

# School leadership, communities and crises: a collaborative autoethnographic exploration of humanism as professional and community capital

Nicola Sum

*Monash University, Melbourne, Australia*

Reshmi Lahiri-Roy

*Federation University, Ballarat, Australia, and*

Wilma Culton, Lisa Gough, Helen Koziaris and Edward Strain

*Department of Education Victoria, Melbourne, Australia*

Received 11 December 2024  
Revised 20 January 2025  
Accepted 1 February 2025

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article bridges research and practice spaces to consider diverse school leadership experiences and expertise, through a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) of a sextet of contributors, to explore humanist approaches as foundational to leaders' professional capital and their engagement with community during crises.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We use CAE as a methodology to explore the relationship of school leaders and their communities, impacted by crises and considered through a lens of Freirean humanisation.

**Findings** – Dialogic collaboration generated discussion on the nature of professional and community capital in the context of crisis. Key themes include the significance of humanism in accounting for the temporality of preparedness, the fragility of social connections and the sustainability of human thriving within schools and across communities.

**Originality/value** – This paper decentres the dualism in leadership research, between practitioner and researcher spaces, to inform a more nuanced understanding of the strengths inherent in a humanist approach to school leadership, which in turn supports community capital in the face of crises.

**Keywords** Educational leadership, Crisis leadership, Humanism, Professional capital, Collaborative autoethnography

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Education is a space of frequent and subjective crises, often defined as disruptions to the core practices of schooling, imbued with risk and uncertainty which impact decision-making (Booth, 2015; Smith and Riley, 2012). How school leaders work to address, support and move forward from each arising challenge, reflects the demands of professional capacity and respect for an ever-diverse community. It also requires a pragmatic reimagining of strength-based approaches, at a time when the context can often be flooded by discourses of attrition and inequity across the profession. This paper explores the relationship between school leadership and community, impacted by the most recent dislocation of learning triggered by Covid-19 as crisis and exacerbated through ongoing challenges (Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou, 2023; Harris and Jones, 2020; Urick *et al.*, 2021).

© Nicola Sum, Reshmi Lahiri-Roy, Wilma Culton, Lisa Gough, Helen Koziaris and Edward Strain. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>



---

We use collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as a methodology. Side by side, we work as education researchers and school principals, in the context of suburban Melbourne schools in Australia, applying a conceptual lens of humanism to consider professional capital through the often-brittle context of crises (Roy and Uekusa, 2020). This paper begins with a review of the literature around the fragility, resilience and professional capital of school leadership during crisis. The extant literature provides insights into time-sensitive conditions, triggered by crises, leading us to engage Freire's principles of humanism, as complex and intentional praxis for addressing societal challenges (Freire, 1993; Firdaus and Mariyat, 2017). Humanism, as a lens through our methodology of CAE, includes considerations of vignettes highlighting our experiences of schooling communities, leadership and the impact of numerous crises. These experiences inform a foundational sense of professional capital in relation to communities we have been part of historically, and spaces we continue to work in presently. Application of the humanist lens leads us to the discussion of key themes, including preparation for crises, the fragile balance of social and community capital, and the urgency of resourcing for sustainability. Conclusions and implications reflect on how this understanding of humanism is negotiated in this context, the constraints of this dialogic collaboration and directions for future research.

### **Schools and communities through crises**

School leaders are often immersed in a quagmire of government policies which are executed in times of crisis. As those closest to the crisis, school leaders navigate simultaneous expectations of rational decision-making (Tarrant, 2011) and the muddle that policies ironically, and unknowingly, create within the crisis which is already unfolding. This can often be an oppressive environment, for school communities, and for sustaining the professional capital of school principals as they navigate the local and global simultaneously (Harris, 2020; Sum, 2021).

Professional capital is framed as a function of human, social and decisional capital (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). As outlined by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), the professional capital of school leaders relies on the combined capital of their individual knowledge and skills (human capital), the nature of interactions which create opportunities to expand individual talent and build trust (social capital), and the discretion of judgement and expertise secured over time in the role (decisional capital). Professional and community capital lends itself to a collective and immersive practice directly related to context. When crises shape these contexts, aspects of professional capital are more or less visible in response to the oppressive situations imposed on school leaders and their communities (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2020).

Against the context of crisis, extant literature has identified several key aspects of professional capital attributed to school leadership. Leadership involves the duality of decisional capital in managing disruption while maintaining a joint purpose. In the aftermath of natural disasters such as earthquakes in New Zealand, Mutch (2015) noted the decisional capital which extends beyond everyday activities, so that crisis requires leaders to address the management of operational decisions during and after the crisis, while simultaneously "maintaining a vision of what was and what could be" in guiding these operational decisions (p.188). This is reinforced in case studies identifying the rapidity of initial response, which requires immediacy of information, communication and trusting relationships to engage all necessary resources needed across the school community at that time (Sum, 2022a; Sutherland, 2017; Tarrant, 2011). Inherent within the practices of such decisional capital is the human and social capital needed to distribute the leadership and facilitate the "undistorted communication" (p. 4) which Sutherland (2017) identifies as key to a framework of trust during crisis. Effective communication further demonstrates the social capital of school leaders hoping to secure a collective response to crisis (McLeod and Dusky, 2021). Leadership is distributed as a means of supporting the capacity building necessary to address the demands of crisis through the "mobilisation of others" (Harris, 2020, p. 324).

