

# Think Piece No. Four

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### THE COMPASSIONATE SCHOOL LEADER

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*'A leader is an individual who significantly affects the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of a significant number of individuals'*

*Howard Gardner, Leading Minds, An Anatomy of Leadership*

Another definition of leadership is to create the conditions for people to thrive, individually and collectively, and achieve significant goals. Most schools would argue that they are compassionate institutions led by compassionate leaders with a concern for every individual and the education of the whole child at its heart. However, it is important to pause and reflect on this especially in these times where there is such a relentless focus on raising attainment which of course fundamentally important but needs to be balanced with the professional moral responsibility of schools to children, parents, society and the nation. We are familiar with the dimensions of good schooling from a range of literature and indeed we have a regulatory framework which sets this out, but the most important dimension should be founded on values connected to the broader purpose of education: a deeper sense of what is worth learning in the early 21st century and clarity about what we want to achieve.

Here compassion can be the key organising principle promoting the highest, collective values. We should all ask the question – 'By the time children finish school, what do we hope they will have become?' The answer to this might vary in different stages of schooling but most of us would argue that they would be fluent, decent, resilient, self-driven achievers who live up to altruistic ideals and values; and that they would be compassionate individuals who care for each other and for the planet. Compassionate leaders strive to make their schools places where everyone tastes the confidence that comes with success in all its forms and where all adults and children are valued and aware of their potential to flourish and achieve.

The teaching profession has always been peopled by some of the most compassionate people in our society. You could not survive in the contemporary education world unless you have an overriding concern for the well-being of your children in all its aspects. Given this what makes a compassionate school leader now? Certainly leaders do the right thing when they focus, not on their own needs and wants, but on the children and adults affected by their actions. We may list here some of the qualities of a compassionate leader:-

- Altruistic – operating on the basis of selflessness and resilience
- Reflective – reflection can led to empathy and to a deeper understanding

- Empathetic – the ability to sense other people’s emotions and to put ourselves in their situation.
- Courageous – standing up for beliefs and values and acting upon them.

Another way of looking at this is to examine the practice of leadership in terms of ways of feeling, ways of being, ways of doing, ways of relating, ways of perceiving and ways of thinking. Ways of feeling relate to our core values and beliefs and ways of being to personal qualities such as resilience and courage, energy and optimism, humility and magnanimity. Our ways of doing relate to enabling and empowering others, and ways of relating to honesty and authenticity, reflection, self-awareness and empathy. Our ways of perceiving call upon our skills of observation and listening, seeking and hearing diverse views and being sensitive to other narratives. Finally our ways of thinking,– our intellectual and cognitive abilities as leaders, allows us to make sense of complex issues and make positive decisions.

Successful schools are built upon compassionate values driven by good educational leadership. These might be expressed as:-

- A clear sense of moral purpose with the explicit intention of making a positive difference to the lives of children and young people creating moral capital.
- Spiritual, moral, social, culture and intellectual development as well as physical and mental health.
- Emotional literacy and the building of empathy and resilience ‘to education the heart’.
- Character education and character virtues.
- Equity, social justice and mutual respect.
- Citizenship and the school as a civic institution.

In such schools compassion can be ‘caught’, learned by children and young people as they, without conscious thoughts, model their behaviours on those they look up to. How leaders and staff behave, and how pupils behave to each other and adults, is fundamental to the ethos of the school and the transmission of compassionate values. Here the use of everyday language is vitally important. In Tim Brighouse’s phrase ‘language can make or break a school’. Language and leadership are inseparable; leaders traffic in language which needs to be targeted to motivate and increase aspiration thinking, and positive to spark enthusiasm and extra effort. Compassion can also be ‘taught’ and cultivated purposefully through the breadth of the curriculum we adopt, the learning contexts we choose, the pedagogies we employ, our focus on engaging and involving pupils, and the evaluations we undertake.

I often ask senior leaders on my visits to schools – ‘What is your DNA?’, or ‘What is unique and distinctive about your school?’ Through this question I am seeking to gain an understanding of their beliefs and values and how they can be observed through the ethos and culture of everyday school experiences. In the best schools the promotion of spiritual, moral, social and cultural education as part of intellectual and emotional development is their very lifeblood an enduring moral and core purpose which is a pre-requisite for living successfully in the 21st century as well as vital for the future of our society.

The powerful RSA Report, ‘Schools with Soul’, (2014) asserts that ‘it is now time to put back the soul and spirit into our schools and begin to create a clearer vision about the purpose and goals of education in the 21st century’. To do this we need compassionate leaders who are able to weave this golden thread through a holistic approach to teaching and learning, an inclusive environment, a rich and creative curriculum, a

focus on involving and engaging pupils, high quality partnerships with parents and the wider community, as well as self-evaluation and collective review.

The long lever of leadership at all levels is our best chance to make this happen. Those who practice educational leadership must always ask themselves the question 'Leadership of and for what'?

*'Leadership is always important. At great social turning points is more important than ever. At times like these, the leadership we need is not leadership that turns us against others or holds us back in awe. It is leadership that lifts us up and turns us around together in pursuit of a common cause that expresses and advances our humanity'.*

*Andy Hargreaves & Dennis Shirley*

*The Fourth Way*



#### VICE CHAIR

**PROFESSOR DAVID WOODS CBE** spent twenty years of his career in teaching, senior leadership in schools and in teacher training. He has worked in local authorities in Solihull and Birmingham, and became the Chief Education Adviser for Birmingham City where he worked closely with Tim Brighouse. In 1998 he joined the DfES Standards and Effectiveness Unit as senior education adviser working closely with Ministers to develop educational policy and subsequently became the Head of the DfES Advisory Service.

He joined the London Challenge programme in 2003 as the Lead Secondary adviser and from January, 2008 became the Principal Adviser for the City Challenge. Later that year he was appointed to the role of Principal National Challenge Adviser for England. In May, 2009 he was appointed to the post of Chief Adviser for London Schools. He is currently a member of the OfSTED Expert Panel on urban education as well as a member of the National College's Steering Groups on Teaching Schools and NLE's. He is a visiting Professor of Education at Warwick University and the London Institute of Education. David has written and spoken extensively on school improvement, his first book co-authored with Tim Brighouse *What Makes a Good School Now?*, was followed up in May 2013 by his next publication *The A-Z of School Improvement*. Also co-authored with Tim Brighouse.