

Big Leadership Adventure - pilot evaluation and impact report

Big Education

Introduction and context - why a 'Big Leadership Adventure?'

Big Education is a Multi Academy Trust which runs a number of programmes and projects for schools and leaders offering a more expansive educational experience. Big Education believes the volatile, uncertain, changing and ambiguous (VUCA) conditions within society mean schools need a generation of school leaders with a broader set of skills and mindsets. This includes the capacity to develop an empowering organisational culture and a broader and more expansive educational offer, and an understanding of how to become more reflective, relational, open and dialogic.

Big Education launched the Big Leadership Adventure (BLA) programme in 2019. This two year programme develops in senior education leaders the mindsets and skillsets to innovate with rigour. The programme encompasses leadership of the Head (challenging the status quo, generating new ideas, being strategic), the Heart (finding your authentic self, building powerful teams, inspiring and galvanising others) and the Hand (making the biggest difference, designing great practices, solving thorny problems). The BLA is a rich mix of workshops, residentials, webinars, visits to and from forward-thinking organisations, peer coaching and on the job projects. Now reaching over 150 leaders across England, the work is continually evolving and growing.

The programme makes some very specific language choices - not least the name: Big Leadership Adventure. This was an active choice to demonstrate the emphasis on innovation and changemaking. Those joining the programme are called 'leaders' rather than 'participants', in an attempt to avoid disempowering leaders. This emphasis on leadership has implications for programme design including an expectation of active participation and leadership within the programme itself.

Big Education has prioritised building capacity for research and evaluation of impact and is committed to using the insights and experiences of this programme to engage meaningfully in the debate around the future of leadership development across the sector.

This report is an executive summary of the key findings from the formative evaluation of the BLA pilot cohort, who completed the programme in Summer 2021. The purpose of this evaluation was to;

- Evaluate the extent to which the programme design drew on the evidence base around effective professional development and learning,
- Understand the effectiveness of programme design and delivery in order to support development and ongoing improvement, and
- Contribute to the evidence base, debate and dialogue around leadership development within education.

Methodology

There were two distinct elements to this work.

1. Programme element analysis: CUREE carried out an analysis of the programme to consider the extent to which the programme draws on the best available evidence (evidence informed design elements).

CUREE analysed the extent to which BLA programme design is aligned with and demonstrates best practices as identified in Cordingley et al.'s [Developing Great Leadership of CPDL evidence review](#). (2020).

2. Impact evaluation: Big Education worked with CUREE to develop a formative evaluation process and impact analysis for the BLA. Through the development of three time snapshots of the programme, Big Education has used naturally occurring evidence alongside a series of programme-specific tools to analyse the distance travelled of the cohort as a whole throughout their two year journey on the programme.

This executive summary provides the key insights from the evidence gathered in three reports taken at three different times ([Time 1](#), [Time 2](#) and [Time 3](#)).

This analysis draws on core data from BLA leaders:

- **Stump speeches:** Each candidate applying to the BLA was asked to prepare and deliver a Stump Speech, outlining what they believe the purpose of education is. This element of the selection day aimed to start the process of deepening, refining and telling the story of one's own philosophy. The Stump Speeches were designed with the intention of revisiting throughout the programme, as part of the Philosophy of Education module. At our final BLA workshop, leaders were asked to deliver their updated Stump Speech to their peers, using their learning and input from year two of the programme.
- **Innovation project proposals:** The year one Innovation Project has been designed to enable the leaders to trial using Design Thinking with a real life problem or area for innovation in their school or organisation. Each leader was asked to put forward an area for innovation, by completing a proposal proforma in September 2019. Through this process, leaders were challenged to think about whether this area for innovation was a new possibility (i.e. doing things differently and being on the journey to delivering 'a Big Education') and whether they had considered the contextual and political navigation.
- **7 Coaching Tools evaluation:** All leaders attended a two day 7 Tools residential in August 2019 and completed an online debriefing which provides a useful insight into their immediate responses and starting points for future growth at the conclusion of the intense introduction.
- **April 2020 check-in survey;** a survey sent to leaders during the early stages of the pandemic, to understand circumstances and support required.
- **Sept 2020 check-in survey;** a set of questions to encourage leaders to reflect on their leadership during this time, and for us to understand their own self-assessment of this.