---

The ambiguity of relationships within professional hierarchies, and need to engage resources beyond school walls, requires school leaders to work through distributed means in order to secure greater collaboration (Harris, 2020; Sum, 2022b). The sense of trust is heightened by evidence that leadership in the face of crisis often prioritises immediate human need over remote policy aspirations (Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou, 2023; Sum, 2022b). This is best reflected in the ways that the most recent Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the weight of social and emotional support that school leaders provide for school staff, students and the families of students across the community (Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou, 2023; Urick *et al.*, 2021). Given some of these demonstrations of the impact of crisis leadership on the ambiguities of human relationships in times of flux, we use the lens of humanisation, as fashioned in the work of Freire. Humanism provides a lens to consider how leadership practices, developed through crisis, inform the professional and community capital of those closest to the “*crisis cliff*”, which we define here as the high stakes positions where decisions are imbued with risk and compounded by an uncertain isolation.

### Humanism as conceptual lens

In walking the line between the edge of the crisis cliff and the policy cascade, the latter often inadvertently oppressing rather than supporting students, families, and communities, school leaders find themselves in the role of having to mitigate this oppression. Through words and actions, working with the understanding that “in times of crisis, leaders should be concerned with Maslow rather than Bloom” (Brion, 2021, p. 33), school leaders are positioned as a focal point for their communities (Mutch, 2015). However, in seeking to address oppressive contexts, Freire reminds us that only when we are aware of our own oppression/s can we support others to unfetter themselves from theirs (Freire, 1993; Lahiri-Roy *et al.*, 2023).

More than a century ago, the philosopher William James (1905) opined:

The essential service of humanism, as I conceive the situation, is to have seen that though one part of our experience may lean upon another part to make it what it is in any one of several aspects in which it may be considered, experience as a whole is self-containing and leans on nothing. (p. 114).

Hence, James effectively exhorted people to join the dots, find the patterns and scrutinise experiences to understand how, when and in what manner humanism must be exercised to make the most of experiences for us and others. Furthermore, this conceptualisation, as self-contained, highlights the immersive nature of crisis leadership as we are understanding it through the most recently emerging scholarship on notions of inflight turbulence and the implications of self-readiness (Urick *et al.*, 2021).

Working with Freirean perspectives facilitates a sharper conceptualisation of humanism (Dale and Hyslop-Margison, 2011). It draws on the understanding that learning takes place outside of the classroom, and “happens at home, in the community and in the workplace” (Stanistreet, 2021, p. 563). Freire’s notion of humanism is based on the desire to understand how humans perceive and unpack their own experiences to reach self-realisation as individuals and a group (Dale and Hyslop-Margison, 2011; Del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Basing his humanism on a combined framework of Christian beliefs and Marxist tenets, Freire considered that people’s own intrinsic worth makes them strive to become more fully human despite obstacles posed by myriad forms of oppression (Schugurensky, 2011), among them entrenched societal structural inequalities and injustices. “Hence, the dialogical space between Christian humanism and Marxist humanism reveals the crux of Freire’s philosophy of humanization, liberation, hope, and transformation”, all of which seem to lay open multiple pathways to extending the already substantive work of school leaders (Del Carmen Salazar, 2013, p. 125).

A humanistic lens, as advocated by Freire, “puts the learner truly at the centre” (Stanistreet, 2021, p. 562) empowering them “to find solutions to the real-world problems they encountered in their lives” (Stanistreet, 2021). Within the space of this article, we also place ourselves

---

(school leaders and researchers/academics) as learners wrestling with a sense of oppression. “Freire believed that such participation was an important part of being human. . . . We realise ourselves as human beings through collective action” (Stanistreet, 2021, p. 564), and such collective action we assert is always empowering “Humanism is about personal autonomy, moral responsibility, and about solidarity with humanity” (Veugelers, 2011, p. 3). Veugelers (2011) claims the inherent tensions between autonomy and social connections as the core of humanism, further stressing education’s role in helping people make sense of this tension, to optimise social justice and human development. Within our personal narratives and in the use of CAE as method, we strive to tease out this vital connection. We work with the Freirean notion “that to educate means to do politics, to build polis, to generate community, to exercise power in a solidary, egalitarian, friendly, cooperative, attentive, sensitive, democratic way” (Kohan, 2021, p. 1) ensuring service to people and community is paramount.

With the effects of multiple crises at local levels, and the most recent impact of the global pandemic still resonating in all areas of life, we concur with Freire that selecting a dehumanised and unjust path is illogical if humanisation is an alternative genuinely available to use (Freire, 2017). Our CAE seeks to explore how leadership through crisis informs greater humanistic practice within and for our school communities.

