

LAIDLAW LEADERSHIP & RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Leadership-in-Action Project Report

Voices from the classroom: A place-based project to bring to light how children and educators facing disadvantage experience artificial intelligence in education.

Host Organisation SHINE (Support and Help IN Education), Leeds

Fieldwork Middlesbrough, Pennywell in Sunderland, and Rotherham

Institution University of Toronto

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Contents

1 Introduction

2 Challenges and Learnings

- 2.1 Challenging assumptions
- 2.2 Unexpected findings
- 2.3 Discomfort in new rooms
- 2.4 Consolidation

3 Leadership Skills Applied and Developed

- 3.1 Adaptive problem-solving and judgement under uncertainty
- 3.2 Communication and influence
- 3.3 Cultural humility

4 Ethical Considerations

5 Collaboration and Team Dynamics

6 Conclusion

Introduction

SHINE, an education charity based in Leeds, funds educational innovation across the North of England. SHINE has invested more than £40 million in educational innovation, much of it in early-stage ideas from teachers trying to change outcomes for children in their own communities, and in the last year supported almost 50,000 children through a hands-on approach to empowering educators and place-based school networks. As part of my Leadership-in-Action project, I sought to inform an ethical approach to AI in education for SHINE by bringing to light voices from the classroom — specifically from underprivileged and disadvantaged communities. The North East of England was the setting of this project because the conditions we set out to understand are concentrated here. With the goal of understanding and reflecting community perspectives as well as possible, depth in a few communities was prioritized over breadth. Middlesbrough, where the majority of the fieldwork took place, is one of the most deprived local authorities in England, with industry collapse producing generational cycles of low-wage work and low educational attainment.

My role. The LiA project began with the goal of reviewing evidence on how AI can support learning, alongside its risks and pitfalls; understanding what teachers, leaders and children think about it; and proposing principles for innovation-focused funders like SHINE to shape their own approach to supporting education in this new age of technology. This involved building the methodology from scratch; securing and running fieldwork across five schools in Middlesbrough, Pennywell in Sunderland and Rotherham, some of the most disadvantaged cities in Northern England; conducting twenty semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers, headteachers, pastoral leads and safeguarding and e-safety leads teaching from Reception to sixth form; and running activity-based focus groups with over eighty children from Year 2 to Year 12, producing more than forty hours of recorded conversation. Alongside this I designed and tabulated a drawing exercise capturing the technologies primary pupils use daily, maintained a parallel review of UK and international AI and EdTech policy and research, triangulated the fieldwork against national datasets, and consolidated both strands into a four-hour workshop presentation for SHINE's full staff team and a written report setting out funding priorities and a set of ethical principles for the charity's approach as an innovation-focused funder.

In December 2025, I had my first conversation with SHINE's CEO that ended up redefining the way I understand education. Having researched education for much of my undergraduate career, I was eager to learn more about student experiences in disadvantaged communities from a charity working close to the ground. We delved into how socioeconomic inequality shapes education, attainment and the experience of learning for children in the North of England, and how quickly new technologies are changing that experience, for better and for worse. Neither of us had a settled view on how artificial intelligence might affect students who have comparatively little resources, as most discourse around AI occurs in well-resourced, higher education settings. The voices disproportionately left out of the conversation — K-12 students facing poverty or socioeconomic inequality — are also the least likely to have access to premium tools, critical literacy education and guardrails around their use of technology. To address this gap we developed a project that brought me away from my desk, out from behind my laptop and into communities in the North East of England to find out what people think.

As a team of seven people, SHINE had not previously had the ability to dedicate someone to spend time in schools solely to understand the changing landscape of technology, how people think about it and approach controlling it in areas of deprivation. The LiA project allowed me to contribute to this by spending weeks immersed in communities uncovering this angle. This project was designed to bring forward the voices of those who are most vulnerable and often left behind by innovation, whose views on education and technology hold powerful insights that are often missed by policymakers.

Challenges and Learnings

2.1 Challenging assumptions

The impact I hoped to have was to bring forward voices that are rarely heard in decisions being made about them, and to make them useful at the strategic level of a funder positioned to act. The first challenge was to not undermine that goal in the design of the LiA project itself. I came in looking for evidence of a digital divide, and had designed focus group questions and activities accordingly. Within the first school visits at Brambles Primary Academy in Middlesbrough, that assumption collapsed. Through conversations with Year 4 and 6 teachers, the headteacher, the computing lead and over twenty students, it quickly became clear that these children are far more digitally literate and technologically fluent than my colleagues and I had assumed. The majority have personal devices at home, use social media despite age restrictions, and have already experimented with AI tools, often in a structured way as part of school assignments.

