

**What Enables
Compassionate Leadership
& What Gets in the Way?
(*An Education Story*)**

A Discussion Paper: December 2022

Professor Kathryn Riley

Kathryn.riley@ucl.ac.uk

www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk



Setting the Scene

This discussion paper explores the contemporary challenges for today's educational leaders and asks:

What are the barriers to compassionate leadership and what enables more compassionate forms of leadership to emerge which help create the conditions for school belonging? ¹

We live in strange and often dark times. Social commentators report that disconnection, disengagement and disillusionment are in the air. Political analysts that poverty and insecurity are growing.² When the going gets tough, it's time for leaders need to hone their skills and re-appraise their approaches to leadership.

Part I of the paper draws on findings from research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the leadership of a group of headteachers of schools in England, highlighting the ways in which issues of compassion and belonging came to the fore.

Part II brings the 'story' up to date. While the immediacy of the pandemic has waned in the UK, the ramifications for young people and are only now beginning to unfold. Educational, social and economic challenges continue to grow, and equally tough times lie ahead. Given these realities, the paper draws on the lenses of compassion and belonging to examine how leaders can enact their agency to help create a road map of possibilities for young people.

I would very much welcome your thoughts on this discussion paper. Please do get in touch by the end of February 2023.

Kathryn Riley, December 2022 Kathryn.riley@ucl.ac.uk

¹ Riley, K. (2022) *Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging*. London: UCL Press. Download at <https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/171324>

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

Part I: Riding the Leadership Wobble Board

When Covid Came

In 2022, the term 'Goblin mode' was voted the Oxford Dictionary 'word' of the year. The phrase refers to a type of behaviour which is 'unapologetically self-indulgent, lazy, slovenly or greedy in a way that rejects social norms'. It has come to be used to capture the mood of individuals who reject the idea of returning to 'normal life' post Covid.³

In 2020, as Covid-19 pushed schools across the UK into lockdown, Dr Manuela Mendoza and I began a collaborative research inquiry, 'Leading in a New Era'. The social purpose of that inquiry – which involved sixteen headteachers/principals – was to gain insights into their leadership journey during Covid, while at the same time creating a space for them to share that journey with colleagues.⁴

The headteachers, from three English local authority areas, worked in different phases and types of schools. We met online over a five-month period in three locality-based groups, with discussions framed around the personal and professional issues emerging for them. Towards the end of 2020, we came together again to take stock.

Leading through the Covid-19 pandemic had taken its physical and emotional toll on these leaders. This was experienced as a sense of loss of the school as a vibrant community; grief at the deaths of staff, family members, local parents; doubts about the future. Nevertheless, there was another side to the Covid roller-coaster. This side included the many reciprocal deeds of love and compassion witnessed every day; the acts of kindness of staff and young people towards each other; the tokens of appreciation from children and families, captured in drawings and videos.

The daily reality of these headteachers was also shaped by their encounters with national government, through the Department for Education (DfE). They characterized this process of engagement as one of information overload, futile directives, lack of clarity and constantly changing priorities. They told us about the many late nights they had spent trawling through ever-changing DfE guidance and were angry about the lack of acknowledgement of their professionalism. Their interactions with the DfE differed significantly from their more enabling encounters with their local authorities.⁵

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-63857329>

⁴ Riley, K. and Mendoza, M. (2020) *Leading in a New Era: Compassionate leadership for place and belonging, A Research Inquiry*. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk.ioe-place-and-belonging-in-schools> and <https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk>

⁵ The research was sponsored by Telford and Wrekin Council and the London Boroughs of Hackney and Islington. The headteachers welcomed the support of their local authorities in tackling the Covid-19 challenges, and in 'translating' government directives into practice.

The headteachers came to conclude that the DfE's technocratic response to the Covid-19 pandemic was devoid of any vision of education; carried within it an implicit deficit model about young people; and had little to do with the social, emotional, or practical consequences of the pandemic on young people and their families.⁶ They rejected the DfE end-game narrative of 'business as usual' and were adamant that they had no intention of returning to a status quo which had failed so many young people. This rejection of 'business as usual' was far from being a 'Goblin mode' response but was their assertion of other possibilities and pathways.