### **Building humanist communities through collaborative autoethnography**

Given our group structure, and that we met as fellow residents in similar yet dissimilar educational spaces, connections of diverse types shaped us into collaborators in understanding such spaces in the context of the pandemic. We became an informal collective of two educator/researchers and four principals, reflecting on the implications for schooling and education in the immediate aftermath of the local Covid-19 lockdowns. As current university-based academics, two of us have also led and managed schools in international settings, while the four school principals represent a cross section of experience levels from both primary and secondary school contexts. At the commencement of the first new academic year since the pandemic, we gathered in person to share our experiences of lockdown learning, and our plans for the year to come. Hence, CAE offered maximum scope as methodology to meaningfully unpack how the shift, from physical to online spaces, had impacted our connectivity with students and the community at large (Hobbs and Whitsett, 2023). Sudden increase in workloads, adjustment to technological challenges and lack of clarity in leadership roles (Urlick *et al.*, 2021; Wharton-Beck *et al.*, 2022) added to mental health challenges for all stakeholders (Harris and Jones, 2020). Our group comprises both school leaders and educators/researchers in higher education, hence rapid shifts in our work practice was experienced by us all (Minihan *et al.*, 2023).

Researchers (Roy and Uekusa, 2020; Zattler, 2020) encourage the extraction of data from individual and collaborative experiences as a continual process to better comprehend social and other realities. Using CAE as method aided our group in furthering this process, including expanding our understanding of myriad forms of capital and their interconnections. From our diverse locations in education, CAE offered us a clearer understanding of the connections between our private and professional lives helping us “examine how the private troubles of individuals are connected to public issues and to public responses to these troubles” (Denzin, 2014, pp. 5–6). Moving forward in times of crisis, through a lens of humanism, supported with CAE as a method which centres the human as a focal point, facilitates creation of spaces for all based on “an education that accompanies another world, more beautiful, loving, supportive” (Kohan, 2021, p. 4).

These informal conversations led to a sharing of professional leadership, teaching, parenting and community participation experiences. We communicated initially as human beings rather than academics and leadership professionals, building liking and trust along the way. We dialogued our way to an understanding of our diverse and multiple exposures to myriad crises not just the recent pandemic. One interesting aspect of this collaborative and

---

unfettered conversations was that it enabled us to create the main source of our research data, through a consequent series of positionality based reflective writing samples. Progressing to analysis and tweaking of the same as we unpacked each other's narratives (Miyahara and Fukao, 2022) proved immensely helpful.

Given the importance we accorded to individual and collective positionings and perspectives along with the collaborative nature of conversations, CAE was a logical choice of methodology. Chang *et al.* (2013) define CAE as “a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyse and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data” (p. 24). The empowerment of researchers within their social contexts is another strength of this method as emphasised by Chang (2013). Etherington's (2007) stress on the collaborative use of reflexive research methods resonated with us as we “did” CAE in safe and thoughtful spaces. Miyahara and Fukako (2022) remind us of the high level of cooperation involved in this methodology, allowing the researcher to move easily between group and individual work, through meaningful interactions and critical conversations. Experiencing this, we developed a deeper awareness of CAE's capacity to facilitate critical reflection, on ethical aspects of research, as generated through our contextual personal and group reflections. It was simultaneously enervating and humbling to experience our individual reflections and group conversations being subjected to collaborative scrutiny (Miyahara and Fukako, 2022; Lozic, 2024). It was very encouraging to observe that the humanism lens remained the fulcrum for all collaborative and reflexive dialogues.

While Valiente-Riedl *et al.* (2024) highlights the ethical challenges inherent in the integrity of CAE's reflective process, we noticed that the mutual respect of the researchers and school leaders for each other's knowledges and experiences mitigated these, maintaining integrity. From a humanistic perspective, we considered CAE as a transformational and emancipatory process, which facilitated our recognition of “the necessity and challenges of conducting empirical analysis, engaging in self-reflection and dialogue, and transforming institutionalised and personal practices and norms” (Lozic, 2024, p. 5). Thus, as researchers and school leaders, we managed to create a unique research circle through mutual trust, attention to ethics and co-caring and empowered through humanism, the thread that linked us all.

The humanism inherent in our mutual respect and adherence to ethics was integral to the drafting of our individual vignettes, outlining our diverse perspectives on crisis. Shared through email, then compiled in a single document, we all read through each vignette. Going forward we met online to scrutinise and critically analyse the themes emerging from the same, dialoguing collaboratively to broaden each other's perspectives. Recording and transcribing these meetings offered scope for further collective and individual reflections while showcasing “the benefits of engaging in practitioner inquiry with people outside one's own organisation (Lozic, 2024, p. 5)”.

### **Individual researcher reflections: leading school communities in moments of crises**

Our engagement with each other marks a breadth and depth of experiences, from Reshmi's background as a school founder to Edward's newly appointed position as school principal, and across the principalship timelines of the four further authors. These vignettes provide an insight into our diverse recollections of crises, alongside the humble and human leadership aspirations we brought to those communities.

#### *Nicola*

I am situated as an insider/outsider to this collaboration, as a previous school principal and now in a role as an early career researcher. However, school leaves an imprint, and my continued work with school principals through preparation programs or empirical studies immerses me

---

in the many moments of challenge, care and defiant optimism that accompanies the work of school principals. While I make no attempt at pretence, I am simultaneously aware of how hard the work is, and inspired by the way school principals address their day to day. Through my own moments of crisis in my time in schools, I found myself drawn to the work of school leaders in their recent pandemic challenges, leading to this wish fulfilment of bringing together principals to tell their story in their own voice here.

