people tirelessly marched on every street in town, closing access to the country’s main port and regional airports. The protestors raised their voices shouting, “Our people never give up, our people must be respected – El pueblo no se rinde, carajo – El pueblo se respeta, carajo,” and challenged the status quo.

I remember one of the leaders in Quibdó (Chocó) powerfully explaining: “Everything our people have won has been through collectively fighting, resisting, and challenging structural inequalities and oppression within our territories. We have fought furiously to ensure that the current and future generations of our children and youths can thrive in a just world. The Colombian state has an historical debt with our people, now it is time to bridge these gaps.”

*Lesson 3: We need to work together toward a shared vision.*

These expressions of resistance, collective leadership, and resilience helped us to pave the way, on the government side, to promote social dialogue. The civil committees made demands on more than 10 different sectors which, according to them, reflected decades of underdevelopment of their territories, underfunding of basic public goods, and a disconnection from social justice agendas. In particular, in the negotiation process regarding education, we collectively sought to create consensus around a shared vision for better public education that would enable these communities to acquire the skills and capabilities needed to lead the development of their territories and also advance collective well-being.

During these years, civil committees were able to convene and mobilise thousands and thousands of people to demand social change in their territories, going beyond mere advocacy. They fought together for making education a top priority to start closing historical equity gaps and managed to redress the way that government at all levels was approaching socio-economic and educational development for these communities.

**The impact**

The agreed accords between the national government and these civil committees amounted to an unprecedented investment of over \$100 million in the education sector, impacting over 700,000 people. Above all, it created an opportunity to develop ethnic-education models, improve educational infrastructure, increase investment in schooling material, undertake teacher qualification and training processes, and strengthen institutional support for the region's education sector. To this day, these community leaders continue to work with the national government to accomplish the accords, seeking to address structural causes of inequality across

the region. In other words, these local leaders managed to create a sustainable participatory scenario to directly influence the policy process at the national level.

### **Reshaping the future**

So, what does the future hold for these communities after this brave exercise of citizenship, empowerment, and territorial belonging? On the one hand, this experience has taught us how social mobilisation, resilience, and collective leadership can challenge exclusionary policies and practices. On the other hand, we still have a long way to go to address all the structural inequalities in Colombia's education system. However, what I have learned is the tremendous power of diverse community leadership to positively and sustainably transform our schools, communities, countries, and world. In other words, the leadership we need now must create an inclusive and participatory scenario, one in which every community member can speak up and exercise the freedom to lead transformation in their own context. If we work collectively and take community-led approaches, I believe that it is possible to make real progress toward a more equitable society.

*Darlin Ibargüen Asprilla is an Enseña por Colombia alumnus*

# Learning Life's Leadership Lessons

ARMINE GEVORGYAN

**We need leaders who draw lessons from their own lived experience and use these to guide their path.**

**A**mid the current turmoil of life, while we often delay planning long-term due to the uncertainty of tomorrow, we must find the courage to reimagine our lives. We need to be brave in rethinking leadership for a more equitable and just world. This can only be achieved through a greater vision for mutual responsibility, emotional intelligence, and collective leadership. As I have reflected on the past two years and the ultimate purpose of education, I have come to the conclusion that my greatest life lessons were taught to me by four key teachers: books, motherhood, contagion, and war.

Growing up in a post-Soviet nation, I was confronted with problems that should not concern a child: a crippling energy crisis, a disastrous earthquake, and conflict on our eastern borders. Despite these challenges, I was able to pursue inspiration and passion for subjects through an important escape: reading books. It may seem trivial, but thanks to books, I felt braver and more determined. No matter how insurmountable the obstacles seemed, I saw knowledge as my greatest weapon to vanquish whatever problems came my way. Because of the love for books that my family and teachers

instilled in me, I was admitted to university with free tuition and graduated with honors.

In addition to books, I had one very important teacher: my mother. Through her tasteful conversations, delicate touch, and humor, she often helped me to learn from mistakes and forget about my embarrassments. Now that I am also a mother, I wonder how she was able to so delicately mitigate the difficulties we faced while never placing blame on us or making us feel wretched. On the contrary, she had the ability to transform the reality around us, focusing only on the positive and building up a wall of love and kindness towards others. It was through my mother's example that I have come to understand that true leadership can be boiled down to responsibility, positivity, and emotional intelligence. Responsibility not only for oneself, but also for relatives, acquaintances, and strangers alike. It is because of my mother's responsibility, and the positivity that she scattered everywhere, that I have sustained my belief in humanity. In a world with so much division, we must lift up examples like my mother and exalt the type of leadership she represents.

Contagion served as my third teacher. The ripple effect of the global pandemic continues to touch all of our lives, particularly when it comes to mental health and education. In more ways than one, life stopped—both in real terms and also in our inability to solve the problems that we face together. As such, we started asking ourselves questions like, “What disasters await our children? How will we prepare our children for an ever-changing world? Are we ready as a human race?” In Armenia, we have a common saying: “There is no evil without good.” The most important thing that many of us have come to realize is that we need to invest heavily in the development of visionary leaders who will be able to see beyond today's problems. We must teach our children to imagine the future that they want

and build towards it. To do so, we must teach them to inspire others, not only to see the desired situation but also to create it. That is why projects that spark student leadership, community innovation, and collective action are so important. As a member of Teach For Armenia's first cohort of Teacher-Leaders, I am proud of what our team has accomplished in this regard. Through Change-Based Learning we have received applications from more than 500 student groups to launch their own innovative projects focusing on local ingenuity, civic responsibility, and global connectivity. Recently, our teachers ran a crowdfunding campaign with their students through which they successfully raised \$40,000. By the end of this school year, more than 150 Student-Led Innovation Projects will have been completed. Contagion was my third teacher, not because of the effects of COVID-19, but because it caused me to realize that ideas are contagious, and our students have demonstrated that.

