

FUTURE

Monday,
5th of April, 2027

Leadership for Everyone Conference

The Psychology of Online Conflict:
Helping Pupils Navigate Digital Disputes

Beyond Hearing:
The Skills of Attentive Listening

Leading the Human Work:
Compassionate Leadership in Education

Kintsugi as Pedagogical Philosophy:
Repair, Imperfection, and Ethical Attention in the Classroom

Philosophical Education:
Teaching about Ethical Dilemmas

2027

Hosted by Ysgol Panteg

FUTURE

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Welcome

It is a pleasure to welcome you to this year's conference, a gathering that continues to grow in ambition, reach and shared purpose. This is now our third year! Each year, this event becomes more than a meeting of professionals. It becomes a moment of pause in the busy life of education, a chance to step back from the immediacy of daily demands and to think together about the future we are shaping. This conference is built on the belief that thoughtful conversation can change practice, that collaboration can strengthen communities and that ideas, when shared generously, can transform the experience of children and young people.

The past year has reminded us that education is never static. New challenges have emerged, familiar ones have deepened and the work of schools has continued to evolve in ways that require clarity, compassion and intellectual courage. This conference offers a space to explore those shifts with honesty and curiosity. Our speakers and contributors bring insight from research, practice and lived experience, inviting us to consider how teaching, leadership and childhood itself are changing, and what it means to respond with wisdom and purpose.

Across this day, you will encounter sessions that examine the craft of teaching, the complexity of identity, the conditions that make learning possible and the human work that sits at the heart of leadership. You will meet colleagues who share your commitment to children and who understand the realities of school life. The conversations that begin here will continue long after the event ends, shaping thinking, strengthening relationships and widening the horizon of what feels possible.

As we gather, let us remember that education is a collective endeavour. It is shaped not by individual effort alone but by shared values, shared questions and shared hope. The future will be built by those who listen carefully, think deeply and act with integrity. We are honoured to welcome you, and we look forward to the insight, imagination and humanity you will bring to this year's conference.

Dr. Matthew Williamson-Dicken
MA(Ed), PGCert, BA(Hons), CMgr FCMI , MASPE

Conference Timetable of Events

8:30am-9:00am	Coffee and Networking Time (Main Hall)					
9:00am-9:45am Session 1	Keynote: Reading the World: Why Reading Still Shapes Everything We Do with Dr. Darren Chetty (Main Hall)					
9:45am-11:00am Session 2	Crash Course in Growing Readers: Nurturing the Love of Reading with Dr. Darren Chetty (Cwm Lleucu Room) 	The Future of Childhood: How Society Is Changing What Children Need with Abi Phillips and Katie Matthews (Pen y Llan Room) 	Understanding Religion, Values, Ethics Practice in the Classroom with Jade Saunders and Alison Coombs (Coed y Canddo Room) 	Data Without the Drama: Intelligent Use of Information for Improvement with Kate Ngwenya and Andrew Phillips (Cwm Bwrwch Room) 	Design Thinking in Schools: Creative Problem-Solving for Real Challenges with Tanwen Davies (Craig y Felin Room) 	Cognitive Load: Designing Instruction that Reduces Unnecessary Strain with Kaysha Wulder (Gwaun Hywel Room) 
11:00am-11:15am		‘Grab and Go’ Coffee (Main Hall)				
11:15am-12:30pm Session 3		The Experience of Feedback: Making Comments That Matter with Jade Bones and Sarah Attewell (Pen y Llan Room) 	Philosophical Education: Teaching about Ethical Dilemmas with Dr. Matthew Williamson-Dicken (Coed y Canddo Room) 	Curriculum Design and Progression for the Effective Teaching of Science with Claire Clarke (Cwm Bwrwch Room) 	Family and Community Engagement: A Cluster Wide Approach with Emily Boshein (Craig y Felin Room) 	Slow Pedagogy: Teaching with Presence and Purpose with Morgan Dalton and Sian Brooks (Gwaun Hywel Room) 
12:30pm-1:15pm	Lunch & Networking Time (Main Hall)					
1:15pm-2:30pm Session 4	Crash Course in Teaching About Identity: Race, Culture and Belonging with Sarah Truelove Roque, Kristian Wharton, Sarah Jarman and Daniel Edwards (Cwm Lleucu Room) 	Children’s Rights: Building a Strong Whole School Ethos with Nerys Phillips (Pen y Llan Room) 	Beyond Hearing: The Skill of Attentive Listening with Dr. Matthew Williamson-Dicken (Coed y Canddo Room) 	Insight Over Output: Rethinking What We Measure with Laura Perrett (Cwm Bwrwch Room) 	Safety as Pedagogy: The Conditions That Make Learning Possible with Alana Parry (Craig y Felin Room) 	Teaching Language: Lessons from Tokyo with Carys Soper (Gwaun Hywel Room) 
2:30pm-2:45pm		‘Grab and Go’ Coffee (Main Hall)				
2:45pm-4:00pm Session 5		Leading the Human Work: Compassionate Leadership in Education with Emma Payne (Pen y Llan Room) 	Breaking Down Walls: Innovative Nurture Provision in Practice with Eve Rowlands and Sarah Attwood (Coed y Canddo Room) 	Teaching the Edges: Reaching Learners Who Sit at the Margins with Chloe Lewis and Elizabeth Messoré (Cwm Bwrwch Room) 	Design Thinking in Schools: Creative Problem-Solving for Real Challenges with Tanwen Davies (Craig y Felin Room) 	Cognitive Load: Designing Instruction that Reduces Unnecessary Strain with Kaysha Wulder (Gwaun Hywel Room) 
4:10pm-4:30pm Session 6	Plenary Session (Main Hall)					

Keynote and Conference Opening

Reading the World: Why Reading Still Shapes Everything We Do

with Dr. Darren Chetty

Reading remains one of the most powerful acts a human being can perform. It is both an intellectual skill and a deeply emotional experience, shaping how children understand themselves, how they interpret the world and how they imagine futures beyond their immediate reach. This keynote explores reading not simply as a curriculum area but as a cultural force that influences identity, empathy and the development of a thoughtful inner life. It considers how reading habits are formed, how they are sustained and how they can be disrupted by the pace and pressures of modern childhood. The session reflects on the quiet rituals that make reading meaningful, from the shared experience of a story to the private pleasure of reading alone. It examines how schools can create environments where reading feels alive, valued and woven into the daily rhythm of learning. We will explore the relationship between reading and language, reading and wellbeing, and reading and the development of confident, curious thinkers. Ultimately, this keynote invites educators to see reading as a gift we offer children: a way of expanding their world, strengthening their imagination and giving them access to ideas that can shape a lifetime. It asks what it means to teach reading with depth, humanity and purpose, and how schools can build cultures where every child feels that reading belongs to them.

Crash Courses

Crash Course in Growing Readers: Nurturing the Love of Reading

with Dr. Darren Chetty



Reading is one of the quiet joys of childhood, yet it is also one of the most powerful tools for shaping a thoughtful, imaginative inner life. This session explores how schools can nurture a genuine love of reading, helping pupils discover books not as tasks to complete but as companions that open new worlds. It considers how reading identities are formed, how confidence grows through small successes and how children learn to associate reading with comfort, curiosity and pleasure. Participants will reflect on the subtle conditions that help reading flourish, including the presence of rich and varied texts, the freedom to choose, and the gentle encouragement that comes from adults who read with warmth and authenticity. The session examines how classrooms can become places where reading feels alive and woven into daily routines, and how pupils can be supported to see themselves as readers who read because they want to, not because they must.

Crash Course in Teaching About Identity: Race, Culture and Belonging

with Sarah Truelove Roque, Kristian Wharton, Sarah Jarman and Daniel Edwards



Identity shapes how learners see themselves and how they experience school. This session explores race, culture and belonging with honesty, care and intellectual rigour. It considers how representation, language, curriculum choices and daily interactions influence whether pupils feel recognised and safe. Participants will reflect on how to create identity-affirming classrooms where every learner can bring their full self without fear of judgement. The session highlights how belonging is built through small, daily acts of recognition and respect, and how schools can become places where diversity is understood not as a challenge but as a source of richness and human connection. It explores how educators can navigate sensitive conversations with confidence and compassion, helping pupils develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others. Ultimately, the session invites schools to build cultures where identity is honoured, difference is valued and every pupil feels they truly belong.

Sessions

Teaching Language: Lessons from Tokyo

with Carys Soper



What can Japanese language instruction teach us about effective pedagogy, engagement, and curriculum design? This session draws upon insights from Carreg Lam and Ysgol Panteg's research visit to Japan, exploring key methodologies used in Japanese schools to develop language fluency and literacy. We will examine structured approaches to language acquisition, including phonetic systems, early immersion techniques, and the balance between rote memorisation and contextual application. The discussion will highlight how Japanese educators integrate visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic strategies to reinforce linguistic understanding and retention. Participants will also explore how these findings could inform language teaching in Wales, considering parallels between bilingual education models and effective literacy practices. The session will encourage reflection on how Japan's focus on discipline, repetition, and cultural embedding could enhance classroom strategies for fostering confident communicators. Join us for an engaging exploration into global pedagogical perspectives redefining how we approach language learning in our schools.

The Future of Childhood: How Society Is Changing What Children Need

with Abi Phillips and Katie Matthews



Childhood is changing in ways that previous generations could not have imagined. This discussion session explores how shifts in technology, family life, community structures and cultural expectations are reshaping the world in which children grow. It considers the pressures that define modern childhood, from constant digital connection to the increasing complexity of social identity, and reflects on how these pressures influence wellbeing, curiosity and the development of a stable sense of self. Participants will examine how children navigate a world that is both more open and more demanding than ever before, and how schools can respond with clarity, compassion and imagination. The session invites educators to think deeply and discuss about what children need now, and how education can remain a place of safety, possibility and human connection in a society that rarely pauses. It encourages a thoughtful re-examination of childhood itself, asking what it means to grow, to learn and to flourish in the twenty-first century.

Understanding Religion, Values, Ethics Practice in the Classroom

with Jade Saunders and Alison Coombs



This session will support practitioners in developing a clear understanding of what effective Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE) practice looks like in the classroom. Participants will gain practical strategies for planning and delivering engaging RVE lessons, explore ways to integrate RVE across the curriculum, and reflect on how these approaches can be adapted to enhance provision within their own school setting.

Data Without the Drama: Intelligent Use of Information for Improvement

with Kate Gwenya and Andrew Phillips



Schools generate vast amounts of information, yet not all of it leads to insight. This session explores how data can be used with intelligence, calm and purpose. It considers how to distinguish between information that genuinely supports improvement and information that distracts from the real work of teaching. Participants will reflect on how to build a culture where data is interpreted thoughtfully, shared responsibly and used to deepen understanding rather than heighten anxiety. The session examines how to create systems that feel humane and sustainable, where information illuminates learning rather than reducing it, and where teachers feel supported rather than scrutinised. It explores how data can strengthen professional dialogue, clarify priorities and help schools understand the lived experiences of pupils. The aim is to help educators use data as a tool for clarity, fairness and meaningful progress, creating an atmosphere where information supports growth rather than pressure.

Design Thinking in Schools: Creative Problem-Solving for Real Challenges

with Tanwen Davies



Design thinking offers a structured yet imaginative approach to solving complex problems. This session introduces the principles of empathy, ideation, prototyping and iteration, and explores how they can be applied to curriculum design, pastoral care, leadership and classroom practice. Participants will consider how design thinking encourages curiosity, collaboration and the willingness to test ideas without fear of failure. The session highlights how creative problem-solving can help schools respond to real challenges with solutions that are both innovative and grounded in the realities of daily school life. It invites educators to think boldly, to explore possibilities and to refine ideas through thoughtful experimentation. The session also reflects on how design thinking can strengthen relationships, deepen understanding of pupil experience and create a culture where creativity becomes a practical tool for improvement. Ultimately, it encourages schools to see design thinking not as an add-on but as a mindset that can transform how problems are approached and solved.

Cognitive Load: Designing Instruction that Reduces Unnecessary Strain

with Kaysha Wulder



Learning becomes harder when working memory is overwhelmed by too much information or too many competing demands. This session explores the principles of cognitive load theory and how they can be applied to everyday teaching. It considers clarity of explanation, careful sequencing and the design of tasks that support understanding rather than overload. Participants will reflect on how to create lessons that feel manageable, purposeful and intellectually engaging, allowing pupils to focus on the ideas that matter most. The session highlights how thoughtful instructional design can reduce strain, strengthen confidence and support deeper learning. It invites educators to consider how simplicity, structure and well-timed guidance can transform the experience of learning. By examining real classroom examples, the session shows how small adjustments can make a significant difference to pupil understanding, helping teachers design lessons that feel calm, coherent and cognitively supportive.

The Experience of Feedback: Making Comments That Matter

with Jade Bones and Sarah Attewell



Feedback is an emotional experience as much as a cognitive one. This session explores how comments shape confidence, identity and the relationship between teacher and learner. It considers how pupils interpret feedback, how tone and timing influence its impact and how teachers can craft responses that support growth rather than anxiety. Participants will reflect on how feedback can become a moment of connection, clarity and encouragement, helping pupils understand not only what to improve but how to move forward with confidence. The session highlights how feedback can strengthen trust, deepen understanding and support the development of resilient learners. It explores how feedback can be designed to feel humane, purposeful and genuinely helpful, and how teachers can create an atmosphere where pupils feel safe enough to engage with critique. Ultimately, the session invites educators to rethink feedback as a relational act that shapes the emotional climate of learning.

Philosophical Education: Teaching about Ethical Dilemmas

with Dr. Matthew Williamson-Dicken



Children are natural philosophers who ask questions that reach beyond the surface of a topic and into the heart of what matters. This session explores how ethical dilemmas can deepen thinking, strengthen dialogue and build moral understanding. It considers how to structure philosophical inquiry in ways that are accessible, rigorous and emotionally safe. Participants will reflect on how philosophical education helps pupils develop habits of mind that support empathy, reasoning and thoughtful engagement with the world. The session highlights how philosophy can enrich curriculum, strengthen relationships and help pupils explore the complexities of human experience with curiosity and care. It also examines how philosophical dialogue can support pupils in navigating uncertainty, forming values and developing the confidence to articulate their thinking. Ultimately, the session invites educators to see philosophy not as an abstract discipline but as a practical tool for building thoughtful, reflective and compassionate learners.