- **BLA Learning Report:** At the end of the BLA, leaders were asked to reflect on two areas; 1) A project they had worked on (which could be their innovation project or something different), in which they felt they had applied BLA learning. 2) How they had developed their wider teams and organisations based on what they had learnt on the BLA.

Results

This results section summarises evidence in relation to both evidence informed design elements, and distance travelled for leaders on the programme.

1. Programme element analysis: evidence informed design elements

CUREE analysed the extent to which BLA programme design is aligned with and demonstrates best practices as identified in Cordingley et al.'s [Developing Great Leadership of CPDL evidence review](#). (2020). This analysis established that BLA programme design takes account of the following evidence informed design principles;

- Having a learning rather than a performance focus;
- Ensuring leaders have access to examples of the content they are exploring in a range of contexts and encouraging and supporting extensive networking to enable them to contextualise their own school leadership;
- Providing access to tools and rubrics that they can use to analyse and enhance their current stage of development and that of their school;
- Incorporating specialist contributions (including expertise in professional development) and integrating those with leaders' own deep knowledge about pupils and community;
- Facilitators modelling openness to learning and ensuring the leaders understand why this is important;
- Designing structures and systems to help manage the cognitive, practical & emotional demands that professional development content and systems make on teachers:
 - Creating time to enable the leaders to incorporate new learning into their practice;
 - Balancing theory against content and pedagogy;
 - Rooting collaboration and peer support in experiments with new approaches;
- Positioning professional development as focused on ensuring excellence in pupil achievement and wellbeing and aligning all activities with that goal;
- Emphasising professional growth as well as the development of knowledge and skills;
- An emphasis on building on deep understanding of:
 - Professional identities practices and motivations;
 - Approaches to learning;
 - Existing knowledge and skills and beliefs;

In summary, the CUREE analysis concluded that there is considerable evidence that BLA aligns closely with evidence based approaches to leadership development and learning.

2. Impact evaluation: distance travelled for leaders on the programme

The following three enquiry questions emerged from the Time 1 initial data collection, and shaped the ongoing impact evaluation:

1. To what extent does BLA provoke leaders to reflect on their own philosophy of education and to understand how it could shape their actions? (Head)
2. To what extent does BLA develop leaders' ability to support, develop and empower others around them? (Heart)
3. To what extent does BLA support leaders to innovate with rigour, and create cultures of innovation in their own contexts? (Hand)

Leadership of the Head: To what extent does BLA provoke leaders to reflect on their own philosophy of education and to understand how it could shape their actions?

The BLA provides leaders with tools and frameworks to deeply explore their personal sense of mission and purpose. This requires leaders to think deeply about what education, school and learning are for, drawing on some of the different traditions of educational philosophy. Through a Philosophy of Education module, alongside working on a Stump Speech on the purpose of education, leaders are provoked to reflect on their own philosophy and understand how it could shape their actions.

The Big Education team used a classification system that explored the degree of 'depth' with which the leaders Stump Speeches addressed the four aspects of the brief, as detailed in Table 3 below, and used a comparative judgement text analysis approach to classify all speeches as they developed from programme start to end:

- Little or no depth - descriptive, not always relevant, no sense of narrative
- Some depth - responsive, relevant and somewhat developed, some sense of narrative
- Depth - analytic and reflective, highly relevant and developed, strong narrative linked to philosophy

Table 1 compares the analysis from Time 1 to Time 3.

Table 1: Analysis of 'depth' in Stump Speeches against four aspects of the brief for Time 1 and Time 3

Perceived purpose of school	Extent to which a Big Education is enacted in current system	Vision for alternative future	Personal story & motivation
Time 1			
Depth = 7 Some depth = 5 No depth = 2	Depth = 2 Some depth = 4 No depth = 7	Depth = 4 Some depth = 5 No depth = 5	Depth = 1 Some depth = 6 No depth = 7
Time 3			
Depth = 9 Some depth = 2 No depth = 0	Depth = 10 Some depth = 1 No depth = 0	Depth = 10 Some depth = 2 No depth = 0	Depth = 7 Some depth = 4 No depth = 0

This analysis shows considerable improvement across all four aspects from Time 1 to Time 3.

