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Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworthyeducator.com/journal.

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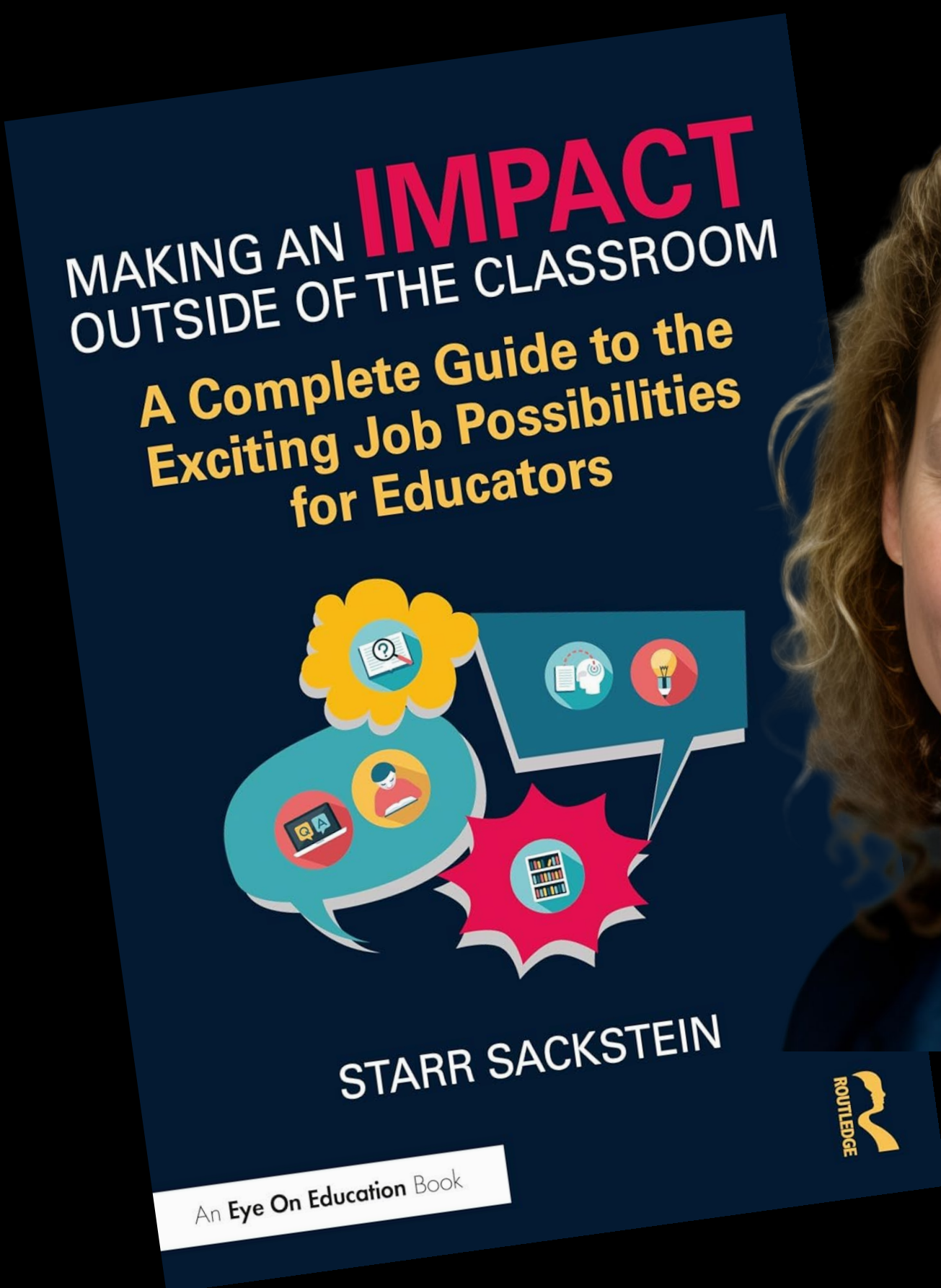
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The deadline for submissions for our Autumn 2025 issue is Monday, September 1, 2025.



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Year One of Making History!

As of July 8, 2025, The Worthy Educator has officially one year in the books, and we couldn't be more proud of everything we have accomplished. Thank you to each of you who have joined us on this journey, contributing your input, time and talents to help us establish this caring, giving community for mid-to-late career educators. We are honored to provide a safe place to come together and support each other!

Launching a new community is no small task, and launching anything in this era of static and distractions is even more of a challenge. Educators are spread thin, and it is difficult to get and keep their attention amidst everything that is going on in our schools, in our communities, and in our personal lives. Making time for wellness and self-care is a must, and making space for visioning and planning and achieving our dreams should be more than a luxury. The Worthy Educator is your home for these things and so much more.

Recently we've surpassed 500 Worthy Educators who belong to our community. We've welcomed new Champions in Education into the fold. We've wrapped up volume one (the inaugural four issues) of this flagship journal, and we have launched our EDInfluencer Microcredential offering ten modules providing the understandings, skills and supports so that you can become effective advocates for your education priorities moving forward.

We've also just announced our new partnership with the former ASCD affiliate from Illinois, soon to rebrand itself as PD 365, joining our first two proud partners, the [Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color](#) (AIELOC) and [Women in Educational Leadership](#) (WE Lead). And we are preparing our next partnership with [Transform ED](#), offering virtual leadership offerings and planning for an in-person event in 2026. We are grateful for all the connections and capacity we are building to support this community, all at no cost to you.

Core to our mission is our [champion](#) work, which provides group and individual support to educators who are striving to make meaningful impact and build a legacy which they can leave to the next generation as they conclude their careers on a high note. Tangential to this is our new [Legends](#) program, building a network of retired educators (and those educators preparing to retire) so that they remain connected as they transition out of their day jobs and find new ways to remain relevant and live vibrantly post-fulltime work.

Also new this year is the development of our [EDInfluencers](#) advocacy work. With so much going on across society and in our profession, we understand the critical importance of providing meetings, supports and resources for educators to become advocates for what is best for children, their families and our communities. Through our Town Halls, Transforming Education Panels, and now our work to build Roadmap 2030 we are crafting a vision for education beyond this era of disruption and change. If you haven't taken part yet, you're invited to dive into our media kit, advocacy alerts, action items and our soundtrack setting the movement to music. It's a true grassroots movement completely free to educators everywhere.

All of these initiatives are in response to the needs and interests you have shared with us. We don't chase dollars, we chase dreams. We embrace robust conversations where you can count on us to provide open, honest thinking. You will never be told what we think you want to hear. We are all about sharing, learning, growing, working through difficult challenges and celebrating the wins at the culmination of good, hard work.

New to all of this? Be sure to complete our [needs survey](#) and make time for a [consultation](#) where we can get to know each other and find ways for you to get involved. Also, keep an eye on our [front page](#) for ten new ways to engage with us every week. There are limitless possibilities fueled by our imaginations and our passion for the work, as well as the time and energy we commit to one another. The more you devote to our community the more you get out of it. It's an investment in yourself. No gimmicks. No surprises. Promise.

You belong here, and so do likeminded friends and colleagues. Share The Worthy Educator with them and invite them to join us on the journey. We promise to treat them with the same caring, integrity and respect you have come to know in your time with us. We love this work. Here's to a great year two ahead!



Walter McKenzie



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Learning Without Borders: Inclusion, Leadership, and Change

Mishkat Al Moumin, Ph.D., Founder and President,
The Communication of Success, Reno, Nevada



When Education Excludes

Usually, students are welcomed on their first day of school by teachers offering words of encouragement, peers exchanging nervous excitement and a sense of possibility filling the air. It should be a gateway to growth; an opportunity, not a battle. This was not my experience.

“What are all the women doing here? Go to the Nursing School now, where you belong.”

These were the first words I heard on my first day of Law School at Baghdad University. Not that there were many women in the class; we were ten among more than fifty students.

Rather than being welcomed, I was dismissed before I had even begun. The weight of tradition, societal expectations, and institutional bias hung in the room, pressing against every woman who dared to take a seat. In that moment, law school did not feel like an open door. It felt closed; an entrance that would require immense effort to pry open and keep from shutting again.

Exclusion in education is rarely about explicit rejection; more often, it is a slow erosion of confidence, a persistent undercurrent of doubt reinforced by the system itself. It is in the way professors overlook certain students, in the way peers question one’s presence, and in the subtle but unrelenting message that some voices matter more than others.

Impact on Learning Outcomes: A Universal Challenge

As a learner, I couldn’t understand the connection between gender and criminology, the topic of the hour. I also couldn’t understand the dismissive behavior of the professor. He entered the classroom without so much as a greeting, perhaps because he saw the first row full of women. Still, not greeting the class was a stark violation of a core Iraqi value. In Iraq, a greeting is not just a formality; it is a wish for well-being, an acknowledgment of presence, and a marker of respect, especially when welcoming someone into a new chapter of their life.



Did I feel like I didn’t belong? Absolutely. Did I switch gears and enroll in the Nursing School? No. Instead, I swam against the current, year after year, jumping through hoops until I completed my Ph.D. Being a woman didn’t mean I had any less appreciation for justice and fairness, nor did it mean I was any less capable of understanding or interpreting the law. But in an environment that viewed women as out of place, competence was not enough. I had to prove, over and over again, that I had the right to be there.

But as I moved forward, I watched my female classmates disappear, one by one. Each year, there were fewer of us, our presence fading like ink washed away by time. When I finally reached my Ph.D. program, I was the only woman left, surrounded by men, outnumbered in every discussion, and carrying the unspoken weight of those who had been forced to abandon the path. The silence of those absent was louder than the voices in the room. It was isolating, a constant reminder of how easily barriers could turn into walls, closing doors that should have remained open.



Leadership in education is shaped by the expectations imposed on people long before they step into a classroom. Those expectations trickle down, influencing how individuals interact and how power is distributed. During oral tests - where performance outweighed written exams - my male colleagues would always turn to me and say, *"Ladies first."* It was not an act of courtesy; they assumed that whoever went first would be given the hardest questions. My response was always the same:

"Not when facing danger."

To me, it didn't matter who went first—what mattered was passing the test. So, I prepared relentlessly, ensuring no book remained unturned. I knew that, as a woman, I would always be scrutinized more rigorously, held to a higher standard, and tested in ways my male peers were not. I refused to be caught off guard.

While my experience occurred in Iraq, exclusion in education is not bound by geography. In the U.S., students from historically marginalized groups - women in STEM, first-generation college students, students of color, and individuals with disabilities - often face similar systemic barriers. While the exclusion may not be as overt as being told to leave the classroom, it manifests in other ways: underrepresentation in leadership, limited access to mentorship, microaggressions, and implicit biases that shape classroom dynamics.

A 2021 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found that women and people of color in academia often experience a lack of belonging and recognition, slower career progression, and higher attrition rates in doctoral programs. Similarly, research from the Education Trust (Patrick et al., 2020) highlights how Black and Latino students are disproportionately excluded from advanced coursework due to implicit biases and structural barriers rather than a lack of ability.

The lesson is clear: barriers in education are not always explicit, but they are deeply ingrained in systems and perceptions. Whether in Iraq or the U.S., students who do not fit traditional expectations are often made to feel like they do not belong. And when students feel they do not belong, it affects not only their performance but also their willingness to persist.

The cost of exclusion is profound, not just for individuals but for society as a whole. Every student pushed out of academia is a lost opportunity for innovation, leadership, and meaningful contributions. The challenge, then, is not simply to grant access to education but to create environments where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

From Exclusion to Transformation

My learning experience shaped my approach to transformative learning, an educational philosophy that goes beyond the classroom to create meaningful, relevant experiences for each learner. I knew that education should do more than transfer knowledge. It should challenge assumptions, foster critical thinking, and provide students with the tools to navigate real-world complexities. Learning should not be passive; it should break barriers, empower, and transform.

Transformative learning is not about simply relaying information; it is about reimagining how knowledge is acquired and applied. It is about recognizing the barriers that students face and finding ways to dismantle them. It is about making education not just accessible, but engaging, reflective, and, above all, relevant.

This philosophy became the foundation of my leadership in education. I sought to take learning beyond textbooks, designing environments where students engaged with knowledge in ways that connected to their lived realities. Whether teaching law in Iraq, Arabic at the Defense Language Institute, or civic education at the United States Institute of Peace, my mission remained the same: to ensure that learning was not just an academic exercise but a force for lasting change.

Exclusion in education is not just about who is denied access, but about who is made to feel like they do not belong. True leadership in education is not just about ensuring students are present; it is about ensuring they are seen, heard, and empowered to succeed.



Educational Identity

I never perceived myself as the sole holder of knowledge or the dictator of how learning should transpire, even though I had lived under a dictatorship. As an educator, my role has always been to facilitate learning, not to impose it.

Learning is like abstract art - each viewer interprets it differently, yet all acknowledge it as art. Similarly, education should not be confined to rigid structures; it should be dynamic, evolving based on the perspectives, experiences, and needs of learners. True learning is not about memorizing facts but about **challenging assumptions, fostering critical thinking, and equipping students with the tools to navigate real-world complexities.**

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Breaking the Cycle: Lessons from Exclusion in Education

- ❖ Exclusion is not always overt; it is often systemic and gradual. Being dismissed outright was painful, but what was more damaging was the slow disappearance of my female classmates, a reminder that exclusion is often structural. In the U.S., this is reflected in the lack of diversity in advanced academic programs and leadership roles, where students from marginalized backgrounds are systematically underrepresented.
- ❖ Access to education is not enough, belonging matters. It is not just about who is admitted but about who is made to feel they have a right to be there. In both Iraq and the U.S., underrepresented students face higher attrition rates due to a lack of mentorship, implicit bias, and systemic disadvantages.
- ❖ Educational barriers are often imposed long before students even enter the classroom. Expectations, both societal and institutional, shape who is encouraged to persist and who is expected to walk away. From early tracking in K-12 education to biases in higher education admissions and funding, these barriers affect students' opportunities long before they reach college.

Teaching Beyond the Textbook



Over time, my journey shifted from fighting for legitimacy as a student to shaping education as a faculty member. I found myself on the other side of the classroom, not as a learner seeking validation, but as an educator redefining learning.

As a faculty member, I faced a unique challenge: teaching one of the most resented subjects: legal English. My students dismissed it as irrelevant to their careers, convinced they would never need English in their legal work. And in truth, who could blame them? The textbook I was expected to use dated back to 1920, outdated, disconnected, and uninspiring. Many of my students were directors and managers pursuing degrees to advance their careers; to them, English felt like an unnecessary hurdle rather than a tool for growth.

But education is not about memorization; it's about engagement. As an educator, you cannot inspire learning if you yourself are uninspired. Teaching is not about delivering rehearsed lines; it is about creating meaningful connections between content and students' realities. I was reminded of this when I audited a course in the U.S. where the professor rehearsed not just the material but even the jokes. I attended the same class twice, expecting new insights, only to realize that everything – right down to the humor – was memorized to the letter. It was a performance, not a lesson.

Leadership in education is not about following a script; it is about questioning, adapting, and creating relevance where it seems lacking. I refused to rely on an obsolete book, just as I refused to see my students as passive recipients of knowledge. Instead of assuming they were only after a degree and not true learning, I sought to connect with them, not through judgment, but through relevance.

To do so, I selected a subject that was directly applicable to their daily work: contracts. Contracts were an essential part of their professional responsibilities, and by starting with what they knew, I introduced what they needed to learn. Establishing relatability is key to advancing learning. Once my students saw the connection between English and their professional success, their resistance faded. They didn't just advance their careers; they truly learned.

The resistance I faced wasn't just from the system; it was from the very people I was trying to empower. But over time, something shifted. By meeting students where they were, making learning relevant, and challenging rigid instructional methods, I saw engagement transform. That moment taught me a fundamental leadership lesson: credibility isn't granted; it's built through persistence, adaptability, and breaking the status quo.

Bridging Language, Trauma, and Learning at the Defense Language Institute

Years later, I carried this lesson with me to the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, California, where I taught Arabic to military students. Teaching at DLI presented a unique challenge - one that extended far beyond language proficiency. Many of my students arrived injured or traumatized from their deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their battlefield experiences shaped how they perceived the language and culture, sometimes making the learning process an emotional battleground rather than an academic endeavor.