Teaching the Edges: Reaching Learners Who Sit at the Margins

with Chloe Lewis and Elizabeth Messor



Some pupils move quietly along the edges of school life, unnoticed or misunderstood. This session explores how teachers can recognise and support learners who feel peripheral, disconnected or overlooked. It considers the subtle signs of marginalisation and the relational practices that draw pupils back into the centre of learning. Participants will reflect on how presence, noticing and gentle persistence can transform a pupil's experience of school. The session highlights how inclusion is built through small acts of attention and care, and how teachers can create environments where every learner feels seen, valued and invited into the heart of the classroom. It explores how to build trust with pupils who may be reluctant to engage, and how to design learning experiences that feel accessible, affirming and responsive. Ultimately, the session invites educators to consider how classrooms can become places where every pupil feels they have a rightful place.

Family and Community Engagement: A Cluster Wide Approach

with Emily Boshein



Strong partnerships between schools, families, and communities are at the heart of successful learning environments. When children feel supported by a connected network of educators, parents, carers, and community organisations, they are more likely to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Family and Community Engagement: A Cluster Approach, brings together educators, leaders, families, and community partners to explore how collaboration across schools and local communities can create meaningful and lasting impact for children and young people. By working as a cluster, schools can share expertise, strengthen relationships, and develop consistent approaches that engage families as valued partners in learning.

Slow Pedagogy: Teaching with Presence and Purpose

with Morgan Dalton and Sian Brooks



Slow pedagogy invites teachers to create moments of calm, depth and deliberate attention in a world that rarely pauses. This session explores how slowing down can strengthen understanding, reduce anxiety and build connection. It considers pace, presence and the art of designing lessons that breathe. Participants will reflect on how slow teaching can make learning feel more humane, more meaningful and more aligned with the rhythms of real thinking. The session highlights how slowing down can help pupils feel safe, focused and able to engage with ideas in a deeper and more reflective way. It explores how slow pedagogy can support wellbeing, strengthen relationships and create a classroom atmosphere that feels calm, purposeful and intellectually rich. Ultimately, the session invites educators to consider how slowing down can become a powerful act of care.

Children's Rights: Building a Strong Whole School Ethos

with Nerys Phillips



Children's rights offer a principled foundation for school culture. This session explores how rights-based practice can shape relationships, behaviour, curriculum and leadership. It considers how schools can create environments where dignity, respect and participation are woven into daily life. Participants will reflect on how a rights-based ethos strengthens trust, fairness and the shared values that guide how adults and pupils treat one another. The session highlights how children's rights can become a living part of school identity, influencing decisions, shaping practice and supporting a culture where every child feels valued and protected. It explores how rights-based approaches can support inclusion, strengthen pupil voice and create a sense of shared responsibility. Ultimately, the session invites educators to consider how children's rights can become a guiding thread that shapes the atmosphere and daily life of the school.

Beyond Hearing: The Skill of Attentive Listening

with Dr. Matthew Williamson-Dicken



Listening is an active, deliberate practice that shapes understanding and relationships. This session explores the craft of attentive listening and how it can transform classroom dialogue based on Ysgol Panteg and Carreg Lam's research in Tokyo. It considers how teachers can model listening with care, how pupils can be taught to listen with intention and how listening changes the emotional climate of a lesson. Participants will reflect on how attentive listening supports empathy, clarity and deeper engagement with ideas. The session highlights how listening can become a central part of classroom culture, strengthening trust and enriching the shared experience of learning. It explores how listening can help pupils feel valued, understood and connected, and how it can support the development of thoughtful, reflective learners. Ultimately, the session invites educators to consider how listening can become a foundational skill that shapes the atmosphere and quality of learning.

Insight Over Output: Rethinking What We Measure

with Laura Perrett



Schools often measure what is easiest rather than what is most important. This session explores how assessment can be re-imagined to capture insight, understanding and growth. It considers the limitations of traditional metrics and the possibilities of more thoughtful approaches. Participants will reflect on how to design assessment that illuminates learning rather than reducing it, and how to build systems that value depth, nuance and genuine progress. The session highlights how assessment can become a tool for clarity and reflection, helping pupils understand their learning in richer and more meaningful ways. It explores how schools can create cultures where insight is valued over output, and where assessment supports curiosity, confidence and intellectual engagement. Ultimately, the session invites educators to rethink what they measure and why, and to consider how assessment can become a more humane and illuminating part of learning.

Safety as Pedagogy: The Conditions That Make Learning Possible

with Alana Parry



Learning depends on emotional safety. This session explores how teachers can create environments where pupils feel secure enough to think, question and take risks. It considers regulation, trust and the subtle signals that communicate safety. Participants will reflect on how emotional stability supports curiosity, confidence and intellectual engagement. The session highlights how safety is not an add-on but a foundation, shaping the atmosphere of the classroom and enabling pupils to participate fully and bravely in learning. It explores how teachers can build relationships that feel steady and supportive, and how classroom routines can create a sense of predictability and calm. Ultimately, the session invites educators to consider how safety can become a central part of pedagogy, shaping the conditions that make learning possible.

Leading the Human Work: Compassionate Leadership in Education

with Emma Payne



Leadership in schools is human work. It involves emotion, relationship and the daily care of others. This session explores how leaders can act with compassion while maintaining clarity and purpose. It considers presence, communication and the culture-building work that shapes how staff and pupils feel. Participants will reflect on leadership that is steady, humane and grounded in values, and on how leaders can create environments where people feel supported, trusted and able to thrive. The session highlights how compassionate leadership strengthens community, deepens trust and creates the conditions for meaningful educational work. It explores how leaders can navigate complexity with calm, how they can support staff wellbeing and how they can build cultures where people feel safe enough to bring their best selves. Ultimately, the session invites educators to consider leadership as a relational practice that shapes the emotional and intellectual life of the school.

Curriculum Design and Progression for the Effective Teaching of Science

with Claire Clarke



This session will explore how a carefully planned and progressive science curriculum can inspire curiosity, deepen scientific understanding, and support high-quality learning throughout the primary years. Delegates will examine how knowledge, skills, and scientific enquiry can be sequenced effectively to ensure learners build confidence and understanding as they progress through the

primary phase. A key focus of the session will be the importance of connecting classroom learning with the wider world. Through meaningful partnerships with local businesses, STEM practitioners, industry experts, and community organisations, learners can see science in action, gain insight into future careers, and understand the real-world relevance of their studies. The session will showcase how these valuable collaborations can enrich the curriculum, raise aspirations, and provide authentic opportunities for learners to engage with science beyond the classroom. Join us to explore how thoughtful curriculum planning and a clear vision for progression can empower practitioners, enhance learner engagement, and lay strong foundations for future success in science. Together, we will consider how to nurture the next generation of curious, confident, and scientifically literate learners.

Breaking Down Walls: Innovative Nurture Provision in Practice

with Eve Rowlands and Sarah Attwood



This session explores how innovative nurture provision can transform the educational experience for children and young people by removing barriers to learning and participation. Through a commitment to creativity, collaboration, and a child-centred approach, staff have developed inclusive practices that go beyond traditional models of support, ensuring that every learner has the opportunity to succeed. Delegates will gain insight into how nurturing environments, flexible approaches, and strong relationships can help learners overcome social, emotional, and academic challenges. The session will showcase practical examples of how staff have thought outside the box to meet individual needs, foster resilience, build confidence, and create pathways to success for all. Join us as we share our journey of breaking down walls, challenging expectations, and embedding nurture at the heart of school life, enabling every learner not just to participate, but to truly thrive.

Biographies of Speakers

Here, we celebrate the distinguished individuals who will be sharing their expertise and insights throughout the event. Each speaker brings a wealth of knowledge and a unique perspective from their respective fields, contributing to the rich tapestry of ideas that will be woven over the course of our conference. Our speakers include leading academics, educational practitioners, and innovative thinkers who have made significant contributions. Their diverse backgrounds and experiences promise to deliver thought-provoking sessions that will inspire and challenge us all. Join us in welcoming these esteemed speakers and prepare to be engaged, enlightened, and inspired by their presentations.



Dr Darren Chetty is a writer, a lecturer at UCL Institute of Education and a former primary school teacher. He is a specialist in children's literature, philosophy for children, and antiracist education. He contributed an essay to the bestselling collection *The Good Immigrant*, edited by Nikesh Shukla. He also writes a regular Books for Keeps column with Karen Sands O'Connor. Their book *Beyond the Secret Garden: Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books*, based on these columns, was published by the English and Media Centre in 2025. For younger readers, Darren co-authored *What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions* with Jeffrey Boakye. His first picture book, *I'm Going to Make a Friend*, illustrated by Sandhya Prabhat, was published in the UK and US in 2025. *Our Wales / Ein Cymru*, written with Martin Johnes, illustrated by Matt Abbott was published in 2026.



Jade Saunders is a member of the Senior Leadership Team and Religious Values and Ethics (RVE) Lead at Blaenavon Heritage VC School. She holds a degree in Religious Studies from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and is passionate about helping children explore beliefs, values and worldviews in meaningful and engaging ways. Alongside her work in education, Jade is an active member of Christ Church, Merthyr, where she has been involved in leading Sunday School and Bible classes for children and young people across the parish. She is committed to supporting young people in their spiritual and personal development, both within school and through her wider community involvement. Outside of school, Jade enjoys spending time with her family and exploring the outdoors. More recently, she has embraced new adventures through paddleboarding and kayaking, enjoying the opportunities these activities provide to connect with nature and experience new challenges.



Alison Coombs has been teaching for 28 years and has proudly served as Deputy Headteacher at Blaenavon Heritage VC Primary School for the past nine years. Throughout her career, she has taught in schools across the Blaenavon area, maintaining a strong commitment to ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn, grow and succeed. She gained her degree in Primary Education from UWIC and has led a wide range of curriculum areas during her career. Assessment is a particular passion of hers, and she enjoys supporting both staff and pupils to achieve their full potential through effective teaching, learning and assessment practices. Outside of school, Alison enjoys spending time with her family and relaxing at her caravan. It provides the perfect opportunity to unwind, recharge and create special memories together after a busy week in school.



Dr. Matthew Williamson-Dicken is the Headteacher of Ysgol Panteg and Carreg Lam. His PhD specialism lies within personality changes, continuous professional learning and the link between professional development and changes within educational organisations. He is the author of 11 books including: 'Applied Personality Development Framework', 'Concise Illustrations of Personality Change', and his most recent book 'Philosophical Fragments: An Anthology of Ideas'. Matthew is a National Vice-Chair of the Executive Board of the 'Association for the Study of Primary Education' (ASPE) who publish the world-renowned journal 'Education 3-13'. In his spare time, Matthew loves Cordon Bleu cooking, playing the piano and travelling to new places.



Kaysha Wulder is Assistant Headteacher at Ysgol Panteg and has vast experience across different levels in the school. She started in Panteg in 2012 as a 1:1 assistant. She moved to be a classroom assistant the next year and qualified as a teacher in 2015, before joining the Senior Leadership Team as the school's ALNCo after a period of maternity with her son, Ernie. Mrs Wulder has taught across all Progress Stages in the school and has changed roles on the Senior Leadership Team as Progress Stage leader, after returning from maternity leave with her third son, Billy in September 2023. Kaysha is passionate and active and the changes in her career have enabled her to support others who have followed her professional path. Outside of school, Kaysha likes to spend time with her family in Llangrannog, reading and baking.



Nerys Phillips is Deputy Head of Ysgol Panteg. Following a successful career in the media where she worked as Second Assistant Director on S4C and the BBC's most popular programmes she decided to redirect to the world of education in 2012. Since then, she has been an enthusiastic and passionate teacher and Senior Leader specializing in developing literacy across the school. In her spare time, Nerys likes to socialise with friends and walk her dog Ted.



Claire Clark is a senior leader at Llanyrafon Primary School with a career in education spanning more than 25 years, including 22 years at Llanyrafon Primary School. As an experienced senior leader Claire has dedicated her professional life to improving outcomes and creating meaningful opportunities for children and young people. Passionate about Science and STEM education, Claire is committed to inspiring curiosity, innovation, and a love of learning through engaging and authentic experiences. A strong advocate for connecting learning to the real world, she works closely with businesses, STEM professionals, and community partners to provide learners with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in meaningful and relevant contexts. Recognised for their collaborative approach and ability to think creatively, they are continually seeking innovative ways to remove barriers, enhance learner engagement, and broaden aspirations. Their commitment to professional growth has led to further study in curriculum design and the development of learner independence, enabling them to support the creation of ambitious, progressive, and learner-centred educational experiences. Through strong leadership, a passion for partnership working, and a belief in the potential of every learner, they strive to create environments where children are empowered to develop the skills, confidence, and resilience needed to thrive both in school and beyond.



An experienced Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA), **Sarah Attwood** is a dedicated practitioner has spent their career championing the needs of children and families, with a particular focus on inclusion, wellbeing, and nurturing positive outcomes for all learners. Beginning their professional journey as an NNEB-qualified practitioner, they progressed into the role of Teaching Assistant before becoming an HLTA, building a wealth of experience and expertise across a range of educational settings. Committed to continuous professional development, they have undertaken additional training in Trauma Informed Schools (TIS) and Nurture UK, further strengthening their understanding of how nurturing, relationship-based approaches can support children to overcome barriers to learning and engagement. A passionate advocate for inclusive practice, they believe that successful support is rooted in understanding and responding to the individual needs of each child. Recognising that inclusion often extends beyond the school gates, they work collaboratively with children, parents and carers, and a wide range of external partners to create holistic support networks that enable learners to thrive. Through a commitment to nurturing relationships, creative problem-solving, and partnership working, they continue to make a significant difference to the lives of children and families, ensuring that every learner feels valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.



Eve Rowlands is the Headteacher of Llanyrafon Primary School in Torfaen with a career spanning 25 years the majority at a senior leader position within Torfaen. As an experienced educational leader Eve has dedicated her career to creating an inclusive, nurturing, and aspirational learning environment where every child is valued and supported to achieve their full potential. A committed advocate for collaboration, Eve has worked extensively with staff, families, schools, and community partners to develop innovative approaches that improve outcomes for learners and strengthen community engagement. Their leadership is underpinned by a belief that the best results are achieved when schools work together, share expertise, and build meaningful partnerships. Through a clear vision, a people-centred approach, and a commitment to continuous improvement, they have led initiatives that promote inclusion, wellbeing, and excellence in teaching and learning. Their passion for collaborative working continues to drive positive change, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to flourish both within school and beyond.