As researchers, we reached two broad conclusions at this stage of the project. Firstly, that participation in an inquiry which was a group endeavour had helped this group of headteachers to build their resilience, and to recognise their own professional agency, as the extract below illustrates:

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

Secondly, that the stress and pressure of the lockdown phase of the Covid-19 epidemic had led them to affirm that, first and foremost, children and young people needed to be seen for who they are, rather than as the grades they were projected to achieve. An articulation of leadership as a moral endeavour (a dynamic ministry as others have

⁶ International evidence of the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on young people is growing. Three examples are provided here.

(i) A European-wide systemic review concluded that Covid-19 had increased young people's sense of loneliness, boredom, fear and stress.

Panchal, U., Salazar de Pablo, G., Franco, M. *et al.* (2021) The impact of COVID-19 lockdown on child and adolescent mental health: systematic review. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* (2021).

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01856-w>

(ii) Reviewing events in Australia, a team of psychologists concluded that a pressure-driven system approaches had placed little trust in teachers and had also undermined system resilience.

Nevertheless, with the right support, children could build their resilience.

Reupert, A., Greenfeld, D., May, F., Berger, E., Morris, Z.A., Allen, K., Summers, D., and Wurf, G. (2022), *COVID-19 and Australian school psychology: Qualitative perspectives for enhancing future practice.*

<https://doi.org/10.1177/01430343221091953>

(iii) Researchers examining the English school system identified a range of system-wide failures: fragmented and overstretched services; short term catch-up funding, rather than longer-term strategic investment; pressures on staff health and their sense of well-being; a testing and inspection regime in need of radical overhaul.

Moss, G., Bradbury, A., Braun, A., Duncan, S., and Levy, R. (2021), *Learning through Disruption: Using schools' experiences of Covid to build a more resilient education system*, London: UCL Institute of Education. (<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10136102/1/Learning%20Through%20Disruption%20ain%20Report.pdf>).

argued,⁷ and a highly relational and place-based activity, driven by deep wells of compassion) had begun to emerge. These leaders saw their role as making connections, bringing others on board, and providing the space for the unheard voices to be heard. The language of compassion, connectivity and belonging had come centre stage.

Coming up for Air?

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

The headteachers were looking forward to the return of students and staff. They recognised they had become proficient in ‘riding’ the leadership wobble board and reflected that they had learned to be more compassionate to themselves, and to others. The experience of the pandemic had reinforced their commitment to creating the conditions for school belonging.

In a period of profound stress and confusion, these school leaders had dug deep into their wells of compassion. They had forged stronger bonds with their local communities; built stronger relationships; and learned to recognize other important aspects of their role: such as initiating the important but sometimes difficult conversations about racism. Looking ahead, they thought it was ‘time’ to:

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

Nevertheless, they were exhausted. Their energy had gone into the Covid-19 ‘sprint’ – which they had completed in record time – they were now facing a ‘Marathon’ and balked at the implications for their time and energy. They had learned much along the way but had found little time or space to capture their learning, or to plan how to incorporate what they had learned into what was to come.