Perhaps being assigned to a demanding language program didn't help matters. Learners at DLI don't choose their languages - languages choose them. The Department of Defense determines language assignments based on operational needs, meaning that a student could be studying Arabic, Chinese, or Pashto without any personal interest or cultural connection to it. This created an uphill battle for engagement, especially when the chosen language carried deep personal or political associations for the learner.

I had to find a way to make Arabic more than just a mandatory subject. It had to become an experience. I turned to creativity, cultural immersion, and unexpected methods to break through resistance.

To make learning engaging, I used Detective Conan, a well-known and widely loved anime. Instead of tedious grammar drills, students had to watch an episode, identify the killer in Arabic, and justify their choice using evidence and reasoning. I spent every free hour selecting images, associating difficult vocabulary with visuals, and crafting learning experiences that made Arabic feel less like an obligation and more like a tool for meaningful communication. I wrote a soap opera in Arabic, introducing narrative-driven learning that made language acquisition feel natural rather than forced. Establishing connection and relatability was key.



But some of my most effective techniques were tied to the senses. Every Friday, I brewed freshly made Iraqi tea with cardamom, serving it from my traditional Iraqi tea set with small silver spoons. Alongside the tea, I brought *klich*a date-stuffed cookies served in every Iraqi home during celebrations. This simple ritual transformed our classroom into a space of comfort, a bridge between cultures where learning became intertwined with personal experience.

Then came the talent show. Students who had spent months immersed in Arabic culture and vocabulary performed skits, songs, and storytelling, demonstrating not just language proficiency but a personal connection to the subject. Through laughter, shared experiences, and the joy of creativity, Arabic became more than just an assigned language, it became part of their identity.

Adapting to Virtual Learning: The Challenge of COVID-19

But the real test of teaching came during COVID-19. Transitioning overnight from in-person to virtual instruction was challenging; how to create engagement, provide meaningful feedback, and move beyond simply sharing PowerPoint slides or textbook readings?

So, I did what I do best: research. I searched for platforms that could offer real-time virtual engagement, and I discovered Nearpod, a tool that allowed instructors to create interactive lessons, engage students in real time, and provide immediate feedback.

With Nearpod, I could take students on virtual visits to Babylon and Ancient Egypt, immersing them in history while teaching Arabic. The platform also enabled interactive writing exercises, where students could practice Arabic script in a way that felt dynamic and personalized.

Years later, when I served as the Managing Academic Director at the National Judicial College, I applied the same principles, designing eleven learning modules using Nearpod to engage judges nationwide in a self-paced, interactive learning experience. The lessons I learned from transitioning to virtual teaching during the pandemic shaped my ability to design effective digital education for professionals at the highest levels.



Lessons Learned: Bridging Language, Culture, and Engagement

- ❖ Cultural immersion fosters deeper learning. When students experience a language beyond the textbook - through storytelling, sensory engagement, and real-world applications - they connect with the subject matter on a personal level.
- ❖ Relatability is key to breaking learning barriers. Students at DLI struggled not because of ability, but because they lacked emotional and practical connections to the language. When I made Arabic relevant to their experiences, their engagement transformed.
- ❖ Education must adapt to challenges, not resist them. Whether teaching in a high-pressure military setting or transitioning to online learning during COVID-19, success comes from rethinking how knowledge is delivered and ensuring it remains interactive, engaging, and impactful.



Dr. Al Moumin and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton discussing assisting Iraq's environmental challenges, October 7, 2004

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Dr. Mishkat Al Moumin is a thought leader in education, environmental advocacy, and leadership development. As the Founder and President of The Communication of Success, she advances transformative learning strategies that drive measurable impact. A Brand Ambassador for Quarantine Racism, she advocates for racial equity and inclusive leadership.



Worthy quotes to sustain us on the journey,
posted weekly for educators everywhere.

*"You could rattle the stars," she whispered.
'You could do anything, if only you dared.
And deep down, you know it, too.
That's what scares you most."*

-Sarah J. Maas





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Beyond Authority: The Rise of Moral, Adaptive, and Transformative Leadership in Education

Javeria Rana, M.A., M.Ed., M.Phil., Academic Director of Unique International Educational Services and CEO of Café Learning, Lahore, Pakistan

In today's dynamic and uncertain educational landscape, leadership can no longer be defined by positional power or procedural control. The old model - centered on hierarchy, compliance, and command - is rapidly eroding. In its place, a new vision is emerging: one grounded not in authority, but in authenticity, values, and vision. We are entering an era where moral courage, adaptive intelligence, and transformative thinking are not optional - they are essential.

As Director Academics at UIES, leading academic direction for over 500 schools across diverse communities, and as a global thought leader with platforms such as The Global Schools Program and Scientix, I have come to see leadership not as a title, but as a **moral obligation**. In the face of global challenges - climate change, inequality, displacement, technological disruption - education leaders are called to be both architects and activists. I have sat in policy rooms, teacher lounges, and rural classrooms - and in each setting, I've seen one truth repeat itself: **systems do not transform unless leaders do**.

The urgency of this transformation is underscored by the rapid rise of emerging technologies, especially artificial intelligence (AI). AI is not just reshaping how students learn - it is reshaping what it means to teach, lead, and serve. We must now ask: How can leaders harness AI to **amplify human potential rather than automate it out**? How can technology be used not merely to replicate outdated systems, but to **reimagine** education as a more equitable, personalized, and globally connected endeavor?

This article explores the **moral imperatives, adaptive capacities, and visionary practices** that define the new wave of leadership in education. Grounded in current research and lived experience, it offers practical insights for educators who are not content with incremental change. This is for those ready to lead forward - with compassion, clarity, and courage.

The Moral Compass: Leading with Integrity and Empathy

In times of volatility, the true test of leadership is not in how loudly one commands, but in how deeply one listens. Moral leadership begins with an unwavering commitment to equity, dignity, and inclusion (Shields, 2010). In today's education systems - marked by uncertainty, socio-political disruption, and rapid technological acceleration - these values are not just ethical ideals; they are non-negotiable imperatives.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as school closures disrupted learning across the world, I vividly recall how we, at UIES, reframed crisis as an opportunity to lead differently. Instead of issuing top-down directives, my team and I convened community circles - bringing together teachers, parents, and even student representatives to shape adaptive, contextually rooted solutions. In rural districts with limited digital access, we co-created low-tech learning packs. In urban schools, we experimented with flexible schedules and peer-to-peer support. These decisions were not made in boardrooms - they were made through listening, empathy, and shared responsibility. And the result? Trust deepened. Morale stabilized. Learning continued.

Moral leadership, in essence, is about showing up - not just as administrators, but as ethical stewards of futures. It demands the courage to confront inequity, to challenge policies that exclude, and to reimagine systems where no learner is left behind. This aligns with the vision of UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2020), which calls on educational leaders to prioritize inclusive, equitable environments that empower all learners.



But let us be clear: this is not soft leadership. It is deeply political, often uncomfortable, and always human. It requires school heads to not only advocate for marginalized communities but also to embed compassion into budgeting, policy, and curriculum decisions. As Fullan (2014) asserts, such leadership nurtures the kind of collaborative resilience that education ecosystems desperately need.

Leadership anchored in moral clarity is not just about what is right - it's about doing what is difficult, necessary, and transformative. In my experience, when decisions are made through the lens of human dignity, the ripple effect is generational. Classrooms become more inclusive. Teachers feel heard. Parents become partners. And most importantly, children believe in the promise of education again.

Adaptive Leadership: Navigating Complexity with Agility

In today's education ecosystem - marked by accelerating change, ambiguity, and disruption - adaptive leadership is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity. Static, hierarchical models have proven insufficient in responding to the fluid realities educators face. Instead, leadership in the 21st century demands intellectual humility, emotional sensitivity, and most critically, adaptability. As Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) assert, adaptive leadership is about mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive amidst uncertainty.

In my role as Director Academics at UIES, leading a vast network of over 500 schools, adaptability is not a theoretical concept - it is daily praxis. During our transition to competency-based learning, we didn't rely on top-down directives. Instead, I initiated distributed leadership through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), enabling teachers to co-create, experiment, and iterate strategies like cooperative learning, project-based pedagogy, and digital formative assessment tools. Not all pilots succeeded - but that was the point. Adaptive leadership embraces failure as data. We evolved together, recalibrating our strategies through collective reflection, local context awareness, and continuous feedback loops.



What we're witnessing is the rise of a new kind of intelligence - **AQ: the Adaptability Quotient** - as a game-changer for leadership. For too long, we revered IQ (intelligence) and EQ (emotional intelligence) as the golden standards. But in a world where change is the only constant, it is AQ - the ability to pivot, learn, unlearn, and relearn - that defines a resilient leader. Adaptive leaders build AQ within their organizations by shifting from a culture of compliance to one of curiosity.

In my leadership journey, I've encouraged teachers to become "learning designers" rather than mere curriculum deliverers. We've fostered a mindset where uncertainty is not feared but embraced - a signal that innovation is possible. This has involved radical trust by giving educators space to innovate, fail forward, and co-own the future of learning. As Wheatley (2011) emphasized, the role of leaders is no longer to direct but to create the conditions in which people can thrive in complexity.

Looking ahead, adaptive leadership must harness emerging technologies - like AI - not as threats but as co-pilots and thought partners in learning transformation. I proudly made Chat GPT co-author of my two research articles. It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will thrive, but those most responsive to change. And in that, adaptability is no longer optional - it's foundational.

Transformative Leadership: Shaping the Future of Education with Vision and Innovation

True transformation in education begins not with tools, but with imagination - leadership that dares to ask: *What kind of world are we preparing learners for, and who must we become as educators to meet that future?* Transformative leadership is not a fixed identity - it is a commitment to reinventing education with vision, courage, and innovation at its core.

In an age marked by exponential technological shifts and socio-cultural redefinitions, the classroom is no longer just a physical space - it is a launchpad for global citizenship. Artificial Intelligence, EdTech, and data-driven personalization are no longer add-ons; they are architectural tools in redesigning learning for relevance and equity. As Director Academics for a vast school network in Pakistan, I've led initiatives where AI-powered platforms enhanced language acquisition, supported real-time formative feedback, and even flagged disengagement before it took root. These innovations did not diminish the role of teachers - they magnified it. By relieving educators of repetitive administrative tasks, we freed their time and minds to do what they do best: inspire, guide, and humanize learning.

This, I believe, is the litmus test of ethical innovation - does it deepen human connection or replace it? As Holmes et al. (2019) contend, AI must serve as a collaborator, not a competitor. But leadership must be vigilant. The promise of technology must be tempered with ethical foresight. We must champion data sovereignty, question algorithmic design, and ensure that teacher agency remains non-negotiable (Eubanks, 2018).

“What kind of world are we preparing learners for, and who must we become as educators to meet that future?”

At the heart of transformative leadership lies anticipatory thinking where we do not wait for the future to arrive; we prototype it. I often encourage school leaders and policy stakeholders in my network to embrace “future literacy,” not just in terms of technology, but also as a mindset that welcomes complexity, embraces paradox, and aligns innovation with moral purpose.

AI has tremendous potential to foster educational equity - identifying learner needs in real time, enabling differentiated instruction at scale, and flagging emotional or behavioral patterns early (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2018) however, we must lead with intentionality as innovation without inclusion is simply exclusion by design.



Moreover, in the post-IQ and EQ era, **AQ - Adaptability Quotient** - is becoming the new intelligence that defines success. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, transformative leaders must not only model AQ themselves but must also design ecosystems that cultivate it in learners and staff alike. In my journey, embedding design thinking and interdisciplinary project-based learning in classrooms across the network catalyzed this shift. Students learned to fail forward, teachers became co-researchers, and leadership evolved from a role to a relationship.

In essence, transformative leadership is about bridging the possible with the purposeful. It dares to reimagine schooling not as preparation for the known, but as a crucible for shaping ethical, adaptive, and creative global citizens - ready not just to survive the future, but to lead it.

Global Frameworks Guiding Transformative Leadership

Transformative leadership in education cannot exist in isolation; it must be deliberately aligned with and inspired by global frameworks that envision a more just, inclusive, and future-ready world. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which champions inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all, is not merely a policy directive - it is a moral imperative that resonates profoundly with my work overseeing a vast network of schools. This global vision challenges leaders to embed equity at every level, ensuring that education is not a privilege for the few but a foundational right accessible to every learner, regardless of background or circumstance (United Nations, 2015).



Beyond equity, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) pushes educational leadership to cultivate 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy (OECD, 2018). These competencies are the lifeblood of a future workforce navigating complexity and uncertainty. As a leader, I have prioritized systemic changes that transform classrooms into incubators of innovation - where teachers are empowered to move beyond rote instruction and instead cultivate learner autonomy and problem-solving prowess.

UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative further expands this vision, framing education as a “common good” and calling on leaders to rethink entrenched power structures, placing learner agency and cultural relevance at the heart of curricular design (UNESCO, 2021). This means leadership is no longer about top-down directives but participatory engagement, elevating educator voices and community partnerships. In my experience, this approach fosters a vibrant ecosystem where culturally relevant curricula are co-created, amplifying learners’ identities and preparing them to be global citizens who engage ethically and innovatively with the world.

Ultimately, transformative leadership guided by these frameworks demands a balance between global vision and local contextualization - a harmonization of universal aspirations with the unique cultural, social, and economic realities of each community served.

Elevating Educator Agency and Voice: Fueling a Profession that Leads the Future

Educator agency is no longer a luxury - it is the cornerstone of transformation in 21st-century education. It refers not merely to autonomy in instructional choices, but to a deeper, systemic empowerment that positions teachers as co-designers of learning ecosystems, policy influencers, and architects of equity (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). In my journey leading over a large network of private and public schools and engaging globally as an education advocate, I have learned that authentic change begins not with directives, but with listening - to teachers, their lived experiences, and their visions for the future.



That is why we launched **teacher-led innovation labs** across our network - safe, creative spaces where educators could lead research, test context-specific strategies, and mentor peers. One teacher, Amina, used her lab to reimagine assessment in multilingual classrooms, combining peer feedback and AI-driven formative tools. Her success didn't emerge from top-down planning - it emerged from being trusted.

This ethos of trust and empowerment resonates powerfully with **The Worthy Educator's Twelve Principles** (*Principles of educator agency and efficacy*, 2024), which offer a comprehensive framework for educator agency and efficacy. These principles are not abstract ideals - they are actionable imperatives. Let's break them down with the urgency and reverence they deserve:

- ✓ **Vision** – Educators must be invited to co-create the future of education in a world shaped by AI, climate uncertainty, and global interdependence. We are not implementers - we are architects.
- ✓ **Impact** – Leaders must value the diverse, lifelong contributions of teachers beyond standard metrics, recognizing that one inspired educator can transform generations.
- ✓ **Growth** – Instead of one-off workshops, we need learning cultures - ongoing, collaborative, inquiry-driven professional development embedded in daily work.
- ✓ **Dignity** – No teacher should have to compromise their personal or professional integrity to do their job. Honor and humanity must frame every system and policy.
- ✓ **Passion** – Let us rekindle why teachers chose this calling. Bureaucracy must never eclipse purpose.
- ✓ **Support** – It's time to invest in the whole educator - mental health, time, space to think and breathe - not just in their instructional tools.
- ✓ **Respect** – Teachers deserve the same public esteem we accord other nation-builders. They are not merely civil servants - they are civic visionaries.
- ✓ **Integrity** – Commercial and political interests must never exploit education. Educators must be protected from policy experiments driven by agendas rather than evidence.
- ✓ **Wellness** – Educator burnout is not inevitable - it is a symptom of systemic neglect. Thriving teachers build thriving societies.
- ✓ **Innovation** – Educators must be empowered to take pedagogical risks, try bold ideas, and lead change without fear of failure.
- ✓ **Recognition** – A culture of gratitude must replace silence. We must celebrate educator growth just as we celebrate student progress.



These principles are not theoretical - they are lived truths I witness every day. In Pakistan, in Finland, in Ghana, in North America when teachers are heard, supported, and celebrated, they transcend their roles. They become designers of futures, mentors of ethical citizenship, and champions of learner agency.