Evidence from the end of programme BLA Learning Report also revealed leader engagement with thinking about the purpose of education:

- *"The project has drawn on my developing reflections on the purpose of education, how working together as a community as a group of schools is so much more beneficial than working in individual silos. It has made me reflect on the power of collaboration both amongst schools, staff and children."*
- *"(There is) not a 'one size fits all' approach, equality, student agency/skills to create lifelong learners,students would benefit from clear academic and well being goals and develop skills of self regulation and responsibility"*
- *"I believe that assessing children on academics marginalises many. It focuses on one one aspect of a child, a person rather than seeing them as a whole. It puts the academic at the core of what a person's achievements are, which doesn't equip them for life."*

The evidence suggests that BLA has played an important role in developing leaders' ability to reflect on their own philosophy of education and to understand how it could shape their actions.

Leadership of the Heart: To what extent does BLA develop leaders' ability to support, develop and empower others around them?

Big Education believes that successful leaders are able to reflect deeply on their own leadership practices and to consider how their own behaviours might affect those around them. Psychological safety should be at the core of any school or organisation. Without this, it is almost impossible to foster a culture of innovation. If fostered well and by everybody, this creates a culture of inclusivity, openness and people feeling they can 'bring their true self to work'¹.

One module on the programme which specifically focuses on developing leaders' ability to support their teams, is the Year One Building Powerful Teams module.

In September 2020, when asked to reflect on their leadership during the pandemic and whether anything had changed, several referenced learning on how to build a high functioning team:

- *"I also feel I have moved further up the 'delegation' ladder and am working with my line managers on the leadership and development of their own areas. One turning point in my thinking has been realising that I can't be all over the detail of absolutely everything in my vision, but I can still coach and support others who do need to be all over a specific area of detail."*
- *"Having to work virtually, fast paced at times, and in a period that many staff found unsettling, provided me with an opportunity to develop how I build relationships. I spent more time connecting with people, involving them and communicating with them than I had done before. I felt the benefits of this during lockdown and see the impact of it even more so now that we have returned to a full school – staff have more trust, are more supportive of initiatives and more willing to jump in, and there is a tangible positive development in people's attitude and the school's culture that I can build upon."*

At programme end, the leaders were asked to reflect on two areas in their final BLA learning report:

- A project they had worked on (which could be their innovation project or something different), in which they felt they had applied learning from BLA;
- How they had developed their wider teams and organisations using learning from BLA.

The majority of respondents referenced the usefulness of learning from the session on building high functioning teams:

- *"do some work ourselves on how we lead and that we needed to think really clearly about what we stand for..it opened up a discussion about our leadership meetings and how we work across the school - the kinds of relationships we want to build but don't"*

The BLA also introduces leaders to a toolkit known as the 7 Tools (renamed 'Big 8' for current BLA cohorts), which supports leaders to develop and then embody empowering and reflective approaches and to enable their teams to do the same. Alongside providing training in the 7 Tools at the start of

¹ Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct, Amy C. Edmondson and Zhike Lei (2014)

the programme, the toolkit is continuously referenced, modeled and practiced throughout the programme for example, by providing frequent, intentional spaces for feedback between peers on the programme. This practice also aims to provide a common language and understanding to support the development of others in leaders' own schools, ultimately enabling culture change across the school.

A significant proportion of the leaders reported that the 7 Tools training workshop content was largely applicable to their role – 13 out of 23 respondents completing the debriefing thought the content was applicable to a 'great' extent, and of those all but one thought it was applicable to a 'very' great extent. Observations offered by the leaders also reinforce this:

- *"(This will be useful because I can use these) practical tools to work through real life issues with colleagues"*
- *"I have always wanted to have others with me when bringing about the mission. I've felt I've had to do a lot of talking/setting agenda - maybe I don't (have to)?"*
- *"(I have learnt) how to bring others along (and to) make feedback more successful."*
- *"I feel the need to now develop others more."*

The 7 Tools were also spoken of positively in the April 2020 checkin survey, with 7 of the 10 inferring that they were using the tools in everyday conversations;