---

*Reshmi*

As a teacher educator and former educational consultant, I am somewhat of an outsider in this space. However, as a past teacher trainer for international schools, I am aware of the myriad and ongoing challenges facing school principals. Furthermore, I am a parent of two adult sons who enjoyed their schooling and had the good fortune to be supported by exceptional school leaders during times of personal and broader crises. As a community member, connected to parents of school going children, and most importantly a teacher educator, I found myself very emotionally invested in the coping strategies devised, and resilience exhibited, by the teaching leadership community in face of the challenges thrown up COVID 19. Hence, the chance to be involved in this writing space was very welcome.

*Wilma*

I have the privilege of being the principal at a primary school in Templestowe, in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The school has over 1200 students and more than eighty staff and is accredited with the Council of International Schools (CIS). I have had the honour of being a principal for 31 years, in two very different schools. The opportunity of leading and shaping the education of a generation of young people and supporting the career development of staff is a gift that I value immensely. Being a part of a community over time allows for a school to make a deep impact on student aspirations, achievement and opening the doors of possibility.

*Lisa*

I have worked for the Department of Education for 18 years. My most recent appointment as Substantive Principal in 2017 was at a primary school. This also marks my first appointment as principal. I am strongly driven by a desire to meet the needs of all students in an inclusive setting, using visible Guiding Statements (Philosophy, Values, Vision and Mission Statements) to underpin this work. As someone who did not enjoy school growing up, it has been a privilege working to maximise engagement to prevent this experience for the students at the school. My husband of 30 years is fortunately incredibly supportive of the commitment I feel to my chosen vocation, and I am also a mother to three adult children, providing me valuable insight into the support I can offer families and our wider community.

*Helen*

I have been a member of the principal class within the Department of Education since 2001 – coming into my current school as an assistant principal and then taking over as principal in 2014. During my time as a leader of the school, I have been involved in the local assistant principal network and the principal executive team of joint networks, while also partnering with universities and other learning organisations in promoting school leadership. This has provided me with opportunities to support and mentor local and international principals through shadowing and on-site visits, and to represent Australian school leaders at local and international events. I am passionate about being the “best you can be everyday” and living by the values of the school which are easily transferred beyond the school gate and into everyday life. It is about providing every student and staff member with the opportunity to learn and grow through experiences supporting personal development.

---

Edward

I am currently a principal within the Department of Education, Victoria (Australia), informed by my previous leadership work as an Assistant Principal, and within the wellbeing and engagement division of the Department of Education. I have an interest in Asian-Australian education, reflected in my current work as a principal in an English/Japanese bilingual school, and historically marked by my engagement with visiting school leaders from other countries, and the opportunity to travel and work with local principals in Indonesia. These opportunities led me to further study, completing my Masters of Instructional Leadership at The University of Melbourne. My approach to leadership is motivated by the need to ensure that all students are provided every opportunity to enjoy an engaging and rewarding public education, complemented by high quality teaching and learning and experiences that establish their pathway as young adults.

### Themes from collaborative interrogations on practice

Through collaborative interrogation, we explored the practice which informed our responses to crises, using Freire's lens of humanism. In this discussion, we address the themes of human preparation, the fragility of social and community capital and lack of investment in human thriving which denotes key challenges to school leadership in the Australian context within which we are situated. However, we also share points on the role of humanism as a challenge to these conditions and use direct quotations from our collaborative discussions to illustrate examples of leadership concern and practice as human beings engaged in communities.

#### *Crisis: a temporal accounting of human preparedness*

Consistent with extant literature on crisis leadership, such as the duality of decisional capital (Mutch, 2015), the distribution of leadership to support and facilitate the engagement of others (Harris, 2020), and the shift in focus from policy satiation to human centred outcomes (Sum, 2022b; Urlick *et al.*, 2021), we denote crisis as temporal and subject to varying degrees of preparation and anticipation.

I think crisis can be defined not only by what's gone on, but how you're feeling at that moment in time. As a leader, you're not supposed to show any weaknesses because then as soon as you show weakness, then that means that the rest of your team has a negative reaction to it. Crisis for me was about how do I manage what I don't understand, in a short period of time, so that I get maximum support from the people who directly report to me. And also, how do I make sure that our parents feel as if they too understand what's going on. (Helen)

From our collaborative engagements, we became aware that a crisis is not the event itself, for the event is merely a trigger. Rather, the event calls to account the quality of the human, social and decisional capital along the temporal continuum of what was prepared for, what is occurring and what may happen next. In Helen's vignette, we identify that the event is a crack in the glass, but more significantly, that the leadership in crisis is about considerations of the immediate impact of the damage, as much as how that may raise the likelihood of further adverse outcomes. As might be expected in crisis, decisional capital is the most confronting aspect of leadership through volatile times. For school principals, it is the dance between stagnant paperwork from higher up the chain of command and the immediacy of addressing staffing, wellbeing, technology and other social needs at school level (Sum, 2022b).