As leaders, we must hold ourselves accountable to these principles. If we want transformative, inclusive, and future-ready education, we must **elevate the profession from within**. That begins by making sure every educator is not just surviving - but thriving, leading, and shaping what comes next.

Action Steps for Educational Leaders

1. **Center Ethical Leadership in System Design**
Institutionalize moral leadership by embedding principles of equity, empathy, and human dignity into educational policies and school culture - drawing from UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring frameworks and SDG 4 commitments.
2. **Build Agile and Adaptive Learning Ecosystems**
Establish systems that prioritize adaptability over rigidity. Encourage continuous cycles of inquiry, reflection, and iteration among all stakeholders, guided by Heifetz's adaptive leadership model and supported by Wheatley's principles of resilient systems thinking.
3. **Harness AI and EdTech with Purpose and Ethics**
Adopt emerging technologies that enable differentiated learning, real-time formative feedback, and data-informed decision-making - while upholding ethical governance, digital equity, and algorithmic transparency (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2018; Eubanks, 2018).
4. **Institutionalize Educator Agency and Professional Efficacy**
Redesign school leadership structures to center teacher autonomy, recognition, and voice, aligned with the Worthy Educator Principles - especially around vision, growth, wellness, and innovation.
5. **Reimagine Stakeholder Engagement as Co-Leadership**
Move beyond traditional consultation to participatory co-design with students, families, and community partners - amplifying civic agency, contextual knowledge, and collective ownership of learning pathways.
6. **Localize Global Frameworks with Intentionality**
Align school improvement strategies with international benchmarks such as the OECD Learning Compass and UNESCO's Futures of Education - translating global competencies into culturally grounded, future-ready learning models.



Conclusion: A Call to Transformative Leadership

The future of education belongs to those who lead not with titles, but with truth. Authority alone is no longer enough - it is moral conviction, adaptive intelligence, and transformative foresight that will define the next generation of leadership. In a world shaped by digital acceleration, climate urgency, and sociopolitical upheaval, our role as education leaders is not to preserve systems but to reimagine them.

We must lead with empathy, integrity, and an unwavering commitment to equity. We must design learning ecosystems that are responsive, inclusive, and deeply human - even as they embrace the power of AI and emerging technologies. The educators we serve are not cogs in a bureaucratic machine; they are architects of possibility. The learners we guide are not vessels to be filled, but agents of change for a world we cannot yet fully see.

In my own journey of championing teacher voice on global platforms, and standing at the intersection of tradition and transformation - I've come to believe this truth: real leadership begins where certainty ends. It begins in the uncomfortable, the untested, the uncertain. It begins in the choice to act boldly even when the outcome is unclear.

To every education leader reading this: the future is not waiting. It is being shaped by the conversations we hold, the risks we take, and the values we live. Step forward not as a manager of systems, but as a steward of futures. Because leadership in education is not about controlling the present - it's about courageously constructing what comes next.

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Principles of Educator Agency and Efficacy: Recognition



12 Principles

1 Goal

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What It Means to be a 100% Principal

Robyn Jackson, Ph.D., CEO of Buildership University and creator of the Buildership® Model, Washington, D.C.



For years, we've been trained to accept less.

We've been told to set "realistic" goals and settle for incremental progress instead of demanding 100% student success. We've been conditioned to celebrate marginal gains - a few more students reading on grade level, a small dip in discipline referrals, a slight bump in graduation rates - while quietly lowering our expectations for the students who still aren't making it.

We've been taught to set "achievable" targets instead of chasing what we know is possible.

And worst of all, we've been led to believe that 100% success is a fantasy - something nice to talk about in the generic vision statements we write, but impossible to realize in our schools.

That's the way leadership has always worked. That's the way we were trained to lead. And that's why so many schools remain stuck in an endless cycle of small improvements that never quite add up to the success we envisioned when we first stepped into this role.

But what if we refused to play by those rules?

What if instead of assuming that some students just won't make it, we committed to figuring out exactly what it takes to help every single student succeed. What if we then actually built the systems to make it happen?

That's what it means to be a 100% Principal.

A 100% Principal isn't just someone who believes that all students *deserve* success. They believe, fiercely, unapologetically, and unshakably, that every single student in their school can succeed. And they honestly believe that it's possible to build a school where that success for every student is inevitable.

That one belief changes everything.

Because once you allow yourself to believe that 100% success is possible, you stop making excuses. You stop settling for "better than last year." You stop managing degrees of failure and start building 100% success. You stop wasting time reacting to problems and start building the kind of school where success isn't just a platitude - it's a promise.

But here's the challenge: Most of us weren't trained to think this way.



The Three Big Lies That Keep Principals Stuck in Incremental Growth

For years, we've been operating under a leadership mindset that encourages cautious optimism at best and quiet resignation at worst. We've been taught to work within a broken system rather than repair and rebuild it. We've been conditioned to celebrate incremental progress because we were never given the tools (or the permission) to pursue 100% success.

If you're like most principals, you didn't step into this role just to "keep things running." You became a principal because you wanted to make a real difference. You wanted to create a school where every student thrives, where teachers are fully invested in the work, and where success is the norm. But somewhere along the way, you got stuck.

Not because you aren't working hard enough. Not because you don't care. But because you've been sold a set of lies - beliefs so ingrained in traditional leadership training that they feel like the truth.

These lies keep us locked in a cycle of small, incremental improvements instead of the bold, transformational success we dream of creating. They convince you to settle for "better than last year" instead of building a school where success is guaranteed for every single student.

If you want to become a 100% Principal, you first have to recognize - and reject - these lies. Let's break them down.

Lie #1: "Some Students Just Won't Make It"

This is the most dangerous lie in education, and it's one most principals don't even realize they've internalized.

No one says they believe it out loud. In fact, if asked directly, every principal would insist that they want all students to succeed. But look at how schools actually operate.

- We set "realistic" goals - 80% reading proficiency, 85% graduation rates - meaning that we are *planning* for some students to fail.
- We talk about "hard-to-reach students" as if it's inevitable that some kids will slip through the cracks.
- We accept that special education students, English language learners, or students from challenging backgrounds will struggle more, rather than questioning why our systems aren't designed to fully support them.

The unspoken assumption? Some students just won't make it.

This is leadership thinking, and it's what keeps principals stuck in incremental progress. When you believe that some students will succeed while others will struggle no matter what you do, you stop looking for real solutions. You start focusing on tweaking the system and making things a little better instead of building a school that works for everyone.

A 100% Principal doesn't fall for this lie.

Instead, 100% Principals make a radical, unshakable commitment:

➤ *Every single student in this school will succeed. Period.*

This belief forces you to stop looking at failure as inevitable and start identifying and eliminating the barriers that keep students from succeeding. It forces you to stop making excuses for why certain kids struggle and start building the systems that ensure they thrive.

It's not easy. It requires a complete mindset shift. But once you break free from this lie, you'll never see your school or your role the same way again.

It's not easy. It requires a complete mindset shift. But once you break free from this lie, you'll never see your school - or your role - the same way again.

Because when you finally allow yourself to believe that 100% success is possible, something unexpected happens.

And that's when a deeper fear starts to creep in.

Even if you believe 100% success is possible...even if you're willing to challenge everything you've been taught...

You may still find yourself asking, *"But at what cost?"*

That question leads us to Lie #2.



Lie #2: "Even If It Were Possible, It's Not Worth It"

Most principals don't reject the idea of 100% success because they don't care enough. They reject it because they believe it would break them and their staff to even try.

They've seen what happens when ambitious district initiatives demand huge results with little support. They've watched teachers struggle under the weight of one more mandate, one more accountability measure, one more impossible goal.

So when they hear about 100% success, they assume it means:

- **Perfection.** Every student getting straight A's, no discipline issues, no failures - an impossible, exhausting standard.
- **Pushing harder.** More PDs, more observations, more stress - on top of an already overwhelming workload.
- **More resistance.** Teachers burning out, students tuning out, staff resenting the relentless pressure to do more.

So they quietly settle for incremental improvements instead. But here's the truth:

➤ *Pursuing 100% doesn't require more effort. It just ensures your effort actually leads somewhere.*

You see, you're already working hard. Your teachers are already working hard.

So your problem isn't effort. Your real problem it's that so much of that effort is wasted on solving the same problems over and over again.



Chasing incremental goals still takes everything you've got. It's just that all that effort never feels like it's enough.

You're constantly putting out fires, plugging leaks, patching holes.

And every year, despite all that effort, the same issues keep coming back.

It's like playing one giant game of whack-a-mole.

But when you commit to 100%, everything shifts.

You stop chasing short-term fixes and start building toward something lasting.

You stop wasting time chasing compliance and start making real progress toward what actually matters.

You stop wearing yourself out trying to hold everything together, and start creating a school that runs smoothly - without you having to push every step of the way.

It's not that 100% takes *more* work. It's that it takes the right work. And, once you commit to that, the work gets lighter, not heavier.

That's the lie: that 100% will cost you more. The truth is, chasing anything less is what's actually draining you.

And yet, even when you believe 100% is possible...

Even when you see that it's the only path that makes your effort worth it...

There's still one lie that keeps you from taking the first real step.

The belief that you can't do it with the staff you have, the district you're in, or the constraints you're under.

This is the most dangerous lie of all.

Because it convinces you that you're stuck.



"It's not that 100% takes more work. It's that it takes the right work.

And, once you commit to that, the work gets lighter, not heavier.

That's the lie: that 100% will cost you more. The truth is, chasing anything less is what's actually draining you."

Lie #3: "Even If It Were Possible and Worth It, I Don't Have the Power to Make It Happen"

Even if a principal believes 100% success is possible, and even if they want it with whole heart, there's often one belief that still holds them back:

"I don't have the power to make it happen."

And honestly? That belief didn't come out of nowhere. They've been taught through policies, politics, and past experience that real change requires permission. From the district. From their superintendent. From the union. From staff. They've seen their best ideas watered down by red tape. They've felt the sting of pushing for something better and being told to "stay in their lane." They've tried to rally people around a vision only to be met with resistance, apathy, or burnout.



So it's no wonder they start to believe:

- "I can't move forward without my district's support."
- "My staff isn't on board, so I'm stuck."
- "We don't have the policies or the resources to make this work."

This is leadership thinking. It happens because we've been taught that power is something you're given, instead of something you can claim.

But you don't need anyone's permission to start building a better school.

➤ **It's not that the barriers aren't real. They are. But you can build 100% success anyway.**

You see, 100% success isn't about waiting for ideal conditions. It's about using what you have to start creating what you need right now. That means:

- You can define success by what your students actually need - not just what the district measures.
- You can start aligning your staff to a shared purpose - even if not everyone is bought in yet.
- You can redesign how your school functions - even if district policy never changes.

You don't need to be choked by the system and stay stuck. You also don't need to bypass the system in order to reach 100%. You can work within whatever conditions you have right now until you can reshape them.

Once you reject the belief that power comes from the outside, everything changes.

- You stop chasing district mandates and start creating a school that works for your students.
- You stop managing numbers and start building a system where success isn't left to chance.
- You stop waiting for permission and start leading with conviction.



This is what separates a 100% Principal from everyone else.

Because while other principals are waiting for change, a 100% Principal is building it right now, right where they are.

The Choice You Have to Make

Once you see the truth, you can't unsee it.

You've spent years doing exactly what you were trained to do - managing failure, working within the system, and chasing incremental progress because that's all that your leadership training taught you was possible.

And where has that left you?

- **Exhausted.** Tired of running on a treadmill that never gets you closer to your vision.
- **Frustrated.** Knowing deep down that your students deserve more but feeling powerless to give it to them.
- **Stuck.** Watching the same patterns repeat year after year, despite all the effort, energy, and sacrifice you pour into your school.

But now, you know why you've felt this way. You've been following a broken model, one designed to keep you playing small.

And now, you have a choice.

You can stay on the path of traditional leadership, where success is measured by how well you manage problems instead of whether or not you actually solve them. You can keep chasing numbers, making excuses, and settling for "better than last year."

Or you can become a 100% Principal.

A 100% Principal refuses to accept anything less than every student succeeding.

A 100% Principal doesn't wait for permission. They build success right where they are.

A 100% Principal stops managing failure and starts creating a school where success is inevitable.

The best part? You can start right now.

- Instead of believing that some students just won't make it, you commit to ensuring that every student succeeds - no exceptions, no excuses.
- Instead of fearing that 100% success will burn people out, you build systems that make success sustainable and automatic.
- Instead of waiting for permission, you take control of the process and start creating the school your students deserve.

The moment you decide to become a 100% Principal, everything changes.

Because 100% isn't just a goal. It's a mindset.

The second you stop accepting failure as inevitable, you start seeing solutions where others see roadblocks.

The second you stop settling for small wins, you start building the systems that make real success possible.

The second you stop waiting for permission, you step into the power you've had all along.

And when you make that shift your school will change. Your students will change. Your staff will change.

And most importantly, you will change.

Becoming a 100% Principal is a decision. And once you make it, you'll never look at your work the same way again.



*Dr. Robyn R. Jackson is a career educator and a best-selling author of 10 books, including the award-winning *Never Underestimate Your Teachers: Instructional Leadership for Excellence in Every Classroom* (ASCD, 2013) and the international best-seller *Never Work Harder Than Your Students and Other Principles of Great Teaching, 2nd Edition* (ASCD, 2018). She also hosts the popular *School Leadership Reimagined* weekly podcast, where she offers free training on how to use feedback, support, accountability, and culture to build a bigger vision, develop a better process, and achieve a brighter future for your schools. You can learn more and connect with Robyn at *MindSteps* and at *Buildership® University*.*

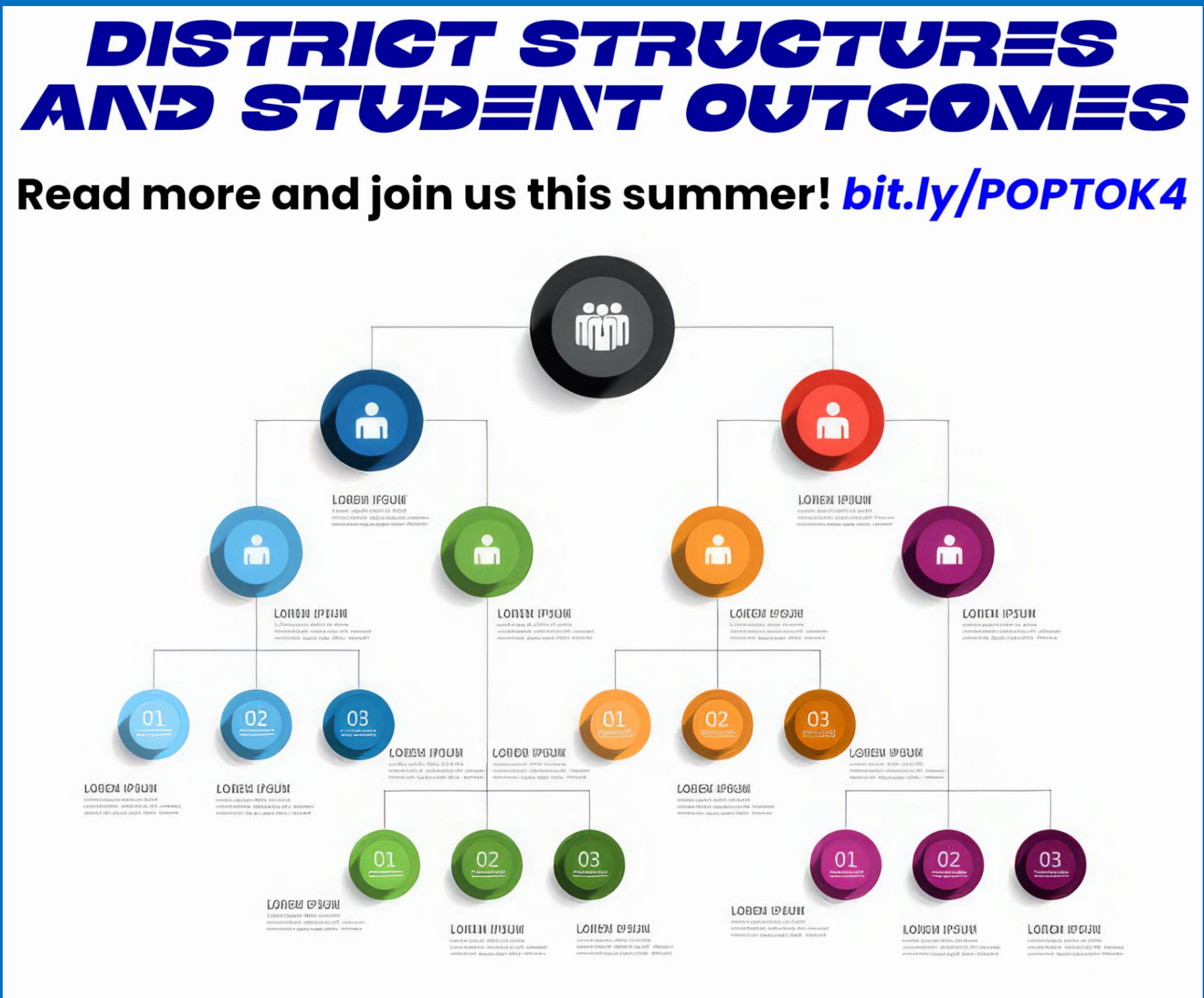


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AIELOC: International Education Change Agents

Kevin Simpson, M.Ed., Founder of the Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC) and KDSL Global, Washington, D.C. and Dr. Ashley Hazelwood, first Fellow at the Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC)

“Without community, there is no liberation.” -Audre Lorde

“I wish this community existed when I taught abroad” is a statement I hear often. Eight years ago I created a new space in the international school community as a call to action. It takes into consideration this and many other experiences colleagues shared with me. Let’s dive into this new association we created, the work we engage in, our community commitments, and how we are addressing the current education climate.