Tanwen Davies is Progress Step 3 lead at Ysgol Panteg. Her initial undergraduate degree took her into the field of medicine, however she soon realised that the solitude of a lab was not for her and she joined the school fresh out of university after studying a PGCE as an NQT 11 years ago. She has taught across the school during that time, however is passionate about developing young scientists and mathematicians with the older children which leaves capacity for phonics, and early year activities with her two young daughters at home. Outside of school, Tanwen loves nothing more than long walks/runs with her sprocker spaniel, trips to the beach and campervan weekends with her family.



Chloe Lewis is an experienced Early Years teacher with 10 years of teaching experience across Early Years to Year 5. As Garnteg's Read Write Inc. Lead and Forest School Leader, she is passionate about creating engaging opportunities for every child to thrive. Chloe's enthusiasm for learning matches that of the children in her class, and she is always striving to Climb to Sparkle alongside her learners, embracing growth, curiosity, and new challenges every day.



With 21 years' experience in the classroom, **Elizabeth Messori** is ALNCo and Foundation Leader at Garnteg Primary School. Liz has worked across a range of year groups and is an enthusiastic teacher who strives to help her students achieve and progress and develop high aspirations. Liz is committed to creating nurturing, high-quality learning environments where every child can thrive and be the best they can be.



With 15 years in the classroom, **Kate Ngwenya** leads Digital and Professional Learning at Garnteg Primary School. Kate has worked across a range of year groups and is an enthusiastic teacher who strives to help her students achieve and progress and develop high aspirations. Kate completed a Post Grad certificate in 'Successful futures' and has used her experience to support the development of the 'Climb to Sparkle' Curriculum at Garnteg, which Estyn stated in 2025 'facilitates highly valuable opportunities for pupils to be creative and independent in authentic and purposeful situations'.



With 28 years' experience in teaching, **Andrew Phillips** currently leads LLC and Humanities at Garnteg Primary School. A former deputy head, Andrew has had the opportunity to work with a number of different year groups and lead many different areas of the curriculum over the years. He enjoys leading whole school projects and initiatives and developing authentic learning experiences for the pupils he works with at school including projects such as F1 in Schools. A passionate teacher who loves the challenge of developing innovative ways to teach in the classroom, he also enjoys working with staff on their own teaching journey and professional development in school. Just as busy outside of the classroom, Andrew is currently the Team Manager of Ebbw Vale RFC in Super Rygbi Cymru.



Morgan Dalton is a Year 1 teacher at Garnteg Primary School, with 5 years' experience working in education. Having studied Early Years Education before completing her PGCE through the two-year route, she has a strong passion for supporting young children as they learn, grow and develop their independence. Morgan Dalton has a particular love for creating calm, inviting classroom environments where children feel comfortable to be themselves, explore their interests and develop independence. For Morgan, the classroom environment is an important part of the learning experience and should feel welcoming, purposeful and reflective of the children within it. With the belief that some of the most valuable moments in the classroom happen when we allow ourselves to slow down, she finds importance to take time to truly notice and listen to children, following their interests and giving conversations, exploration and ideas the space to develop naturally. She values being present in these moments and allowing children the time to think, wonder and make sense of their learning.



With 13 years' experience across all year groups in primary education, **Jade Bones** is an enthusiastic Year 3 teacher who is passionate about helping children thrive. Jade is committed to creating meaningful learning experiences that help every child achieve, make progress and develop confidence. She has a particular interest in understanding how children's emotional regulation and readiness to learn can positively influence their learning, alongside the important role that purposeful feedback plays in helping children recognise their progress and understand their next steps.



Sarah Attewell has a wealth of experience in both early years and foundation phase pedagogy. She is an enthusiastic teacher with 14 years of classroom experience, with a passion for helping children thrive. This year, Sarah has joined KS2 and is in a Year 3 classroom. She works collaboratively with her job-share partner to create meaningful learning experiences for the children. Sarah is excited to bring her foundational knowledge and assessment into Year 3 and strives to help every child succeed, make progress and develop confidence.



With eight years of experience in the classroom, **Abi Phillips** is a passionate teacher at Garnteg Primary School who is committed to creating meaningful, engaging and purposeful learning experiences for every child. Having worked across a range of year groups, Abi knows the importance of providing children with a nurturing environment in which they can develop confidence, independence and a love of learning. Alongside her teaching, Abi has continued to develop her professional practice through postgraduate study, completing her Master's degree with a particular focus on formative assessment and its role in supporting children's learning within Curriculum for Wales. Abi has a strong commitment to developing an engaging, child-centred curriculum that provides children with authentic opportunities to explore, investigate and learn through play.



Katie Matthews has spent 8 years teaching across Gwent. Having worked in a number of different schools and across all year groups, she has a strong knowledge of learner development. With a BSc in Social Sciences, she has an excellent grounding in observing and exploring how the shifting culture in wider society is influencing learners who are at the beginning of their educational journey, entering the Foundation Phase, as well as how shifting values in communities impacts how learners respond to classroom expectations. Kate joined Garnteg in September 2026 and has taken on the role of leading an equity group with the Learning Ambassadors' support.



With 9 Years teaching experience **Sian Brooks** is a current member of the senior leadership team and leads pedagogy at Garnteg Primary School. Having taught across the Foundation Phase, Sian is passionate about the Early Years pedagogy and creating engaging purposeful environments that support children to become confident independent learners. Sian has completed Froebel training and spent 8 months on a Welsh Sabbatical course at Cardiff University using the experience to future develop the oracy skills across the school. In 2022, Sian created the baseline assessment system that is now used throughout the school and has supported other schools in the cluster and wider areas such as Blaenau Gwent ensuring consistency and meaningful tracking of pupil progress.



Sarah Truelove Roque is the Headteacher of Cwmffrwdroer Primary School and has 29 years' experience working in education within Torfaen. Prior to her current role, she led another primary school within the local authority, bringing extensive experience in school improvement, leadership, and community engagement. Under Sarah's leadership, Cwmffrwdroer Primary School has developed a strong community-focused ethos, underpinned by a commitment to equity, inclusion, and high aspirations for all learners. Working collaboratively with staff, pupils, families, and the wider community, she has helped create a culture where equality and diversity are embedded in everyday practice. This commitment was recognised by Estyn, which highlighted the school's anti-racist environment as an established and natural part of its provision. Sarah is passionate about fostering inclusive school cultures, developing future leaders, and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive and succeed.



Kristian Wharton is the Deputy Headteacher of Cwmffrwdroer Primary School, committed to creating a positive, inclusive, and inspiring learning environment where every child feels valued, supported, and empowered to succeed. With a strong belief that every child deserves to be seen, heard, and celebrated for their individuality, Kristian works closely with pupils, staff, families, and the wider community to promote high standards of learning and wellbeing. A passionate advocate for equity and inclusion, he has played a key role in developing the school's commitment to becoming an anti-racist learning organisation. Through challenging discrimination, celebrating diversity, and fostering a culture of respect and belonging, Kristian strives to ensure that all children can see themselves reflected in their education and feel a strong sense of identity and pride. As Deputy Headteacher, he supports the strategic leadership of the school while championing innovation, creativity, and nurture. His focus on inclusion, achievement, and social justice helps ensure that Cwmffrwdroer Primary School remains a welcoming place where every child can learn, grow, and thrive.



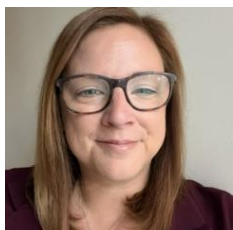
Sarah Jarman is an experienced primary school teacher who has been teaching since 2005. Based at Cwmffrwdroer Primary School in Pontypool, Sarah combines her role as a Reception teacher with responsibilities as Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo) and a member of the senior leadership team. She is passionate about inclusive practice and creating Early Years environments where children feel seen, valued and able to develop a strong sense of belonging. Sarah has a particular interest in how identity, diversity and representation can be meaningfully embedded from the very beginning of a child's school journey through everyday experiences, conversations, resources and relationships.



Daniel Edwards is a Humanities and Eco Leader at Cwmffrwdor Primary School and is currently in his fifth year of teaching. Before entering education, Daniel spent 15 years working in the banking sector, bringing a wealth of professional experience and a unique perspective to his role as an educator. Daniel is passionate about the transformative power of education and the role schools play in shaping strong, connected communities. Having experienced first-hand the positive impact teachers can have, he is committed to ensuring that every pupil feels valued, supported, and empowered to succeed. His work is driven by a desire to nurture capable, confident, and ambitious young people. A keen sportsman and enthusiastic supporter of grassroots and school sport, Daniel is particularly passionate about promoting rugby and the values it represents, including respect, teamwork, resilience, and community. He believes sport has a unique ability to bring people together and create opportunities for young people to thrive. Daniel is also proud to be part of Cwmffrwdor Primary School's journey towards becoming an actively anti-racist organisation. He is committed to fostering an inclusive environment where diversity is celebrated, every voice is valued, and all members of the school community feel a strong sense of belonging.



Laura Perrett has served as Headteacher of Llantarnam Community Primary School for the past eight years, following her first headship at Cross Ash Primary School in Monmouthshire. Prior to this, she spent eight years as Deputy Headteacher and classroom teacher at Sofrydd Primary School in Blaenau Gwent, having begun her teaching career there in 1998. Throughout her career, Laura has developed a strong passion for educational leadership and school improvement. She has led a range of curriculum and strategic areas, with particular expertise in English, Physical Education, Assessment, Recording and Reporting, and Additional Learning Needs (ALN). She is especially committed to nurturing and developing staff, fostering a positive school culture, and ensuring that every learner is supported to achieve their full potential. Laura is passionate about continuous improvement in teaching and learning, with a strong focus on effective pedagogy informed by assessment to accelerate pupil progress. She firmly believes in the importance of collaboration, valuing strong partnerships between staff, pupils, families, and the wider community. She is also dedicated to supporting and inspiring the next generation of teachers and school leaders. Outside of school, Laura enjoys maintaining an active lifestyle and spending quality time with her family, particularly with her two children.



Emma Payne has been teaching for 25 years, spending 23 of those in three Newport schools, and currently serves as Headteacher at Maendy Primary School - a role she has held for nearly 2 years. Throughout her career, Emma has strived to build strong, meaningful relationships with pupils, their families, and her colleagues. She earned her degree from the University of South Wales, Newport, and has led a wide range of curriculum areas alongside serving as ALNCo. Wellbeing is a particular passion of hers, supporting both staff and pupils to achieve their full potential. Maendy's motto, 'Nurture, Partnership, Inspire', reflects her dedicated focus on building positive relationships and bringing out the best in everyone. Outside of school, Emma enjoys spending quality time with her family and is always partial to entering a run or two.

The Psychology of Online Conflict: Helping Pupils Navigate Digital Disputes

Introduction

Online conflict is now woven into the everyday social lives of children and young people. Arguments that once began and ended in the playground continue long after school has ended, replayed through group chats, social media posts, gaming platforms and comment threads. For educators, this creates a significant layer of complexity: disputes are more visible, more permanent and more emotionally charged, yet they are also less easy to supervise or contain.

It is tempting to respond by tightening rules, blocking platforms or issuing stern warnings about “cyberbullying”. While clear boundaries and consequences matter, they are not enough. Pupils need behaviours they can actually perform when they feel hurt, angry or humiliated online. They need to know how to pause, how to choose language carefully, how to seek help and how to repair relationships once harm has been done. In other words, we must teach the psychology of online conflict as a set of practical skills, not just a list of prohibitions.

This article explores the behaviours that schools can explicitly teach to help pupils navigate digital disputes. It draws on ideas from social psychology, developmental psychology and restorative practice, but translates them into classroom-friendly routines and whole-school approaches. The focus is deliberately positive: not on what pupils must stop doing, but on what they can learn to do differently.

Why Online Conflict Feels Different to Pupils

Before considering specific behaviours, it is worth pausing on why online conflict often feels more intense, more confusing and more overwhelming to pupils than face-to-face disagreement.

First, audience size and invisibility matter. A sharp comment in a corridor may be heard by three friends; a sarcastic post can be seen by dozens (or more) of peers, some of whom the pupil barely knows. The imagined audience becomes huge, and this amplifies feelings of shame and fear of judgement. At the same time, the pupil cannot see who is reading, reacting or quietly screenshotting, which increases anxiety and rumination.

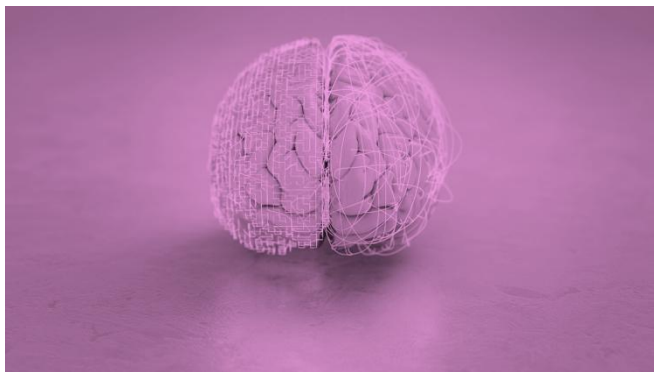
Second, online spaces strip away many of the cues that help us regulate conflict. Tone of voice, facial expression and body language are replaced by text, emojis and reaction icons. Pupils are still learning to interpret these signals, and misreading is common. A joke intended as playful can be experienced as cruel; a brief reply can feel like rejection. Without the subtle feedback of another person’s face, pupils may escalate quickly, convinced that they have been slighted.

Third, time and permanence change the emotional landscape. A harsh message can be reread repeatedly, each time re-triggering the original hurt. A post can be shared, commented

on and revisited weeks later. For pupils who are still developing emotional regulation, this can make it harder to “move on” or to see a conflict as a single event rather than a continuing threat.

Finally, online conflict is often entangled with identity. Pupils may feel that their reputation, their friendships or their sense of belonging are at stake. This makes defensive reactions more likely and increases the temptation to retaliate publicly in order to “save face”.

Understanding these dynamics helps schools frame the behaviours they teach. The goal is not to pretend that online spaces are neutral or harmless, but to equip pupils with tools that acknowledge the emotional reality of digital life.



Behaviour One: Recognising Emotional Triggers

The first behaviour is deceptively simple: notice what you are feeling. When pupils encounter a provocative message, their bodies react before their reasoning skills catch up. Heart rate increases, breathing becomes shallow, muscles tense, and thoughts narrow to the perceived insult or threat. In this state, impulsive replies are far more likely.