- *"Coaching - has proved helpful when talking to colleagues in my current setting."*
- *"The 7 Leadership tools - useful with staff and students who are either finding this time demanding or an opportunity"*
- *"7 tools of coaching - used frequently with one-to-one google hangouts"*

The terms used most commonly to describe leaders' experiences of the 7 Tools workshop were: 'thought-provoking', 'reflective', 'engaging', and 'challenging'. 14 out of 23 leaders said that the most exciting or stimulating part of the experience for them was in "connecting" or 'meeting' the other members of the cohort:

- *"Meeting other leaders struggling with the same things"*
- *"The group dynamic - starting this journey together"*
- *"Connecting with so many great people who want to change and improve education"*
- *"Meeting new people who are open to thinking big"*

The evidence gives a strongly encouraging picture of the effectiveness of the approaches within BLA in developing leaders' ability to support, develop and empower others around them.

Leadership of the Hand: To what extent does the BLA support leaders to innovate with rigour, and create cultures of innovation in their own contexts?

As education leaders, the instinct is often to jump from problem to solution based on what we already know. Education is fast paced, so this often seems like the quickest and right way to 'fix things'. This means we get stuck in a cycle of rehearsing the same type of solutions for the same type of

problems. To create change that really makes a difference, a mindset shift is needed. The BLA trains leaders in Design Thinking, as an approach to enabling leaders to innovate with rigour. Leaders implement Design Thinking by undertaking an Innovation Project in groups, focused on answering some element of the question ‘What constitutes a Big Education?’

At the April 2020 checkin survey, several responses spontaneously referenced the value of horizon scanning (a Design Thinking tool):

- *“Horizon scanning - searching out best practice, including international examples.”*
- *“Horizon scanning and taking time to develop solutions - eg what remote learning looks like. We had to react quickly to get the chn learning initially - now have taken some time to collect feedback/reflections from all stakeholders to improve our offer. ”*

Interestingly, at this high–pressured time (mid COVID lockdown), several responses reflected on the need to innovate current practice in order to address the issues they were facing in school;

- *“My ‘change’ focus has slightly gone into overdrive as I’m very interested in having the ideas and plans for what should happen when schools return.”*
- *“Being away from school has encouraged me to frame problems in different ways.”*

Throughout the lockdown period, we placed a heavy emphasis on using Design Thinking as a way to approach new challenges. In September 2020, almost one third of the leaders said that they had used Design Thinking to support their leadership during this time;

- *“I have really enjoyed using the design thinking tools with a team to develop a new approach to observation and feedback in our school. Being able to use these tools has enabled me to lead the process in a more strategic and structured way meaning that the team are fully engaged in the process. The process of developing a new approach has been more rigorous and I feel it has led to a stronger outcome.”*

In the final BLA Learning report, the majority of respondents provided evidence of embedding Design Thinking approaches in their ways of working, for example:

- a) Considering end users:
 - *“The school based part of our project involved a group of five in school who met with the group of children weekly to look at the problem they wanted to solve. The children will by the end of term have created a stop motion animation of the problem and the aim is to have a meeting set up for September with a councillor who will be able to enact change. We have been tracking their progress through a carefully designed questionnaire that X designed”*
- b) Horizon scanning:
 - *“We all took part in horizon scanning our own schools through the use of surveys and collecting feedback from each member about what each school had done and the perceptions on the success of each interaction with parents....This enabled us to get a deeper understanding of the complexities of the parent home relationship, as well as views from parents and staff, which allowed us to come to the conclusion there would not be a simple one size fits all approach to this problem.”*
- c) Prototyping and refining:

- *“The digital workshops were designed by the teachers and she tested and refined it with her children before it went live with everyone.”*

Respondents also mentioned using their innovation project as a tool to influence change at system level:

- *“I would like to share this project across the trust as an example of enriching a curriculum and for other schools to take on this approach.”*

The evidence indicates that BLA learning on design thinking did support leaders to innovate with rigour, and to create cultures of innovation in their own contexts.