What is AIELOC?

The Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC) began as an affinity group on Facebook on March 14, 2017 after one of Kevin’s colleagues was discouraged from applying for a leadership position at an international school due to her race and country of origin not matching the expectation. He was serving as her sponsor and a reference, and he wanted to know if she was experiencing this, then what was happening to others?

Today, AIELOC is devoted to amplifying the work of international educators and leaders of color with a focus on advocacy, learning, and research. In January 2020 the group moved to an association open to all past, present, and future educators and leaders around the world committed to speaking up, learning, advocating for change, taking action in addressing racism (and all -isms) and discrimination in the international school ecosystem. They are volunteer led and operate as a community in order to make changes globally.

What does the work of AIELOC look like in action?

Dr. Nadine Richards (she/her) brought remarkable creativity and vision to AIELOC by founding the Aspiring Leaders of Color Program, crafting a transformative space for emerging leaders to thrive. Her innovative approach continues to inspire and shape a more inclusive future in international education.

AIELOC fosters professional growth through learning opportunities such as webinars, an in-person conference, and a virtual conference, providing spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and skill development. Later this year the first African International School Educator Virtual Conference will be added. The association is now in year 6 of their AIELOC and Women of Color in ELT Virtual Conference. The Aspiring Leaders of Color Program supports emerging leaders by offering mentorship and tailored resources to advance their careers. Next year will be the fifth cohort. Alumni of the program have gone on to a variety of roles from Curriculum Directors, Head of Special Education, Assistant Director, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Leaders and more.



AIELOC's Advocacy Circle and Advocacy Community Collective are key initiatives that bring together educators to collectively advocate for themselves and others. The emphasis is on how to advocate for oneself and for others. The Research Collaborative contributes to the field by producing research that highlights the experiences of educators of color and addresses issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. This team shares new and upcoming the work of community members who are engaged in doctoral programs and beyond. Additionally, the DEIJ Leaders Program equips educators with the tools and strategies needed to lead transformative work within their institutions and communities. Together, these programs build a powerful network of change agents working toward a more just and inclusive international educational landscape.

Our AIELOC Affinity Space leaders are vital in creating brave, affirming spaces where members can connect, heal, and grow both personally and professionally. Their leadership nurtures belonging and strengthens our collective movement toward equity and justice in international education.

What does AIELOC commit to the community it serves?

Dr. Teneshia Taylor (she/her) has been a fierce and unwavering advocate for AIELOC members, consistently championing their voices and experiences. She also spearheaded the AIELOC Research Collaborative, creating a powerful platform for inquiry, knowledge-sharing, and transformative scholarship.



At AIELOC, our commitment to fostering a culture of dignity, respect, learning, and fairness isn't changing. We know that well-being, care and empathy are at the core of educational excellence, and we will continue to advocate for practices that uphold these values - no matter the challenges ahead.

We also recognize that new federal guidelines may bring about uncertainty for some of our global partners. That's why we're here to support and provide guidance as we all navigate these changes together. Our position is clear:



We stand by our values. No policy or directive will change our belief that dignity, respect, and fairness are essential to education. These principles will continue to guide our work and our community.



We're here for our partners. We know that compliance requirements can be complex, and we're committed to offering support, resources, and clarity with updated information to help institutions and educators meet these challenges while staying true to their missions.



We will keep advocating. Our work doesn't stop here. We will continue to push for policies that amplify underrepresented voices, ensure equitable opportunities, and promote meaningful, lasting change in international education.

No matter how the landscape shifts, empowering the community remains firm in our mission. We are here to support, advocate, and build a future where education is inclusive, equitable, and for all.



Juan Jacobs Sheblak (he/him) has played a pivotal role in inspiring and empowering leaders at AIELOC through his commitment to equity, inclusion, and authentic leadership. His mentorship and thought leadership have helped shape a more conscious and courageous community of global educators.

In what ways is AIELOC is staying engaged in the current education climate?

AIELOC is committed to staying proactive as the policies and conversations around international education evolve. We know that nimbleness, collaboration, and informed advocacy will be key to protecting our mission and our community.

Here's how we plan to move forward:

Keeping the conversation flowing. We want to create space for open and honest dialogue with educators, institutions, and policymakers about these changes and how we can respond effectively.

Staying informed. We will continue to monitor policy developments so that our community has the information and resources needed to navigate potential impacts.

Pushing for change. Advocacy has always been central to our work, and that won't stop. We'll keep fighting for policies that protect inclusive education and ensure that diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging remain core to learning environments.

Providing real support. We recognize that these shifts may create uncertainty, and we're committed to offering the guidance, tools, and training needed to help educators and institutions stay aligned with both regulatory requirements and their core values.

Yes, the landscape is shifting, but our dedication to this work is not. AIELOC will continue to stand with international educators and leaders of color and all, ensuring that our voices are heard and our impact is felt. We invite our community to join us in shaping the future, advocating for equitable education, and championing the well-being of all learners and educators.



AIELOC is proud to serve as a partnering organization in the International School Anti-Discrimination Task Force, standing alongside others committed to dismantling systemic inequities in education. Through this collaboration, we amplify our impact and continue to push for meaningful, lasting change in international schools worldwide.

The AIELOC Community gained global recognition through our powerful I Am Not a Virus campaign, launched during COVID to confront racism and xenophobia happening to members who identified as Black and who were residing in China. This bold, collective action sparked critical conversations and affirmed our commitment to justice, visibility, and solidarity.

To learn more about AIELOC please visit us at aieloc.org/



The Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC) is an official partner of The Worthy Educator.



Kevin Simpson is the founder of KDSL Global, an international education consulting company which launched in 2016 in the USA and in the United Arab Emirates serving schools, educators, and leaders in over 60 countries. Kevin then founded the Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color as an affinity group on Facebook then transforming it into an association open to all past, present, and future educators and leaders around the world committed to speaking up, learning, advocating for change, taking action in addressing racism and discrimination in the international school ecosystem, amplifying the work of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), researching topics of interest.



Dr. Ashley Marie Hazelwood is a dynamic thought-leader and project strategist, skilled in the areas of K-12 and higher education; diversity, equity and inclusion; and capacity-building. Dr. Hazelwood is a generalist, highly proficient in the promotion, accountability, awareness and implementation of equitable and inclusive strategies to facilitate actionable change in order to build community resilience. Dr. Hazelwood has served as an equity-centered researcher, having worked with organizations like Educational Testing Service (ETS), the Council for State School Chief Officers (CCSSO), the United Community Corporation and the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions. Dr. Hazelwood is a trained college professor and facilitator, passionate about creating anti-racist environments in a variety of educational ecosystems. She was the first Fellow at the Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC).



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Ready? Let's Talk!



Raising the next Generation of Leaders: Our Own Children

Jyoti Marwaha, JSHRM, PHR, CPCC,
Senior Director of Human Resources and Founder of
Moonshot Consulting, Washington, DC

***“The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical
substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.”***
– Carl Jung



Growing up as a child of immigrant parents, I was trained to keep my head down and do what I was told. The ideology was straight forward. Work hard, listen to what others have to say, and under any circumstance, *do not speak your mind*. In other words, squash your perspective and do as you are told. That did not help as I entered the workforce. It took me nearly 10 years into my professional career to **unlearn what I was taught**. At no fault of my parents, they only taught what they learned themselves.

My name is Jyoti Marwaha, and I am a human resources practitioner with twenty years of experience across multiple industries working for Fortune 100 companies and within the nonprofit space. I am a certified coach and senior executive. But above all the professional titles and certifications, I am first a mother to a son and daughter who are my greatest investment.

Last year, I opened Moonshot HR Consulting as a dream project to support teenage children develop self-awareness skills. My goal has been very simple. I want to arm the next generation of leaders with skills that they can translate into the workforce. Skills that will help them practice kindness and help them connect with others.

I have seen a lot in the last two decades practicing Human Resources. I have seen young professionals enter the workforce with bright-eyed dreams for the future. I have seen first-time managers lacking confidence in leading new teams. And most of all, I have seen senior leaders sit around a table with the overconfidence to end battles (yes, a bit overexaggerated). But time and time again, what I have not seen is genuine confidence in building human connections. Real connections. **Even at the most senior professional level.**



Now as a parent of a teenager these days, I am in a constant tug-of-war with being able to spend quality time with my child when the internet dominates his time, energy, and focus. In no fault of his own, because both education and social connections enabled through the internet are critical success factors to his and other school-age children today. However, in the age of rising AI, there is one thing for sure I know that will always win. That is making **space to prioritize real human connections**.

So, how do we build genuine confidence to connect with others? It begins with knowing ourselves. That means overcoming our fear about our shortcomings. Letting go of self-doubt. Embracing kindness to ourselves. In this piece, I lay out a few steps to build social connections that can be practiced at home, at family events, and at work. These experiences will help shape the next generation of leaders, our children. So, let's get started.

Step One: Get to Know Yourself

Over the course of my career, I have coached hundreds of colleagues at all professionals on a fundamental skill; self-awareness. What I have learned is that unfortunately, as we get older, we begin to live in a reactive mindset and slowly our awareness around our joys and triggers fade away. These lived experiences translate into our relationships at home and at work. We forget what we value, what interests us, and fail to understand how the people around us – *experience us*. Slowly, these behaviors become a pattern, and we forget who we really are.

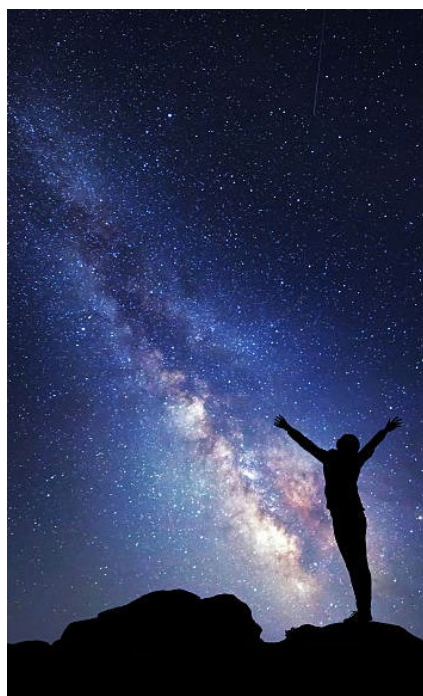
So, I ask you today, what is your North Star? What are those defining moments through your life that brought you the most joy? Really think about this. Now write them down. What this does is help you understand your patterns and habitual responses to thoughts and situations.

As a mom, I tell my kids to journal their trigger points. And there are plenty of them as I raise two opposite personalities. What this does is help them understand in real time what points, people, or situation trigger their emotions, creating a negative mindset.

You're probably wondering how this connects to social connections. It's simple. When we can effectively identify with our emotions, we can build genuine confidence to relate to others. When our emotions are regulated, we provide ourselves with a safe space for positive self-talk. Which leads me to step two.



Step Two: Practice Self-Kindness



Have you ever walked into a social gathering alone? It's scary, right? Every fiber inside you is anxious, excited, and there is a profound discomfort that hits you all at once. How do you overcome that? Start by practicing kindness to yourself. Remember that there are others at the same event that likely feel the same way. Here is a trick I use when I walk into a new space, whether it is a presentation at work or a social event:

I start with self-affirmation statements. Each statement starts with "what if." Meaning, what if I learned something new today? What if I picked up a new best practice from a stranger? What if I got to meet a new connection that could lead to a lifelong friend? These simple yet powerful words keep me grounded and my nerves in check. They bring a sense of excitement to learn about someone else. To hear their lived experiences. To understand their story. They help me understand that there are others in the room who, like me, are new to the event and are eager to hear my story, learn about my experiences, and create new lifelong connections. We all have a story and that is our greatest connection. For me, these what if statements serve as a gentle reminder to practice kindness to myself before I walk into a new space. It connects the dots on how I practice self-awareness and how I show up for others.

Step Three: Create Meaningful Dialogue

I pause before starting a conversation. Yes, you read that right. What this does is give me a few seconds to remind myself that the conversation is not about me. It is about my participation partner. This small act serves activates my listening skills so that the conversation can be authentic. So here are a few other tricks that help me create connections with others:

When trying to create a new connection or add value to an existing connection, remember to start with simple observations. What is it that your conversation partner likes to talk about? What are their core values? These will come up in conversations – so take note. Remember the small moments where they demonstrate emotions through facial expressions or body language. That will help you connect what matters most to them.

Be open to sharing about yourself. What keeps you up at night? What skill did you just learn that you're excited to talk about? What are some personally meaningful best practices you are willing to share with this connection?



Bringing it all Together



I started this piece with a personal story and I'll bring it full circle for you now. For many years, I kept my head down at work and at school. I did exactly as I was told. I didn't share my perspective out of the fear of being retaliated against. I had created this false sense of believing that my perspective did not hold weight; my story didn't matter.

Then my world changed. I had a mentor who believed my words mattered. She gave me the confidence to have a voice. But the best part is that she gave me the confidence to know myself, first. I made the connection that how I feel about myself is how I give back to the people around me, and everything changed.

My career took off. I became a business owner. I built a network of connections that I can reach out to anytime I need guidance as a parent or as a professional. And those same people know they can count on me for the same.

It all started with a connection. It took off when I showed others I wanted to hear their story and share mine. As Jung promised in his famous quote, these relationships – starting with my mentor – transformed me.

I am writing to share this gift, and to tell all of you that it is my dream to share with our next generation, our children, the same skills my mentor taught me. I have developed a series of modules on The Power of What-Ifs, covering self-awareness and social awareness, driving home the reality that how you show up matters. By helping children harness their unique presence in the world, we can empower them to fulfill their potential and their dreams as they launch into adulthood. Building connections - real connections – so as they progress through adolescence the narrative they write about themselves can change, too. It will make all the difference in the choices they make in their lives!

How can you and I work together to instill this in our future leaders?



Jyoti Marwaha is a compassionate, energetic, and results-oriented human resources professional with more than a decade of progressively responsible roles in state and federal government, financial services, healthcare, and K-12 education. A successful influencer enabling a people-focused mindset, she is seeking to give back by working with educators, parents and students to prepare our next generation for successful, satisfied lives full of robust, thriving, nurturing relationships.



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From Control to Connection: How Nonviolent Communication Helped Me Fall in Love with Teaching Again

Jill McPherson, Educator, Communication Strategist and Speaker,
Toronto, Ontario

From an early age, I knew I wanted to work with children. I was the child who loved holding babies, the teenager who relished babysitting, and the community babysitter whom parents sought out because their children requested me. I engaged with them, played with them - I was the babysitter my younger self would have wanted.