Schools can teach pupils to recognise these early signs of emotional activation. This involves:

- Naming emotions: giving pupils a rich vocabulary beyond “angry” or “sad” helps them differentiate between frustration, embarrassment, jealousy, disappointment and shame. Each emotion carries different urges and needs.
- Linking body and mind: short exercises where pupils identify physical sensations associated with particular feelings (hot face, tight chest, shaky hands) make it easier to spot rising emotion in real time.
- Normalising emotional responses: pupils should understand that feeling upset or furious after a hurtful message is not a failure; it is a human reaction. The skill lies in what they do next.

In practice, this behaviour can be embedded through daily check-ins, reflective journals, or brief discussions after anonymised scenarios. Staff can model it by saying, “When I read that, I noticed I felt defensive and my shoulders tightened. That tells me I need to pause before I respond.”

Recognising emotional triggers does not solve the conflict, but it creates a crucial moment of awareness. It opens the door to the next behaviour.

Behaviour Two: Pausing Before Responding

If recognition is the first step, deliberate pausing is the second. Pupils need a simple, memorable rule that they can apply when they feel provoked online. One such rule is the STOP strategy:

- **S** – Step back: physically move away from the device if possible; put the phone down or close the laptop.
- **T** – Think: ask, “What exactly has happened? What do I know, and what am I assuming?”
- **O** – Observe: notice thoughts (“They all hate me”), feelings (“I feel humiliated”) and urges (“I want to post something back immediately”).
- **P** – Plan: decide on a next step that aligns with longer-term goals (staying safe, keeping friendships, avoiding trouble).

Schools can encourage a minimum pause period, such as ten minutes, before any reply to a message that triggers strong emotion. For some pupils, especially younger ones, this may need to be longer and supported by an adult.

To make pausing a habit, teachers can:

- Practise with role-play: pupils act out receiving a hurtful message and rehearse the STOP steps, including physically stepping away.
- Use visual prompts: posters, bookmarks or lock-screen images reminding pupils to “Pause, then respond” can reinforce the behaviour.
- Integrate pausing into school policy: for example, advising pupils that they should never respond to conflict online during the school day, but instead report and discuss it with staff.
- Pausing is not about suppressing feelings or ignoring harm. It is about creating enough space for thoughtful choice rather than automatic retaliation. Over time, pupils who practise pausing learn that they can survive the initial surge of emotion without acting on it.

Behaviour Three: Choosing Respectful, Clear Language

Once pupils have paused, they still face the challenge of how to communicate. Online conflict often escalates because language is ambiguous, sarcastic or loaded with blame. Schools can teach pupils to use respectful, clear language that reduces misunderstanding and keeps the door open for resolution.

Key elements include:

- “I” statements: instead of “You are horrible”, pupils learn to say, “I felt hurt when I saw that comment.” This shifts focus from attacking the other person to expressing personal experience.
- Specificity: vague accusations (“You always do this”) are replaced with concrete descriptions (“Yesterday you posted that picture without asking me”).

- Curiosity rather than assumption: pupils practise asking, “What did you mean by that?” or “Can you explain why you posted it?” rather than assuming malicious intent.
- Avoiding public humiliation: pupils are encouraged to address issues privately where possible, rather than posting responses that invite an audience and intensify shame.

In the classroom, teachers can use message-editing exercises where pupils are given examples of heated replies and asked to rewrite them using respectful language. They can compare how different versions feel and discuss which are more likely to lead to constructive outcomes.

Importantly, respectful language does not mean pupils must minimise harm or accept blame. It means they communicate in a way that is more likely to be heard and less likely to inflame the situation. For pupils who have grown up seeing adults argue aggressively online, this is a counter-cultural skill that needs explicit modelling.



Behaviour Four: Seeking Help and Preserving Evidence

There are times when online conflict crosses into harassment, threats or serious breaches of privacy. In these cases, pupils must not be left to manage alone. A critical behaviour is knowing when and how to seek adult help, and doing so in a way that preserves evidence.

Schools can teach pupils to:

- Recognise thresholds: repeated insults, spreading rumours, sharing private images, exclusion from groups, threats of violence or self-harm, and any form of hate speech should be clearly identified as behaviours that require adult intervention.
- Preserve evidence safely: pupils learn to take screenshots, save messages and note dates and times. They are taught not to retaliate or delete conversations before speaking to an adult.
- Use platform tools: blocking, muting and reporting functions are explained and practised. Pupils should know that using these tools is not “snitching”; it is self-protection.

- Access school systems: clear, child-friendly routes for reporting online conflict are essential. This might include trusted adults, digital reporting forms, or pastoral drop-in sessions.

Staff must respond consistently and promptly when pupils seek help. If pupils feel that reporting leads only to blame or inaction, they will stop doing it. Schools should therefore communicate what will happen when a pupil comes forward: who will see the information, how it will be used, and how the pupil will be supported.

Teaching this behaviour also involves addressing the fear of social consequences. Pupils may worry that seeking help will make them look weak or disloyal. Honest discussion about these fears, alongside examples of situations where adult intervention prevented serious harm, can help shift attitudes.

Behaviour Five: Repairing Harm and Restoring Relationships

Even when conflict is managed safely, it often leaves behind hurt feelings, damaged trust and fractured friendships. The final behaviour is therefore about repairing harm. This does not mean forcing pupils to “make up” or pretending that nothing happened. It means offering structured opportunities for acknowledgement, apology and future agreement.

Restorative approaches are particularly useful here. In a restorative conversation, pupils are guided through questions such as:

- What happened from your perspective?
- Who has been affected and how?
- What do you need now?
- What needs to happen to make things as right as possible?

The emphasis is on understanding impact rather than assigning blame. Pupils who caused harm are encouraged to take responsibility and to offer genuine apologies, which may include commitments about future behaviour (for example, not sharing images without consent, or refraining from commenting on certain topics).

Schools can support repair by:

- Providing trained facilitators (teachers, pastoral staff, or peer mediators) who can hold restorative meetings.
- Ensuring that online behaviour policies explicitly include restorative options alongside sanctions.
- Allowing time for follow-up: relationships do not heal instantly, and pupils may need ongoing support to rebuild trust.

Repair is not always possible or appropriate. In cases of serious abuse, the priority is safety, and distance may be necessary. However, in many everyday disputes, restorative work prevents long-term resentment and teaches pupils that conflict can be resolved without permanent enmity.



Embedding Behaviours in Classroom Practice

Teaching these behaviours cannot be left to one-off assemblies or occasional wellbeing lessons. They need to be woven into the fabric of school life. Some practical strategies include:

1. Micro-Lessons and Routines

Short, regular sessions focused on one behaviour at a time are more effective than long, infrequent lectures. For example, a tutor group might spend ten minutes each week practising emotion recognition, pausing strategies or message editing. Over a term, these micro-lessons build a shared language and expectation.

2. Scenario-Based Learning

Using anonymised, realistic scenarios allows pupils to explore online conflict safely. Teachers can present a situation (a group chat argument, a humiliating meme, a rumour spread on social media) and ask pupils to identify emotional triggers, propose pause strategies, draft respectful responses and decide when help should be sought. This bridges theory and lived experience.

3. Cross-Curricular Links

Subjects such as English, drama and citizenship offer natural opportunities to explore conflict, perspective-taking and language. Analysing characters' online interactions in contemporary texts, or improvising digital disputes in drama, can reinforce the behaviours in engaging ways.

4. Staff Modelling

Perhaps the most powerful teaching tool is adult behaviour. When staff respond to conflict calmly, acknowledge their own emotions, use respectful language and seek collaborative solutions, pupils see the behaviours in action. Conversely, if pupils witness adults engaging in public arguments, sarcasm or online shaming, the formal curriculum will be undermined.

5. Pupil Voice and Co-Creation

Inviting pupils to help design guidelines for online behaviour, or to create resources (posters, videos, peer workshops) about the five behaviours, increases ownership. Pupils are more likely to use strategies they have helped to shape.

Whole-School Culture And Policy

Behaviour teaching is most effective when it sits within a coherent whole-school culture. This involves:

- Clear policies that define online conflict, outline reporting routes, and describe both sanctions and restorative options.
- Consistent messages across staff, so pupils do not receive conflicting advice about whether to ignore, confront or report.
- Integration with safeguarding: online conflict should be recognised as a potential safeguarding concern, particularly where it involves threats, exploitation or hate.
- Engagement with families: parents and carers need to understand the behaviours being taught so they can reinforce them at home. Simple guidance sheets, workshops or newsletters can help.

A school that treats online conflict as a shared responsibility, rather than a private matter for pupils, creates a safer environment. Pupils learn that they are not alone, that adults take their experiences seriously, and that there are constructive ways forward even when things go wrong.



Conclusion

Online conflict is not going away. As platforms evolve and pupils' digital lives expand, schools will continue to encounter disputes that spill across screens and into corridors. The question is not whether conflict will happen, but whether pupils will have the skills to navigate it without harming themselves or others. Focusing on teachable behaviours offers a hopeful answer. When schools help pupils recognise emotional triggers, pause before responding, choose respectful language, seek help and repair harm, they are doing more than managing incidents. They are cultivating self-regulation, empathy and resilience. They are teaching pupils that their online actions have psychological consequences, and that they can choose responses that protect both their own wellbeing and the dignity of others. For educators, this is demanding work. It requires patience, consistency and a willingness to engage with the messy realities of pupils' digital lives. Yet it is also deeply aligned with the core purpose of schooling: to prepare young people not only for exams, but for life in community. In a world where so much conflict is played out on screens, helping pupils navigate digital disputes is no longer an optional extra. It is a central part of what it means to educate.

Beyond Hearing: The Skills of Attentive Listening

Introduction

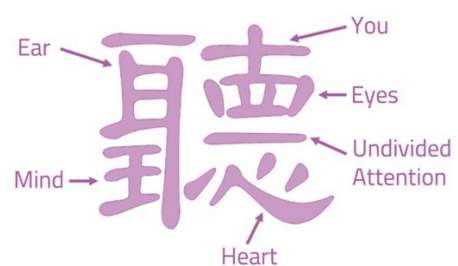
This case study introduces a refined conceptualisation of classroom listening as a family of purposive, analytically separable stances rather than a single capacity.

The taxonomy emerges from Project Tokyo's observations in Japanese schools where teachers routinely name and rehearse specific listening stances. It emerges from discussions with governmental departments and organisations (such as the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's Teacher Training Division and the British Council). Finally, it emerges from contemporary theorising in discourse studies, cognitive psychology and socio-emotional pedagogy.

Treating listening as purposive sharpens learning intentions, clarifies observation criteria and aligns assessment with distinct cognitive, social and normative aims (Rost, 2011; Vandergrift, 2007). Expanded below is an exploration of listening drawn from the conceptual anchor of the kanji script (聴) which attempts to provide an evidence-informed account of each listening stance, situating each in relevant theoretical debates and contemporary empirical threads.

Japanese Kanji Symbolism: A Layered Semiotic Prompt for Pedagogy

The kanji symbol, 聴, functions as a compact semiotic device that richly indexes the multimodal and moral character of careful listening. Its conventional pedagogical parsing draws four readable motifs: ear (耳), eye (目), heart/mind (心/忖) and enclosing strokes that signal unified attention. The kanji uses these symbols as analytic levers for specifying what we mean by "listen" in which can be directly applied to classroom contexts. This section elaborates those elements and connects them to research that justifies treating listening as an integrated stance rather than a checklist of discrete skills.



- **Ear (耳):** this literal component foregrounds auditory perceptual access. Perceptual accuracy, which includes phoneme discrimination, signal-to-noise

separation, prosodic sensitivity, is a prerequisite for higher-order listening (Henshall, 1999; Vandergrift, 2007). Cognitive models emphasise that noisy or degraded input dramatically increases processing load and reduces capacity for inferencing and memory consolidation (Kintsch, 1998).

- Eye (目): the eye component formalises the multimodal nature of situated communication. Gesture, gaze, visual artefacts and environmental context routinely disambiguate spoken input and scaffold coherence (Clark & Brennan, 1991; McNeill, 1992). Multimodal integration reduces ambiguity and supports interlocutors' joint attention and grounding in interactional work (Clark & Brennan, 1991).
- Heart/Mind (心/↑): this element anchors interpretive, evaluative and socio-affective dimensions such as understanding another's perspective, valuation, empathic resonance and forming a judgement. Theoretical work on socio-emotional learning and dialogic pedagogy positions these capacities as central to purposeful listening, not peripheral add-ons (Rogers & Farson, 1957; Vygotsky, 1978).
- Enclosure / unifying strokes: the additional strokes in 聴 are read metaphorically as directives for coordinated attention. That is listening as a whole-person stance that integrates sensory reception, contextual scanning and inner processing. This visual unity supports the pedagogical claim that effective listening is an organised orientation of resources rather than the sum of independent micro-skills (Spahn & Hadamitzky, 2004).

Semiotically, the contrast between 聴 (attentive, multimodal listening) and 聞 (ordinary hearing, asking/receiving) helps us to define what we mean by listening. In Welsh and in English, the distinction is often confused and sees the words “hear” and “listen” often used interchangeably. This approach can obscure the pedagogical importance of intentional, multimodal attention. Preserving the kanji distinction when translating classroom practice retains analytic precision and helps educators name what specific stance they intend when they ask pupils to “listen.”

Listening to Understand Content and Concepts

Listening to understand is a receptive cognitive stance whose main task is to build clear mental representations of spoken discourse that learners can use for reasoning and transfer. Cognitive models of comprehension (Kintsch, 1998) describe how listeners form situation models by combining propositions, inferences and curricula expectations.

Recent empirical work emphasises the metacognitive supports for this stance: proficient comprehension involves explicit planning, active monitoring during listening and brief post-listening evaluation (Polatcan et al., 2025). Studies connect successful comprehension to a repertoire of strategies, such as asking simple questions and summarising, and linking to prior subject knowledge that reduces the need for heavy inference (Kintsch, 1998). Developmentally, listeners move

from grasping surface gist to deeper analytic understanding through graduated exposure to more complex discourse, targeted questioning and chances to apply newly organised knowledge to problems.

Analytically, listening to understand differs from verbatim recall. Evidence of success includes accurate paraphrase, coherent reconstruction of argument sequence, and the ability to use heard frames to reason across problems or to teach others. In bilingual contexts, such as Japanese–English or Welsh–English settings, consolidation is often supported by translanguaging meaning understanding a concept in the receipt language and rendering it in a different target language. For classroom assessment, this stance offers measurable outcomes (paraphrase accuracy, transfer tasks) but requires aligning talk tasks with explicit comprehension aims.