Next steps for the Big Leadership Adventure

Big Education has invested in evaluating impact from the outset. Insights and learning from the programme element analysis and impact evaluation have iteratively informed programme design in the following ways;

- Improved the Design Thinking input: Working with sector leading practitioners, we have embedded a more structured and rigorous approach to the teaching and implementation of the Design Thinking process. We have moved to having an individual rather than a group innovation project for ease, but retained group support and shared reflection and thinking.
- Increased the focus on diversity, equity and inclusion in the programme, including explicitly linking this into the Design Thinking training: a key part of client centered or user centred design is about listening to all voices and deeply understanding the issues from multiple perspectives as a foundation for making change.
- Deepened the integration of Design Thinking with the Big 8 has become increasingly clear that the Big 8 is a critical underpinning of any successful approach to innovation and change. We have worked to explicitly integrate the Big 8 and Design Thinking, alongside insights from psychology around Adult Ego Development, and approaches to developing mindsets around openness to change and innovation.
- Deepened our approach to developing a changemaking mindset by working extensively with Citizens UK to embed community organising methodology: this ‘bottom up’ approach to change is congruent with our goal as an organisation to empower communities to change.
- Worked with a leadership development psychologist to unpack and exemplify the research underpinning the Big 8. Through this work we have:
 - Developed a comprehensive research paper which is integrated into the programme
 - Developed programme content further to embed new and relevant research findings
 - Developed the Big 8 as a tool to measure the confidence and competence of individuals in all eight aspects and the impact this is having on their wider organisations.

- Added Theory (the use of research and theoretical models to support learning and development) as an additional strand to the 7 Tools (hence the name change to the Big 8).

Based on the impact evaluation, further possible considerations for BLA design are

- To revise the Design Thinking module so that it better supports the practical implementation of Innovation Projects and school leaders' own school improvement work;
- To explore possibilities for further integration of elements of the programme so that deep connections are fully realised and support maximum development for leaders;
- To continue to develop our impact evaluation capacity and deepen our understanding of certain elements of the programme, especially impact on students;
- To consider scale and variations of the programme to enable access for more leaders - continue to test alternative approaches (e.g. pilots in specific regions and contexts) to deepen understanding of the most impactful, sustainable and cost-effective approaches.
- An integration of how leaders can understand and manage complexity - Adult Ego Development psychological theory (Loevinger) within the Design Thinking module

Key learning and conclusions

There are many encouraging findings from the programme element analysis and impact evaluation and the programme does seem to be effective in developing a different type of leadership within the sector.

- In light of the volatile, uncertain, changing and ambiguous (VUCA) context in which school leaders now work, leaders need to be adaptable and to both respond to and strategically lead change. These mindsets and skillsets can be developed through evidence informed approaches and the BLA provides a model for doing so, from which lessons can be drawn for design and delivery of leadership development for senior school leaders.
- The impact evaluation shows that a holistic and integrated approach which combines the development of reflective practice, implementation science, self awareness and the skillful leadership of people impacts positively on leadership practices. These elements need to be in balance and leaders need support to connect and apply learnings across these domains.
- The disruption caused by COVID has highlighted the need for leaders to be adaptable and creative.
- The programme has been effective in developing leaders' views on the purpose of education, based on a thorough understanding of the history and main traditions of Philosophy of Education. Big Education believes this is critical in developing leaders who can develop a rigorous foundation for their communities.

- It is important to ensure that innovation is rigorous, and does not simply involve generating new ideas. Innovation requires clarity of purpose, a clear rationale and a psychologically safe culture. Evidence from the impact evaluation suggests that disciplined, expert teaching of Design Thinking is needed alongside scaffolded implementation practice. Any successful innovation must also consider how best to create a culture where many voices are heard and it is safe to express your truth and try new practices.
- Insights from Adult-Ego Development psychological theory will be an important programme addition as they will support the development of a mindset to deal with 'wicked' problems. The approaches developed on BLA support this approach to problem solving through developing a greater sense of openness to new thinking, curiosity and determination to innovate and creating the psychological safety to try new things, make mistakes and gain new insights about oneself.
- Big Education believes that sustainable and profound change requires 'bottom up' working, to engage and empower the communities schools serve. Community organising methodologies are a powerful way to achieve this goal.