Wilma discussed this as the acknowledgement of crisis as past and present, requiring the *"bringing together all of the elements of your experience, of the information that you're receiving, in any direction that might be happening around you, and trying to make the best decisions that are going to guide you forward into smoother waters."* Through a humanist lens, school leaders expect the next crisis, for this is the only certainty about the volatility of a leadership context. However, they seek to position themselves with a view across solutions of the past, ideas for the future and risk to the people in their care at the present time. It is also

being perched on what we identify as the *crisis cliff* between access to limited resources and human need for learning, materials, remuneration and family care (Mutch, 2015; Urick *et al.*, 2021). Such demonstrations of decisional capital further reinforce the integrated nature of social capital, and human capital (Fullan *et al.*, 2015; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012), necessary to address human-centred outcomes, and consolidate trust across the community, as a priority of crisis leadership (Sutherland, 2017; Tarrant, 2011).

Humanism requires a joint effort as a means to harm reduction in times of crisis, with school leaders using their skills and understanding of risk to guide others safely. Effective leadership depends on leveraging social capital to communicate critical decisions across staff, students, and parents.

### *Crisis leadership: addressing the fragility of social and community capital*

Through a humanist lens, we are drawn to acknowledge that schools are currently staffed and led by crisis-damaged people. As a microcosm of the communities they are immersed in, schools have continued on with the core values of teaching and caring for students, but the people within the school buildings are the same as those in the broader community – exhausted, overwhelmed and affected by crisis in ways that have not been accounted for. Urick *et al.* (2021) noted the turbulence of crisis, and while extant scholarship provides a developing picture of the nature of leadership during crisis, they remain largely centred on the Covid-19 pandemic, we propose that this is already historic.

It's the relationship of people to the event. We have a community and there are crises that we take in our stride. Our community's experience of crisis is different at different points. You may have the passing of a parent, or you may have a severe accident of a student that is a crisis for certain members of your community. Yes, there are guidelines and protocols and understandings of how to deal with those things. But I think if we're talking about crisis, it's when principals are in crisis, which is not necessarily the same as when our community is in crisis. It's our relationship with the stimuli or the events that determines when that crisis is actually being felt. We came through [Covid-19] having no guidelines . . . but now the flood of paperwork. It's our experience of that paperwork and those extra demands that determines that that is the crisis, even though you wouldn't necessarily expect that to be the case. (Lisa)

As the notion of human preparedness indicates, crisis leadership is that tenuous thread woven through the urgency of drawing on social capital, as a means to engage the diversity, and support of community capital. Lisa's vignette above identifies the strength of community capital, which is able to absorb a variety of crises through school life, tempered by scale and impact. However, Lisa also raises the sense of oppression felt by school leaders when administrative tasks are imposed in ways that demand a level of human and decisional capital that is detrimental to the effectiveness of leaders and their teams. Through a humanist lens, this appears to impose conditions which compromise the fragile nature of social community that school leaders need to invest time in. Instead of being able to immerse themselves in the community, and continue to develop their human capital through the richness of collaborative and engaging relationships, time is redirected to imposed and potentially artificial administrative tasks, which is at a disconnect from the school context and its priorities. Using Freire's lens, we propose that the nature of humanism expands the professional capital of school leaders in their approach to crisis. School leaders are engaged in trust building as an intrinsic part of community capital, in the way that Veugelers (2011) captures the tension at the core of humanism. Unclear policy creation and enactment by government adds an artificial sense of crisis, serving to undermine humanist efforts and effectively erode trust building and distract from wellbeing (Sum, 2023).

For school leaders who recognise the oppressive nature of additional administration, the flow-on from crisis leadership is the burning of both ends of a very short candle. Helen noted this as the experience of going on regardless. She reflected that "you don't recognize the strain it puts on you until you burn or crash at a particular time, and I think that's really important to

---

*acknowledge. And yet you still pick yourself up. You still go on.”* That we have school leaders experiencing such sense of strain, driven by the reality of trying to work in meaningful ways with the human beings who inform their offices, schools and communities, while under pressure to meet artificially urgent administrative targets, should be a primary reconsideration of education systems. Do we want school leaders who are present and immersed in school communities, strengthening those relationships which are most evident and vital through crisis, or do we insist on office wardens who are held accountable for countless forms and plans, which serve to compromise the value of school leaders as talented and knowledgeable professionals?

Edward reflected that in crisis, *“It was seeing what rules were existing, what rules had to be adhered to. What rules we had to create for our school communities. It was very much thinking on our feet and I think that’s a great testament to the people in this room.”* By this he refers to fellow school principals, and as the emerging literature shows, there is compromised value to investing time in data entry and filing forms, when human collaboration and collective response is needed. Wilma reinforced the reality that principals are fatigued, and teachers are struggling and looking to part-time roles, combinations which themselves are foreshadowing further crises for education.

#### *Sustaining professional capital: addressing resourcing for human thriving*

Recognition of the school principal as human, is oppressed by systemic approaches to school leadership, as a mechanical and automated process. This effectively bypasses school leaders as critical human engagement in schools and communities, through explicit policy making and systemic interventions that seek to drive a change response as a work-around to the presence of school leaders.