Listening to Remember and Encode

Memory-oriented listening prioritises processes that convert speech into durable, retrievable knowledge. Cognitive theory shows encoding is not automatic; it requires deliberate strategies and is supported by consolidation mechanisms that benefit from a range of retrieval methods (Roediger & Butler, 2011). When listeners adopt an encoding stance they use techniques such as segmentation, labelling, rehearsal and mnemonic linking, and they often use external artefacts (such as notes, diagrams) to scaffold consolidation.

Classroom research confirms that retrieval practice after listening episodes greatly enhances long-term retention and transfer (Roediger & Butler, 2011). This stance is therefore pedagogically important in areas of learning where retention is central, such as vocabulary learning, procedural schemas and thematic facts. It is also analytically separable from immediate comprehension: a learner may grasp a lesson's gist but still fail to encode it for later use.

Listening to Follow Instructions

Instruction-focused listening mobilises precise sequential and conditional processing to convert spoken directives into accurate action. Linguistic analyses of imperative and procedural discourse highlight the cognitive demands on working memory and temporal sequencing (Clark & Carlson, 1982). In language schools and full immersion settings, practising this stance is especially important because it emphasises understanding commands and retrieving the information needed to act.

Unlike comprehension for conceptual understanding alone, instruction listening is outcome-centred: success is measured

by performance fidelity (the exactness and accuracy with which something is copied or reproduced) rather than by internal paraphrase. This matters because errors can have concrete consequences. Often there is a right or wrong response to an instruction, which makes it important to frame mistakes as low-stakes learning opportunities.

This type of listening often encourages compensatory strategies, such as immediate repetition, checkpointing and use of visual checklists, which offload cognitive load and improve reliability. Research in human factors and instructional design supports multimodal learning (spoken, visual/kinaesthetic and modelling/demonstration) to enhance procedural uptake and reduce error rates. Pedagogically, separating this stance clarifies why some listening tasks require different evidence and different classroom designs than comprehension or critical listening.



Listening to Prepare or Craft a Response

Preparation-listening is an anticipatory stance that integrates comprehension with short-term speech planning. The learner must simultaneously understand incoming discourse and hold salient elements in working memory while composing a context-sensitive contribution. Cognitive load theory explains the challenge: selecting elements for production competes with depth of comprehension and requires strategic filtering and goal-directed attention (Brown & Yule, 1983).

This stance is central to dialogic pedagogy. Empirical classroom work shows that explicit structures (such as roles, wait time and response scaffolds) increase the quality of contributions (Mercer, 2000; Banarjee et al., 2025). Successful preparation-listening is visible when responses directly reference prior talk, extend reasoning, or pose analytically productive questions that move discourse forward.

Listening to Learn Language and Pronunciation

Language-learning listening prioritises perceptual attunement to phonological, prosodic (rhythm, stress and intonation) and syntactic (word order) features that support later production. Theoretical accounts of phonological acquisition emphasise perceptual tuning: repeated exposure and focused discrimination enable learners to form robust phonemic categories and distributional knowledge (Vandergrift, 2007).

Success is measured by increased accuracy, improved pronunciation in production tasks and faster lexical retrieval. Methodologically, teachers can use audio-based decoding tasks and longitudinal fluency measures (for example the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) to develop this stance. Treating language-learning listening separately highlights that language listening is not merely comprehension but an input pathway essential for vocabulary, phonology and oral proficiency.

Listening for Empathising

Empathic listening foregrounds affective resonance and relational interaction: the listener's primary task is to grasp and reflect the speaker's emotional experience rather than to prioritise immediate informational extraction (Rogers & Farson, 1957). Psychological models stress that affective attunement builds trust, helps regulate emotion and creates conditions for learning that depend on relational safety (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In classrooms, empathic listening is embedded in restorative practice and pastoral dialogue; outcomes include reduced conflict, increased disclosure and improved classroom climate. It relies on sensitivity to paralinguistic cues, narrative content and the speaker's contextual framing. Analytically, empathic listening is cognitive and a method of connecting emotions. It carries ethical dimensions (such as respect, non-judgement and care) that shape the social ecology of learning.

Listening to Collaborate and Co-Construct Meaning

Collaborative listening treats dialogue as joint epistemic work where individual contributions are synthesised into shared understanding. Theoretical work on dialogic education positions listening as co-productive: knowledge is constructed through intersubjective exchange and metadiscursive linking (Mercer, 2000). Practically, collaborative listening involves discussing how a speaker organises their text, engages with their audience and expresses stance. It requires role awareness, reciprocal uptake and explicit moves to revoice and connect peers' ideas. Conceptually, this stance reframes listening as generative: listening actions produce the material that the group transforms into collective knowledge.



Listening to Evaluate and Think Critically

Critical listening mobilises analytical scepticism: the listener judges claims by evidentiary sufficiency, rhetorical structure and source reliability (Kahneman, 2011). It requires explicit evaluative schemes and metacognitive monitoring for bias and incorrect judgements. Learners who adopt sceptical yet fair dispositions and use evaluative strategies show greater success in interpreting mediated speech and in collective reasoning tasks (Polatcan et al., 2025).

Assessment of critical listening entails asking learners to justify judgements with evidence, to identify logical gaps or rhetorical strategies and to revise positions in light of new data. Conceptually, critical listening serves epistemic aims, collective responsibility and protection against manipulation, while enabling reasoned group participation.



Listening for Aesthetic Appreciation

Aesthetic listening foregrounds form, mood and craft. The stance values timbre, phrasing, metaphor and rhetorical texture, and treats ambiguity as a resource for interpretive richness (Attfield & Oatley, 2016). In curricular areas of learning such as music, literature and drama, aesthetic listening cultivates expressive sensitivity, interpretive vocabulary and a shared language for discussing craft.

Classroom work on aesthetic engagement links repeated exposure and reflective practice to deepened interpretive skill. Beyond the arts, aesthetic listening enhances sensitivity to prosody and nuance that benefits language learning, comprehension and social attunement.

Listening to Attend to Non-Verbal and Environmental Cues

Multimodal listening synthesises auditory input with visual and spatial cues (gesture, facial expression, posture, proxemics and ambient sounds) to build a coherent situational interpretation (McNeill, 1992). This stance is crucial in inclusive classrooms where non-verbal signals often index needs, and in classroom management where non-verbal cues indicate engagement.

Research on multimodal communication shows that listeners who integrate non-verbal channels of information effectively have superior interactional repair strategies and better social comprehension.

Listening to Monitor Understanding and Self-Regulate

Metacognitive listening is an ongoing procedural stance in which listeners appraise comprehension in real time and deploy regulation strategies, such as clarifying questions and summarising, to maintain comprehension quality (Flavell, 1979). Contemporary evidence demonstrates that explicit instruction in planning, monitoring and evaluation reliably improves academic listening outcomes and transfers across contexts (Polatcan et al., 2025). This stance underpins independent learning: learners who monitor and regulate through listening are more adept at adjusting strategies, seeking support and avoiding cumulative misunderstanding.

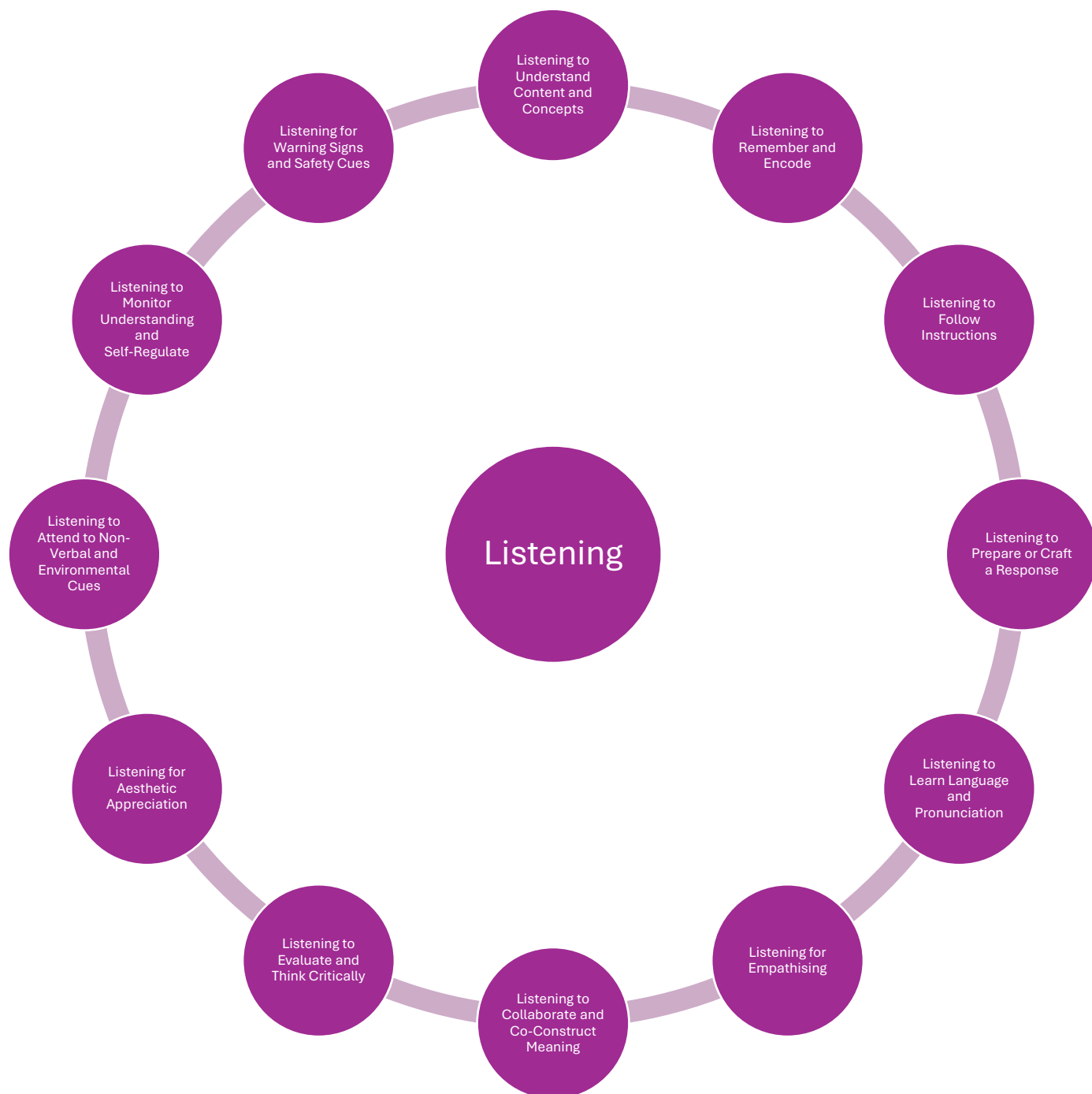
Listening for Warning Signs and Safety Cues

Vigilance-oriented listening prioritises rapid detection of distress signals, escalation and environmental hazards. The cognitive work involves detection, classification and expedited response. Learners who have experienced significant adverse childhood experiences may be overly focused on this kind of listening, whether consciously or unconsciously. If so, other listening modes are likely to be compromised and will require consistent reassurance and demonstration that the environment is safe and that the individual is protected from harm. Only when safety is established can a learner's full listening potential be realised.



Conclusion

These stances are analytically distinct but empirically interwoven. For example, listening to understand often co-occurs with memory encoding; empathic listening may co-occur with monitoring and metacognitive regulation; collaborative listening depends on preparation-listening and critical evaluation.



The kanji symbol, 聴, remains a useful heuristic precisely because it foregrounds this integration: ear for perceptual acuity, eye for contextual scanning, heart/mind for valuation and the enclosure stroke for unified orientation. In other words, the kanji symbol, 聴, offers a semiotic shorthand that highlights multimodality and moral attention. Operationalising these elements in schools and immersion centres will help design tasks that isolate or combine specific processes. It will help practitioners declare precise learning aims whilst allowing learners to experience and utilise the full range of their listening skills to deepen knowledge, understanding, empathy and skills.

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Leading the Human Work: Compassionate Leadership in Education

Introduction

Leadership in education has always been a profoundly human endeavour. Schools are not simply institutions of curriculum delivery or assessment management; they are living communities shaped by relationships, emotions, vulnerabilities and hopes. Senior leaders and headteachers sit at the centre of these communities, carrying responsibilities that are both operational and deeply personal. They are expected to hold the school steady through uncertainty, to respond wisely to crises, to nurture staff, to safeguard pupils, and to maintain clarity of purpose even when the emotional climate is turbulent. In recent years, the pressures on school leaders have intensified: rising levels of pupil need, increasingly complex safeguarding cases, workforce fatigue, public scrutiny, and the relentless pace of change have made leadership more demanding than ever.

In this context, compassionate leadership is not a soft alternative to traditional leadership models. It is a disciplined, intentional and strategic approach that recognises the central truth of educational life: people work better, think better and behave better when they feel valued, understood and safe. Compassionate leadership is not about lowering standards or avoiding difficult conversations. It is about creating the conditions in which excellence becomes possible because the human foundations are strong. It is about leading with clarity and courage while holding firmly to the dignity of every person in the school community.

This article explores compassionate leadership as a practical, psychological and cultural framework for senior leaders. It examines why compassion matters, how it operates, and what it looks like in the everyday life of a school. It is written for headteachers, deputy heads, assistant heads and senior leaders who recognise that the future of education depends not only on systems and structures, but on the human work that holds them together.

The Case for Compassionate Leadership

Compassionate leadership is often misunderstood as mere kindness. In reality, it is a rigorous stance that combines empathy with accountability, emotional intelligence with strategic clarity, and relational warmth with professional courage. It is rooted in three compelling realities that senior leaders cannot ignore.

1. Human Wellbeing as a Precondition for School Improvement

Schools are human systems. They function through relationships, communication, trust and shared purpose. When staff feel psychologically safe, valued and supported, they are more creative, more resilient and more willing to innovate. They take risks, collaborate more deeply and engage more fully with professional learning. Conversely, fear-based cultures produce

compliance rather than excellence. Staff may follow instructions, but they do not flourish. Compassionate leadership creates the emotional conditions in which improvement can take root and sustain itself.

