What we have learned about:
The headteacher's role in the leadership of REAL Projects

I want to put on record that transformation of student's learning does not happen in schools where the headteacher is preoccupied with raising attainment scores or meeting the expectations of Ofsted as goals in themselves. Rather, transformed attainment and outstanding Ofsted judgments are bi-products of a school culture in which students and teachers are passionate about their work, are excited, engaged and empowered by their learning, and where they (both staff and students) profoundly believe that their role is to liberate the learning potential of each and every learner.

Because the embedded implementation of REAL Projects takes 3-5 years, the task requires leaders who create the conditions for this long-term development work; who engage with the work themselves; who learn alongside their teachers; and who model and use the PBL processes in school-wide adult learning.

Leaders with a PBL mind-set understand that focusing on achievement and scores comes with a low ceiling - and that 'getting an Ofsted outstanding' is not a compelling vision. Instead, they realize that growth potential lies in transforming students' learning experiences through trusting teachers and equipping them with the tools that allow collective critique and refinement of their craft. Leaders have to inspire about what is possible, set a context for success, and then to let go and empower their teachers, in the same way that teachers have to do that for their students in the REAL Projects classrooms.

(Freely adapted and developed from a Drew Perkins 2015 blog post.)

Some History

In 2008 the Paul Hamlyn Foundation partnered with Innovation Unit to launch what was to be a four-year programme entitled *Learning Futures*[1]. It drew inspiration from a predecessor PHF innovation, *Musical Futures,* which has demonstrated that radically alternative approaches to pedagogy – ones that emphasise student engagement, collaborative working, peer tutoring, real-world relevance, student agency, project orientation, valuing learning both within and beyond school and minimally invasive teaching – can have transformative effect on both achievement and participation in music learning. The task in 2008 was to embark upon a systemic enquiry with a group of schools inspired by these features to develop 'grounded

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[1] *Learning Futures* ran from 2008 to 2012, at which point Paul Hamlyn transferred the intellectual property from the programme to Innovation Unit (IU) and it became *Engaging Schools*. In 2012 the Education Endowment Foundation gave IU a grant to design and run a random control trial (RCT) to generate a UK empirical evidence-base about the impact of PBL on students engagement and achievement. At that point it became *REAL Projects*.

theory' about what learning might look like across the curriculum if it had similar features. What might be the implications for the design of schools and the design of pedagogy?

That all now seems a long time ago.[2] It is so long ago that Project-Based Learning (PBL) was for many of us still viewed as an approach that had been extensively tried and found wanting in the seventies and the eighties. So long ago that few of us had at that point heard of High Tech High, or Expeditionary Learning, or New Tech Network, or Big Picture schools, or of their school designs, or their approach to pedagogy, or their astonishing evidence of success.

More to the point, it is worth saying two further things. The first is that we never set out in 2008 to introduce PBL into schools or to develop REAL Projects. We set out to find models of schooling and learning that would profoundly engage all students and that could liberate the potential and the achievement of all learners.   Put simply, we believed then (and know now) that all learners can be successful, but we also knew that could never happen within the existing paradigm. We set out to find alternative paradigms.

As that suggests, we also couldn't in 2008 have known (but might have guessed) that there would be significant implications for the design of school, and the learning of teachers, and the role of parents, and the involvement of community. We certainly couldn't have then known that evolving the new models of practice, or supporting the work well, or developing new materials, or finding practitioners eager to make the changes would be only small parts of our challenge.

The real challenge was finding schools and school leaders with what proved to be a unique combination of features – ambition for the work, an evolving vision of how it could be achieved, the courage to make big changes in the face of what feel to be hostile external accountabilities, and the leadership capabilities to fashion and steward and inspire and advocate for the work as it evolved.

In the pogrammes we have supported since 2008 we have partnered with more than 70 schools eager to undertake this work – all of which were up for it and, we believe, have drawn benefit from the experience. Of these, however, we would classify fewer than 50% as being more than marginally (a word chosen carefully) successful, and fewer than 10% as becoming (or on the road to becoming outstandingly successful – potential exemplars for the system.

