

Leadership in Action Report – Laidlaw Research Scholarship

Working with CRANE (Children at Risk Action Network), Uganda



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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

For my Laidlaw Leadership in Action project this summer, I spent a month in Uganda working with CRANE (Children at Risk Action Network), a Kampala-based NGO whose mission is to *keep children safe*. CRANE operates as a network connecting hundreds of partner institutions, including churches, schools, and charities, working collaboratively to improve education quality, safeguarding, and child protection standards across Uganda.

My placement was divided between the CRANE office in Kampala and one of their network schools, House of Joy Primary School, in Kasala. Kasala is a rural community approximately two hours' drive from the capital. The school sits on roughly twelve acres of land, surrounded by small farms and homesteads, and has capacity for more than 300 pupils. However, it currently operates below capacity, largely due to the economic challenges faced by families. As with most schools in Uganda, House of Joy is fee-based: day pupils pay around £60 per term, although bursaries and partial scholarships are provided for vulnerable children.

My first two weeks were spent before the school term began, focusing on maintenance and development work at the site, running safeguarding training sessions for CRANE member organisations, and assisting with a children's day event at the Kampala office. During the latter two weeks, once the school term had begun, I taught at House of Joy, leading classes in English, Maths, Reading, and PE, as well as running extracurricular sessions in debating and animal care with the school's rabbits.

The placement gave me invaluable insight into the complexities of education in a low-resource setting, challenged my assumptions about teaching and leadership, and forced me to adapt rapidly to unfamiliar cultural, logistical, and ethical environments.

Challenges and Reflections

1. Resource limitations and living conditions

From the outset, I faced a series of practical challenges. The village of Kasala, while welcoming and peaceful, has extremely limited infrastructure. Power cuts were frequent, sometimes lasting whole days or nights. There was no hot water, and the accommodation's water supply was pumped direct into a small storage tank. Transport options were scarce, and access to medical or emergency facilities was minimal.

While initially frustrating, these conditions forced me to adopt a mindset of adaptability and gratitude. Small daily inconveniences became opportunities to practice resilience, whether that meant revising lesson plans by battery light during a power cut or finding

ways to engage pupils without printed materials. It also prompted reflection on privilege and sustainability: many of the constraints I experienced temporarily were permanent realities for the local teachers and students.

Learning to operate effectively within these constraints was a valuable leadership exercise. It reminded me that resourcefulness in finding creative solutions with limited inputs is a hallmark of effective leadership in global development contexts.

2. Teacher education and learning quality

One of the most striking challenges was the low level of teacher education. In Uganda, primary school teachers typically require only O-Level qualifications (the equivalent of GCSEs) and a teaching certificate. Given that under 20% of Ugandans complete secondary school, many teachers have a modest academic foundation. Furthermore, teaching is not considered a prestigious career: it is often seen as a fallback for those who performed poorly in exams and were unable to pursue prestigious professions such as law, medicine, or engineering. This context has real implications for educational quality. Teachers are often underpaid, undertrained, and undermotivated. In many cases, lesson content is memorised from textbooks rather than deeply understood by the pupils. When I observed early lessons, I noticed a heavy reliance on rote learning and repetition, with very little space for creativity, questioning, or discussion.

As a result, many children leave primary school with large learning gaps. Studies suggest the average Ugandan child misses the equivalent of two years of education during their seven years of primary schooling, due to absenteeism, closures, and teacher absence. Confronted with this reality, I had to rethink what “impact” meant in my role. I could not overhaul the entire education system, but I could work *with* the teachers to model alternative methods: introducing question-based learning, pair work, and storytelling exercises, that encouraged engagement and critical thinking.

This experience sharpened my understanding of systems leadership: meaningful change often starts with small, replicable practices that shift culture over time, rather than grand reforms.

3. Learning Culture and discipline

Another major challenge was the dominant learning culture. Across most Ugandan schools, teaching is highly hierarchical. Teachers lecture from the blackboard; pupils copy and recite in unison. This model discourages individuality and hides variation in understanding. Children quickly learn that “being wrong” carries social and sometimes physical consequences. Corporal punishment, although officially banned, remains

common. In conversations with local parents and those working with other organisation, it was clear that for many hitting was still seen as a necessary discipline tool.

Introducing interactive or student-led learning therefore required careful cultural sensitivity. During one lesson, when I asked pupils to work in pairs to create short English dialogues, many froze up, terrified of giving the “wrong” answer. Rather than confronting the system head-on, I sought to model a different approach subtly. I praised effort and creativity rather than correctness, introduced peer feedback circles, and encouraged teachers to experiment with group questioning. Over time, some teachers began to mirror these methods, commenting that they noticed increased engagement from quieter pupils.

This process taught me that leadership through influence (by example, empathy, and persuasion) is often more effective than direct instruction. Changing deep-seated practices requires trust and relational understanding, not imposition.

4. Language barriers

Although English is Uganda’s official language of instruction, many rural pupils (and some teachers) have limited proficiency. Most children grow up speaking Luganda or another familial language, and transition to English only upon starting school. This made teaching abstract concepts (particularly in maths) challenging.

I quickly realised that effective communication depended not just on simplifying language, but on reading non-verbal cues and building rapport. I relied heavily on gestures, drawings, and peer translation. It was humbling to experience communication from the opposite perspective, to be the one misunderstood or struggling to connect linguistically.

This reinforced key Laidlaw leadership values, curiosity and humility. Instead of assuming my way of communicating was superior, I learned to listen more attentively and adapt my style. This was great to see how the Laidlaw programme linked closely with my own real experiences on the LiA project.

Leadership and skill development

The Laidlaw Scholars Programme emphasises developing six key leadership traits: ambition, bravery, curiosity, determination, goodness, and extraordinariness. My time in Uganda gave me tangible opportunities to practice each.