The last lesson perhaps elicited in me the most jarring clash between my personal ideals and the reality confronting my nation. First, in July 2020, we witnessed skirmishes on Armenia's northeastern border. Then, in September, a 44-day war erupted. No one was untouched by the resulting violence and displacement. Due to the war, tens of thousands of students were out of school. Many were displaced from their homes and sought refuge in different regions of Armenia. Instead of being broken, our team found the courage to teach peace and promote hope. When Teach For Armenia created Teach for Peace and announced the launch of an Emergency Education Response, I was eager to join the effort. As an Emergency Education Manager, I joined a group of alumni who were able to quickly form teams and spread across the nation. At one point, we were supporting one out of every 24 displaced students. The war taught me the power of hope to galvanize collective leadership in the face of adversity.

Books, my first teacher, taught me to relish learning. My mother, and now my own experience as a mother, continues to teach me lessons in responsibility, positivity, and the importance of emotional intelligence. Lastly, two dark teachers of illness and war showed me that leadership can be equally as contagious and that hope can galvanize collective action. Through all these experiences, I have learned that instilling in us virtues such as perseverance, kindness, love, and faith can make the world a better place. Just like the dandelion, we know that spring will come with many flowers and a new generation of leaders who will be courageous enough to redefine what is possible.

*Armine Gevorgyan is Leadership Pathways Manager at Teach For Armenia*

# My Journey To Become a Student Leader

**ESTHER REMILEKUN ODEKUNLE**

**We need leadership rooted in teamwork, empathy,  
and belief in what we can build together.**

## **The 21st-century leaders**

*The leaders we need now are the leaders of the 21st century.  
Leaders who understand the power of service and are willing  
to help the citizens.*

*Leaders who do not see political offices as places to escape  
generational poverty.*

*We need leaders who are proactive and not afraid to take  
the risks.*

*And be of help in solving local and global challenges using  
design thinking skills.*

*We need leaders who believe in young people's potential.  
Creating opportunities for them to thrive and help them  
become more influential.*

*We need leaders who are not greedy but contented and stay  
away from corruption.*

*Leaders who are responsible for every action they take and reflect on how it affects the nation.*

*Leaders who embrace technology in creating sustainable solutions.*

*They are the ones with the strategies to achieve the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals.*

*They are the ones with the spirit of "Ubuntu." I am because you are.*

As a student leader, I have learned four lessons about how I can personally live into this 21st century leadership:

### **Lesson 1: How we must work together**

My mentor once shared a story with me during a leadership talk. As a young graduate, he volunteered to teach in a private secondary school after his compulsory National Youth Service. It dawned on him at the time that he needed to be strategically committed to giving back to the community, and he thought of this as a good step. Within a few weeks, he started showing up and getting involved, even to a point that he worked in collaboration with the executive members. He assisted the team in content writing, video creation, and graphic designing, and executed community-based projects that supported the organization's vision. He loved working with people to achieve a common goal and seeing everyone being celebrated.

From his story, I was able to learn the power of teamwork and the essence of collective leadership. I remember sharing a message like this while I organized a two-hour daily lesson with some other kids in my community during the pandemic in 2020. I reminded them of the acronym "TEAM," which could mean "Together Everyone Achieves More." It encouraged us all to work together to ensure that learning took place.

Through this experience and others, I have learned how to collaborate with other people to make an impact. I believe in a world where people will be willing to help one another without expecting anything in return. I see this world as one that would allow every citizen to rise and live to their full potential.

### **Lesson 2: How we lead with empathy**

For the first time in my life, I became conscious of the word “empathy” when I attended a Skill2Rural Boot Camp in September 2021 at the age of 16. It sounded strange to me at first when the facilitator explained the difference between empathy and sympathy. I learned that sympathy could simply mean to feel sorry for someone, while empathy goes beyond feeling sorry to feel what other people feel. I saw what he meant when he taught us the processes of design thinking for problem solving. He explained that empathy means putting oneself in other people’s shoes. I now understand that empathy can help one identify what the problem is, those who are being affected, why we need to help, and what to do to solve the problem.

### **Lesson 3: How we can be stronger as a collective**

In October 2021, my colleagues Balikis, Isaac, and I applied for a national competition, the Beyond School Community Challenge. We were told to identify a problem in our community and create an innovative solution to it. Several problems were highlighted, but we chose to work on building a community tech lab.

We did the presentation perfectly, and we took third place in the competition with a grant of 250,000 Nigerian nairas. It was very easy for us because we were all involved in the entire presentation. Balikis introduced the team members and presented the problem statement using her personal story. I talked about the proposed solutions and the impact of the project, while Isaac talked about the

action plan and the market strategy. In the process of executing the project, I took the role of a secretary while my teammates worked on community mobilization, the procurement of items we needed, and stakeholder engagement. Today, we have the structure built, we have two laptops, and some of our colleagues now have access to resources that improve their digital literacy skills.

One of the most beautiful things I've learned about teamwork and collective leadership is that everyone motivates each other to keep going, even when it seems like things are not working perfectly.

#### **Lesson 4: How we must all believe in young people's potential**

Over the last 16 months, I've built another level of confidence in myself as a result of meeting with the Teach For Nigeria teachers in my school, who have now become our mentors. It is one thing to believe in oneself, and it is another thing for people to believe in you. Despite all the stories they had been told about the community, they keep their beliefs so strong and recognize the potential of the students they work with.