The main variable has been headteacher leadership.

It is for this reason that we are focusing significantly on leadership here. It is also for this reason that we have chosen a rather unusual structure for the materials. At their heart will be two think-pieces:

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[2] Some great publications exist from that work that can be found here: Musical Futures and Language Futures - two subject-based manifestations of the work have thrived and have their own websites.

- The first is a piece that looks at what lessons we have learned from the relative failure and frustrations of so many of the schools to achieve as much as they set out to achieve.
- The second is a provocation drawn from the leadership perspectives of some of our most successful school leaders. It offers challenges of perhaps a different order.

These materials are supported by video conversations with members of our team and with two of those leaders referenced above.

The Struggle to Lead

Let's be clear, it isn't headteachers who are critical to the design of great projects, or to the leadership of PBL teams, or to the capacity-building of teaching teams, or to igniting student passions and producing exhilarating exhibitions. That is what PBL Leads and their teams of teachers do.

However, what is consistently evident from our work with REAL Projects in UK schools over the last few years is that the active advocacy, stewardship and enablement of the headteacher – and other senior leaders – is critical to success.

That being the case, this first think-piece has arisen from the leadership struggles and learnings in our schools. (It is the first of two. The second one draws complementary but different insights from those sites that have been most successful.) It derives from the experiences and insights of the four Leadership Coaches who have been working in schools across the country for the last two years supporting school leaders to support the work. It represents a distillation of insights from this work in answer to the question:

> **What do we now know that school leaders need do to support REAL Projects implementation in their schools – if they are to avoid the problems many schools and leaders have encountered?**

Four things make a big difference

1. **The leader locates REAL Projects and the work at the centre of the future vision for the school**

   - <u>The leader is eloquent in articulating a future vision to the entire staff and community.</u>

This happens, of course, in multiple ways, but common features tend to be about aspirations for students' success that far transcend historical achievement patterns. Compelling visions tend to have a social justice element – a belief that all students can succeed and that historical approaches to learning and assessment have failed to liberate this potential for all students. The vision is likely to involve progressively re-designing 'school' so that it is more relevant and appropriate to the second decade of the 21st Century. It will embrace a curriculum and pedagogy that can better prepare learners for their lives as citizens, workers and family members in the modern world.

In the most successful schools, this is a vision that is co-constructed with the entire community, so that all staff, students, parents and community members are invited to share the commitment and the sense of optimism and possibility it creates – and can find their ways to contribute. Whilst all this might seem to be stating the obvious, an inspiring and inclusive vision that located REAL Projects for all staff was not something that can be taken for granted.

- ● <u>The leader is steadfast about the future place of the work within the school's curriculum and the wider system – they see the long game; they hold the line.</u>

Working alongside our schools over the last few years, we have seen initial visions for the work buffeted and blown away by the pressures of Ofsted and examinations. The kind of vision described in point one is both a moral imperative and a long-term task. It represents a leadership mission. The school leader is the one who has to hold this ground, to see the long game, to embody the belief.

- ● <u>The leader creates safe space for experimentation and risk – establishes a culture that nurtures the work, that is optimistic and celebratory.</u>

The team developing REAL Projects knows that this work is not without risk. Not only is it new to the school and pedagogically different, but it also involves significant unlearning and re-learning for staff. They need to have confidence that their headteacher is 'holding' the risk on their behalf and that his/her advocacy is both secure and informed. When the pressure is on, whether from parents and community, governors, or external accountability demands, it is the headteacher who has to communicate confidence, authority and stability.

2. The leader is proactive about enablement, problem-solving and empowers the team by actively sponsoring work.

- ● <u>The leader chooses the team wisely and appoints a charismatic, dynamic and optimistic adult learner to lead the work.</u>

The introduction of REAL Projects represents both an expression of belief in a pedagogical model that can transform student engagement and achievement and also a view about how school should be re-designed if it is to be a creative environment for adult learning. When High Tech High says that 'teacher as designer' is one of their four founding design principles, they are saying that designing great pedagogy together is the essence of what teachers as professionals should do. In this way, the set-up phase involves identifying a passionate PBL Lead who can help grow others, and recruiting (not conscripting) an enthusiastic and committed team.