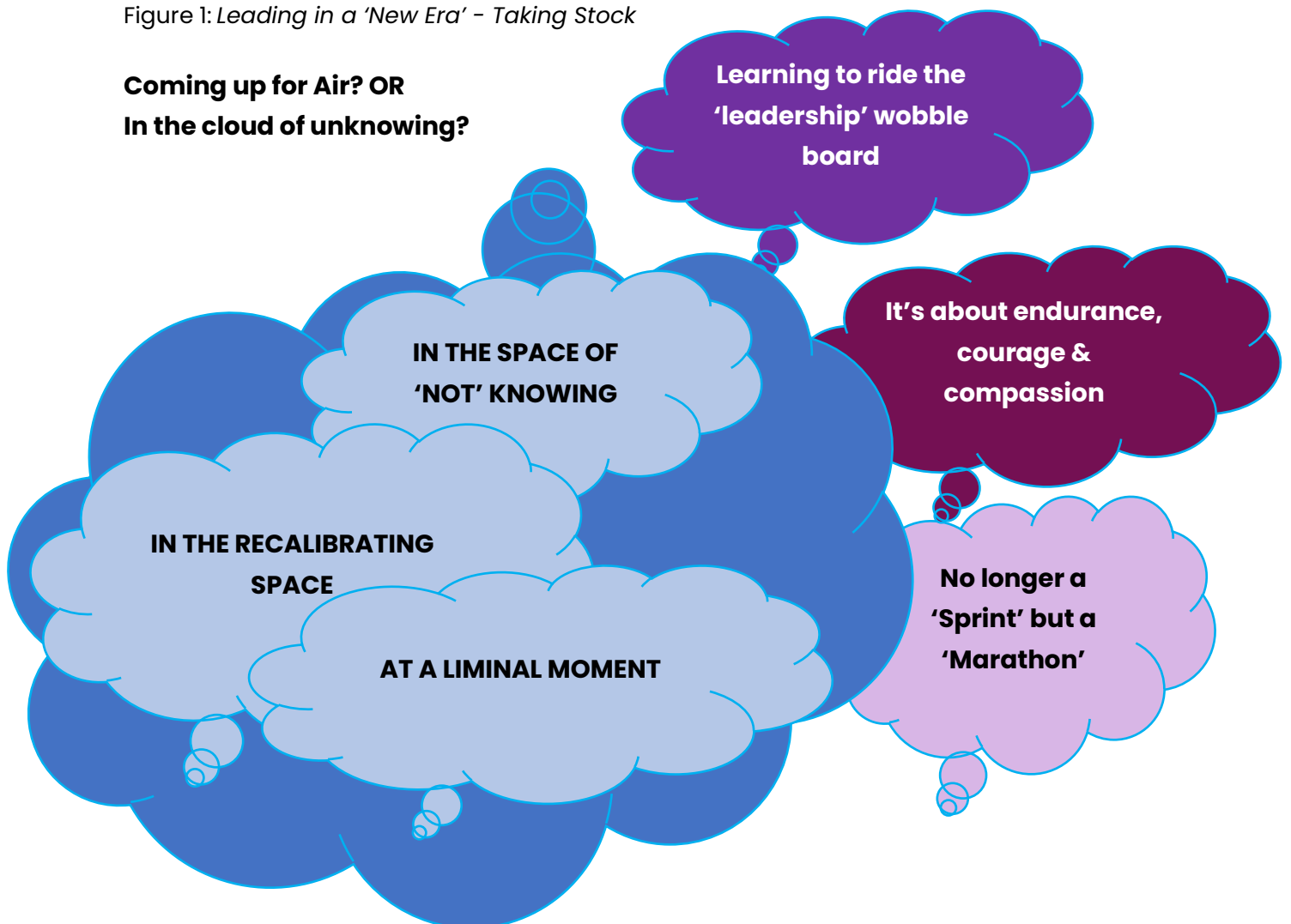
As researchers, we concluded that the pandemic sprint had taken these leaders – and no doubt many other school leaders across the Globe – into a liminal space. A liminal space is a place of disturbance and uncertainty: an in-between space of not knowing what to do next, something which many leaders struggle with. Nevertheless, liminal spaces are also spaces of ambiguity which offer the potential for new thinking, new learning and new

⁷ Smylie, M. A., Murphy, J., and Seashore Louis, K. (2020) *The Practice of Caring School Leadership*. California: Corwin Press.

practices.⁸ Figure 1: *Leading in a New Era: Taking Stock* illustrates some of the elements of this Covid-19 liminal state for the headteachers we worked with.

Figure 1: *Leading in a 'New Era' - Taking Stock*

**Coming up for Air? OR
In the cloud of unknowing?**



Learning to ride the leadership wobble board was no mean feat. The leadership sprint may have reaffirmed their core values and beliefs but how would they - and their peers elsewhere - fare during the marathon which lay ahead? The second part of this discussion paper explores what might enable school leaders to cross the leadership threshold into a re-calibrating space (of compassion and belonging) and what might get in the way. It is organised around three themes:

- *Taking stock of the past*: The contemporary challenges of exclusion, as well as the benefits of belonging.
- *Competing models of leadership*: The pressures to follow the rules from the past;
- *Letting Compassion have its Day*: The behaviours and attitudes of compassionate leaders.

⁸ The concept of liminality has been explored from a number of perspectives including psychology and spirituality, for example, in the work of the theologian, Richard Rohr.