2. Compassion Strengthens Professional Relationships

Trust is the currency of leadership. Staff trust leaders who listen, who explain decisions, who acknowledge difficulty and who act with fairness. Pupils trust leaders who see them as individuals rather than problems. Parents trust leaders who communicate openly and respectfully. Compassion builds relational capital that makes difficult conversations, change management and crisis response more effective. It does not remove challenge; it makes challenge possible without damaging relationships.

3. Compassion Protects Leaders Themselves

Senior leadership is emotionally taxing. The weight of responsibility, the exposure to conflict, the pressure of accountability and the constant need to make decisions can erode wellbeing. Compassionate leaders practise self-compassion by recognising their limits, pacing themselves, and seeking support. This is not indulgence; it is sustainability. Leaders who ignore their own wellbeing cannot lead others well. Compassionate leadership therefore includes compassion directed inward, allowing leaders to remain steady, reflective and resilient.



The Psychology of Compassionate Leadership

Compassionate leadership is grounded in psychological principles that help leaders understand and respond to the emotional dynamics of school life. These principles are not abstract theories; they are practical tools that shape everyday leadership behaviour.

1. Emotion Recognition and Regulation

Effective leaders recognise the emotional climate of their school. They notice when staff are anxious, when pupils are unsettled, and when tensions are rising. They are attuned to subtle cues — the tone of a staffroom conversation, the energy in a corridor, the hesitation in a colleague's voice. Crucially, compassionate leaders regulate their own emotional responses. They model calmness even under pressure, not by suppressing emotion but by managing it. This emotional stewardship creates stability and reduces the likelihood of reactive decision-making.

2. Perspective-Taking

Compassionate leaders actively consider how situations feel from another person's viewpoint. This does not mean agreeing with every perspective, but understanding it. Perspective-taking reduces conflict, improves communication and supports fair decision-making. When leaders understand the emotional context behind a staff member's behaviour or a pupil's reaction, they can respond more wisely and more effectively.

3. Attachment and Belonging

Schools are attachment-rich environments. Pupils and staff alike seek belonging, security and connection. Leaders who cultivate relational warmth — through visibility, approachability and genuine interest — strengthen the school's social fabric. A sense of belonging increases motivation, reduces anxiety and supports behaviour. Compassionate leadership therefore includes the intentional creation of relational spaces where people feel seen and valued.

4. Cognitive Load and Decision Clarity

Compassionate leaders understand that overwhelmed staff cannot perform well. They reduce unnecessary cognitive load by clarifying expectations, simplifying processes and communicating decisions clearly. Compassion is therefore embedded in operational design. When systems are clear and manageable, staff experience less stress and more autonomy. This is not only efficient; it is humane.

Core Behaviours of Compassionate Leadership

Compassionate leadership is enacted through behaviour. It is not a set of beliefs but a set of actions that senior leaders model consistently. These behaviours shape the culture of the school and influence how staff and pupils experience leadership.

1. Attentive Presence

Compassion begins with attention. Leaders who are fully present — in conversations, in corridors, in meetings — signal that people matter. Attentive presence is not about spending large amounts of time with every individual; it is about the quality of attention given. When a leader listens without rushing, maintains open body language, and shows genuine interest, the interaction becomes meaningful. Staff feel valued, pupils feel recognised, and the leader gains insight into the emotional life of the school.



Attentive presence also involves noticing subtle cues of distress or frustration. A quiet staff member, a withdrawn pupil, or a tense conversation can indicate deeper issues. Compassionate

leaders are alert to these signals and respond early, preventing small concerns from becoming larger problems.

2. Humane Communication

Compassionate leaders communicate with clarity, warmth and respect. They avoid ambiguity that breeds anxiety, and they frame messages in ways that acknowledge the human impact of decisions. Humane communication does not dilute expectations; it strengthens them by ensuring people understand and feel respected.

When delivering difficult messages, compassionate leaders explain the reasoning behind decisions, acknowledge the emotional weight of the information, and offer space for questions. They avoid harsh or dismissive language and instead use phrasing that maintains dignity. This approach builds trust and reduces defensiveness, making change more manageable.

3. Fairness and Consistency

Compassion is not indulgence. It is fairness. Staff and pupils thrive when expectations are consistent, boundaries are clear and decisions are transparent. Compassionate leaders apply policies consistently, avoid favouritism, and explain reasoning when exceptions are made. They ensure accountability is paired with support, recognising that fairness is a form of compassion because it protects dignity and reduces uncertainty.



4. Restorative Responses to Conflict

Compassionate leaders use restorative approaches to address conflict. They focus on repairing relationships rather than assigning blame. Restorative leadership involves facilitating conversations that explore impact, encouraging responsibility rather than punishment, and supporting reintegration after incidents. It models forgiveness and future-focused thinking, helping pupils and staff learn from conflict rather than becoming defined by it.

Restorative practice is not a soft option; it is a disciplined method for building long-term relational strength. It requires skill, patience and emotional intelligence, but its impact on school culture is profound.

5. Staff Care and Professional Nurture

Compassionate leaders invest in staff wellbeing not as an add-on, but as a strategic priority. They protect staff from unnecessary workload, offer flexible approaches where possible, and provide high-quality professional development. They recognise achievements publicly and privately, creating a culture where staff feel appreciated and motivated.

Staff care also involves creating psychologically safe spaces for honest dialogue. When staff feel able to express concerns without fear of judgement, the school becomes more adaptive and more resilient. Compassionate leaders foster this openness through their own behaviour, modelling vulnerability and reflective practice.

6. Courageous Compassion

Compassion sometimes requires courage. Leaders must make difficult decisions — about staffing, safeguarding, behaviour or performance — with humanity and clarity. Courageous compassion means being honest even when the message is hard, holding boundaries that protect the community, and acting decisively when safety is at stake. It balances empathy with responsibility, ensuring that compassion does not become avoidance.

Compassion without courage is sentimentality. Courage without compassion is brutality. Leadership requires both.

Compassionate Leadership in Action: Whole-School Approaches

Compassionate leadership is not confined to individual behaviour; it shapes whole-school culture. Senior leaders can embed compassion through strategic actions that influence systems, relationships and daily practice.

1. Designing Systems that Reduce Stress

Compassionate leaders audit school systems through a human lens. They ask whether processes reduce or increase workload, whether communication channels are clear or confusing, and whether staff are receiving too many messages. They consider whether pupils are navigating unnecessary bureaucracy and whether expectations are realistic.

Streamlined systems are compassionate because they respect people's cognitive and emotional limits. When processes are simple and communication is coherent, staff experience less stress and more autonomy. This enhances performance and strengthens wellbeing.

2. Building Relational Cultures

Schools flourish when relationships are strong. Leaders can cultivate relational culture by encouraging collaboration rather than competition, creating spaces for staff connection, and modelling respectful disagreement. They celebrate collective achievements and foster a sense of shared purpose.



Relational culture is not accidental; it is engineered through leadership behaviour. When leaders prioritise relationships, the school becomes a place where people feel connected and motivated.

3. Leading through Visibility

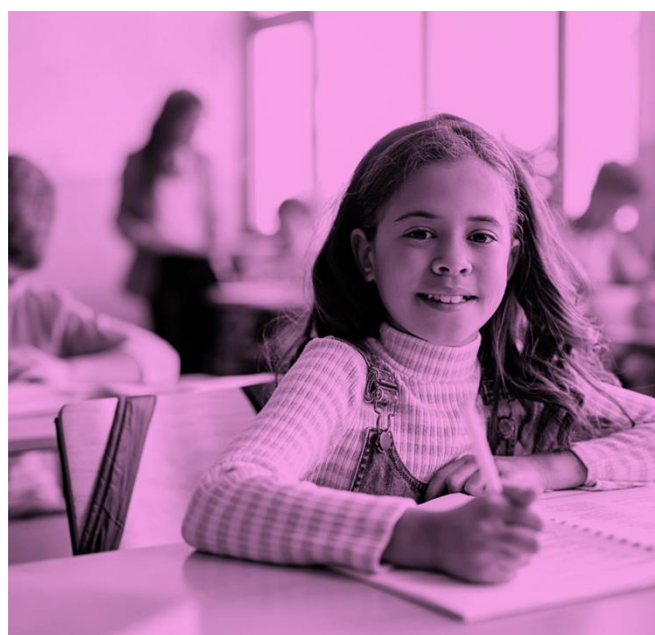
Compassionate leaders are present. They walk the school, greet pupils, check in with staff, and show interest in classroom life. Visibility builds trust and reduces the psychological distance between leaders and the community. It allows leaders to understand the lived experience of staff and pupils, making their decisions more grounded and more humane.

4. Embedding Reflective Practice

Reflection is a compassionate act because it allows leaders to learn from experience rather than repeat mistakes. Schools can embed reflection through leadership journaling, coaching conversations, structured debriefs after incidents, and staff reflection groups. Reflection strengthens emotional intelligence and improves decision-making, making the school more adaptive and more resilient.

5. Prioritising Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is the foundation of compassionate culture. Leaders build it by welcoming challenge without defensiveness, responding calmly to mistakes, encouraging experimentation, and protecting staff from humiliation or ridicule. When staff feel safe, they contribute more fully and take greater professional risks. Psychological safety therefore enhances both wellbeing and performance.



Compassionate Leadership During Crisis

Crises reveal leadership character. Whether dealing with a safeguarding emergency, a critical incident or a community tragedy, compassionate leadership provides stability and humanity. Compassionate crisis leadership does not eliminate difficulty, but it reduces harm and strengthens community resilience.

During crisis, compassionate leaders slow the pace, recognising that people need time to process emotion. They communicate clearly and frequently, acknowledging fear and uncertainty. They provide practical and emotional support, maintain calm routines where possible, and plan for long-term recovery rather than focusing solely on immediate response.

Compassionate crisis leadership is not about appearing strong; it is about being steady. It is about holding the community with care while navigating complexity with clarity.



Developing Compassionate Leadership in Senior Teams

Compassionate leadership is a collective endeavour. Senior teams can cultivate it through shared reading and discussion, coaching focused on emotional intelligence, peer observation of leadership behaviours, joint reflection on difficult decisions, and agreement on compassionate communication norms. A compassionate senior team sets the tone for the entire school.

When leaders support one another, challenge one another constructively, and hold one another accountable for compassionate practice, the school becomes more coherent and more humane. Compassion becomes a shared language rather than an individual trait.

Conclusion

Leading the human work of education is demanding, profound and deeply consequential. Senior leaders and headteachers carry the emotional weight of their communities, often quietly and without recognition. Compassionate leadership offers a way to lead that is both humane and effective — a way that honours the dignity of staff and pupils while driving improvement with clarity and purpose.

Compassion is not softness. It is strength. It is the disciplined practice of seeing people clearly, responding wisely, and shaping a culture where everyone can flourish. In an era of complexity, scrutiny and relentless pace, compassionate leadership is not simply desirable. It is essential.

Kintsugi as Pedagogical Philosophy: Repair, Imperfection, and Ethical Attention in the Classroom

Introduction

Kintsugi (金継ぎ), the Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics with lacquer and powdered gold, offers a rich philosophical and practical frame for rethinking classroom practice. Rooted in wabi-sabi aesthetics, which value impermanence, imperfection, and incompleteness, Kintsugi reframes fracture as a visible and valuable part of an object's biography (Juniper, 2003; Koren, 1994). When translated into education, Kintsugi becomes both a metaphor and a method for shaping learning cultures that honour learning through mistakes, foreground repair, and cultivate relational care. This case study develops those connections and foregrounds concrete implications for teachers working on the classroom floor.

Aesthetic Foundations: Making Mistakes Visible and Valuable

The core aesthetic proposition of Kintsugi is deliberately counter-intuitive to educational cultures that prize seamless competence: the repaired object is not disguised; its fissures are gilded and thus become the place through which viewers access the object's history. For educators this offers a powerful reframing of mistakes. Instead of being private stigmas to be erased by corrective feedback or high-stakes assessment, errors become visible traces of cognitive work and are marks that can be read, discussed, and learned from.

Claxton's notion of building learning power and Boaler's research into the productive role of mathematical error support such a stance, demonstrating that learners who engage with uncertainty and difficulty develop persistence and deeper conceptual understanding (Claxton, 2002; Boaler, 2016). Recent classroom research indicates that teacher behaviours which model vulnerability and normalise revision increase learners' willingness to take intellectual risks and sustain effort (Kroeper, 2022; Slater, 2024). Translating Kintsugi into everyday practice therefore involves a shift in what is displayed, discussed, and assessed: teachers make the processes of error and repair legible by foregrounding draft work, annotating changes, and using formative tasks that require learners to explain how their thinking has changed over time. In this way, visible seams become pedagogical artefacts that support metacognition and collective norms around productive struggle for success.

Ethical Dimensions: Repair as Relational Practice

Kintsugi is not simply an aesthetic practice; it is an ethic of care. The craft requires patient alignment of fragments, attentive layering of adhesive, and time for cures to set. This highlights a moral stance against disposability. In school contexts, such an ethic resonates with trauma-informed and care-based pedagogies that prioritise relational safety and continuity (Van

der Kolk, 2014; Noddings, 2012). Where punitive, exclusionary responses sever relational ties, repair-oriented practices preserve belonging and personal agency. Enacting Kintsugi ethically in classrooms therefore means reorienting disciplinary and pastoral responses around restoration. Restorative conversations, facilitated reconciliations (either by teacher or learners themselves), and structured routines for reparation after mistakes replace sanctions with processes that teach responsibility, empathy, and the labour of mending relationships. This orientation recognises that repair is not a single remedial act but an instructional strand that requires time, scaffolded practices, and institutional support; when sustained, it teaches learners how to attend to harm, accept responsibility, and co-construct trust.

Cultural Resonance: Everyday Artefacts and the Value of Use

Kintsugi's provenance in the tea ceremony illuminates a culture that values objects precisely because of their history of use and care. In chanoyu, repaired utensils are prized for the stories their scars tell; the marks are evidence of continuity between people, events, and everyday practices (Sen, 1979). Schools can adopt a similar valuation for the material traces of learning. Rather than treating notebooks, draft pieces of work, classroom displays and group artefacts as ephemeral outputs, teachers can build pedagogical routines that preserve these traces as communal memory and evidence of intellectual labour. Portfolios that retain annotated drafts, artefacts that document problem solving, and values process rather than glossy final products all operate from this logic. Doing so connects curriculum to learners' lived histories, allowing classroom knowledge to be read as part of an evolving communal biography and thereby strengthening belonging and stewardship (Hoque, 2023).