It is ridiculous that people do not expect extraordinary things to happen in our community, just because it's a rural community with a low literacy rate. One of these teachers, Mr. Saka, keeps exposing our minds to opportunities that we can participate in beyond the classroom. He once prepared us for a national competition, where we made it to second runner-up out of about 80 schools that applied across Nigeria. I was so happy to be part of the team, and I felt another level of joy for having traveled by plane for the first time in my life. We won a seed grant to start a project in our community, and this sparked a lot of excitement among teachers, community leaders, and school heads in our education district. Everyone cel-

ebred our team as this sends a positive message about the benefits of education beyond the classroom to the entire community.

A few months later after this event, I applied for another opportunity, the Teach For All Student Leader Advisory Council (SLAC), under the guidance of my mentor and his coach. I almost forgot that I had applied until January 31, 2022, when I received an email from Wendy Kopp, congratulating me that I had been selected to be one of the eight SLAC members, out of over 140 applicants. I shared this news with my mentor, and we were so excited about it. I wouldn't have achieved this without the support of Coach Gideon, who shared the opportunity with us, and my mentors, who guided me during the application process. They edited my essays and also helped me reflect deeply on the stories I needed to share.

It took us time to share this win with people around us because we could not predict all the opportunities that it would bring to us and our community. This is another example of history made in this community, that we were invited and celebrated by the education district. People were amazed by the transformation that is happening as a result of the belief that these teachers have in us, as young people, that we can change our story for the better.

*Esther Remilekun Odekunle is a Teach For Nigeria student and member of Teach For All's Student Leader Advisory Council*



# Extreme Ownership

## Teacher Edition

EMILY NEOH GAIK KIN

**Developing the leadership we need begins with teachers taking “extreme ownership” for their students’ outcomes—even beyond what many would typically expect of teachers.**

**T**here is no other sector that is more responsible for shaping the formative years of entire generations than education. At the same time, there are very few industries in which the product of their work takes over ten years to complete and its true impact even longer to manifest.

Indeed, our ultimate goal of cultivating lifelong learners is often interrupted by short-term, cross-sectional proxies such as test scores, and by retrospective accounts such as the school leavers report that provides a snapshot of learners’ behavioral conduct and extracurricular achievements but says next to nothing about how they learn and what they need in order to thrive. Students may use these documents for important life milestones, such as applying to university or for a job. However, this pragmatic view of education often feels like a hollow mission which overshadows the kind of learning that transforms individuals from the inside out.

But what if you could peer into a more specific future and see the difficult student from your class now applying some of the knowl-

edge, skills, and attitudes from school to do great things that benefit society at large? Or that the biggest lesson a former student who works in government or business took from their education was the value of integrity that they experienced in your classroom?

These may not be data points that get measured and tracked by most teachers or schools; however, such real-world outcomes must always be in the back of our minds as reminders of why we do the work we do. More importantly, we need to step up and own these results of what goes on in our classrooms, day in and day out.

Considering how much is at stake in whether our education systems live up to their potential, I humbly posit that all educators should adopt a model of self-leadership that is characterised by two succinct but powerful words: extreme ownership.

According to retired U.S. Navy SEAL, Jocko Willink, extreme ownership is the practice of owning everything in our world to a maximal degree. It means that I am responsible for not just the actions I directly control, but also for those that affect whether or not the mission is successful. So as an educator, I am responsible for all the factors that could affect the educational outcomes of each student that I have under my charge.

What this belief translates to is, first and foremost, the discipline to consistently craft high quality learning experiences for my students so that they pick up the key knowledge, skills, and attitudes that must be fostered through their education. Similar to a warzone—where nothing can be left to chance—my limited time in the classroom means that lesson planning must be rigorous and its delivery effective.

Additionally, I must be proud to own the results and outcome of each and every lesson and to know that over time, these wins compound. Given the great number of lessons I teach over the course of a term, no one else is going to be able to hold me accountable by observing and evaluating every single one—so it is only through extreme ownership that I can continuously improve and strive for better, even when no one else is watching. It cannot be that I am only prepared to teach my best lessons when subjected to a formal observation by the school admin or inspectorate. Indeed, professional autonomy should not be something bestowed upon us by an influential external party but rather a commitment to excellence that is initiated and owned by each of us.

Of course, any teacher understands that in reality, we occasionally deliver a lesson that miserably bombs and fails to meet its learning objectives. Extreme ownership means reflecting on these moments and unearthing productive solutions and ideas for what to try next. I owe it to both my learners and myself to critically reflect on what goes on within these learning spaces in order to choose and execute the most appropriate next steps that will drive learning outcomes forward.

But what if, upon reflection, I draw blanks? This happens. When it does, it is also on me to approach a more experienced or knowledgeable teacher in the physical or virtual hallway and pick their brains. Indeed, extreme ownership in this line of work also means taking my continuous professional development seriously. While institutions like the school or the district office may be able to craft generic professional development plans for the educators under their charge, my own reflective practice helps me identify more specific gaps in my knowledge and practice. Therefore, I take the initiative to seek out opportunities to improve in my craft, knowing full well that the limits to my teaching capabilities also mean the limits of many of my learners' attainment.

Now, as heroic as extreme ownership may sound when taken up by any individual teacher, a good lesson I have learnt is that ownership is not a solo feat, but a collective one. Sometimes, when exercising the autonomy that extreme ownership espouses, there is a tendency to consider our classroom practice in isolation from the broader context of the school or community. What this often looks like in education is criticism of “interference,” and a subsequent setting aside of new whole-school visions and centralised curricula. However, this means that we omit to see how whole-school visions and national curricula can be an education community’s guiding light, founded upon larger shared contexts and with far-reaching aims for a specific school, district, or even nation. Thus, bold actions such as modifying curriculum materials need to be undergirded by sound decision-making processes, whether by an individual teacher or wider panel, that still foregrounds and champions these wider aims and aspirations. It also becomes much easier to take ownership for action stemming from a decision that has been well thought through and remains aligned to the larger goal.