I pursued a degree in Child Psychology, during which I volunteered in the speech department at a nearby hospital with plans to become a Speech Pathologist. However, it was during my fourth-year practicum at a local elementary school that my calling became clear - I was meant to be a teacher.

Over the course of my 29-year career, I taught in various roles and districts, moving frequently in my early years due to my husband's career. I taught music classes in the mountains of British Columbia, I was a classroom teacher in a one-room schoolhouse covering grades 1 to 9 on the Alberta prairies, and amidst that time I had my share of substitute teaching positions while away and upon returning to Ontario. After I began my first contract position and between four maternity leaves and an education leave, I embraced a range of teaching experiences within the elementary system.

The Inner Conflict of Classroom Management

Like many new teachers, I began my career with enthusiasm and love for the profession. However, I quickly faced an unexpected challenge: managing a classroom of approximately 25 students. The tension between fostering a nurturing learning environment and enforcing discipline became a persistent struggle. Was I a facilitator of learning or a dictator of behavior? The expectations placed on teachers regarding student behavior often seemed to prioritize control over connection.

Over these years, one thing continued to occur... the inner conflict I would experience when I used classroom management strategies that I learned in Teachers' College. They sometimes worked but often there were those one or two students in the classroom that would not conform. I remember thinking: I am the teacher; I am the boss - right? They have to respect me, right? And when they did not, in those moments, I sooo disliked my job. So many times I would ask myself why I became a teacher? Was it worth dealing with this disrespectful behavior? Why can't I just teach? Why do I have to be the bad cop all the time? Why can't they just behave?



My mind would search for someone to blame. I was using the strategies I had been trained to use - so if they didn't work, was I failing as a teacher? Some suggested I needed to be stricter or more intimidating. But as a 5-foot-tall woman, the idea of using fear as a classroom management tool seemed laughable. I envied the 6-foot male teachers who could command instant silence with a deep voice and a few stern words.

The education system is deeply rooted in punitive justice. Even when strategies appeared to succeed, they left me uneasy. I entered teaching because I loved children - so why was I speaking to them in ways I would never want to be spoken to? Why did some days I leave work feeling depleted, recognizing that I had prioritized controlling behavior over truly connecting with my students?

Discovering Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

One day, I was sitting in the staff room listening to a colleague vent about a challenging student. I offered some thoughts, and another teacher, overhearing our conversation, asked if I had training in Nonviolent Communication (NVC). I had never heard of it. She lent me a booklet from her training, which included six CDs. That evening, I started listening on my drive home.

Emotional moments followed as I realized I had found what I had been longing for my entire career - a way to communicate with students that fostered both connection and collaboration.

At the time, I was teaching music and drama, racing from classroom to classroom with my cart. Before NVC, I would stand outside a room listening to the teacher instruct students on how to prepare for my arrival, mentally preparing myself for the challenge of managing a room full of energetic children. But after beginning my NVC journey, my internal question shifted from,

“How am I going to control all these bodies?” to

“How am I going to connect with these fellow human beings? Young people who have feelings and needs just like me.”

This paradigm shift rekindled my love for teaching. It was no longer about managing behavior but instead about questioning my own deeply ingrained beliefs about authority and control. Letting go of the hierarchical, domination-based paradigm was challenging, but the more I valued connection over compliance, the less I needed traditional disciplinary strategies.



Living NVC in the Classroom

As I became more proficient in the language of NVC, I transitioned from simply using it to truly living it. I began teaching it explicitly to my students rather than just modeling it.

In drama, I replaced published scripts with “real play.” Students brought real-life conflicts into class, and together, we practiced NVC to navigate them. Disagreements on the playground? Sibling conflicts? Frustrations about school? All were welcomed and explored through an empathetic, needs-based lens. In music class, our “song of the month” always centered on feelings, needs, and human connection. While learning musical elements, students were also deepening their self-awareness and empathy for others.

NVC gave me the tools to guide students through conflict, shifting the focus from right and wrong to underlying needs. Conflict arises when two individuals are employing strategies to meet their needs in opposing ways. Instead of imposing consequences, I helped students listen to each other with curiosity, seeking to understand what need the other was trying to fulfill. When students felt seen and heard, their defensive strategies dissolved, and collaborative solutions naturally emerged.

Welcoming “No”

One of the key shifts I introduced to my students was learning to welcome honesty - especially when it comes in the form of a “no” - without taking it personally. We’ve all been there: upset over something someone said or did, only to be told, *“Don’t take it personally.”* But what does that actually mean? How do we *not* take it personally?

From a young age, most of us unknowingly learn that other people’s opinions of us shape how we see ourselves. It becomes ingrained - what someone else thinks of us *must* mean something about who we are. This belief can make a simple “no” feel like rejection rather than honesty.

In my classroom, I always started the day with a “Meet and Greet” song. The moment that song played, students knew it was time to wrap up what they were doing and gather at the carpet for a morning greeting - whether a handshake, a high-five, a namaste, or a hug. But I made one thing clear: a hug was only for those who *truly* wanted to give or receive one. If not, a simple “No, thank you” was absolutely okay.

And yet, even at just four years old, children were already taking a “no” personally. I could see it in their faces - the slight hesitation, the uncertainty, the disappointment. That’s when I introduced a reframe: instead of thinking of “no” as rejection, what if we saw it as a gift of honesty? I told them, *When someone says no, it doesn’t mean they don’t like you. It means they trust you enough to share their truth. And when you can welcome their no, you can trust their yes.*

One day, I noticed several students reluctantly accepting hugs they clearly weren’t comfortable with. So I decided to try an experiment. I invited everyone to ask for a hug, but with the understanding that each and every person *must* say no. What happened next surprised me: the room filled with laughter. Some kids confidently said no with their arms at their sides, while others, giggling, reached out for a hug anyway - even as they said “no.”

It struck me that for some, saying no - especially to an adult - was a new and exhilarating experience. They weren’t used to their “no” being heard without consequence. In that moment, they weren’t rejecting each other; they were playing with the power of their own voice. And for me, that was the lesson in action: *No* isn’t unkind. It’s just honest. And when we can accept it with an open heart, we make space for deeper trust and authentic connection.

“Real Play” in Drama Class

When I first started teaching drama, I relied on scripts for my older students. But one day, two sixth graders burst into the classroom, arguing over a ball.

“He took my ball!” one shouted.

“He wouldn’t let me play anymore, and that’s not fair!” the other protested.

I used to dread moments like these - being asked to be the judge over a situation I hadn’t even witnessed. But that day, I decided to scrap my lesson plan and try something different. I asked if we could use *their* conflict as our drama lesson. After reassuring them that no one was in trouble and no one was going to be punished, that we were simply going to learn from what happened, they agreed.

I explained the scenario to the class and invited them to approach it through the lens of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). I reminded them that every action is an attempt to meet a need and asked them to step into empathy: *What might each person be feeling?*



Hands shot up. *Angry? Frustrated? Lonely?*

I nodded. *Yes! And what do we usually do with those feelings?*

We look for someone to blame. We falsely believe someone *made* us feel this way. And when we believe that, we become victims, powerless until the other person changes, apologizes, or just *acts differently* so we can feel better. But in NVC, we see uncomfortable feelings differently - not as something caused *by* someone else, but as signals pointing to an unmet need.

I asked the class to guess: *What needs might Suraj have had when Clay took the ball?*

More hands. *Respect? Consideration? Trust?*

Suraj let out a deep sigh and nodded.

Then I asked, *And what do you think Clay was needing when he took the ball?*

More guesses. *Connection? Acceptance? A sense of belonging?*

Clay’s eyes welled with tears as he whispered, *Yeah.*

This is the moment I love most - the moment when conflict shifts from blame to shared understanding. I reminded them that conflict itself isn’t bad; it’s simply a signal that communication has broken down. Yet how often do we punish kids for lacking the self-awareness and communication skills that we’ve never actually taught them?

This is why I tell my students: *When we pause, take a deep breath, and get compassionately curious, we stop being victims. We become empathetic classmates instead. Conflict only happens at the level of strategy - what we do to meet our needs. But when we look beneath the strategy and connect at the level of need, that’s where real problem-solving happens.*



And then, the magic of NVC unfolded.

As soon as these two boys felt truly seen - once they received empathy and knew that their needs mattered, *that they mattered* - their walls came down. And once they verbalized what they heard the *other* person needed, they naturally came up with their own creative solutions.

And what happened next in my drama lesson? The class broke into small groups and “*real played*” how to navigate “*Someone Took My Ball*” through the lens of NVC. No need to be right. No need for punishment. Just a shared commitment to understanding and collaboration.

Because my job as a teacher isn’t to be the judge or the punisher.

My job is to be a facilitator of communication; to guide my students toward what’s really on the other side of conflict: *deep connection*.

A New Chapter: Teaching in a Bigger Classroom

I loved my job. I don’t think I could have loved it more.

But in the spring of 2024, I was informed that I would no longer be the Music and Drama Teacher. I was being reassigned to a position that I knew would drain me. I saw this as my sign - it was time to leave the school system and take my teaching to a broader audience.

I miss my students greatly, but I remind myself why I left. I am now dedicating myself to supporting educators and administrators in learning a paradigm that will not only help them fall in love with teaching again but will also foster a new generation of self-aware, empathetic adults capable of effective listening, creative collaboration and compassionate connection.

“You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you’ll join us, and the world will live as one.”



Jill McPherson has been a teacher for more than twenty-five years, from kindergarten to grade 8, as well as Special Education and the Arts, providing invaluable experience addressing children’s needs and behaviors. She has a degree in Child Psychology from the University of Guelph and a Bachelor of Education from Brock University, as well as training in counselling and Nonviolent Communication.



Tahseen Qureshi
Texas

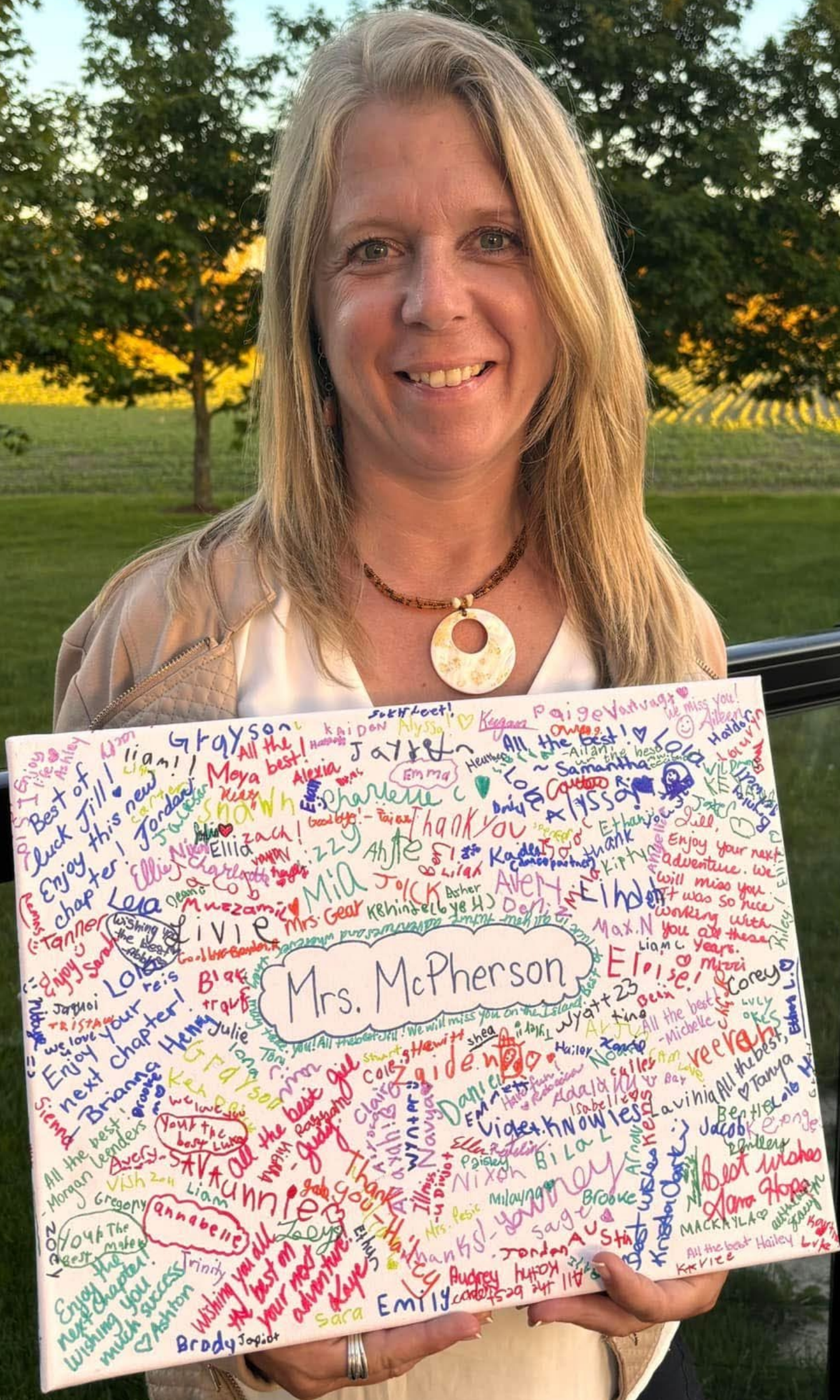
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How to Fall in Love With Your Job Again: Find Out What's Really at the Core of Your Challenges and What to Do About It!





Leading with Purpose: Reimagining EdTech and AI Integration in Schools

Dr. PJ Caposey, Superintendent of the Meridian Community Unit School District #223, Stillman Valley, Illinois



Effective educational leadership boils down to two critical responsibilities: maximizing the capacity of the individuals we have the privilege of serving and aligning individual efforts with the school's broader mission. In today's world, that mission must evolve to meet the demands of an AI-driven, tech-saturated society.

Schools must understand that for us to stay relevant, we must change commensurate with the speed of change of society. If you don't believe that statement, look at the mission statement of any school. Our job is to create students who are ready to participate in, and lead, our society in the future. Given that, the unfortunate reality is that while the world accelerates, many schools are still preparing kids for yesterday.

The reluctance to increase our speed and embrace technology at the rate society does isn't just a missed opportunity - it's a disservice. Our students are growing up with social media, generative AI, and online ecosystems baked into their daily lives. If we're still debating whether to let kids use tools like ChatGPT or Khanmigo - we're not preparing them, we are restraining them.

To lead with purpose in this new environment, educational leaders must do more than tolerate technology. We must model it, integrate it, and reimagine systems that prepare students not just to navigate the world, but to shape it.

Remove Barriers, Build Confidence

Technology isn't neutral - it either empowers or intimidates, amplifies or deadens. And for many educators, the world of edtech and AI still feels foreign. There's a fear of breaking something, of doing something wrong, of being accused of letting students cheat. That fear creates paralysis.

Research supports what many of us have experienced firsthand: without confidence, change stalls. A [RAND Corporation report](#) found that teacher self-efficacy is a strong predictor of both classroom technology use and instructional quality. But self-efficacy doesn't magically appear. It's cultivated - and that's our job as leaders.

So, what does confidence-building look like in the context of tech and AI integration?



✓ Model It, Even Imperfectly

During a staff meeting, the principal opens the session by using a digital whiteboard tool (like ClickUp or Padlet) for brainstorming - acknowledging ahead of time, "I'm still learning this, so bear with me." When the tech inevitably glitches or they click the wrong button, they laugh it off and keep going, showing that mistakes are no big deal. Later, they follow up with a staff email reflecting on the experience and sharing a short tutorial video they found helpful.

✓ **Set Clear, Supportive Guardrails**

Create a short, teacher-friendly “AI in the Classroom” document that outlines what’s acceptable and encouraged (e.g., using ChatGPT to generate quiz questions or brainstorm lesson hooks) and what’s not (e.g., having AI write student feedback word-for-word). For those of you that just read that and panicked, do not worry because many of these resources have been created and shared on the internet. You do not need a CIO or to be an expert yourself to get this started. Then, hold a lunch-and-learn session to walk teachers through it, give examples, and encourage questions. Ensure the document is co-developed with a few trusted teachers so it feels collaborative, not top-down.