Part II: When the Going gets even Tougher

Taking Stock of the Past

The already excluded

The concepts of belonging and compassionate leadership – as a form of leadership which helps create the conditions for school belonging – have been central to my research for some time.⁹ Drawing 1: 'I don't belong here' is taken from research carried out some years ago with young people who had been expelled from school. At the center is a small child looking distraught. The caption reads: *You're thick.. You're stupid.. You don't belong here.. Get out of my school.*¹⁰ As an abject depiction of the experience of being excluded, the image has both haunted and galvanized me.



Drawing 1: *I don't Belong Here*

Across many countries and contexts, a rapid increase in exclusion, alienation and a sense of 'not' belonging in school has led to mounting concerns about the mental health, well-being, and life chances of young people. Exclusions are growing and some – arguably those with the greatest needs – find themselves handed the ultimate 'red card' of exclusion from school. Children and young people from low-income families are four times more likely to be excluded from school than their more affluent peers.¹¹ Those from

⁹ Book publications include Riley, K: *(2013) *Leadership of Place: Stories from Schools in the US, UK and South Africa*. London: Bloomsbury. *(2017) *Place, Belonging and School Leadership: Researching to Make the Difference*. London: Bloomsbury. *(2022) *Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging*. London: UCL Press. Download at <https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/171324>

¹⁰ Original source: Riley K & Rustique-Forrester E. (2002) *Working with Disaffected Students: Why children lose interest in school and what we can do about it*. London: Chapman Sage, p 28.

¹¹ The Fair Education Alliance (2017) *Third state of the nation report card, 2016–2017*. London: The Fair Education Alliance, <http://www.faireducation.org.uk/report-card/> accessed 27/10/2017.

disadvantaged groups, such as children with special educational needs, are also disproportionately excluded from school. Racial disparities in exclusion rates are particularly acute for Black Caribbean pupils.¹²

The consequences of being excluded from school are profound for individuals, their families and for society. We know, for example, that the disaffected and excluded search for 'belongingness' elsewhere, finding it in many ways, including extremism, self-harming and gang membership and that the excluded frequently become the exploited.¹³

The outsiders looking in

Belonging and 'not' belonging are highly differentiated experiences, as research in a number of fields including psychology and the sociology of education has demonstrated¹⁴. Sociologist Carol Vincent has identified the ways in which belonging in England is shaped by a raft of inequalities - including race, ethnicity and social class - which frequently intersect.¹⁵ She draws on the work of Bridget Anderson to illustrate how national belonging has been constructed as being 'composed of people who share common ideas... and patterns of behaviour ... through their ethnicity, religion culture or language, in ways that can exclude those who do not conform to this - the migrant, the refugee, the outsider.'¹⁶

This process of becoming an outsider occurs daily. In 'People Like Us', psychologist Matthew Easterbrook points to the importance of identify, and the barriers and stigma associated with having low levels of formal education.¹⁷ If as a parent, your own school experience has been one of rejection, then your child's school may become a place of trauma and shame.

In the second of a series of Podcasts on school belonging, GP and Professor of Community Medicine Anita Berlin and Associate Professor of Criminology Janet Foster discuss the ways on which the process of stigmatization and marginalisation contributes to families seeing themselves as failures. Anita describes how she and her GP colleagues were puzzled by a steady increase in the number of mothers seeking medical help. The common trigger was traced to their encounters with the headteacher of the local school which had left them feeling they were bad parents. The impact on this groups of mothers

¹² For an overview of these issues see: Taylor, M. (2020), *Creating change for the 'pinball' kids*, RSA, London. <https://thestaffcollege.uk/publications/creating-change-for-the>

¹³ For a deeper discussion of these issues see: Riley, K. (2019) 'Agency and belonging: What transformative actions can schools take to help create a sense of place and belonging?' *Journal of Educational & Child Psychology*; 36 (4), 91-103.

¹⁴ See, for example, Reay, D. (2017) *Miseducation*. Bristol: Policy Press.

¹⁵ Vincent, C. (2022) 'Belonging in England today: Schools, race, class and policy'. *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 58(3) 324-341.

¹⁶ Anderson, B (2103) *Us and Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 2.