These challenging times in education call for teachers to adopt and exercise the self-leadership model of extreme ownership, which will not only help learners to realise their full potential but also contribute to the fulfilment of curricular aims of the wider educational system. It is vital to note that in most cases, extreme ownership is not flamboyant showmanship but the act and discipline of consistently doing the right thing in order to move the needle on the most impactful student outcomes. Importantly, extreme ownership is freedom, in that it allows us to both earn and enjoy the professional autonomy we earnestly seek to have in our careers.

*Emily Neoh Gaik Kin is a Teach For Malaysia alumna*

# The Courage to Fly

DEWINA LEUSCHNER

**We should not wait for anyone else's permission  
to be the leaders we believe we can be.**

**A** commonly held myth is that there is not really a physical explanation for how bumblebees are able to fly. Even though this question has long since been solved, the bumblebee is a great example for two things: the first is that the concepts we work with today are limited; the second is that just because we lack a solid explanation for any given phenomenon doesn't mean the phenomenon itself does not exist.

As a student of management and entrepreneurship, leadership plays a great role in my studies. Just the fact that I'm studying leadership implies what many people assume to be clear: a leader requires certain knowledge on how to lead, and someone who lacks that knowledge, therefore, can't be a good leader. If everyone believed that, the consequences would be dire for us all, as the conclusion from that would be that children, young adults, and inexperienced people can't lead. I want to prove that the opposite is true. Leadership doesn't require anything that we don't carry with us every day anyway, and everyone can be a leader at any point in time.

I'm currently working with a student initiative called "ROCK YOUR LIFE!" that was originally founded by three university students who were aware of the inequalities in our education system and refused to stay silent any longer. The project grew larger and larger, and today,

“ROCK YOUR LIFE!” exists at many universities all across Germany and has even expanded to other European countries. At its core, “ROCK YOUR LIFE!” is a mentoring program for eighth grade students, with the purpose of closing the gap between those who already get a lot of support from their parents and those who don’t, whether for financial, language, educational, or any other reason. Every one of us has been through phases of uncertainty about possible career paths and our own strengths, including me. I’ve never participated in a project like “ROCK YOUR LIFE!” as a student, but I have always been lucky enough to have a mentor by my side when I needed it most. So I knew what it feels like not to be alone with these questions and for someone to have my back and believe in me. It is something you can’t put a price on, and it can change everything. It did for me.

Today, I am a mentor and the treasurer for the “ROCK YOUR LIFE!” chapter at my college. I have never met the three original founders of “ROCK YOUR LIFE!” and therefore, can’t say much about their prior knowledge and experience in leading a group of mentors and eighth grade students in fundraising, marketing, and events management. But I can tell you for sure that neither my colleagues nor I had much prior knowledge. We are all students—some of us pursuing a business or education major; others studying subjects with no connection to this topic at all. The reason we’re doing this is not that we feel ready to lead or know what we’re doing but because we value the sparkling eyes of the kids when they celebrate their success with their mentors more than all the reasons that could possibly hold us back. We keep going, even though we stumble along the way and even though it is not always easy, because the alternative is leaving the kids to fend for themselves—leaving them without the mentor that I had and will never stop being grateful for.

We can't accept this alternative, and therefore, we fight. We don't always know what we are doing, but we try and learn with every step and every failure, and this is how most of the "ROCK YOUR LIFE!" organizations at different colleges across Europe work. Next year, 2023, will mark the 25th anniversary of "ROCK YOUR LIFE!" and I feel that this is already proof that it works.

Wherever in the world you might be right now and whatever your knowledge and resources at hand are, when you see a need out there and have the belief in yourself and the desire to create change, then you have all you need to change the whole world upside down. There is no point in thinking about age, gender, prior knowledge, or anything else that the world could expect from you but you don't have.

Sometimes, following the paths society lays out before us to pursue its definitions of success can make the path seem easier to follow than forging your own path, but in the end, all of these concepts about success are just that: concepts in the mind of people. They have nothing to do with your actual success. So these concepts should never stop you from doing something you're passionate about or changing the world to the better. Especially not when the alternative is to keep a status quo that leaves so many behind.

No bumblebee in the world ever remained on the ground because someone told it that they can't explain how it should be able to fly. That's their problem. The bumblebee flies anyway.

All of this doesn't mean that we should not try to build up expertise on leadership. But it is not the precondition to lead. The leadership we need today is one that goes out into the world with an open mind and open heart. We need leaders who open their eyes to the needs of the world and then just do what they feel is necessary right now, without

letting themselves be held back by arguments about why they aren't good enough to lead. Even if it might look like failure to some, and even if you might feel like you're failing sometimes yourself, if you can create a spark in just one person out there, then the long walk of stumbling was worth it. Every possible action can be a step into the right direction, and sometimes, all we need to create the most-needed changes in the world is simply the courage to walk the first mile. The courage to fly.

“ROCK YOUR LIFE!” has created more than 8,500 mentoring relationships across Europe so far. What if any of the students engaged in this work had stopped because of the fear of being too young, too small, too inexperienced? It would never have created the impact it did. It would never have changed so many lives of students and their mentors.

In the end, leadership is about three things that we all have the potential to emanate: love, passion, and courage. We don't need to be taught to show these traits any more than the bumblebee needs to be taught to fly from one flower to the next. Most probably, it couldn't explain the physics behind it itself. However, it doesn't matter. The bumblebee does what it feels passionate about, and so do leaders. And just as the bumblebee never needed to ask anyone if it could fly, you don't need to ask if you can lead and succeed. Just spread your wings and fly.