✓ **Normalize Risk and Mistakes**

Start an “Innovation Highlight” segment at every staff meeting where one teacher shares a new tech tool or strategy they tried - even if it didn’t go perfectly. Encourage honesty about what went wrong and what they learned. Celebrate their effort with a small token - like a silly “Tech Adventurer” badge or a coffee gift card - and publicly thank them in the weekly staff newsletter.

✓ **Protect Educators Who Try**

Explicitly communicate to staff that when trying new tech or AI strategies, they are *not* being evaluated on polish or perfection. Update the teacher evaluation rubric or walkthrough form to include a non-punitive checkbox like “Evidence of experimentation with new instructional strategies,” and make it clear that mistakes made while innovating won’t be held against them. When a parent complains about a new tech tool a teacher used, the principal defends the teacher’s intent and invites feedback through a constructive, supportive lens.

We don’t need every educator to become a tech expert overnight. But we do need to create an environment where they feel safe enough to start. As a [McKinsey & Company article](#) noted, “low confidence and lack of time” are the two biggest barriers to edtech implementation. Leaders must remove both.



Make the Case: This Helps Kids Learn Better

Technology is only worth our time if it improves learning or instruction. That’s the non-negotiable. Yet many edtech initiatives are launched with vague intentions, unclear expectations, and little return on instructional investment. This lack of direction is how school leadership has lost trust around technology with some staff members. We cannot repeat the same mistakes.

Let’s be clear: this is not about bells and whistles. It’s about what works. [The Education Endowment Foundation \(EEF\)](#) has shown repeatedly that technology’s impact on learning depends not on the tool itself, but on how it’s used. If implemented with clarity and purpose, edtech can lead to meaningful learning gains. If not, it’s just noise.

We must relentlessly connect tools to purpose, if not any old anti-technology argument can win. Technology in schools must work to solve the three very real issues noted below:

✓ **“This helps students learn better.”**

If it doesn’t improve comprehension, engagement, or application - why are we using it?

✓ **“This helps teachers teach better.”**

Tools that free up time, support differentiation, or enhance feedback loops are worth the investment.

✓ **“This helps our system stay relevant.”**

Let’s stop pretending this isn’t about survival. The digital divide isn’t just about access - it’s about mindset. Systems that fail to evolve are being left behind.

Getting to critical mass starts with shifting the conversation. It's not about convincing people to adopt a tool because it's trendy or mandated - it's about showing how it solves real problems. When educators see that a new approach genuinely helps them teach more effectively or supports student learning in a tangible way, momentum builds naturally. The focus must be on relevance, not compliance.

✓ **Tie Tools to Real Problems**

Don't pitch new software, introduce solutions. Pitch solutions to everyday issues: grading overload, limited student feedback, missed opportunities for differentiation. When tools solve pain points, adoption follows.

✓ **Show Real Outcomes**

Share student success stories, even if they are not from your school. Heck, show your own growth and what you can do now compared to before. Show before-and-after examples. Use data, yes - but also use stories. People change because of emotional connection, not just statistical significance.

✓ **Get Honest About AI**

Our kids are using AI. While schools scramble to "AI-proof" assignments, students are teaching themselves how to code, generate content, and solve complex problems. We can treat AI like the next cheating scandal, or we can embrace it as the most powerful learning accelerator in modern history. Heck, we must realize that many, if not all, articles (including this one) that educators read to learn and be professionally developed are being supported in development by AI.

Instead of guarding against AI, we should teach students to engage critically and ethically with it. A [Brookings Institution report](#) argues that AI fluency - including skills like prompt engineering and bias recognition - will become a basic requirement for participation in the modern economy. If our students aren't learning these skills in school, where will they learn them?



Make Innovation the Culture, Not the Exception

Culture is what happens when the principal walks out of the room. In most schools, when the leader stops talking about tech, it disappears. That's not innovation - that's compliance. The best systems don't rely on a single champion. They build structures that sustain momentum and allow innovation to scale. That means developing environments where tech isn't a niche - it's the norm. So how do we build that culture?

✓ **Celebrate Educators Who Take Risks**

Highlight those who try new things. Tell their stories. Showcase messy prototypes, not just polished products. When risk-takers are celebrated, others follow.

✓ **Start Young**

If tech and AI are seen as "high school only," we miss critical windows of exposure. The earlier students are introduced to tools that support creation, inquiry, and reflection, the more naturally they will integrate them later.

✓ **Create Time and Space for Professional Growth**

The biggest barrier to teacher learning is time. That's not an excuse - it's a leadership problem. If professional development is only focused on compliance or technical use, we're not developing leaders - we're training technicians. We need PD that inspires big-picture thinking and redefines what's possible.

✓ **Empower Internal Champions**

Not every voice has to be the leader’s. In fact, the most effective tech adoption often comes from trusted peers. Identify and elevate teacher-leaders who can advocate from within and help bridge the gap for others.

✓ **Reinforce the Non-Negotiable**

Innovation isn’t optional anymore. Global competition, automation, and rapid information cycles have redefined what it means to be “college and career ready.” If our systems don’t reflect that urgency, we are part of the problem.



Final Thoughts: Leading from the Front

Leading schools today is harder than it’s ever been. The expectations are higher. The scrutiny is constant. The consequences are real. The change is faster and more profound. But the opportunity to impact the future has never been greater.

Technology isn’t the answer to every problem. But ignoring it is not an option. Leading with purpose means stepping into discomfort, asking the hard questions, and building systems that serve not just today’s students - but tomorrow’s world.

To do that, we need fewer mandates and more modeling. Less fear and more vision. We need to build cultures where trying new things is normal, where failure is expected, and where learning - at every level - is relentless.

Because if we don’t lead with purpose, we’ll find ourselves following the status quo. And in the world our students are walking into, that’s simply not good enough.



PJ Caposey is the Superintendent of Schools for Meridian, Illinois Community Unit School Districts #223, a former Illinois State Superintendent of the Year and a finalist for the National Superintendent of the Year for the American Association of School Administrators. He is a best-selling author of ten books, a dynamic speaker, and a transformational educational leader with an incredible track record of success. He works with two universities as well as the Illinois Principals Association as a Principal Coach and as the author of the first complete stack of microCredentials offered in the state of Illinois.



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VIII. Contacting Elected Representatives



IX. Writing and Calling Campaigns

X. Social Media Campaigns

Get Started!



Leading through Technology: Three Leaders Share How AzTEA has Positively Impacted their Careers

Nan Williams, AzTEA Executive Director
Lindsey McCaleb, AzTEA Past-President
Erica Price, AzTEA Board Member
Chandler, Arizona



The Arizona Technology in Education Association (AzTEA) is a state-wide non-profit organization that has served Arizona districts and schools for over 25 years, since 1998. Starting as an International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) affiliate, AzTEA has provided professional development and networking opportunities for teachers, instructional coaches, and leadership around educational technology. In the past few years, as the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) Chapter, AzTEA has expanded offerings and opportunities to better meet the needs of education IT professionals. Over the years, we have grown and evolved, continuously finding creative ways to meet the needs of our Arizona educators and remain champions of effective educational technology integration while collaborating with partners and organizations throughout the state. We are excited to share with you a bit of our history and evolution as an organization.

AzTEA's humble beginnings began as a parking lot conversation between 3 like-minded people from three different areas in educational technology (a district Technology Director, a Library Media Specialist, and University Professor). The three held separate technology meetings and this was the first time that they all came together. They recognized that they were all doing similar things with different groups of people and decided that they should do something together. They came together and in 1998 formed the Arizona Technology in Education Alliance Corporation. This Alliance consisted of members from Tucson, who formed the Tucson Area Council on Technology (TACT). TACT hosted a variety of monthly meetings and hosted a yearly Technology Conference in Tucson. Another group, consisting primarily of technology coordinators from around the state met on a regular, though informal, basis in Phoenix. There were four local chapters of this statewide organization. The original chapter, formed in Phoenix, divided to become the east and west side chapters. In 2000, the Tucson Area Council on Technology reorganized to become the Southern Arizona Chapter. The final chapter was formed in 2001 in northern Arizona and the organization explored ways to develop chapters that would help the rural parts of Arizona.

For many years, the Mesa school district sponsored a local, then regional, then state and nationally recognized technology conference in the summer. As this conference grew, AzTEA helped support the conference that provided a valuable resource for the educators interested in technology statewide. Simultaneously at Arizona State University a national conference, Microcomputers in Education Conference (MEC) attracted a national and international audience over the years, and in 2001 the conferences merged.

Historically, AzTEA offered three annual regional conferences, serving north, central, and southern Arizona. AzTEA in the Pines was held in Flagstaff in the fall. Starting in the 1990s, the Way Out West (WOW) Conference was held annually in the month of May. In 2002, the Southern Arizona chapter of AzTEA became one of the prime sponsors of what was the TACT conference in January, becoming a unifying force within the state.





Dr. Nan Williams began her affiliation with AzTEA through her involvement in Way out West. She worked in the central region as an EdTech Coach and was invited to be on the planning committee. Over the years, she has held a variety of leadership roles within AzTEA from Business Partner Liaison for the WOW Conference, Westside Chairperson, Professional Learning Chairperson, Committee Member, President-Elect, President (2 terms), and Past President. In 2018, when AzTEA needed a new Executive Director, Nan stepped up and shared the role of Interim Director with another long-time AzTEA member, Judith Romero. When it came time for the Board to choose a permanent Executive Director, both Nan and the organization knew that she was the perfect fit. As the third Executive Director for the organization, Nan now supports AzTEA on a daily basis and represents the organization at the state level and on the national stage.

As time went on, Title IID funds became non-existent and the regions dissolved. AzTEA began to focus more intentionally on bringing members together across the state, improving collaboration, allowing for districts near and far to learn from one another, and refocusing the work of our all-volunteer force.

These shifts coalesced into the Fall Conference; an annual event focused on empowering educators to integrate and utilize technology in their classrooms. There is always something for everyone, regardless of current technology use, from basic tips and tricks to creative and innovative applications of emerging technologies. Each year the conference evolves based on feedback from prior attendees, and for the fall of 2024, AzTEA recognized the need to support coaches and created a track specifically created to meet the needs of coaches. Leveraging our connections in Arizona alongside our pride in providing relevant, timely opportunities for educators has allowed us to bring in some big names in our education space to talk with our teachers. Our keynote speaker at our 2023 Fall Conference was the creator of the well-known TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) framework for tech integration, Dr. Punya Mishra. Our relationship with Dr. Mishra began both of our journeys of delving into the world of Artificial Intelligence. Six months later, when our Past-President, Lindsey McCaleb applied to ASU for the PHD program, Dr. Mishra was one of the faculty members in the program, and through the relationship that was started at the fall conference, he became her advisor.

With the Fall Conference cemented as the signature event for Arizona teachers, AzTEA added a spring conference in 2018, the Curriculum & Instruction & Information Technology Symposium, to support school and district leadership. Specifically, the CI & IT Symposium emerged from a recognized need for closer alignment and collaboration between curriculum and technology departments. During the Symposium, we bring district teams together and provide informational sessions and intentional spaces to address shared challenges. In recent years, the Symposium has shifted to include fewer presentations and a greater emphasis on structured collaborative time to address problems of practice, allowing teams to walk away with actionable strategies for practical implementation. Each year has a theme, ranging from “No Looking Back: Looking Forward” in 2021 to “AI: Charting Open Waters” in 2024. The CI & IT Symposium has proven highly effective in fostering collaboration between Curriculum and IT departments, focusing on how to address key challenges, implement solutions, and adapt to emerging technologies, empowering districts to drive meaningful change.



In 2019, AzTEA became one of nine ISTE Certified Educator providers. This prestigious certification is aligned with the ISTE Educator Standards. At the same time, we responded to an RFP from the Wyoming Department of Education to train 100 educators, and the following year, they added an additional 100 educators. Over the past five years, we have trained 252 educators and guided them through their portfolio development process. We are one of the last remaining partners, and with Arizona’s recent adoption of EdTech Standards (which are based off of the ISTE Student Standards), the ability to offer such rigorous professional development continues to be of great importance for our educators.

While our conferences are well-attended, in 2021 we acknowledged a need for a program that could provide more regular professional development and eventually be able to provide specific training to districts. AzTEA applied for a Arizona STEM Acceleration Project grant to fund the creation of the AzTEA Ambassadors program. These grant funds allow for AzTEA to create a process for educators to apply to be an Ambassador or Ambassador-in-Training with us. Accepted applicants receive in-depth training on the Arizona EdTech Standards (AETS), which are aligned to the ISTE Standards for Students. They then work in collaboration with our Ambassador Trainer to create a

variety of professional development offerings, which have all been offered as interactive webinars and are currently being developed into asynchronous courses. While some of the offerings provide background and deep dives into the AETS, others focus fully on AETS integration into content areas, including Language Arts, Science, Math, and Social Studies. Our Ambassadors have also recently expanded session offerings to include special education and artificial intelligence. We are excited to continue to develop webinars and courses that can be offered synchronously and asynchronously, and hope to bring them directly to districts in the future.

AzTEA understands that we are more impactful together, and has held a long-standing partnership with other educational associations, creating the STEM Collaborative in 2013, composed of AzTEA, the Arizona Science Teachers Association (ASTA), and the Arizona Association of Teachers of Mathematics (AATM). The STEM Collaborative has hosted regular events together, such as a STEM Unconference (held annually for the past 10 years) and quarterly networking meetings. In 2022, the Collaborative applied for a grant that resulted in a shared Learning Management System for each organization to publish online course offerings. Each organization now employs someone part-time to oversee course creation from its inception to implementation.

Becoming our state's CoSN Chapter opened up new opportunities for professional development, this time specifically designed for IT education professionals. Prior to 2024, Arizona only had six professionals who were CETL (Certified Education Technology Leader) Certified. In the spring of 2024, AzTEA facilitated a three-month cohort to read "Certified EdTech Leadership" (Mike Daugherty) and engage in deeper learning to prepare for the CETL Certification Exam. Over 30 professionals participated, including a range of IT directors, IT staff, and EdTech instructional coaches and specialists, and by the summer of 2024, Arizona had 22 CETL Certified professionals.



practice approach, provides training and professional development, and engages in policy advocacy around AI. In this rapidly-evolving landscape of emerging technologies and generative AI, it is crucial that AzTEA contribute to providing guidance and learning in this area.

AzTEA has also ensured that major disruptions to our world and the field of education did not become disruptions to serving our members. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the STEM Collaborative came together to hold a series of virtual PD Webinars led by teachers and instructional coaches. The "Tech for the Times" offerings were developed in a collaboration between content educators paired with educational technology educators. This series was highly requested with over 745 sessions viewed over a month period. In the fall, the AzTEA conference was reformatted to be completely virtual, taking advantage of technology to maintain the spirit of networking and learning from others through the use of breakout rooms.

We also recognized that during emergency remote learning, educators needed more frequent outlets to share, connect, and collaborate. Thus we began regular "teacher talks," which were simply a virtual space to discuss challenges and find support and solutions. These "teacher talks" morphed into "Pandemic Problem-Solving" meetings were our regular Thursday evening hangout time to commiserate and support each other. Lindsey McCaleb was a new EdTech Coach who had only been in her position for 9 months when the pandemic started and everyone in her district was looking to her for guidance on how to move from in-person to online learning. She started coming to these sessions "first to find her tribe" and get support from others that were in the same and/or similar situation. Eventually, she grew her personal learning network and found that she was not alone and could call on a number of people to help bounce ideas off of, strategize, and generally just look for solutions that no one had thought of pre-pandemic. We also made efforts to connect educators through various social media platforms. Technology fatigue brought about by the pandemic influenced what we felt was a timely social media campaign in the summer of 2021, the Self-Care Summer Social Media Series. Our series asked educators to join our AzTEA leadership in taking a step back for themselves and participate in reflective personal practice activities.