Ambition and Vision

Despite the constraints, I maintained a clear vision of my goal: to enhance the quality of learning and teaching at House of Joy. I recognised that change would be incremental, but ambition meant *believing* that even small improvements could ripple outward. I shared this vision with the headteacher, suggesting strategies for community outreach to attract new students, such as open days and parent engagement sessions.

Bravery

Living and working in a new cultural context demanded both physical and moral courage. Whether navigating long journeys on unreliable transport, approaching corporal punishment sensitively, or running training sessions for adults as a young visitor, I had to step beyond my comfort zone daily. Bravery meant acting with integrity even when uncertain of the outcome.

Curiosity

Curiosity was vital in understanding local culture and perspectives. I spent evenings speaking with teachers about their experiences, learning about Uganda's education policies, and visiting nearby homes to understand the socioeconomic realities that shaped school attendance. This openness not only improved my cultural awareness but also deepened my empathy and effectiveness.

Determination

Some days were difficult, whether in tricky responses to teaching, communication breakdowns, or feelings of isolation. Determination kept me grounded in purpose. I learned that perseverance is not about ignoring frustration but channelling it productively.

Goodness

Ethical leadership looks like acting with compassion, fairness, and respect, and this was central to this project. "Goodness" in leadership means aligning decisions with values, not just outcomes. In practice, this meant respecting cultural norms while gently promoting safeguarding and inclusion; being transparent about my role and limitations; and prioritising relationships over results.

Extraordinariness

What made this experience extraordinary was its depth of learning. It stretched me intellectually, emotionally, and ethically. I left not as an expert, but as a more self-aware leader - one who understands that transformation begins with listening and partnership.

Ethical considerations

Working in an international development setting brings complex ethical questions.

1. Cultural sensitivity

As a visitor from the Global North, it was vital to avoid a “saviour” mentality. I was conscious that I was entering an existing community with its own expertise, resilience, and challenges. My role was to contribute *alongside*, not *above*, local teachers. I frequently sought feedback from the headteacher and staff to ensure my activities aligned with their goals.

2. Photography and representation

Another ethical consideration was the use of photographs. It is common for volunteers to take and share photos of children, but this raises questions of consent and dignity. I ensured that any photos taken were either group shots with permission from teachers or images focused on facilities rather than individual children.

3. Safeguarding and child protection

Through CRANE’s training sessions, I deepened my understanding of child safeguarding in low-resource contexts. This included identifying abuse, responding appropriately, and supporting children’s wellbeing. The organisation’s holistic approach of combining education with psychosocial support underscored the interconnectedness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) and SDG 4 (Quality Education).

Collaboration and team dynamics

Strong collaboration was essential throughout the project.

At CRANE's Kampala office, I worked with a diverse team of Ugandan staff, British volunteers, and local partner representatives. Each brought distinct perspectives. The biggest challenge was communication style. In Ugandan professional culture, hierarchy and deference are emphasised. Teachers and staff were sometimes reluctant to voice disagreement or criticism openly.

To foster openness, I prioritised active listening and positive reinforcement, inviting feedback in private conversations rather than group settings. Gradually, trust developed. At the school, collaboration extended to pupils. Running group activities like debating or team sports required coordination, patience, and flexibility.

Linking to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

My Leadership in Action project directly contributed to two of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals:

SDG 4 – Quality Education

Through teaching, mentoring, and promoting participatory learning, my work supported SDG 4's objective of ensuring inclusive and equitable education. The focus on improving learning culture (encouraging curiosity, reducing fear of mistakes, and fostering teacher development) aligns with target 4.1 (quality primary education for all) and 4.c (increasing the supply of qualified teachers).

SDG 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing

By engaging in safeguarding and anti-corporal punishment initiatives, the project also contributed to SDG 3. Emotional wellbeing and physical safety are prerequisites for learning. Through training and discussions with teachers, I helped highlight alternative discipline methods and promote a culture of respect and care.

In practice, these SDGs are deeply intertwined: a child who feels safe learns better; an educated community better protects its children.

Personal growth and key takeaways

This month was transformative on multiple levels.

1. Understanding leadership as service

Before Uganda, I think I often tended to see leadership largely in terms of *initiative* - taking charge, driving change. The experience reshaped that definition. I now see leadership as *service*: enabling others to grow, empowering local ownership, and leading from within rather than from above.

2. Appreciating contextual intelligence

I learned that effective leadership requires contextual intelligence - the ability to read a situation, culture, and power dynamic before acting. What works in one setting may backfire in another. In Kasala, quiet patience often achieved more than assertive direction.

3. Valuing small wins

Initially, I was frustrated by the scale of systemic challenges, such as underqualified teachers, poverty, and cultural barriers. But over time I learned to value small victories: a class confidently answering questions without fear, a teacher experimenting with pair work, or a parent expressing appreciation for the school's impact. Leadership in development is about *sustained incremental change*, not overnight success.

4. Deeper commitment to education equity

Finally, the experience reinforced my long-term commitment to education as a tool for social transformation. Witnessing the resilience of Ugandan teachers and children, even amidst scarcity, reminded me of the universality of the desire to learn.

Conclusion

My month with CRANE in Uganda was a fantastic, challenging, and deeply meaningful experience. It tested my adaptability, expanded my global perspective, and strengthened my leadership values. I returned with a renewed sense of humility and purpose: real change begins with listening, partnership, and perseverance. Leadership is not about having all the answers, but about helping others find theirs.

As I conclude my Laidlaw journey, I hope to carry forward these lessons: to be a leader who is ambitious yet grounded, brave yet sensitive, and above all, guided by empathy and integrity.