*Dewina Leuschner is a Teach First Deutschland student alumna and former member of Teach For All's Student Leader Advisory Council*

# Collective and Locally Rooted Leadership in the Face of a Pandemic

**ELISA ADLER**

**Acting locally and collectively  
will enable us to overcome longer-term  
challenges beyond the pandemic.**

**W**hen most people think of “leadership”, their first thought is to think of individuals—that person who was a hero in a war, the player who made the difference in a game, a president that changed the course of an entire country’s history, the CEO who saved a company from the brink, or even an idol for a legion of fans. However, with the global impact of the new coronavirus pandemic, the world saw very clearly the limitations of this individualistic view of leadership and the need we have for leaders who act collectively, locally, and in the face of urgent challenges.

The scale of a disease that impacted all nations demanded a global joint effort of scientists. The global science community had to work in a collective manner to fight this virus. It was not about the one scientist who would find the solution alone. What humanity needed was the fastest vaccine ever, and the only way to develop it was by

sharing knowledge across national borders. Collaboration was key in the pursuit of a solution to face an urgent challenge. And the science community understood it fast.

Besides the direct health impacts of the pandemic, evidenced through the death tolls we unfortunately became accustomed to hearing about on a daily basis, the pandemic also exacerbated a whole catalog of other social challenges. This has certainly been the case in my own country of Brazil, which was already one of the most unequal countries in the world before the pandemic. The social confinement and economic crises caused by the health measures over the past two years have only aggravated this scenario. Poverty has gotten worse, unemployment has risen, and even hunger has returned to the national agenda. Education followed the same path, as unequal access and quality got worse. Private schools that educate approximately 17% of the students of the country—mostly from wealthier families—quickly found solutions to guarantee the continuity of the academic year, therefore minimizing the educational loss of their students. On the other hand, the 39 million students who attend Brazil's public schools suffered an average of one and a half years of closed schools, with few educational alternatives made available to them.

In Brazil, every state and municipality has the autonomy to determine how to implement its school calendar, as long as they offer 200 school days and a minimum of 800 class hours per year. With the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a regulation was approved allowing flexibility in school attendance but requiring proof of 800 hours of educational activities during the year, even if done remotely. Thus, each of the 26 states and thousands of municipal departments of education had to establish a content delivery strategy that could be endorsed as teaching hours. However, many municipalities were unable to find solutions due to a lack of resources or technical skills.

This scenario of education has amplified the already brutal, unequal education picture, as revealed by the declines seen on the learning index of public schools. In São Paulo, the most populous Brazilian state, the subject index for Portuguese language has slid back to 2011 levels. In mathematics, the gap seems to be even bigger. In a country that had already one of the worst positions on the PISA assessment, and which became a record holder in terms of school closure during the pandemic, local communities across the country demanded effort to ensure that the impact wasn't even worse.

Against this challenge, communities and educators needed to operate in ways that were both collaborative and rooted in deep knowledge of the places and the life conditions of the students, their families, and communities. Only then they could develop the right actions to mitigate some of the negative impacts of the pandemic on their students' education. It is against this context that teachers have united in unprecedented demonstrations of leadership. At *Ensina Brasil*, our teachers' sense of urgency has driven them to find contextual solutions.

In the first week of suspension of in-person classes, with so many uncertainties lying ahead, *Ensina Brasil* organized a hackathon which gathered around 150 people, including teachers, alumni, and members of the organization's internal team. An extensive brainstorming took place at a virtual meeting, co-creating actions that could be organized to support the students, their families, teachers, schools, and the education departments. Preliminary ideas were generated, and a working group called "The Responsibility Is Ours" was created. The group aimed to lead the prioritization and development of concrete, scalable actions to impact students across the country.

One of the initiatives successfully developed by the group focused on expanding the connection and relationships between teachers and

students. The initiative consisted of teachers making phone calls to students to engage them in a conversation focused on their well-being. The project coordination team created an open website, where teachers from any location could have access to materials and topics to guide their conversations, as well as child-safeguarding guidance and procedures for handling situations where students reported sensitive situations. Within six months, the platform served over 500 municipalities across all 26 Brazilian states, and the municipal networks of Caruaru and Petrolina, in the state of Pernambuco, adopted the project as a strategy to fight school evasion and dropout. The “Ligação do Bem” initiative was a great example of a collective project, where teachers’ deep knowledge of their students’ needs and context was the key to success.

In Maranhão, a state in the Brazilian Northeast, Ensina Brasil’s teachers realized the biggest bottleneck to implementing digital education solutions was the lack of IT skills in most public teachers. The state government entered into a partnership with Google to reach as many students as they could. However, many teachers didn’t have—or even know how to create—an email account. To promote teachers’ digital inclusion, Ensina Brasil teachers, along with the education department, created the first ever online course for teachers in Maranhão and helped them learn how to use Google’s platforms. This initiative impacted more than 2,500 teachers across the whole state.

In another Brazilian example of collective and local leadership, the department of education of the Cariacica municipality, one of the cities with the lowest human development index (HDI) score in Espírito Santo state, invited Ensina Brasil to establish a partnership for creating playful videos based on the Common National Curriculum Base skills. The purpose of the videos was to keep the students engaged during the suspension of in-person classes. This initiative involved all of our teachers who worked in the municipality and became a reference for

the entire state. One year after they started to work on the videos, the education department created a media center, led by some of these teachers. Classes started to be shown on TV in more than 20 other cities, and they were used as a tool to supplement learning even after schools reopened.