While we have hundreds of members throughout the state, as with many non-profit organizations, our core team of volunteers that keep the wheels turning is small but mighty. We maximize our human capital by collaborating with other organizations to accomplish incredible things, and we learn from one another along the way. Over the years, AzTEA has joined forces and collaborated with a variety of educational groups to advocate for effective, safe, ethical, and impactful educational technology integration. We serve our educators state-wide through various levels. AzTEA supports everyone from classroom teachers to district leadership through tailored events, professional development, and recognition of impact awards. Each year we present awards to teachers, administrators, and even state-level leaders who support educational technology education with students. Through the organization's work with ISTE, AzTEA has also selected a yearly recipient of the prestigious "Making IT Happen" award to a nominated educator making a positive impact on educational technology beyond their own institution. AzTEA also celebrates the Ruth Catalano Award named after one of our founding members. This award recognizes individuals in the organization that embodies a volunteering spirit.



We view AzTEA as a place where we grow leaders. Erica Price has worked with the AZTEA Board since 2016, and is currently serving as the Professional Learning Committee Chair between terms on the board. Her journey began with AZTEA as many before her, when a long-time AZTEA Board member and colleague within her district invited her to get involved. Being part of something bigger than just her own district gave her a sense of community that quickly became a passion for the Arizona EdTech community. As she approaches a decade of service to the organization, she often reflects fondly on the confidence she gained through board involvement, the lifelong friends she has made, and the opportunities to meet edtech leaders from around the state and participate in workgroups and conferences as a representative of AZTEA. While AzTEA works locally, we think globally, to support our Arizona educators who are preparing all students for future success in innovative ways.

AzTEA leverages its position to connect our members to the best resources for their districts, sites, and students from our partners, sponsors, and professional networks. In our most recent initiative, we focus on bringing our professional knowledge and development to our members in an on-demand format through our adoption of Canvas for asynchronous and hybrid experiences. We foster interdepartmental and cross-district collaboration through events and special interest groups, we build capacity in future leaders through board leadership development, an EdTech coaches cohort, and the AzTEA Ambassadors and we keep our members and leaders aligned to industry standards.



Nan Williams has been the executive director for the Arizona Technology in Education Association (AzTEA) since January 2018. She is also an adjunct professor at the University of Arizona and an academic professional at Arizona State University.

Lindsey McCaleb is the past president of the Arizona Technology in Education Association (AzTEA) and a current doctoral student at Arizona State university. She previously served as a school board member, ed tech coach and principal in the Creighton and Balsz Elementary School Districts.

Erica Price serves on the board of the Arizona Technology in Education Association (AZTEA). And is Ph.D. Candidate at Arizona State University with an interest in digital humanities and digital history as a method for scholarly research and sharing her findings.

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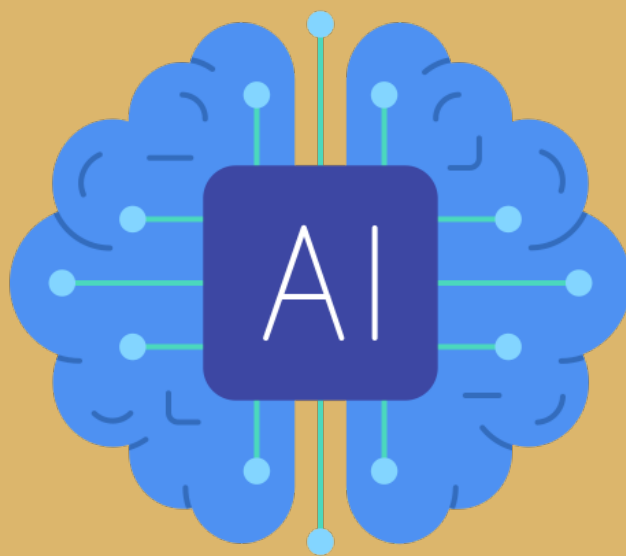


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Reclaiming AI for Learning: Empowering Students

John Schembari, Ed.D., School Improvement Expert and Education Management Consultant, New York, New York



When I proclaim in my workshops that AI has the potential to revolutionize teaching and learning in powerful ways, I'm often met with skepticism. The common refrain? *"But AI is cheating."* And yes - some students do use AI to shortcut their assignments. One teacher recently shared her frustration after discovering that a student used AI to complete a task meant to match curated protest songs with social justice issues. Instead of analyzing and making connections on their own, the student submitted an AI-generated response.

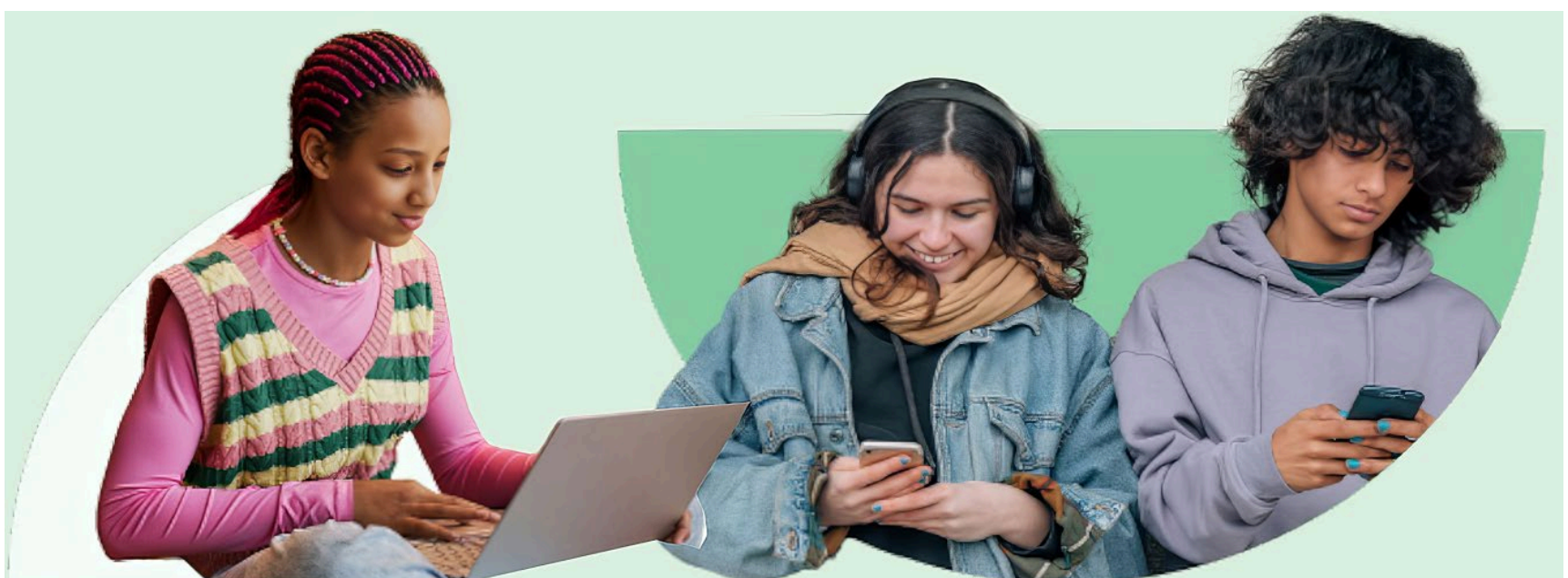
Understandably, the teacher felt discouraged. But this doesn't have to be a story of academic dishonesty - it can be a case of instructional opportunity. With some redesign, this assignment could have invited AI as a tool to extend student thinking, rather than replace it. Let's explore the mindset shift we have to make regarding AI use and identify practical strategies to design cognitively rich, AI-enhanced learning experiences that promote engagement, critical thinking and creativity.

The Dilemma

The high school teacher I mention above is a committed practitioner who is particularly passionate about helping her students to appreciate both the history and literature of social equality movements in her African American literature seminar. To ensure that her students did not get confused or distracted by the thousands of possibilities available to them, she spent hours curating a select list of singers and protest songs related to different social justice issues such as civil rights, war, gender and climate. Her goal was for learners to match songs to issues and explain their thinking in writing. However, one student had AI do this task for him and then submitted the response as his work and the teacher felt cheated. While her feelings about the situation are understandable, what if she looks at it as more than a case of AI misuse? Consider it as a teachable moment.

The common assumption is that AI use equals plagiarism, when a student uses another person's words, ideas, or work without giving them proper credit and presents it as their own. While the use of AI is not inherently plagiarism, it can be if it's not used and cited properly. Much of this depends on whether the user clearly acknowledged that they employed AI as a learning tool, if they added their own thinking beyond what information the AI, like ChatGPT, provided them and if they cited it as a source.

Students use AI for a variety of reasons. Per the report, [Teen and Young Adult Perspectives on Generative AI](#), written by Harvard's Center for Digital Thriving in partnership with Common Sense Media and Hopelab, which relates that, of teens surveyed, many admit to using AI to cheat on assignments, homework or tests. At the same time, they also shared positive academic experiences they've had with generative AI, including finding new information (53%) and brainstorming (51%). In addition, the study noted that Black and Hispanic youth are "significantly more likely" to use AI than other groups and that generative AI helps students find answers to questions they may be too afraid to ask adults and by offering them guidance on what to say if they do feel anxiety about those kinds of conversations.



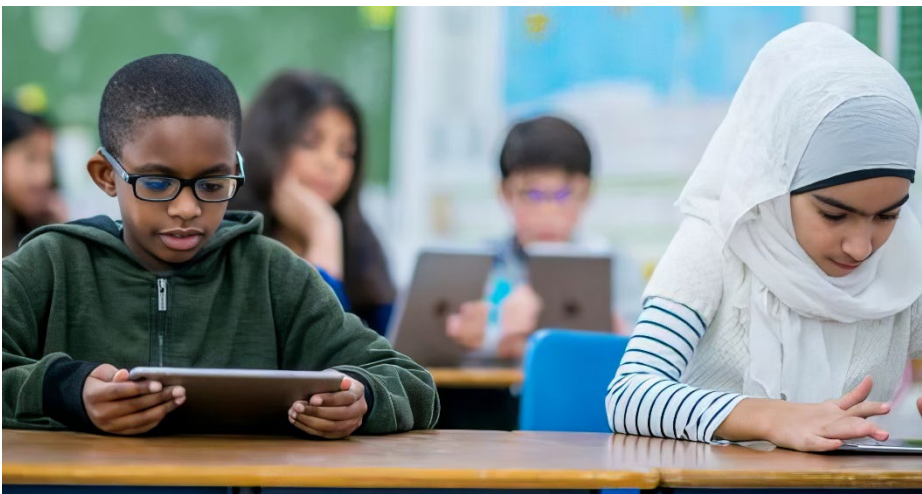
While the fact that many young people do use AI to cheat is alarming, digging deeper we understand that they also use it in constructive ways. For these reasons, we need to reframe how we see AI from something that students use to shirk responsibility and accountability for learning to that of a tool that serves as an impetus for them to learn if we design learning tasks in a more cognitively rich and engaging manner.

As **Jose Bowen**, former president of Goucher College, recently stated on the Have a Life Teaching podcast, “What we (educators) call cheating, other industries call progress.” Indeed, youth today will need to know how to use AI to compete in the 21st Century workplace and if schools continue to ban them from using it, we are teaching them our past rather than their future.

Redesigning Learning Tasks

We often ask our students to summarize text and recall basic information in the form of written reports. While this serves an important purpose - particularly when checking student understanding before moving on - such tasks are easily generated by AI. These assignments follow predictable patterns, require lower-order thinking and align closely with the formats on which AI systems have been trained.

In contrast, stronger learning tasks invite students to engage in deeper thinking: to add their own voice, offer analysis, reflect on meaning and synthesize content across sources, experiences and disciplines. These tasks are far more difficult for AI to replicate because they require personal insight, contextual judgment and authentic engagement.



Consider how you can redesign assignments. Instead of asking “What happened in the text?”, we can ask “What does this remind you of?”, “Why does this matter now?” and “What’s a perspective that’s missing from this text?” Incorporating student voice, choice and purpose not only resists AI overuse but fosters more durable, relevant learning.

Additionally, when used intentionally, AI can serve as a springboard for discussion, comparison and critique. For instance, students might review an AI summary and revise it, identifying what it missed or misunderstood. In this way, AI doesn't replace learning - it fuels it.

Designing AI-Enhanced Learning Experiences

First, teach responsible use, instructing children as to what ethical use involves. Ethical AI is accomplished in ways that are honest, responsible and respectful of others’ work, privacy and learning goals. It involves being transparent about when and how AI is used and ensuring that it supports - not replaces - original thinking, creativity and critical analysis. One powerful way to promote the ethical use of AI is to require learners to share their AI use reflections. This simple accountability measure can increase transparency around the use of AI, encourages student metacognition and maintains the primacy of original and creative thought.

Reflections on AI use should prompt students to consider not only *what* they used AI for, but *why* they chose to do so, *how* it influenced their thinking and *what* limitations or biases they noticed in AI responses. By making space for these considerations, educators can help cultivate a deeper awareness of the implications of AI use - fostering digital citizenship, ethical reasoning and academic integrity. Moreover, embedding discussions about ethical AI use within classroom dialogue helps normalize responsible behavior and equips students with the discernment they will need as these technologies become more embedded in their academic, professional and personal lives. When students understand that ethical use is not just a rule but a reflection of values - honesty, respect, responsibility - they are more likely to integrate those values into all aspects of their learning.

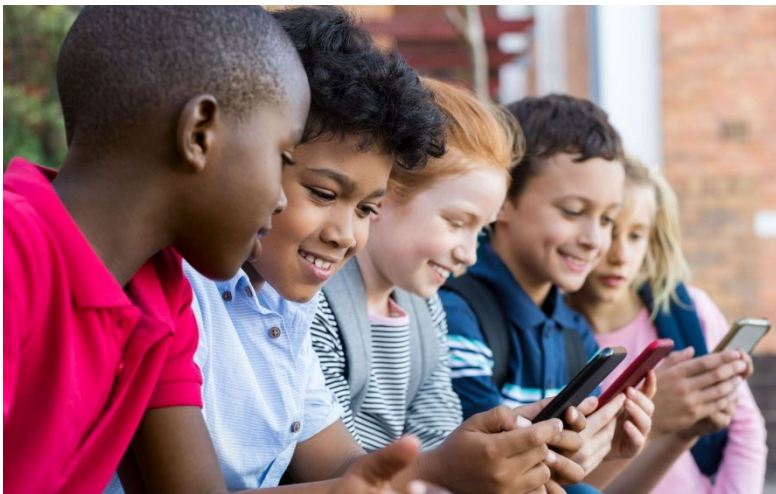
This helps to embed AI in the learning process. It’s important that those we teach do not see the primary purpose of AI as being a shortcut in getting things done but, rather, as a partner enhancing their learning journey. We should design AI-infused assignments that help students brainstorm ideas, refine and revise original work and critique AI-produced content. Requiring youth to document AI interactions also assists us in our ability to follow the flow of the generative AI conversation and idea generation.

This metacognitive approach deepens learning by prompting students to assess the strengths and limitations of AI-generated responses, understand the ethical implications of its use and use their own voice in discussing the information they present. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a mindset where AI is not seen as a replacement for human effort, but as a catalyst for deeper inquiry, creativity and thoughtful engagement.



Document AI interactions

How do we design student reflections on AI use so that these assessments of student learning spotlight the use of it as a process rather than a product? First, provide students with key questions they can use to guide and structure their thoughts. These questions can assist in anchoring their thinking:



- ➔ What specific task or challenge did you use AI to help with?
- ➔ How did AI influence your thinking or planning?
- ➔ What ideas did you accept from the AI? What did you change or reject and why?
- ➔ Did using AI clarify or complicate your understanding of the topic?
- ➔ How did your final product differ from the original plan and what role did AI play?