I think what impacts on teachers and school leadership is that from a teaching point of view, the breadth of the curriculum and the layers that are being asked for teachers to lead and implement, it goes beyond the skill set of teachers. They don’t have the experience, and it goes beyond much of what we can do as well. So, you keep adding layers to an already very busy curriculum, and there are only so many things that you can do. (Edward)

Compounding the pressures on school leaders, of balancing remote requirements of policy makers with immediate needs and engagements of local community, is the gap in resourcing. While Covid-19 is one of many crises, its global impact shattered the grey haze of school investment and government funding for resources to address notions of quality, 21st century and other such flamboyant educational packaging. The lack in investments, across elements such as school buildings, technology and access to learning materials, tumbled out like layers of broken cake patched over with poor icing. The pandemic brought to light the many stresses and resource challenges for schools that could no longer be covered over. Through a humanist lens, we note the complexity of school leaders working with and across their community, which enables them to draw on their social capital and co-construct community capital. However, without appropriate access to resources and investment in community identified priorities, it is difficult for school leaders to fully address the challenges. They are modelling human-centred practice, but constrained by policy making which is oppressive rather than expansive. Freire would argue that under such conditions, it is difficult to see how we might strive to overcome obstacles, for the very people who should be centred and supported, are being under-resourced (Stanistreet, 2021).

From Edward’s vignette on the nature of curriculum and expectations of teachers, as shared above, and across a number of related aspects such as the cost constraints of new teacher recruitment, or social complexity of supporting families across the community, schools are deeply lacking in the necessary investment to secure the appropriate resources. This lack of adequate and considered resourcing is a further form of oppression impacting the capacity of school leaders to leverage their human capital in a way that allows them to make the most effective decisions. The compromised decisional capital was evident in multiple ways through

our discussions. Nicola noted that there seemed to be a sense of tension around who held “*control of schools*”, which seemed to be at a somewhat performative level, but nonetheless came through our conversations as an imposed pressure on school principals. This underlying current of control, potentially undermines the humanism of school leaders themselves. In response to this apparent expression of systemic constructs, principals expressed their position to hold to their “core values” of caring for students and teachers. Wilma captured this as “a *prioritisation of the core values of looking after people first*”.

### Conclusion

Drawing on human capital, to engage and expand social capital, so as to create a greater possibility of effective decisional capital is an experience in navigating turbulence through the most human experience – fear and tolerance of risk. If humanism is the manifestation of autonomy, moral responsibility and solidarity with humanity, trust is the lynchpin of social and community capital that undergirds this. From the rapidly emerging body of scholarship seeking to address crisis leadership at its most immediate, school leaders continue to demonstrate their humanist solidarity with community through trusting and reciprocal relationships. The challenge as we move forward is to consider whether the same is being extended to the school leaders themselves, by those who should be held accountable for providing such security. As they stand at the fine edge of the *crisis cliff*, there is little evidence of support, reinforcement or investment to guard against the risk of precarity faced by school leaders. Instead, crises have accumulated into a permanent sense of crisis, bringing with it artificial layers of pressure and workload evident in various forms of paperwork, benchmarking and administrative duties.

While this contribution, to the evolving global dialogue on crisis leadership, is by its qualitative nature, a thick description of leadership currently situated in suburban Melbourne, we are a collaborative undertaking progressing towards humanist practice in educational leadership. We have drawn on culturally and historically diverse experiences of educational leadership work which is not bound by urban Australia. This CAE does not seek to generalize across a global community of school leaders, rather to provide detailed, considered and critical analysis of our experiences of crisis. Future research needs to consider the specificities of artificial pressure which continue to evolve into a state of near-permanent crisis in schools and across their communities at this time. Studies could be enriched by examinations of emergent policy approaches to school governance and leadership performance. At both local and global levels, educational re-imagining has prioritised concepts such as student wellbeing and teacher attrition. The most recent global monitoring report identified the value of school leaders as change agents, focused on learning and people, but subject to short political tenures. Almost three years on from the global pandemic, the call for greater advocacy and investments in educational leadership indicates the gap in accounting for the humanity of the work.

At a time when educational goals and priorities are being reviewed and reframed, we have argued that there is a need for a humanist understanding of the work of school leaders. This informs some of our early identification of the nature of professional capital being developed and negotiated by school leaders at the forefront of educational crises. The alternative is that this critical role within education, and across our communities, will find itself effectively marginalised, in favour of a selective ignorance of the oppressive conditions under which school leaders work to maintain fragile and under-resourced schools, communities and the relationships which connect them.

### References

- Booth, S.A.S. (2015), *Crisis Management Strategy: Competition and Change in Modern Enterprises*, Routledge Revivals, London.
- Brion, C. (2021), “Leading in times of crisis”, *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 27-38, doi: [10.1177/1555458921992386](https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458921992386).