None of the three examples above mention a single name. There is no one person who was responsible for the leadership of it all. Nor was there some very bright individual who had the ideas and was responsible for making it all happen. The examples speak about the importance of lots of people united in working for a common purpose. To be locally rooted helped individuals to deeply understand the context, creating a sense of urgency about the cause they were there to solve. And it was only by having so many people working together that both the impact and scale of these initiatives were possible in the face of unprecedented challenges.

The leadership we need now is a leadership that learns from what made us strong at our weakest moments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we haven't been able to sit and wait for a heroic individual genius leader to save the day. We have solved challenges locally and collectively. As our minds begin to turn to the after-effects of this pandemic, which is still far from over, there is a lot we can learn from how we operated these past two years when we have been at our best. If we do that, it gives us hope that we can take on the entrenched and stubborn challenges facing our societies with new energy, ideas, and vigor.

*Elisa Adler is an alumna of Ensina Brasil and the Head of Public Affairs and Network Engagement*



# Trust-based Collective Leadership

## Mobilizing Through Real Connections

**ALEXANDRA VASSALLO**

**Developing the leadership we need is about  
building trust and relationships.**

*Tuesday 17th March, 2020*

“Hello... good morning, Maycol?” I’m hearing some voices speaking Quechua in the background, a language I don’t speak. So I add, “I’m Maycol’s teacher, Alexandra.” There are a lot of noises in the background, but I’m able to understand things like “Come! She is calling,” and finally a response: “Hello? I’m Maycol.”

Both of us seem nervous. My hands are sweating, and I can barely hear his voice. We were expecting to start classes in school that Monday, but we’re now talking to each other from our homes, by cellphone, more than 230 miles away, because of the lockdown. He is a student in Nuevo Progreso, located in the highlands of Ancash. I’m in Lima, on the coast of Peru.

I try to start a conversation with him and his mom, Mrs. Veronica, but the responses are usually just a yes or no. Somehow, I manage to share some things about myself and learn a bit about him:

Maycol:

- 10 years old.
- Three sisters, two of them live with him.  
Sara just finished high school.
- Mrs. Veronica stays at home to take care of the kids.  
She speaks some Spanish.
- He likes soccer and drawing.
- He is responsible for taking care of the animals.

At the end of the call, we agree to speak on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 8 a.m. I send him an activity through text message. We have a short conversation about the activity, and I tell him, whatever he needs, he can just ring or text me.

A couple weeks go by and Maycol and I are still communicating through cell phone calls. This time, we are on a call with Jesus and Kevin, two of Maycol's classmates. I notice that I'm not hearing Maycol's voice, so I ask: "Maycol, are you there? Are you able to hear us?" There is silence. After a few seconds, I hear Sara, Maycol's sister, "Maycol is crying, he got mad, he doesn't want to do anything." I try to calm Maycol but nothing works, so we give him some space.

Maycol leaves the call and immediately Kevin adds, "Don't worry, he is always like that." Kevin explains that in school, Maycol would usually cry "out of nowhere." At that point, Julia, Kevin's older

sister, joins the call: “Maycol’s father tends to be violent when he drinks and can usually be found drinking around the community.”

I can’t sleep that night, trying to figure out what has just happened. Was there anything that I said or did that triggered the situation? Has something happened at home that I wasn’t able to hear during the call?

We had several calls like this one. We would be having classes, and suddenly, Maycol would start crying. The night before every class, I felt anxious, thinking that it might happen again the next day. My heart froze at the thought of saying or doing something that would make Maycol feel bad. I felt that I was failing as a teacher.

*Tuesday 5th May, 2020*

It rings a couple of times before Maycol answers. He is in a good mood, and we talk about the weekend. It looks like we might be able to get some work done, which calms me. Maycol starts reading out loud. He reads one paragraph, and I read the next. Near the end of the text, I finish reading and say, “Maycol, it’s your turn.” No one answers, and there is a long silence again. For the first time, I hear Maycol crying in the background, and then I start crying too. “Sometimes, I feel that I can do better for you, but I don’t know how, and that makes me feel really sad,” I say.

We stay crying in silence for a few minutes until Mrs. Veronica starts sharing about the problems they are having at home with her husband and her worries about Maycol now that her daughter is moving to another community. “We will think about how to support him. We will make it together,” I add.

I hang up the call and continue crying. I'm feeling emotionally challenged. I have always been avoidant of negative emotions, and yet, this is the first time I am showing my emotions to other people. I spent all this time trying to be compassionate with Maycol, but I wasn't being compassionate with myself and my own process.

On Thursday, I call Maycol. I start the conversation sharing how I felt on Tuesday, sharing my personal story with emotions of sadness and anger. We talk and even share a few laughs. From this point forward, we start looking at each other in a more human way.

Mrs. Veronica also joins in and we reach an agreement with her: we are going to focus on Maycol's well-being. "I will put all the activities aside. I'm going to design classes just for Maycol—that way, we can work on what he needs," I say.

"How can I help?" she asks. I stay in silence for a second, and then say, "What if you join our calls as if you were another student?" She hesitates but accepts. From that moment on, trust starts growing.

By July of 2020, Mrs. Veronica decides to join Growing with Love, a program for parents that has been launched in the community. During those months, she works with Nilton, a high school teacher who has taught Maycol's sister and is aware of the family's context. Together, they work on how she can become a support and source of security for Maycol.

*Thursday 6th August, 2020*

For the past months, we have been working with a new learning approach, centered in games and expression through art. On this call, we decide to play a game that requires making funny voices

and guessing what type of animal it is. Suddenly, in the background, we hear the sound of a fart and a high-pitched voice (his sister's) yelling "Maycol!" and after that, a laugh from Maycol, and after his, our laughter. A moment that could have been embarrassing becomes a space of so much happiness and complicity between us.