¹⁷ Easterbrook, M. (2022) <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/people-us>

was a downward spiral of depression, and on their children – a drop in attendance. The headteacher eventually left the school under a dark cloud.¹⁸

The newly disenfranchised

The dislocation and widening inequalities generated by the Covid-19 pandemic reinforce the importance of belonging, and the need to identify who else is becoming newly disenfranchised from being fully engaged in society. Recent research evidence indicates that young people who have already experienced the greatest disadvantages in society are also now suffering the most from the health, social and economic consequences of Covid-19.

The Prince's Trust, for example, reports that Covid has left a third of young people feeling that their life is out of control; their education and social lives have been disrupted; and their opportunities for the future restricted.¹⁹ The Children's Society has pointed out that the cost-of-living crisis is set to worsen the situation for the estimated four million children and young people living in poverty. Refugee and migrant children, young people at risk (including the growing number of young people with mental health issues) are most likely to experience the impact of this crisis.²⁰

And yet.....

A growing body of evidence, from my own research and many others, indicates that when belonging is a school's guiding principle, more young people experience a sense of connectedness and friendship, perform better academically and come to believe in themselves. Their teachers also feel more professionally fulfilled and their families more accepted.²¹ Addressing a sense of school belonging has been found to close the achievement gap by between 50- 60% and has benefits that stretch into adulthood. The presence of school belonging in adolescence is also linked to positive long-term outcomes for adult mental health and the likelihood of future education and employment opportunities.²²

¹⁸ <https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk/> (home/podcasts/Podcast 2, 'You are all in detention').

¹⁹ <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk>

²⁰ www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/impact-of-covid-19-on-young-people

²¹ This is based on findings from research undertaken for the National Education Union (NEU) reported in Riley 2022 (see note 1) and in Riley, K., Coates, M., and Allen, T. (2020) *Place and belonging in school. Why it matters today*. London: National Education Union. <https://neu.org.uk/place-belonging> and www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk

²² Allen, K. A., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J. and Waters, L. (2018) 'What Schools Need to Know about Belonging: A meta-analysis'. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30 (1), 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8>.

For insights into the practice of school belonging also see: Allen, K. A. and Kern, P. (2019) *Boosting School Belonging in Adolescents: Interventions for teachers and mental health professionals*. London: Routledge.

Competing Models of Leadership

Scanning the contemporary leadership landscape, two widely different approaches to leadership seem to be emerging. The first is not unfamiliar and is what has come to be described as a command-and-control approach, often expressed in terms of a 'zero tolerance'. The second reflects the relational and compassionate approach discussed earlier in the article, with its focus on connectivity and belonging.²³

Neuroscientists report that we are hard-wired for compassion.²⁴ In the context of the impact of Covid-19 on young people and on the ongoing issues of exclusion and alienation isn't the time ripe for education leaders to hone their compassionate leadership skills? What's getting in the way?

In an exploration of compassionate leadership in the health and care sectors, Michael West identifies the barriers and enablers to compassionate leadership.²⁵ The many barriers include - what he, and others have described as - the shackles of routines; the complexity of regulations, protocols and demands; the fear of making mistakes in organisations that are bureaucratic and demanding; the complexity and difficulty of some tasks; demanding performance targets; stress and overload. These barriers are all too familiar to the world of education.

The practice of leadership has always been a messy, uncertain and challenging one - and no more so than today. The research on leadership during Covid, presented in part I highlighted many of the pressures on school leaders. New challenges continue to emerge, such as increases in behavioural problems; deepening pressures on school budgets; growing numbers of young people living in poverty.

In these difficult times, it is understandable that across the leadership 'piste', some leaders are hesitant to go down the compassionate leadership track, anxious about the testing and inspection regimes, reluctant to leave the familiar and believing that the 'control' ski run will get them across the finishing line. Equally too, the leadership road ahead is far from easy for those headteachers who want to create schools which are spaces of

Got to <https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk/> (home/podcasts/Podcast 3, 'This is how you look. This is how you feel' to hear Kelly-Ann Allen discuss some of these important issues about what it means to belong in school.

²³ Riley, K. (2022) What's Your Model of Leadership? Does It Work - And Does It Matter? *Teaching Times* <https://www.teachingtimes.com/whats-your-model-of-...>

²⁴ <https://charterforcompassion.org/defining-and-understanding-compassion/our-brains-are-hardwired-for-compassion>

²⁵ West, M. A. (2021) *Compassionate Leadership: Sustaining Wisdom, Humanity and Presence in Health and Social Care*. The Swirling Leaf Press.

belonging and compassion yet recognise that they face the structural constraints of a strong national accountability system.