- ● <u>The leader ensures the REAL Projects team receives planning time, timetable prioritization, resources and funding to support the work.</u>

Collaborative time for planning and reflection is not an optional extra, it is a foundational commitment of the work. When the REAL Projects team asks for longer learning units to allow for deep learning, that is not a marginal request – it is core to what is required for success. It also means the leadership team needs to be proactive in finding spaces that allow for collaborative and creative learning and making the timetable enabling, not restricting. While schools are always struggling with finances, it is important that the PBL team receive funding that is at minimum equal to that of

departments within the school and that they have autonomy about it use. They also need resources to bring in external experts to the school to work alongside the students.

- The leader empowers the PBL team and actively sponsors and promotes the work – communicating success, spreading optimism; offering challenge; seeking out opportunities for celebration and endorsement

Such active sponsorship derives both from the leader's belief in the work and from close involvement. Leaders become celebrators and pollinators; affirmers and questioners. Through so doing they both validate the work on the ground and they learn alongside their teachers. Teachers have a right to see that their leaders value the core work of the school and to be affirmed when the head is inspired by what they are doing.

3. The leader mediates and mitigates external accountability pressures and constraints – they offer stewardship and guardianship by regularly engaging with the work.

- The leader develops a strong narrative to work alongside Ofsted to help it understand the work and its place in the school.

Many heads passport pressures from external accountability onto their staff, but this is destructive for REAL Projects. All our evidence shows that Ofsted inspectors can recognize the value of student engagement. They are inspired by the use of real work and authentic tasks. They applaud the incorporation of real-world audience and they value exhibition and authentic assessment. They love student portfolios and the confidence of students in talking about them. (At one school the lead inspector hugged a student after her exhibition presentation!) Peer critique and multiple drafting have brought consistent praise from Ofsted inspectors, as have student-led conferences. In our most successful schools, the leaders fill the REAL Projects team with confidence about their work and celebrate it with external visitors. When students and teachers know that their heads care about and are inspired by the work; when heads model the relational approach with students; when they demonstrate comfort in the devolved learning environments of REAL Projects sessions – it ignites their work and draws yet further discretionary effort.

- The leader visibly and regularly engages with REAL Projects – he/she leads by example

This is a real discriminator. There is no getting away from it that the leaders who most inspire and support their REAL Projects teams are those who engage actively with the work. This can be anything from practical involvement as a team member through to regularly visiting and celebrating project sessions, or being active at exhibition time and with parents in student-led conferences. It is also from such engagement that other leadership functions are informed. By getting close to the work, it is possible to be proactive about enabling, problem-solving and celebrating.

4. The leader is informed and connected to the wider international knowledge-base and models that for the rest of the school

Just as the school is becoming rich in knowledge, tools and materials in support of REAL Projects, connecting with the practices of teachers across both UK schools and internationally, so the school leader should model this by connecting the school with national and international practice and the evidence from research. There is a growing body of practice in successful PBL design and delivery, and there is equally a growing range of school design models and features that are facilitative of engaged and impassioned learning. By connecting the school with advanced practices – and contributing to them – the leader is living out on a larger canvas the values that will help internal learning to thrive.

Not drowning but flying – insights from success

There are many ways to succeed. In fact, one significant truth about highly successful leadership is that it is often idiosyncratic and unconventional. With that in mind, let's be clear at the outset that the ideas contained in this piece are only one take on success, one selection of wisdoms, drawn from a few of our most astonishingly advanced schools.

Put another way, the ideas in this piece are not universal verities. They are, though, drawn from the insights of some leaders from whose practice we should certainly want to learn.