- Chang, H. (2013), "Individual and collaborative autoethnography as method: a social scientist's perspective", in Jones, S.H., Adams, T.E. and Ellis, C. (Eds), *Handbook of Autoethnography*, pp. 107-122.
- Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. and Hernandez, K.A.C. (2013), *Collaborative Autoethnography*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA.
- Chatzipanagiotou, P. and Katsarou, E. (2023), "Crisis management, school leadership in disruptive times and the recovery of schools in the post COVID-19 era: a systematic literature review", *Education Sciences*, Vol. 13 No. 2, p. 118, doi: [10.3390/educsci13020118](https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13020118).
- Dale, J. and Hyslop-Margison, E.J. (2011), "Pedagogy of humanism", in *Paulo Freire: Teaching for Freedom and Transformation. Explorations of Educational Purpose*, Springer, Dordrecht, Vol. 12, pp. 71-104, doi: [10.1007/978-90-481-9100-0\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9100-0_3).
- Del Carmen Salazar, M. (2013), "A humanizing pedagogy: reinventing the principles and practice of education as a journey toward liberation", *Review of Research in Education*, Vol. 37 No. 1, pp. 121-148, doi: [10.3102/0091732X12464032](https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12464032).
- Denzin, N. (2014), *Interpretive Autoethnography*, Sage Publications, Los Angeles, CA.
- Etherington, K. (2007), "Ethical research in reflexive relationships", *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 13 No. 5, pp. 599-616, doi: [10.1177/1077800407301175](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800407301175).
- Firdaus, F.A. and Mariyat, A. (2017), "Humanistic approach in education according to Paulo Freire", *At-Ta'dib*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 25-48, doi: [10.21111/at-tadib.v12i2.1264](https://doi.org/10.21111/at-tadib.v12i2.1264).
- Freire, P. (1993), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex.
- Freire, P. (2017), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (M. B. Ramos, Trans.), Penguin Books.
- Fullan, M., Rincon-Gallardo, S. and Hargreaves, A. (2015), "Professional capital as accountability", *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Vol. 23 No. 15, p. 15, doi: [10.14507/epaa.v23.1998](https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v23.1998).
- Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2012), *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*, Teachers College Press, Ontario Principals' Council, NY, Toronto.
- Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2020), "Professional capital after the pandemic: revisiting and revising classic understandings of teachers' work", *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, Vol. 5 Nos 3/4, pp. 327-336, doi: [10.1108/JPCC-06-2020-0039](https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-06-2020-0039).
- Harris, A. (2020), "COVID-19 – school leadership in crisis?", *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, Vol. 5 Nos 3/4, pp. 321-326, doi: [10.1108/JPCC-06-2020-0045](https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-06-2020-0045).
- Harris, A. and Jones, M. (2020), "COVID 19–school leadership in disruptive times", *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 40 No. 4, pp. 243-247, doi: [10.1080/13632434.2020.1811479](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2020.1811479).
- Hobbs, J. and Whitsett, L. (2023), "Severed connections and timely reflections: a collaborative autoethnography navigating uncertainty amid COVID-19 in higher education", *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, Vol. 22, pp. 1-26, doi: [10.1080/15505170.2023.2187900](https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2023.2187900).
- James, W. (1905), "The essence of humanism. The journal of philosophy", *Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Vol. 2 No. 5, pp. 113-118, doi: [10.2307/2012206](https://doi.org/10.2307/2012206).
- Kohan, W. (2021), "Why Paulo Freire more than ever?", *Academia Letters*, Article 277, doi: [10.20935/AL277](https://doi.org/10.20935/AL277).
- Lahiri-Roy, R., Belford, N. and Sum, N. (2023), "Transnational women academics of colour enacting 'pedagogy of discomfort': positionality against a 'pedagogy of rupture'", *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, Vol. 31 No. 3, pp. 339-357, doi: [10.1080/14681366.2021.1900345](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1900345).
- Lozic, V. (2024), "The transformative power of practitioner inquiry: collaborative autoethnography, norm critique and research circles in Swedish education", *Critical Studies in Education*, pp. 1-18, doi: [10.1080/17508487.2024.2400691](https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2024.2400691).
- McLeod, S. and Dulsky, S. (2021), "Resilience, reorientation, and reinvention: school leadership during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic", *Frontiers in Education*, Vol. 6, 637075, doi: [10.3389/educ.2021.637075](https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.637075).