Growth Mindset and the Pedagogy of Mistakes

Kintsugi extends and complements Carol Dweck's growth mindset theory by supplying an aesthetic-ethical model for how classrooms can dignify struggles for success. Dweck's findings indicate that beliefs about the malleability of ability shape persistence and the interpretation of difficulty; when learners construe mistakes as informative stages of development rather than immutable signs of failure, they adopt adaptive strategies and sustain effort (Dweck, 2006; Yeager and Dweck, 2012). Kintsugi adds to this by showing how visible, communal repair itself can be an instructional mechanism that scaffold's learners' interpretive frames. Where simple growth-mindset statements risk becoming hollow if unaccompanied by practice,

the Kintsugi metaphor demands visible artefacts and social practices that embody the message: errors are seen, narrated, and transformed into learning gains.

Empirical work clarifies how this combined approach should be operationalised. Praise and feedback that target process, strategy, and corrective action (rather than fixed traits) produce more resilient responses to setbacks (Kroeper, 2022; Yeager et al., 2022). Growth-oriented interventions have the greatest effect when embedded in classroom ecosystems where the language of struggle for success and the routines of revision are routine, when low-stakes cycles allow productive failure, and when institutional policies signal that revision and repair are valued (Yeager et al., 2019). Practically, this means teachers must weave multiple complementary practices into daily life: routinely modelling problem-solving that includes false starts and refinements; structuring tasks so that early attempts are explicitly formative and revision is required and rewarded; teaching learners to annotate errors with prompts that make the lesson explicit ("What did this attempt teach me? What will I try next?"); and designing peer feedback systems that privilege strategy and next steps rather than merely correctness. When these practices are combined with transparent lessons about neuroplasticity, which show how practice and corrective feedback change brain networks, learners receive both rationale and routine for embracing difficulty (Boaler, 2016).

Extending the Kintsugi-growth mindset nexus into equity work requires further nuance. Kintsugi's reframing of scars as testimony offers a particular resource for recognising the cultural and social resilience of marginalised learners. Toldson (2024) argues that educators should "celebrate the gold" by affirming knowledge gained through tough experiences and strategies learned from mistakes, trauma and perseverance rather than interpreting performance gaps as deficits. Practically, this involves designing tasks that allow learners to connect disciplinary inquiry to community literacies, providing revision pathways that value strategic attempts, and ensuring that messages about effort and growth are delivered within relationally safe contexts where learners' emotional histories are recognised (Van der Kolk, 2014; NEU, 2024). The evidence base cautions, however, that mindset work without contextual supports is limited: decontextualised messaging can produce little change, whereas integrated programmes (where feedback practices, assessment design, teacher talk and institutional signals align) yield measurable improvements in persistence and attainment (Yeager et al., 2019; Yeager et al., 2022). Kintsugi methodologies help teachers avoid superficial growth talk by insisting on visible practices of repair and by making the social infrastructure of support explicit and observable to learners.

Epistemological Implications: Knowledge as Fractured and Repaired

Kintsugi prompts teachers to reconsider epistemology in the classroom. Rather than privileging smooth trajectories from ignorance to mastery, Kintsugi suggests that knowledge is often subject to change, negotiated, and reconstructed through episodes of breakdown and repair. Freire's dialogic model and contemporary constructivist perspectives foreground learning as praxis (action, reflection, and revised action) and Kintsugi provides a material metaphor for that cycle (Freire, 1970). In classroom design, this perspective supports inquiry units with built-in revision checkpoints, metacognitive routines that require learners to articulate how their thinking has changed, and collaborative problem solving that makes the process of conceptual repair public. When learners document their

learning pathway with prompts such as “I used to think... now I think... because...”, the classroom produces readable traces of epistemic repair that function both as assessment evidence and as cultural artefacts demonstrating that intellectual growth is messy, social and morally situated (Badenhorst, 2018; Keulemans, 2016).

Kintsugi as a Framework for Flourishing Classrooms

Kintsugi methodologies furnish teachers with an integrative philosophy combining aesthetic valuation of imperfection, ethical commitment to repair, and evidence-based strategies for supporting learning from error. When enacted thoughtfully and systemically, Kintsugi-informed practice makes visible the seams of learning, supports durable relational repair, and integrates growth-oriented feedback and assessment into everyday pedagogy. For teachers the practical messages are clear: treat errors as visible instructional data, design and protect routines for repair and revision, and sustain relational infrastructures that enable learners to revise, restore and flourish.



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Philosophical Education: Teaching about Ethical Dilemmas

Introduction: Why Philosophical Education Matters in Schools Today

Philosophical education has always been present in schools, although often quietly, woven into conversations about fairness, kindness, responsibility and truth. In recent years it has begun to move from the margins to the centre of educational thinking. Schools increasingly recognise that children are growing up in a world where ethical complexity is not an occasional challenge but a daily reality. They encounter moral questions in their friendships, in their digital lives, in their understanding of identity and in their engagement with the wider world. Schools therefore have a responsibility not only to teach knowledge but to cultivate the intellectual and emotional capacities that help children navigate ethical dilemmas with maturity, curiosity and care.

Philosophical education offers a powerful way to meet this responsibility. It invites pupils to think deeply about questions that do not have easy answers, to explore ideas that stretch their imagination and to engage with perspectives that differ from their own. It teaches them that disagreement can be respectful, that uncertainty is not a failure and that reasoning is a shared endeavour rather than a competitive sport. In doing so it nurtures dispositions that are essential for life in a pluralistic society. These include empathy, intellectual humility, critical thinking and reflective judgement.

One of the most effective ways to introduce philosophical thinking to children is through thought experiments. These are carefully crafted scenarios that illuminate moral principles, expose hidden assumptions and provoke meaningful discussion. Thought experiments such as the Trolley Problem, Nozick's Experience Machine and the Ship of Theseus have long been used in universities to challenge children's intuitions. They are remarkably accessible to primary aged pupils when framed with care. Children respond instinctively to stories, puzzles and imaginative scenarios. They enjoy exploring questions that begin with "What if" and they relish the opportunity to test the boundaries of their own thinking. Thought experiments therefore provide a natural bridge between childhood curiosity and philosophical inquiry.

Philosophical education also aligns closely with Philosophy for Children, often known simply as P4C. This pedagogical tradition has shaped classroom practice for decades. It emphasises the creation of a community of enquiry, a space where pupils sit together, listen attentively, build on one another's ideas and explore questions collaboratively. It is not a debate and it is not a lesson in which the teacher delivers answers. Instead it is a shared journey of reasoning, guided by open questions and grounded in mutual respect. P4C provides the structure that allows ethical dilemmas to be explored safely and meaningfully. It ensures that philosophical inquiry is not abstract but relational, not intimidating but empowering.

Philosophical education offers more than an enrichment activity. It is a cultural investment. Schools that embrace philosophical thinking cultivate climates where pupils feel heard, where staff feel trusted and where difficult questions are approached with calm curiosity rather than fear. In such environments children learn that their thoughts matter, that their voices have value and that they can contribute to collective understanding. This strengthens pastoral care, enhances behaviour culture and enriches curriculum design. It also supports safeguarding because pupils who are used to articulating their thoughts and exploring ethical questions are more likely to speak up when something feels wrong.

The need for philosophical education is heightened by the complexity of modern childhood. Children encounter ethical dilemmas in digital spaces often long before they encounter them in formal ethics lessons. They must decide whether to share a message, whether to intervene in a group chat, whether to believe a rumour, whether to post a photograph, whether to respond to unkindness and whether to trust what they see online. These are not trivial decisions. They are moral choices that shape relationships, wellbeing and identity. Philosophical education gives pupils the tools to think about these choices with care rather than impulse.

It also prepares pupils for the ethical questions emerging from technology. Artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles, virtual reality and data privacy all raise profound moral issues. Thought experiments such as the Trolley Problem is no longer merely a classroom puzzle. It is a real question in the design of self-driving cars. Nozick's Experience Machine resonates with debates about virtual worlds and digital wellbeing. The Ship of Theseus echoes questions about identity in an age of online avatars and curated digital selves. Philosophical education helps pupils understand that technology is not neutral. It is shaped by human values and those values must be examined.

At the heart of philosophical education is the belief that children are capable of deep thought. They may not use the vocabulary of professional philosophers, but they can reason, question, imagine and reflect. They can recognise fairness, grapple with dilemmas and articulate their own emerging moral frameworks. When given the right environment, one that is safe, structured and dialogic, they rise to the challenge with remarkable insight. Senior leaders who champion philosophical education therefore affirm a powerful truth. Children's minds are not only ready for knowledge. They are ready for wisdom.

Philosophical education also strengthens the relationship between pupils and teachers. When teachers engage with pupils' ideas rather than simply delivering content, they model intellectual humility and curiosity. They show that adults do not have all the answers and that learning is a shared endeavour. This builds trust and deepens the relational fabric of the school. It also enhances staff wellbeing because teachers who facilitate philosophical enquiry often report that these sessions are energising, joyful and professionally fulfilling. They remind teachers why they entered the profession. They entered it to help children think, grow and flourish.

For senior leaders, the strategic value of philosophical education is clear. It supports behaviour culture by teaching pupils to reason before reacting. It strengthens safeguarding by encouraging pupils to articulate concerns. It enriches curriculum design by connecting subjects to ethical questions. It enhances pastoral care by giving pupils language for their emotions and dilemmas. It supports staff development by modelling reflective practice. It builds a school ethos grounded in dignity, respect and thoughtful engagement with the world.

Philosophical education is therefore not an optional extra. It is a vital component of human-orientated, ambitious schooling. It prepares pupils not only for academic success but for life in community. It teaches them to think with care, to listen with respect and to act with integrity. In a world where ethical complexity is unavoidable, philosophical education offers a compass. It does not provide answers. It helps pupils navigate uncertainty with wisdom.

The Purpose of Teaching Ethical Dilemmas

Teaching ethical dilemmas in schools serves a deeper purpose than simply encouraging lively discussion. It is a way of helping children understand themselves, understand others and understand the world they are growing into. Ethical dilemmas invite pupils to explore questions that do not have straightforward answers, and in doing so they cultivate habits of mind that support thoughtful citizenship, emotional maturity and reflective judgement. For leaders, the value of this work lies not only in what pupils learn, but in the kind of school culture that emerges when philosophical thinking becomes part of everyday life.

Ethical dilemmas encourage pupils to think beyond instinct and to articulate reasons for their choices. When children encounter a scenario that challenges their assumptions, they begin to recognise that moral questions often involve competing values. They learn that fairness can conflict with loyalty, that kindness can conflict with honesty, and that safety can conflict with freedom. These tensions are not abstract. They are present in the daily life of a school community. When pupils practise reasoning through dilemmas, they become better equipped to navigate real situations with care rather than impulse.

This work also nurtures empathy. Ethical dilemmas often require pupils to imagine how a situation feels from another person's perspective. When they consider the feelings of the person on the track in the Trolley Problem, or the person who chooses to enter the Experience Machine, or the person who wonders whether they are still the same individual in the Ship of Theseus, they practise stepping outside their own viewpoint. This imaginative movement is central to moral development. It helps pupils understand that other people's experiences are real and meaningful, even when they differ from their own.

Philosophical education also supports intellectual humility. When pupils realise that intelligent people can disagree about the same dilemma, they begin to appreciate the limits of certainty. They learn that changing one's mind is not a weakness but a sign of growth. They discover that listening carefully can be more powerful than speaking quickly. In a world where public discourse is often polarised, this capacity for humility is essential. It helps pupils resist the temptation to oversimplify complex issues and encourages them to remain open to new ideas.

Developmental psychology provides insight into why ethical dilemmas are so effective. Children's moral reasoning evolves gradually. Younger pupils often focus on rules and consequences, while older pupils begin to consider intentions, fairness and social expectations. Ethical dilemmas meet pupils where they are and gently stretch their thinking. They offer scenarios that are rich enough to challenge older pupils but simple enough to be grasped by younger ones. This flexibility makes philosophical education suitable for a wide range of ages and abilities.

Philosophy for Children provides the pedagogical structure that allows ethical dilemmas to flourish. The community of enquiry model encourages pupils to sit together, listen attentively and build on one another's ideas. It creates a space where disagreement is safe and where questions are valued. In this environment pupils learn to speak thoughtfully, to respond respectfully and to consider the implications of their views. The teacher acts as a facilitator rather than an authority figure, guiding the discussion with open questions and encouraging pupils to explore ideas collaboratively.

The community of enquiry also supports emotional safety. Ethical dilemmas can touch on sensitive themes, and pupils need to feel secure in order to express uncertainty or vulnerability. When the classroom culture is built on trust, pupils are more willing to share their thoughts and more able to listen to others without judgement. This emotional safety is essential for philosophical inquiry. It ensures that pupils can explore difficult questions without fear of embarrassment or ridicule.

Ethical dilemmas also help pupils understand the complexity of real life. Many children encounter moral questions long before they encounter formal ethics lessons. They must decide whether to intervene when a friend is unkind, whether to share a message that might hurt someone, whether to tell an adult about a concern and whether to stand up for someone who is being excluded. These decisions are not simple. They involve competing values and uncertain outcomes. When pupils practise reasoning through dilemmas in a safe environment, they become better prepared to make thoughtful choices in real situations.

Philosophical education also strengthens pupils' ability to articulate their thoughts. Ethical dilemmas require pupils to explain their reasoning, to justify their choices and to respond to challenges. This develops language skills, confidence and clarity of expression. It also helps pupils recognise the difference between opinion and argument. They learn that an opinion becomes an argument only when it is supported by reasons. This distinction is central to critical thinking and supports learning across the curriculum.

Philosophical education also prepares pupils for life in a democratic society. Ethical dilemmas encourage pupils to consider the consequences of their choices, to recognise the impact of their actions on others and to engage with questions of justice, fairness and responsibility. These are essential skills for citizenship. They help pupils understand that democracy is not only a system of voting but a way of living together that requires dialogue, compromise and mutual respect.

The purpose of teaching ethical dilemmas is therefore both intellectual and moral. It helps pupils think clearly, feel deeply and act wisely. It prepares them for the complexity of modern life and strengthens the culture of the school. It affirms the belief that children are capable of profound thought and that philosophical inquiry can enrich their development in ways that extend far beyond the classroom.