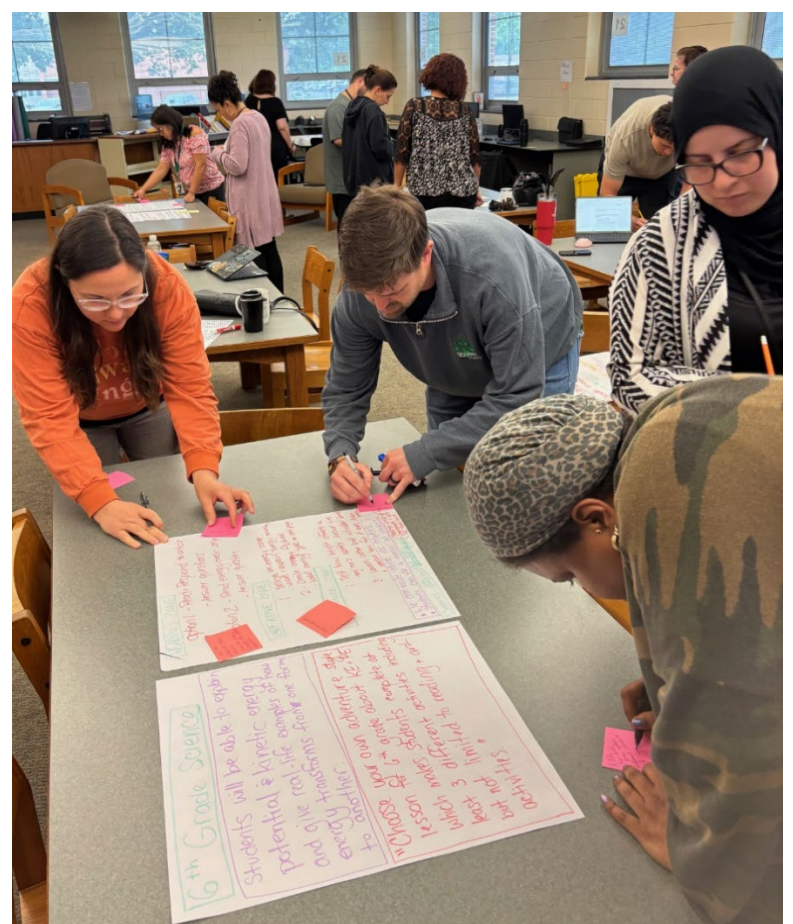
Teachers may also require that learners document where in the timeline of their work that they used AI, such as when brainstorming, drafting, revising and fact-checking. Within reflective journals, learners may also link their AI use back to learning objectives and indicate how its use helped them succeed in meeting academic goals. The key takeaway here for educators is to make AI reflection a regular, low-stakes practice rather than a one-off requirement with ‘gotcha’ implications. Journals, exit slips and discussion-based debriefs can be used after any assignment where AI played a role, gradually deepening students’ self-awareness.

What We Can Do Differently

Returning to our protest song example, there are several ways through which this assignment could be structured so that it is AI-enriched. We can continue to allow students to use AI to match songs with the protest theme; however, it should be framed as a research aid - not a replacement for student thought. If we ask students to analyze lyrical rhetoric in class, short bursts of class-generated reflection journaling or peer-to-peer discussions comparing historical movements and identifying oversimplified interpretations can help frame the work for critical thinking. Learners can also create multimedia reflections such as podcasts, videos, infographics, concept maps and social media posts that share new understandings. In the same way, inviting students to discuss what AI got right and got wrong, comparing their AI outputs and conclusions with classmates. This kind of reframing sets the stage for everyone to provide greater input and benefit from better results in their learning.

We can also use the moment to coach students on the importance of critical thinking - asking them to question: *Whose voices are centered in this song? What historical or cultural narratives are being uplifted or omitted?* and *How is language used to persuade, provoke, or unify?* One powerful strategy is to have students annotate AI-generated descriptions of protest songs, highlighting where the text captures key themes - and where it falls short. For example, what happens when the tools students use to learn about these songs are not built to recognize or respect the full scope of the history and people behind them? Have students identify vague interpretations of lyrics, circle missing context, and add margin notes that contrast AI’s summary with their own analysis.

AI tools are trained on dominant cultural narratives which can fail to capture layered and nuanced meanings in texts rooted in Indigenous storytelling. In this way, AI might flatten a protest song’s metaphor-rich lyrics into generic language, missing references to historical events, dialect and double meanings central to the song’s power. Encouraging the student - who used AI to match protest songs to social justice themes without thought - to critique these gaps to improve their critical thinking and affirm the importance of culturally responsive interpretations that challenge algorithmic biases. These strategies deepen engagement by empowering students to be more ethical as informed consumers of media.



Teachers in South Plainfield, NJ, engage in a gallery walk around their AI generated lessons at a workshop facilitated by the author for NJ Teacher to Teacher.

Supporting Equity and Access

While we must acknowledge the significant role that AI has and will continue to play in the learning process, it is essential not to overlook the potential equity gaps it may create. Requiring the use of AI outside of school hours can inadvertently deepen disparities, as not all students have access to the necessary technology or reliable Internet at home. This digital divide can prevent some students from fully participating in AI-enhanced learning opportunities, so it’s crucial to recognize that AI is best utilized in a controlled, equitable environment - primarily within the classroom - where teachers can model its ethical and productive use.

In-class AI use allows educators to provide necessary scaffolding, particularly for students who may struggle with literacy development or critical thinking skills. Teachers can guide students through the process, ensuring they understand both its potential and limitations. At the same time, AI can be a transformative tool for multilingual learners, offering translation and language support that bridges communication gaps. Additionally, it can assist students who face challenges in expressing their thoughts clearly in writing, providing prompts, suggestions and alternative phrasing to help them articulate their ideas more effectively, ensuring that it serves as an inclusive and supportive tool for all students, regardless of their backgrounds and abilities.

In Conclusion: This Matters

AI is not the end of student thinking; poor instructional design is. As a new technology, it demands more of us as educators. When we design strong and well thought-out learning experiences that use AI as our partner to stimulate student creativity and thought, rather than as a shortcut to task completion, we are far more likely to foster classroom environments where students are intrinsically motivated to own their learning, rather than merely comply. Effective integration of AI reinforces both the necessity of media literacy and should encourage exploration, reflection and original expression - qualities that emerge when students are engaged in meaningful, intellectually rich tasks.



The author working with Tajik teachers at the American corner in Dushanbe presenting on AI as a Fulbright Scholar.

Rather than expressing frustration when students use AI inappropriately - such as in the case of the teacher who discovered students relying on AI to match protest songs to social justice themes - educators should treat such moments as clarion calls to reimagine instructional design. These instances highlight a need to move beyond assignments rooted in recall, fact-matching, or surface-level comprehension. Instead, educators should prioritize tasks that validate student identities and also demand synthesis, critical evaluation and creativity - learning goals that are not easily outsourced to AI. When students are asked to create something new, take a stance, defend a perspective, or connect ideas across disciplines, they are far more likely to use AI as a tool *within* the learning process - not as a substitute for it.

In full disclosure, portions of this article were developed with the assistance of generative AI tools, which were used to support idea generation, phrasing and revision. Final content, structure and interpretations are my own.

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Dr. John Schembari is a school improvement expert and former district administrator with a strong background in instruction and technology. He partners with the Center for Educational Innovation, Fordham University, CUNY Brooklyn College, the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, TNTPand the School Culture and Climate Initiative helping to support educators in building the skillsets needed to prepare students for the future AI-based economy they will enter. View his recent Worthy Incubator on AI for students [here!](#)



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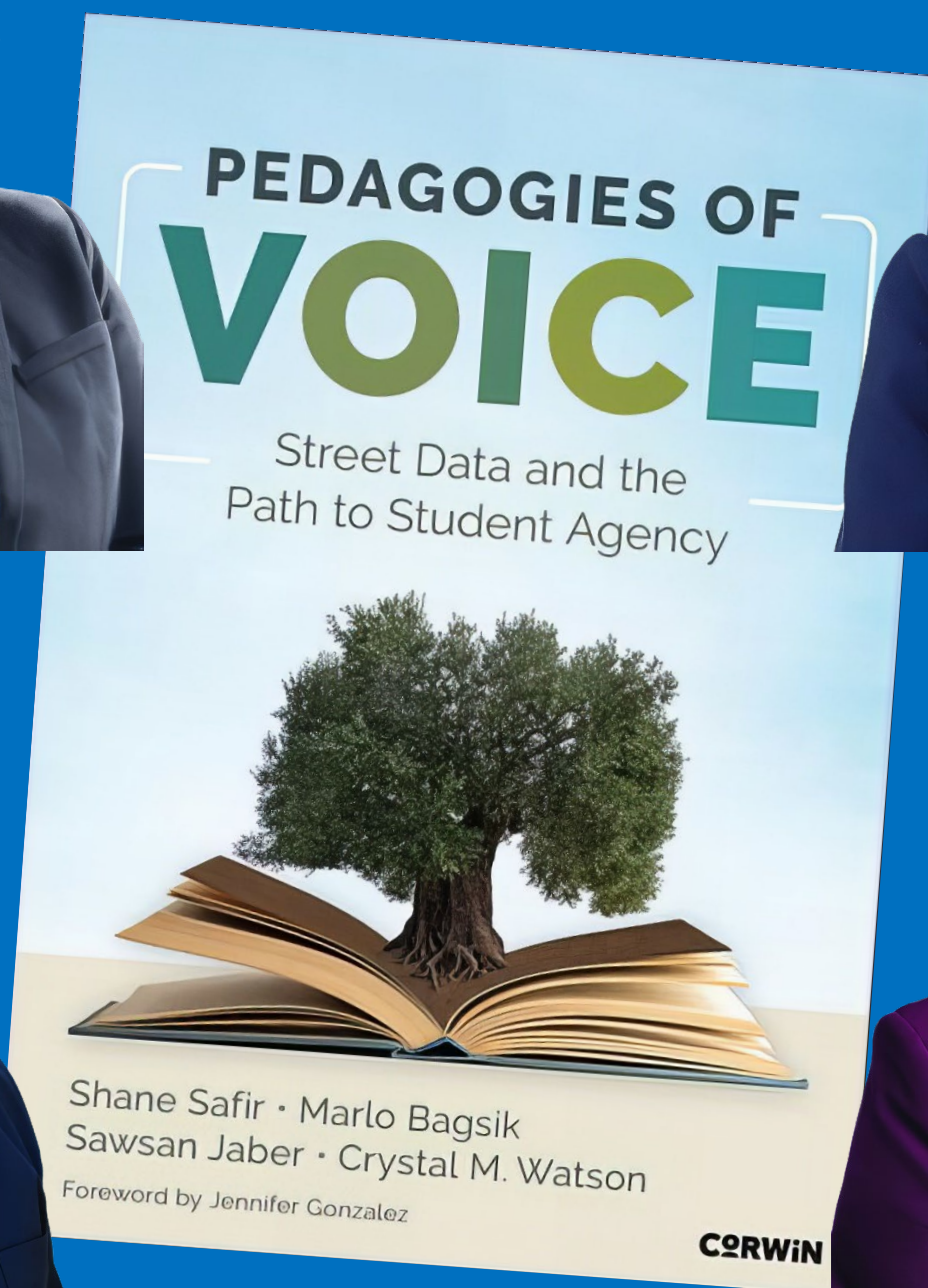
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What is Agency and Why Does it Matter?

By Ann DeChenne M.Ed Ph.D (ABD), Founder and Director of Little by Little Education Services, Salem, Oregon

It's a question I began to ask myself this year as I struggled to find a way to truly capture my student's attention. It was an aha moment while brainstorming one afternoon in front of my whiteboard; dry erase marker in hand. How was I going to get my students to engage? Over the past few years I have begun to encounter more and more learned helplessness (or should I call it manufactured helplessness, thanks to covid, cell phones, and social media).

Agency for both students and teachers isn't just a concept, it's a core ingredient for meaningful learning and long term sustainability in the classroom.

The reluctance to increase our speed and embrace technology at the rate society does isn't just a missed opportunity - it's a disservice. Our students are growing up with social media, generative AI, and online ecosystems baked into their daily lives. If we're still debating whether to let kids use tools like ChatGPT or Khanmigo - we're not preparing them, we are restraining them.

To lead with purpose in this new environment, educational leaders must do more than tolerate technology. We must model it, integrate it, and reimagine systems that prepare students not just to navigate the world, but to shape it.

What is Agency?

Simply, agency is the ability to make choices and take action in ways that matter. The student who raises their hand and says "Can you help?" or "I don't understand?", that student is demonstrating agency. For students agency isn't just voice or participation, but also influence, relevance, and ownership.

For educators, agency is professional autonomy, creativity and room to respond to real student needs. This doesn't mean letting students do whatever they want, but giving students some control when they often don't feel in control of much at all.

Agency is not a soft skill, it is foundational and it is important now more than ever. Agency supports deeper thinking, especially for the multilingual, those who are identified as needing special education, and students from marginalized communities.

Too often, in education the work focuses on what people lack, rather than what they can do. When narratives position students as passive recipients, they strip away agency, the very thing that drives long-term engagement, learning and self-determination.



Some ideas for what an agency-centered approach might mean are:

- ➔ Recognizing that students are not helpless, they are capable, resourceful, and often already leading change. Even when they don't feel those things, we can model, affirm, and create space for them to grow into that identity.
- ➔ Shifting from “giving a voice” to actually listening to the voices that are already speaking. With grading, planning, and committees it is easy to get caught up and forget to actually listen to what the students are saying. I gave my students a survey and it took me almost the whole year to actually get to the results. It wasn't timely but I actually looked at the results to identify what the students were telling me. I have made some changes accordingly and realize some work that I need to do to help the students understand that they have a voice.
- ➔ Ensuring that students are decision-makers, not just passive recipients of the content. Offering choice, even in small ways, restores agency to students who often feel they have none. It can be as small as giving them a choice of assignments or how to present their work. When we center agency, we change everything.



Schools aren't always designed to nurture agency. They are built to deliver curriculum, manage large groups, and measure outcomes. Student voice is often not centered and neither is teacher autonomy. Yet, moments in the classroom can change everything. Pivoting mid-lesson because of a question a student asks, a group proposes a new way to show their learning, a student says “can you help me?”. These are moments of agency. These are the heart of learning.

Why Agency Now More Than Ever

In the past few years, I've seen student engagement drop in ways I hadn't expected. The pandemic interrupted so much more than academic progress, it disrupted motivation, fractured relationships, and deepened a sense of disconnection from learning.

Students returned to classrooms carrying invisible weight: grief, uncertainty, digital burnout, and in many cases, a belief that school no longer had anything meaningful to offer them. They aren't wrong to question it. Our students live in a world where the future of work is uncertain, where AI tools can write essays in seconds and where viral content feels more valuable than careful thinking and homework. In that world compliance based education, focused on worksheets, rigid rules, and standardized tests, feels increasingly irrelevant.

“For me this journey toward centering agency isn't over. It's a practice. A mindset. What would change if we stopped teaching to students and started learning with them?”



That's why agency matters more than ever. When students feel powerless and mute, they disengage. When they don't believe their voice or choices matter, they retreat to apathy and defiance. But when we invite them to co-create their learning, when we show them that their ideas are important, something begins to shift.

Agency isn't about learning outcomes, it's about identity. When we center agency, we give them ownership. Confidence. Resistance. Those are the very things they'll need to navigate an unpredictable world.

This shift doesn't just benefit students. It can revitalize teachers too. When I began centering agency in my classroom, I felt myself coming back to life as an educator. I wasn't just managing behavior but watching students begin to become more aware, more curious. I wasn't just covering content, I was listening, adapting, and co-creating. Did it happen overnight? No, and I personally and professionally have a long way to go, but I am actively on the journey.

We don't need any more systems that ask students to sit still and be quiet. We need spaces that ask them: What do you think? What do you want to change? What do you want to build? Agency is the thread that connects learning to purpose

Agency doesn't require a curriculum overhaul. It starts with small intentional shifts: asking more questions, offering meaningful choices, and truly listening. It means showing students, especially those who've been marginalized, that their thoughts, voices and decisions matter.

For me this journey toward centering agency isn't over. It's a practice. A mindset. What would change if we stopped teaching to students and started learning with them?



Ann DeChenne is a high school English language development teacher at North Marion School District in Oregon. In her spare time she is Founder/Director of Little by Little Education Services a 501C3 that works with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Refugee Led Organizations (RLOs) in Africa and India. [in](#) [o](#) [e](#)

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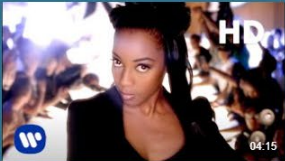
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