We keep our calls over the next weeks, with many ups and downs, sometimes with moments of silence and anger, but always celebrating our small victories.

On one call, as we are playing a game, Maycol gets angry. "I don't want to play anymore," he says. We decide to give him some time, and a few minutes later, he gets back to the game. I realize he is, little by little, learning his own strategies to control his emotions. Speaking with him has become one of my favorite moments of the week.

*Tuesday 13th October, 2020*

I ask Maycol to draw something that makes him very happy, so it can become a refuge to which he can return to when he is sad or angry. He draws himself eating what makes him happiest: french fries cooked by his mom. He describes to me the different dips he has included with that big bowl of fries. I then share with him that I have drawn the three of us (Maycol, Mrs. Veronica, and myself) eating those fries. I make him a promise: we are going to make this drawing real.

*Into 2021*

Over the next months, the communication between us grows, as does Mrs. Veronica's relationship with him. In December, with the end of the school year, I travel to the community and we meet

in person for the first time. I enter his house and see him. On the table, there are three big bowls of french fries; we finally claim our shared promise.

During the summer of 2021, we keep in touch. In the new school year, we keep working through distance education, and Maycol also joins projects with the rest of the students.

Finally, after 260 days, we start in-person classes again, on the second floor of a church.

*Wednesday 25th August, 2021*

It's the third week of classes in the church, and it's time for a workshop that the students chose this month: English. Maycol had already participated in the workshop, but he peeks through the door and asks, "Can I come in?" He enters the classroom and starts reviewing the new words while I step out for a moment.

When I return, I see Maycol engaging with two students. "It seems hard but you just need to practice the pronunciation," he says and starts helping them. I stand by my desk, watching how confident Maycol looks. I'm feeling so proud. It has been a long road, but every step has a purpose. They practice several times until the two students finally nail it and shout "Yes!" and celebrate with a high five.



Trust was what allowed us to move forward. During the process, sometimes we needed to feel uncomfortable, but that is what enabled Maycol, Mrs. Veronica, and especially myself to grow. Also, I learned that trust requires leaving self-orientation aside, investing

time in building a relationship from a space of vulnerability, and continuing to show up every day, no matter what happens.

The leadership we need today is collective leadership, and that starts by building trust. We may need to go an extra mile, but just remember that not even 230 miles were an obstacle for Maycol and me.

*Alexandra Vassallo is an Enseña Perú alumna*



# The Leadership We Need Now Is Not a One-man Band, but an Orchestra

IDA KARLBERG GIDLUND AND SARA HEINRICH

**We need leadership fueled by  
the trust that many shoulders have the  
strength to carry us further together.**

**T**he past two years have been strange. Never before has the entire world lived through the same crisis. COVID-19 has affected us all, has isolated us. Borders were closed, so were doors to homes. Many of us have navigated an array of uncertainties and have had to adapt quickly to a new reality. Two years into coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, we can also be proud of huge successes. We managed to develop vaccines faster than would have been thought possible. Learning and collaboration were key to this success.

We are seeing increasing socio-political divides and socio-economic inequalities within and across countries. With the pandemic, access to education and learning has become even more limited for many children and young people, as schools closed. As digital solutions were implemented, inequalities in accessing learning have risen.

Since 24th February 2022, there has been war in Europe. Something that we would not have believed would happen again. Crisis follows crisis, and we need to reflect deeply on what kind of leadership we need—and have to develop—now, as parents, as citizens, as members of the Teach For All community.

While the world has been in crisis, wonderful things have happened to us privately. In May 2020, Sara gave birth to her first child. She has spent much of the pandemic reading stories to her son. One of his favourites is *The Musicians of Bremen*. Coincidentally, this tale has also been on Ida's mind lately. And it wonderfully illustrates three leadership principles that we believe to be important going forward.

Given enormous learning losses due to the pandemic as well as caused now by the war for children and young people fleeing Ukraine, we need many leaders to rise to the challenge and take responsibility to ensure educational equity for all children. This leadership needs to be built on a strong conviction that change is not only possible, but urgent, and always starts with a decision to act. Secondly, leaders need to communicate their vision in a way that inspires others and invites them to join and become part of achieving it. Finally, they need to create and hold a space in which people can come together and contribute their talents and unique experiences to achieve the shared vision.

### **The Musicians of Bremen**

The classic tale by the Brothers Grimm beautifully illustrates these three principles of effective collective leadership. The tale begins with an old donkey who has become too weak to carry heavy loads for the miller. Cruelly, the miller throws him out. The donkey does not get discouraged and seizes the opportunity to start afresh. He decides to go to the city of Bremen and become a musician. On his

way, he shares his vision and inspires a group of animals that have similarly become “useless” to their owners to join him on his journey: a dog, a cat, and a rooster. As they march to Bremen together, they pass a house that a bunch of bandits are occupying. The donkey sees an opportunity for the group to realise their vision of a better life. He has the idea to chase away the bandits by creating a scare. The dog climbs on the donkey’s shoulders, the cat gets onto the dog’s back, and the rooster flies up to stand on the cat. Together, they create a spooky monster whose spine-chilling shadow falls through the window and frightens the bandits. In combination with the intimidating cacophony of their screams, the four animal friends manage to scare away the bandits. They decide to move into the house and become musicians, sharing their talents with the animals in the surrounding forests and friendly passersby and living happily ever after.