1. **There has to be a genuinely compelling vision that inspires and unites the whole school community around the work**

This is so self-evident that it is embarrassing to lead with it – or at least it should be. However, the truth is that most of our schools have not led with a compelling vision. They have not created a narrative of dissatisfaction with the status quo by confronting the realities of the present provision. They have not awakened a shared sense of possibility by offering insight into how things can be different. They have not placed REAL Projects at the heart of their collective strategy for how things can be progressively transformed for learners and they have not captured all this in a vision of how things will be radically and dramatically different for their school's graduates as a result of their shared endeavours.

Where schools are not drowning but flying, they have done this. There is an energy across the entire building about the sense of collective possibility. There is a pervasive optimism that is rooted in transformative intent. Visible manifestations of their aspirations are evident throughout the building. Everyone is clear about the collective agenda for the next six months – and everyone believes that if they can pull it off together, then they will be six steps closer to their ultimate vision.

This is the vision they all contributed towards and bought into; the vision that ennobles their work; the vision that makes sense of the multiple strands of work and varied professional development activities; the vision that will be refined again together in light of that six month-worth of experience.

*[David Taylor shares in his video](#) how such a vision can be built together through a process of national and international enquiry followed by collective synthesis and collaborative design – and how it can be fuelled by review and through engagement with students.

2. **PBL cannot be an innovation at the margins. You either believe in it or you don't. If you do, then it must be positioned to carry the weight of what the school most aspires to do**

Most of the schools that we work with have implemented PBL in Year 7 for 20-25% of the time, and are seeking to grow it. They believe in it, but want to start small, to develop a key group of staff, to demonstrate its success before moving into Year 8 and beyond. Few have cracked the challenge of how they can incorporate it into Key Stage 4 – but that is three years down the line.

When we met with the visionary, passionate and highly experienced leaders of New Tech Network in the States, they said very simply that they would never work with a school wanting to adopt such an implementation strategy. Their view is that it represents 20% of the curriculum for 20% of the school and therefore is doomed to remain an adjunct to the core business of the school; doomed to be an activity at the margins; doomed not to transform the culture of the school or the belief systems of all the staff; doomed NOT to be the focus of a collective learning journey….

*[Oli's video clip](#) makes this point very effectively.

3. **View the entire implementation process as a leadership learning journey first and foremost, and as an action-enquiry for the whole school second. We learn forward together. How we get there is a sustained professional enquiry.**

We have all become so accustomed to rational, planned change strategies that it feels uncomfortable to be faced with uncertainty. The school effectiveness and school improvement movements of the 80s and 90s made fairly universal the notions of school development plans and performance management strategies and rational planning processes. These presume a relatively stable state world. More recently, a theory and research literature has grown up around organisational learning, action enquiry, adaptive planning, emergence and uncertainty.

The truth is that when seeking innovative and radical alternatives we just don't know how to do it. There are no precedents or blueprints and, if there were, they probably wouldn't work 'here', in our context. One 'not drowning' headteacher, when asked for his school development plan by Ofsted said simply:

> *"We don't actually have one, because we have an enquiry orientation to growth and development. We have a few images of preferred future state and then we form enquiry partnerships to enquire our way towards them."*

Another said:

"We don't do a school development plan. You can't plan the ideas that you're going to have tomorrow, can you? Let's be honest, it's not a bad idea to get some ideas down on paper every now and again, but you wouldn't want to have to stick to them, would you?"

This is not a glib dismissal of custom and practice. It is an expression of a profound alternative paradigm, one which sees all adults (and students) as professional enquirers; which unites them around discovery learning and experimentation; which shatters traditional notions of 'rightness' or 'authority' being associated with position, and which places leaders in the roles of translator, synthesiser, question-setter, mobiliser, designer and, most profound of all, fellow journeyman and learner.

*[Oli's video](#) contains a powerful expression of this approach at School 21.

*[David Taylor's](#) description of the journey since 2006 at Stanley Park is the description of an evolutionary learning journey.

4. The supporting organisational features and the enabling conditions are never finished; they have to flex in response to the learning
One of the most fascinating and frustrating features of the schools that we have worked with is the belief that virtually everything operates on an annual cycle; that the timetable, curriculum, staffing, rooming and budgeting processes, for example, occur once and then they are ossified until the next year. That is a mind-set, not a reality.