The Trolley Problem: Teaching Consequences, Intentions and Moral Trade Offs

The Trolley Problem is one of the most famous thought experiments in moral philosophy. It is simple enough for children to grasp within moments, yet rich enough to occupy professional philosophers for decades. Its power lies in its

clarity. It presents a situation where every option carries a cost, and where the decision maker must weigh consequences, intentions and moral principles. In the classroom it becomes a mirror in which pupils can see their own values more clearly. For senior leaders it offers insight into how philosophical education can deepen reasoning, strengthen dialogue and enrich the moral life of the school.

The classic version of the Trolley Problem begins with a runaway trolley travelling down a track. Ahead of it stand five people who cannot move. If nothing is done, the trolley will strike them. The person controlling the lever has the option to divert the trolley onto a side track where one person stands. The question is simple. Should the lever be pulled? Should one person be harmed in order to save five? Children understand the dilemma immediately. They recognise the tension between saving more lives and deliberately causing harm. They sense that both choices feel uncomfortable. This discomfort is the beginning of philosophical inquiry.



In a community of enquiry pupils begin by sharing their instinctive responses. Some say that pulling the lever is the right thing to do because it saves more people. Others say that pulling the lever feels wrong because it involves choosing to harm someone. As pupils listen to one another they begin to articulate reasons. They explore the difference between allowing harm and causing harm. They consider whether numbers matter. They ask whether intentions matter. They wonder whether the person on the side track has the same moral status as the five on the main track. These questions emerge naturally from the scenario and lead pupils into deeper reflection.

The Trolley Problem introduces pupils to two major traditions in moral philosophy. The first is consequentialism, which focuses on outcomes. A consequentialist might argue that pulling the lever is the right choice because it results in fewer deaths. The second is deontology, which focuses on duties and principles. A deontologist might argue that pulling the lever is wrong because it involves intentionally harming an innocent person. Pupils do not need to learn these terms, but they can explore the ideas. They begin to recognise that moral reasoning involves weighing principles that sometimes conflict.

The Trolley Problem also reveals the emotional dimension of ethical decision making. Pupils often describe feeling torn, uneasy or conflicted. They notice that their feelings do not always align with their reasoning. This recognition is important. It helps pupils understand that moral decisions are not purely intellectual. They involve emotion, empathy and imagination. When pupils share their feelings openly they learn that others may feel differently, and that these differences are worth exploring rather than dismissing.

Variations of the Trolley Problem deepen the inquiry. One well known variation involves a footbridge. In this version the trolley is still heading towards five people, but there is no lever. Instead

the decision maker stands on a bridge next to a large person. If the large person is pushed onto the track, the trolley will stop and the five will be saved. Pupils often react strongly to this version. Many who were willing to pull the lever are unwilling to push the person. They sense that physically pushing someone feels more direct and more personal than pulling a lever. This variation helps pupils explore the difference between doing harm and allowing harm, and between physical action and mechanical intervention.

Another variation involves uncertainty. Pupils might be told that the trolley will probably stop if diverted, but not certainly. They might be told that the person on the side track is a doctor who saves many lives. They might be told that the five people on the main track are trespassing. These variations help pupils recognise that real life dilemmas often involve incomplete information and competing narratives. They learn that moral decisions are rarely made with perfect clarity. This insight prepares them for the complexity of real situations in school and beyond.

The Trolley Problem also connects to contemporary issues especially for older children's thinking. Autonomous vehicles must be programmed to make decisions in emergencies. Should a car protect its passengers at all costs, or should it minimise overall harm? Medical triage involves deciding how to allocate limited resources. Should a doctor prioritise the patient most likely to survive, or the patient in greatest need? These real world dilemmas show pupils that philosophical thinking is not abstract. It is woven into the fabric of modern life. Senior leaders can use these connections to show staff and pupils that ethical reasoning is relevant, practical and essential.



Philosophy for Children provides the structure that allows pupils to explore the Trolley Problem safely. In a community of enquiry pupils sit together, listen carefully and build on one another's ideas. The teacher guides the discussion with open questions. Pupils learn to speak thoughtfully, to respond respectfully and to consider the implications of their views. They discover that disagreement is not a threat but an opportunity for deeper understanding. This approach ensures that the Trolley Problem does not become a debate about who is right. Instead it becomes a shared exploration of values.

Therefore, the Trolley Problem is therefore more than a puzzle. It is a tool for cultivating moral reasoning, emotional maturity and reflective judgement. It helps pupils understand that ethical decisions involve trade offs, tensions and uncertainty. It prepares them for the complexity of modern life and strengthens the culture of the school. It affirms the belief that children are capable of profound thought and that philosophical inquiry can enrich their development in ways that extend far beyond the classroom.

The Experience Machine: Happiness, Authenticity and the Purposes of Education

The Experience Machine is one of the most elegant and unsettling thought experiments in modern philosophy. It asks a simple question about happiness and reality, yet it opens a doorway into profound reflection about the aims of education, the nature of wellbeing and the choices that shape a meaningful life. When explored through a community of enquiry, it becomes a powerful tool for helping pupils think about what matters to them and why. For leaders, it offers insight into how philosophical education can deepen pastoral care, enrich curriculum design and strengthen the moral character of the school.



The thought experiment begins with a scenario. Imagine a machine that can give you any experience you desire. Once connected, you would feel as though you were living a perfect life. You would experience joy, success, friendship and fulfilment. You would not know that the experiences were simulated. The question is simple. Would you choose to enter the machine? Pupils understand the scenario immediately. They recognise the appeal of a life without pain, disappointment or failure. They also sense that something feels uneasy about choosing a life that is not real. This tension is the beginning of philosophical inquiry.

In a community of enquiry pupils begin by sharing their instinctive responses. Some say they would enter the machine because it promises happiness. Others say they would refuse because they value real experiences, even when they are difficult. As pupils listen to one another they begin to articulate reasons. They explore the difference between pleasure and meaning. They consider whether authenticity matters. They ask whether a life lived in ignorance can be fulfilling. These questions emerge naturally from the scenario and lead pupils into deeper reflection.

The Experience Machine invites pupils to think about the nature of happiness. It challenges the assumption that happiness is simply a matter of feeling good. Pupils begin to recognise that many of the experiences they value involve effort, struggle and uncertainty. They talk about achievements that required hard work, friendships that grew through challenges and moments of pride that came from overcoming obstacles. They realise that happiness is often intertwined with authenticity, growth and connection. This insight helps pupils understand that wellbeing is not merely the absence of difficulty. It is the presence of meaning.

The thought experiment also encourages pupils to think about autonomy. When they imagine entering the machine, they realise that they would lose the ability to make real choices.

They would not be able to shape their own future or respond to real events. They would be living a life designed by someone else. This recognition helps pupils understand the importance of agency. It encourages them to value the freedom to make decisions, even when those decisions involve risk or uncertainty. In a school context this insight supports the development of responsible citizenship and personal independence.

The Experience Machine also raises questions about identity. Pupils begin to wonder whether they would still be themselves if they entered the machine. They ask whether identity is shaped by real experiences or by the feelings those experiences produce. They consider whether a life without challenge would allow them to grow. These reflections connect naturally to the Ship of Theseus, another thought experiment that explores identity and change. Together these scenarios help pupils understand that identity is not fixed. It evolves through experience, reflection and choice.

The thought experiment also resonates with contemporary concerns. Pupils live in a world where digital experiences are increasingly immersive. Social media, gaming and virtual reality offer spaces where pleasure can be pursued without the complexity of real life. Pupils recognise that these spaces can be enjoyable, but they also recognise that they can become substitutes for authentic connection. When pupils explore the Experience Machine they begin to reflect on their own digital habits. They ask whether online experiences support their wellbeing or distract from it. They consider the difference between curated digital selves and real identity. These reflections support digital citizenship and help pupils navigate online life with greater awareness.

The Ship of Theseus: Identity, Change and Personal Growth

The Ship of Theseus is one of the oldest and most enduring thought experiments in philosophy. It asks a question that appears simple at first, yet becomes more intriguing the longer one reflects on it. The scenario begins with a ship that has sailed for many years. As time passes, its wooden planks begin to rot and are replaced one by one. Eventually every plank has been replaced. The question is straightforward. Is it still the same ship? Pupils recognise that something has changed, yet something has remained. This tension opens a rich space for reflection about identity, continuity and personal growth.



Some pupils say that the ship is still the same because it has kept its name, its purpose and its history. Others say that it is a different ship because none of the original material remains. As pupils listen to one another they begin to explore the idea that

identity may not depend solely on physical parts. They consider whether identity might involve story, memory or function. They ask whether something can remain itself even when it changes. These questions emerge naturally from the scenario and lead pupils into deeper reflection.

The Ship of Theseus invites pupils to think about personal identity. They begin to wonder whether they are the same person they were when they were younger. They recognise that their bodies have changed, their thoughts have changed and their experiences have changed. Yet they also sense that something about them remains continuous. This recognition helps pupils understand that identity is not fixed. It evolves through experience, reflection and choice. When pupils explore this idea together they begin to appreciate the complexity of growing up. They realise that change is not a threat to identity but part of its development.

The thought experiment also encourages pupils to think about the identity of communities. They begin to ask whether a school remains the same when staff change, when pupils change or when buildings change. They consider whether a community remains itself when traditions evolve or when new values emerge.

The Ship of Theseus also resonates with questions about digital identity. Pupils live in a world where online profiles can be edited, curated and transformed. They recognise that their digital selves may differ from their real selves. When they explore the thought experiment they begin to ask whether identity can be shaped by digital choices. They consider whether an online avatar is part of who they are or a separate creation. These reflections support digital citizenship and help pupils navigate online life with greater awareness.



Teaching Ethical Dilemmas Safely and Effectively

Teaching ethical dilemmas requires more than presenting a scenario and inviting pupils to respond. It requires a carefully crafted environment where curiosity is encouraged, where disagreement is safe and where pupils feel able to explore uncertainty without fear of judgement. Leaders play a crucial role in shaping this environment. They set the tone for how philosophical inquiry is valued, how staff are supported and how pupils are encouraged to think deeply about questions that matter. When ethical dilemmas are taught with care, they become a powerful tool for intellectual growth, emotional development and community building.

The foundation of effective philosophical inquiry is psychological safety. Pupils must feel confident that their ideas will be heard respectfully and that mistakes will not lead to embarrassment. This safety is created through routines that emphasise listening, turn taking and thoughtful response. Teachers model calm curiosity, showing pupils that every idea is worth exploring. They avoid rushing to judgement and instead ask open questions that invite deeper reflection. When pupils see that their contributions are valued, they become more willing to share their thoughts and more able to listen to others with genuine interest.

Teaching ethical dilemmas also requires careful facilitation. Teachers must be attentive to the emotional responses that dilemmas can evoke. Some pupils may feel unsettled by scenarios that involve harm, conflict or uncertainty. Others may feel strongly about particular issues because of personal experience. Effective facilitation involves noticing these responses and responding with sensitivity. Teachers can acknowledge feelings openly, allowing pupils to express discomfort or confusion. They can offer reassurance that uncertainty is natural and that philosophical inquiry is not about finding the perfect answer but about exploring ideas thoughtfully.

Open questions are central to effective facilitation. Questions such as “What makes you think that?” or “How might someone else see this?” encourage pupils to reflect more deeply. They help pupils move beyond instinctive reactions and begin to articulate reasons. They also encourage pupils to consider alternative perspectives, which strengthens empathy and intellectual humility. Teachers can also use follow up questions to help pupils examine the implications of their views. When pupils say they would pull the lever in the Trolley Problem, for example, teachers can ask whether they would make the same choice in a variation of the scenario. This helps pupils recognise that moral reasoning involves consistency and reflection.



Ethical dilemmas also require careful framing. Teachers must ensure that pupils understand the scenario clearly and that they recognise the moral tension it presents. They should avoid presenting dilemmas in ways that trivialise harm or oversimplify complexity. Instead they should frame dilemmas as opportunities for thoughtful exploration. They can emphasise that the purpose is not to find the correct answer but to understand the values and principles involved. This framing helps pupils approach dilemmas with seriousness and respect.

Safeguarding considerations are essential when teaching ethical dilemmas. Some scenarios may touch on themes that are sensitive for particular pupils. Teachers must be attentive to

signs of discomfort and ready to offer support. They should avoid dilemmas that involve graphic detail or that mirror situations pupils may be experiencing personally. When sensitive themes arise naturally in discussion, teachers can guide pupils gently, ensuring that the conversation remains safe and respectful. Senior leaders can support this work by providing training on how to handle sensitive topics and by ensuring that staff feel confident in their facilitation skills.

Conclusion: The Future of Philosophical Education

Philosophical education offers something rare in the life of a school. It creates space for reflection in a world that often moves too quickly. It encourages pupils to think deeply in a culture that sometimes rewards speed over understanding. It invites staff to explore ideas with curiosity in a profession that can become dominated by urgency and routine. When a school embraces philosophical inquiry, it becomes a place where thinking is valued, where dialogue is respectful and where ethical complexity is approached with care rather than fear. This final section draws together the themes of the article and reflects on the future of philosophical education in schools.

The central insight of philosophical education is that children are capable of profound thought. They may not use the vocabulary of professional philosophers, but they can reason, question, imagine and reflect. They can recognise fairness, grapple with dilemmas and articulate their own emerging moral frameworks. When given the right environment, one that is safe, structured and dialogic, they rise to the challenge with remarkable insight. This recognition should shape the future of schooling. It suggests that education should not only prepare pupils for academic success but also cultivate the intellectual and emotional capacities needed to navigate life wisely.

Philosophical education strengthens these capacities by inviting pupils to explore ethical dilemmas. Thought experiments such as the Trolley Problem, Nozick’s Experience Machine and the Ship of Theseus provide scenarios that illuminate moral principles, expose hidden assumptions and provoke meaningful discussion. These scenarios help pupils understand that ethical decisions involve trade offs, tensions and uncertainty. They encourage pupils to articulate reasons, consider alternative perspectives and reflect on the implications of their choices. These habits support thoughtful citizenship, emotional maturity and reflective judgement.

The future of philosophical education lies in the hands of leaders who recognise its value and champion its practice. It lies in classrooms where pupils explore ethical dilemmas with curiosity and care. It lies in communities where dialogue is respectful and where reflection is valued. It lies in schools that embrace philosophical inquiry as part of their identity. When this future becomes reality, pupils will be better prepared for the complexity of modern life. They will be thoughtful, reflective and wise. They will be ready not only to succeed but to contribute meaningfully to the world.

Notes

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