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

Letting Compassion have its Day

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



Drawing 2: *I Belong here*

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

are heard and whose are overlooked. They have the opportunity to lay the groundwork for compassion.²⁶

Compassionate leadership is needed at all levels of the education system, starting with national government: whose actions, inactions and regulations set the climate of what is expected and what is judged to be important. The local authority/municipality/local system lies at the intersection of schools and national government and through their strategic intent and leadership can have a significant impact on the expectations and beliefs about what is possible and expected in a locality. Telford and Wrekin's authority-wide school belonging strategy is one example of this.²⁷

Compassionate cultures are nurtured by leaders who behave with compassion, as Michael West has argued (25). Drawing on the experience of the health and social care sectors, he identified four behaviours which characterise compassionate leaders. These can be readily translated into the education domain as follows:

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

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

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

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

Compassionate leaders create compassionate cultures and enable the conditions for school belonging. A compassionate approach encourages ingenuity, flexibility and a 'can do' culture. The compassionate leader often demonstrates the enviable skills of an eagle: the capacity to look in two directions at the same time (the internal world of the school and the world beyond the school gates). Their vision crosses boundaries, reaches out to communities, other schools and organisations.

Compassion brings out the best in people. It helps make connections and unites us. Compassion is the superglue that binds communities together: the ingredient that has the potential to redress some of the imbalances and inequities accelerated by the Covid-19

²⁶ For a rich discussion about what it means to be a school leader today, go to <https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk/> (home/podcasts/Podcast 4, 'Zero Tolerance of a sense of Us?' and Podcast 5 'Belonging Becoming, Believing in our Global World' to hear some leading figures talking about these issues. These include Dame Mary Marsh, past headteacher and Chief Executive of the NSPCC; Jo Dibb, past Executive headteacher, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School, London; Dave McPartlin, headteacher Flakefleet School, Fleetwood; Jo Riley and pupils from Cremer Primary School, Hackney.

²⁷ Telford and Wrekin Council (2019) *Belonging Strategy*, Available at: <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=telford+and+wrekin+belongin+g+>

pandemic. Compassion brings joy to the lives of young people – and staff – creating bonds and friendships in a shared community of learners.

As I complete this discussion paper, the Winter Solstice is drawing near: the longest night and another liminal moment of uncertainty and opportunity. In reflecting on the issues I have raised in this discussion paper, as well as my original question, 'What enables compassionate leadership to emerge and what gets in the way?' I have also come to think about:

- What holds people together?
- What helps build community?
- What wise acts can 'we' (as leaders) take to help create the conditions for school belonging?

Do get in touch and let me have your thoughts on this paper.

Acknowledgments:

With many thanks to all of the headteachers involved in 'Leading in a New ERA'; their supporting local authorities; and the many contributors to the Podcast Series 'Lets Hear it for School Belonging'. Particular thanks to my co-researcher Dr Manuela Mendoza for her creativity and exemplary research skills in both these projects.

Further resources and materials

* For a range of videos, materials and podcasts (including the 'belonging/ exclusion' Rapps of Jamie Pyke and linked vivid images by Kristy Campbell) go to <https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk>

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



Professor Kathryn Riley

Kathryn Riley is Professor of Urban Education at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and with the late DancePoet, TioMolina co-founded of The Art of Possibilities. She is also an Associate of the Staff College which supports Education and Children's Services. She began her work in education as a volunteer teacher in Eritrea, later teaching in inner-city schools, before holding political office as an elected member of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and becoming a local authority chief officer.

As an international scholar whose work bridges policy and practice, Kathryn has been engaged in research, policy and development work on educational reform and school leadership, partnering with many organisations and colleagues. Her international work has included heading up the World Bank's Effective Schools and Teachers Group, as well as projects with the OECD and UNICEF. Over recent years, Kathryn has focussed on place and belonging, community collaboration and partnership, and new forms of leadership.

Kathryn has published widely. Her most recent book, 'Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging' was published by UCL Press and is available free online through UCL Press. <https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/171324>