At School 21 (*[as Oli says in his presentation](#)) there have been multiple iterations of the curriculum and the staffing, the timetable and the rooming, as their work has evolved. This is rare, but not unique. In Kunskapsskolan schools their timetable is re-created every six weeks. In Big Picture schools there is no 'timetable' – learning arrangements are designed as the work and the passions of students evolve and emerge. It is a mind-set issue.

Put more pragmatically, the organisational arrangements of a school, in the cosmic sense, should be in service of the school's big picture vision. At a more particular level, they should be capable of evolution and flex to meet the emergent learning from the staff's enquiry into the work and its changing needs.

If leaders can't do that, then they are a part of the problem and not an enabler of the solution. Our not drowning leaders see this responsiveness and flex as an integral part of their stewardship and creative leadership.

5. There need to be some design principles that bring coherence and rigour to the work and which make potentially manifest the application of the vision
This could have been the first point made, because it is such a ubiquitous finding both from our own 'flying' schools and from our enquiries around the world. In a way it goes without saying that if you are aspiring to redesign the model of school to some

extent, then you need to have some design principles around which the collective enquiry and leadership can coalesce.

These design principles serve a unifying purpose. They make it clear what the school stands for. They translate the vision into practical strands of activity. They create an aspirational and energising point of reciprocal and peer accountability. They enshrine our values. When Larry Rosenstock in his Edutopia video says that one of High Tech High's four design principles is no student tracking (no grouping by perceived notions of 'ability') he is enshrining the school's profound belief that all students can succeed in learning regardless of socio-economic circumstance, or experience, or prior learning histories. He is also speaking to his teachers' passions.

As a part of an international leadership programme, the Global Education Leadership Partnership, the IU published a book on system transformation for education systems[3]. The relevance here is the opportunity it offers to illustrate how design principles can become an architecture around which systems (and schools) can coalesce to design action enquiries, innovate, create prototypes, structure professional learning, create joint work groups, exchange codified materials, evaluate pogress – and get excited together about the manifestations of their mission.[4]

At the school level, the school leader is the guardian and custodian of these design principles.

SYSTEM RE-DESIGN: SIX PRINCIPLES

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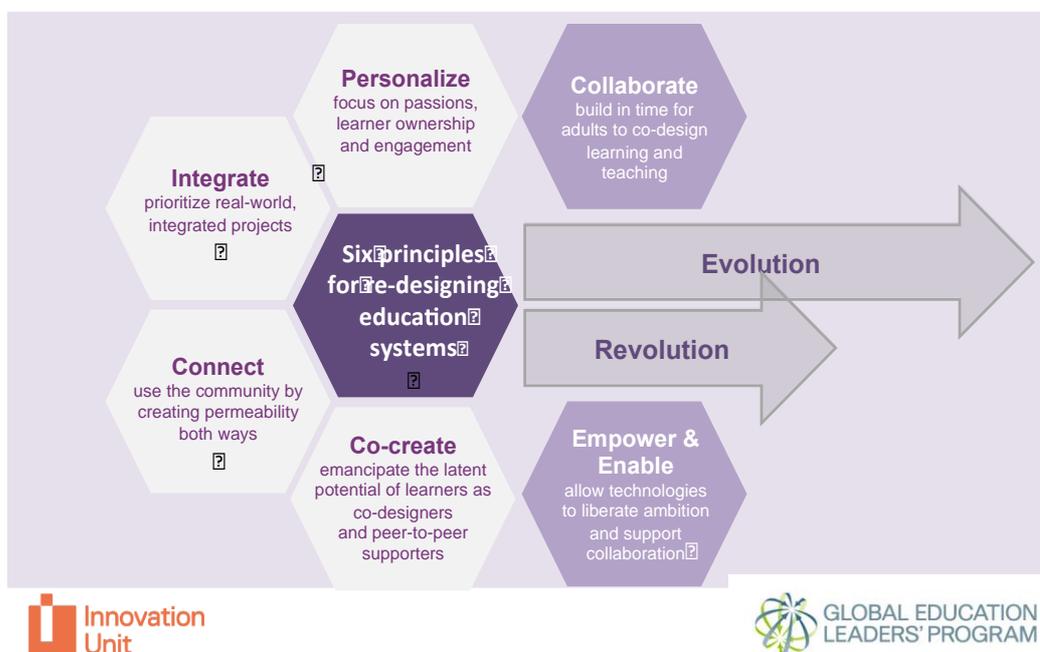
[3] *Redesigning Education: Shaping Learning Systems Around the Globe,* Innovation Unit, 2013.
[4] In the model, there are four core 'design principles' supported by two 'enabling principles' related to teacher collaboration/learning and the enabling utilization of technology.