### **One decision: hope, resilience, and agency**

Everything starts with the donkey no longer being of any use to the miller. Instead of giving up and accepting his fate, the donkey decides to realise his dream of becoming a musician. He acts on the decision by starting to walk towards Bremen. In a world in constant flux, leaders need to make decisions and act on these quickly while remaining open to new information arising that might inform their evolving approach. It probably took courage for the donkey to start his journey and to step outside his comfort zone. Nonetheless, he acts, and he acts with resilience. Driven by the strong belief that a better future is possible, he exercises his agency.

Looking more closely, it becomes apparent that a couple of pre-conditions are at work that lead to the donkey feeling capable of making up his mind and taking the first steps. He has a firm belief that a better future is possible. The Cambridge Dictionary defines

resilience as “the ability to be happy, successful, etc. again after something difficult or bad has happened.” This ability is arguably fueled by two core beliefs: the hope that a better future is possible and the conviction that every individual is resourceful and has something to offer that one can initiate by taking these first steps.

In the face of a future that many times has been described as VUCA, an acronym from the military context meaning “vulnerable, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous,” we need to be able to act before and without having all possible information. The hope that a better future is possible and that you have what is needed to take the first step are two anchors that give us the courage to decide to take the first step.

### **One vision: inspiring and engaging others**

On the way towards Bremen, the donkey shares his vision with the animals he meets: “Let’s form a band, together we can create something better than the destiny that would await us otherwise.” Donkeys are not usually associated with musicality and beautiful song, but the donkey in this story can inspire others to join him. His vision becomes a shared vision. This shared vision is so compelling that the other animals muster the courage to join and take a chance at creating a better future for each of them, together.

The donkey’s ability to inspire the animals he meets to become his companions is grounded on his friendliness, openness, and curiosity. He stops, asks questions, and listens, really seeking to understand everyone’s challenges before inviting them to come along. He also takes the time to see their strengths and talents.

Even if the challenge is urgent and the need might seem obvious, taking this time to listen and connect to others affected by a problem

is essential. For a shared vision to arise, every individual needs to feel the deep conviction of hope and resilience in themselves and actively make the decision to join into co-creating solutions.

### **Many shoulders: mutual support and encouragement**

As they pass the bandits' house, the four companions see the opportunity to make a life for themselves there instead of walking all the way to Bremen. They stand on each other's shoulders to create an imposing whole that none of them could have created by themselves. Together, they chase off the bandits. Working together from the vantage point of each animal's unique characteristics and strengths enables them to achieve something none of them could have accomplished alone.

The bandits are an unforeseen challenge on the animals' way to Bremen but also an opportunity to fulfill their vision in a different way than they originally thought. The animals do the best they can with what they have. The strength of the shared vision anchors them and enables them to spontaneously change direction.

During the pandemic, Ida has often thought back to the Teach For All conference in New Zealand in 2015, which had the motto "Further together." Being able to seek strength and rest on many shoulders makes communities resilient and agile. We can come further together when we trust the collective to seize opportunities when they arise and hold space for everyone to contribute with their unique strengths and experiences.

### **Standing on shoulders in Sweden**

Ten years ago, the founding of Teach for Sweden was one important step towards the vision that all children in Sweden can reach their learning goals and through that, become able to choose their own

future. It started with the decision to act and work for change. Along the way, we have engaged a range of stakeholders and collaborated for the sake of all children. We are positive that change is constant and that learning and knowledge are the most important assets that instill confidence in one's own agency.

To create a better future here in Sweden and globally, all children are needed. And that needs more leaders now who share one vision. Leaders who can inspire others along their way to join and find solutions to problems that threaten peace and a sustainable future on this planet. Leaders come in all shapes and forms, are of all ages and backgrounds, and can be activated when one person takes the decision to form a band.

The anchoring belief we instill in all our participants and partners is that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background or their parents' educational background, have potential. Everyone can be a leader by deciding to not accept the status-quo, by taking the first step towards change. It's the leadership that our alumnus Raoul has shown, when deciding to return to his school after the programme once a week to teach self-leadership skills and thereby turning a student elective that had mainly been used for homework support into a lesson that really can move the needle for students' future. It's the leadership of Banaz, a former student to one of our fellows who has decided to contribute to building a better education system by becoming a teacher herself. It's the leadership of Cecilia, former fellow and Teach for Sweden staff member, who decided to not accept the low mathematics results in one municipality and joined the municipality to work with teachers to improve outcomes.

The leadership we need now is not a one-man band but rather an orchestra. Or possibly a jazz ensemble. It starts with the decision

to act and work towards a better future. It finds its expression in many leaders coming together behind a shared vision. And it is fueled by the trust that many shoulders have the strength to carry us further together.

*Ida Karlberg Gidlund is CEO, and Sara Heinrich is a leadership development coach, at Teach For Sweden*

# Appendix

## About Teach For All

Teach For All is a global network of 60 independent, locally led and governed partner organizations and a global organization that works to accelerate the progress of the network. Each network partner recruits and develops promising future leaders to teach in their nations' under-resourced schools and communities and, with this foundation, to work with others, inside and outside of education, to ensure all children are able to fulfill their potential.

Learn more at [teachforall.org](https://teachforall.org)



In October 2021, the Teach For All network's global community came together for its annual global conference to reflect on the challenges of the past 18 months and explore the question, "What Leadership Do We Need Now?" Over the course of four days, staff members, teachers, alumni, students, and allies from across the network participated in dozens of sessions alongside global thought leaders who shared their experiences and perspectives on the leadership we need to rise to the challenges of our changing world.

This collection of essays is the result of the contributions of the conference's speakers and other voices from across our network, and together, it represents a call for leadership that disrupts inequity, progresses with purpose, learns and adapts, and works collectively.

Learn more about the 2021 Global Conference at [teachforall.org/2021-teach-all-global-conference-video-archive](https://teachforall.org/2021-teach-all-global-conference-video-archive)