- Minihan, S., Orben, A., Songco, A., Fox, E., Ladouceur, C.D., Mewton, L., Moulds, M., Pfeifer, J.H., Van Harmelen, A.L. and Schweizer, S. (2023), "Social determinants of mental health during a year of the COVID-19 pandemic", *Development and psychopathology*, Vol. 35 No. 4, pp. 1701-1713, doi: [10.1017/S0954579422000396](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579422000396).
- Miyahara, M. and Fukao, A. (2022), "Exploring the use of collaborative autoethnography as a tool for facilitating the development of researcher reflexivity", *System*, Vol. 105, 102751, ISSN 0346-251X, doi: [10.1016/j.system.2022.102751](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2022.102751).
- Mutch, C. (2015), "Leadership in times of crisis: dispositional, relational and contextual factors influencing school principals' actions", *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, Vol. 14, pp. 186-194, doi: [10.1016/j.ijdr.2015.06.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2015.06.005).
- Roy, R. and Uekusa, S. (2020), "Collaborative autoethnography: 'self-reflection' as a timely alternative research approach during the global pandemic", *Qualitative Research Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 383-392, doi: [10.1108/QRJ-06-2020-0054](https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-06-2020-0054).
- Schugurensky, D. (2011), *Paulo Freire*, Continuum, New York, NY.
- Smith, L. and Riley, D. (2012), "School leadership in times of crisis", *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 57-71, doi: [10.1080/13632434.2011.614941](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2011.614941).
- Stanistreet, P. (2021), "Revolution in the head: a conversation with Paulo Freire", *International Review of Education*, Vol. 67 No. 5, pp. 561-567, doi: [10.1007/s11159-021-09922-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09922-w).
- Sum, N. (2021), "Glocalization: issues and strategies for school leadership", in Brooks, J.S. and Heffernan, A. (Eds), *The School Leadership Survival Guide: What to Do when Things Go Wrong, How to Learn from Mistakes, and Why You Should Prepare for the Worst*, Information Age Publishing, Charlotte, pp. 117-130.
- Sum, N. (2022a), "School leadership and information literacy: leading in crisis and beyond COVID-19", in Dhiman, S.K. and Marques, J.F. (Eds), *Leadership after COVID-19. Future of Business and Finance*, Springer, Cham, doi: [10.1007/978-3-030-84867-5\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84867-5_18).
- Sum, N. (2022b), "School leaders' perceptions of their roles during the pandemic: an Australian case study exploring volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA leadership)", *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 42 No. 2, pp. 188-207, doi: [10.1080/13632434.2022.2045268](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2022.2045268).
- Sum, N. (2023), "Quiet in the mind: women leading during crisis explored through a lens of hope", *School Leadership and Management*, doi: [10.1080/13632434.2023.2268658](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2023.2268658).
- Sutherland, I.E. (2017), "Learning and growing: trust, leadership, and response to crisis", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 55 No. 1, pp. 2-17, doi: [10.1108/JEA-10-2015-0097](https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-10-2015-0097).
- Tarrant, R. (2011), "Leadership through a school tragedy: a case study (Part 1: the first week)", *Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 65-76, available at: [https://www.massey.ac.nz/~trauma/issues/2011-3/AJDTs\\_2011-3\\_full.pdf](https://www.massey.ac.nz/~trauma/issues/2011-3/AJDTs_2011-3_full.pdf)
- Urick, A., Carpenter, B.W. and Eckert, J. (2021), "Confronting COVID: crisis leadership, turbulence, and self-care", in *Frontiers in education*, Vol. 6, 642861, doi: [10.3389/feduc.2021.642861](https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.642861).
- Valiente-Riedl, E., Robinson, H., Fletcher, J. and Cejnar, L. (2024), "Breaking new ground: using and evaluating collaborative autoethnography to enhance teacher adaptability in higher education", *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, Vol. 21 No. 9, doi: [10.53761/6dtsce37](https://doi.org/10.53761/6dtsce37).
- Veugelers, W. (2011), *Education and Humanism: Linking Autonomy and Humanity*, Sense, Rotterdam, doi: [10.1007/978-94-6091-577-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-577-2).
- Wharton-Beck, A., Chou, C., Gilbert, C., Johnson, B. and Beck, M. (2022), "K-12 school leadership perspectives from the COVID-19 pandemic", *Policy Futures in Education*, Vol. 22 No. 1, doi: [10.1177/14782103221135620](https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103221135620).
- Zattler, J. (2020), *Never Let a Crisis Go to Waste*, Centre for Global Development Website, available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/never-let-crisis-go-waste> (accessed 12 April 2024).

#### About the authors

Nicola Sum is lecturer in education at Monash University, drawing on over 20 years of school experience in the Victorian, UK, and International School systems. She is a school principal, who completed her PhD

on glocalisation and educational leadership, and is passionate about the voice of educational leaders in the field. Nicola Sum is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [nicola.sum@monash.edu](mailto:nicola.sum@monash.edu)

Reshmi Lahiri-Roy is a scholarly teaching fellow in Education and Humanities at Federation University and is currently pursuing a second Ph.D. in Inclusive Education at Deakin University. Reshmi's career in education encompasses research, teaching and industry engagement across the tertiary education, school and non-profit sectors.

Wilma Culton is principal in the Department of Education in Victoria. She is the recipient of the prestigious 2021 Public Service Medal for her service, insights and expertise demonstrated in her commitment to her school community and the network of principals across the state.

Lisa Gough is a school principal immersed in the lives of students and families, focused on supporting learning opportunities for every child. She works in the Department of Education, Victoria, and is based in a well-established school in South-East Melbourne.

Helen Koziaris leads a secondary school, working with the Victorian Department of Education to ensure diverse educational experiences for students. She is an established principal who has contributed to professional learning programs for international school leaders and remains engaged in academic programs supporting school leaders.

Edward Strain is a current school principal with over 15 years of teaching and leadership experience in Victorian schools and the Department of Education encompassing wellbeing, engagement and instructional leadership. He has undertaken undergraduate studies at Monash University and postgraduate studies in Education at La Trobe University and Melbourne Graduate School of Education.