6. PBL requires a flatter structure within which peer relationships are key – peer support, peer critique, peer accountability

It is strange that we call teaching a profession and yet we structure it into hierarchical tiers. They may be appropriate to some of the management functions of school, but they get in the way of collaborative work norms. *This is a point that is well made by [Oli in his presentation](). As he says, the implementation and evolution of REAL Projects requires lateral not vertical relationships. They are the norms of shared responsibility, mutual learning, collaboration, peer support and critique and coaching, collective accountability – much the same as the learning culture norms we want within our classrooms for REAL Projects.

Of course, School 21 is a relatively new Free School, which means that they do not have decades of historical 'positioning' to dismantle or practices to unlearn. And it is easy to make that an excuse. However, there are schools within our programme where school leaders have been able to create twin 'structures' within their schools – functions and practices where position, role, responsibility and accountability reside, alongside fields of operation where we are not our position. In these arrangements, school leaders are junior members of REAL Projects teams (the ones with the most unlearning to do), are co-enquirers and roles and responsibilities are flexible, non-positional and more like the 'bobbing cork' leadership we experience in sports teams.

Leaders who aren't drowning are able to foster and broker such twin cultures and to model them through their own behaviours. *David Taylor talks of relationships being key in [his presentation](). That works for staff relationships as well as those with students.

7. The school leader has to be steadfast about the outcomes but open up the process to all, because the leader doesn't have all the answers.

This is a great way (*taken from [Oli's video]()) of capturing many of the previous points in an insight that embraces the conditions for action enquiry, the guiding rigour of the design principles, the openness of the necessary cultural conditions and the place of the 'flying leader' in holding everyone (including him or herself) to account for vision and outcomes whilst removing the positional authority about 'answers' that so many schools assume in their structures.

As one leader within the programme said:

> *'I had to be teaching for ten years before I was allowed to have a good idea. I don't want our school to be like that. If we are going to re-invent schooling and learning and transform achievement, we just can't afford to do that. We need everyone's creativity and passion.'*

8. Teaching alone is not an option. Team teaching and collaborative design, planning and reflection are essential

The works of Donald Schon – for example, the idea of reflective practice and 'the reflective practitioner' – became widely incorporated into teacher preparation and

development programmes. It makes sense, of course, because it is at the heart of sustained adult learning. However, the design of schools has never really facilitated reflection. For many teachers, preparing lessons late at night, teaching in isolation, attending staff meetings at the end of the day driven by 'agendas' filled with topics related to administration and accountability concerns, the conditions for reflection are a long way from their working reality.

An even more pervasive barrier arises from the practice norms that we have developed, where teachers teach in 'classrooms' isolated from their peers. The ideal form of professional reflection would have three components:

- Reflection **for** practice
- Reflection **in** practice
- Reflection **on** practice

What this requires is opportunity for collaborative design of pedagogy (reflection **for**), a shared teaching context and experience (reflection **in**) and sustained peer engagement about past practice as a part of the design of future learning (reflection **on**).

In his talk and the photographs he shows, *David Taylor sets out his commitment to this. Stanley Park's Studios and break-out spaces for 70 students, 3 teachers and other adult supports is an ideal environment – and the extended learning units (up to half-days) offer a great opportunity to support it. Similarly *Oli's presentation tackles this issue head on. They are two leaders matching their vision for the work with enabling operational conditions.