Children across every focus group emphasised that AI is "not a person", that it is frequently wrong, that it works in effect as a faster search engine and that its results must be checked by a human. When asked what would make an AI tool useful for them, students consistently described a tool that shows you how to do something rather than one that gives you the answer. Most pointed out that if you use it all the time, you won't learn much. This prompted me to ask myself and my colleagues: What can we really learn from these kids? What would be useful for us to know, given that most of them have a base of knowledge (through experience) and access to technology regardless of circumstances they're facing at home? How can I use this rare opportunity to understand the landscape here more deeply, by asking more meaningful, challenging and insightful questions?

I redesigned the project around those questions, inviting more conversation and prioritizing listening while shedding my own assumptions. Children were asked to discuss the technologies they use in a day, as well as to rank themselves, their peers, teachers and families on a scale of confidence with technology, explaining their reasoning. Topics of discussion included their favourite and least favourite parts about school, their hobbies and goals, who they may turn to for help at school, their conception of what AI is and does, and their opinions on whether it makes school more or less fair. Secondary students were prompted with more complex questions along similar lines and debate-style activities.

This new approach completely inverted the ideas I came into the region with. I learned how different their relationship with technology is than my own, how the various benefits, pitfalls and risks of both AI and social media are amplified in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage, as well as the difference between a digital divide and digital use divide in practice — that the key issue, unexpectedly, may be over-access rather than under-access. My LiA project taught me to trade my assumptions for their opinions. I came in looking for evidence of a digital divide, but left wondering if the real gap isn't in what these kids know, but in whether those with authority and resources bother to ask them.

2.2 Unexpected findings

A second challenge was analytical. The further I went, the less the subject stayed within the boundaries of a question about technology. It became clear that the ethical questions raised by AI in areas of disadvantage cannot be separated from the material conditions of children in them. At Woodsetts Primary School in Rotherham, I met the school's pastoral lead, who oversees mental health, family relationships and safety, and whose observations about lack of media literacy in parents deeply concerned me. I am slowly but surely realising how interconnected these issues are. You cannot address a child's use of AI or social media without engaging their parents on its risks. It is enormously difficult to shift a child's habits, their interest in education or their resilience in isolation. Everything starts with the family and returns to the family when you look at how digital technology intersects with disadvantage.

I learned that education is a key factor in lifting people out of poverty, but it cannot accomplish that alone. As the Chief Executive of Tees Valley Education told me, if no one is checking that a child has eaten when they come into school in the morning, that their uniform is right, that they're regulated after what might have been a chaotic night at home, they won't be in a position to absorb what they're taught in class, and may resort to tools that provide shortcuts. Someone has to build the bridge that lets them cross into it, and any frameworks I proposed had to be done with humility and recognition of that fact. I resisted the temptation to produce tidy recommendations, and instead made the case that it is not possible to think clearly about what artificial intelligence is doing to education without accounting for what social media has already done, and how technology more broadly changes the way we learn and process new information.

2.3 Discomfort in new rooms

The first secondary school of my fieldwork presented unexpected challenges, though I spent the days leading up to it more nervous than at any other point in this project. I had no natural authority in a space where the students were hardly younger than me. I anticipated a more natural flow of conversation because of this, more of a roundtable than an interview, but I underestimated the fact that being close in age isn't a guarantee of this. What I seemed to get, at first, was a room of deer in headlights. They avoided eye contact and shrugged at prompts. Breaking through to them was more difficult and imposter-syndrome-inducing than speaking to a room full of professionals at any other point in my LiA. Until this point, I had spent the project in a primary school mindset, where a small nudge is more than enough, but I seemed to have forgotten that secondary students are more wary of saying the wrong thing. I remember being more self-conscious myself just a few years ago. If I could conduct this again, I would have spent more time speaking to Laidlaw Scholars my own age for tactics to help engage young adults. From this I learned the value of collaboration and cross-cultural communication even outside the scope of a particular project — this can provide external perspective that challenges the echo chambers produced in one's own mind.

2.4 Consolidation

The final challenge was taking six weeks of deep, organic conversation, of days spent in schools and communities that grew to mean so much to me, watching their challenges, struggles and excitement play out, and turning it into something actionable. I hoped to invite my team to think

critically about how these insights might shape their direction as an innovation funder and how they consider the communities they serve in future.

The fieldwork gave me clarity. The teachers I spoke to thought their insights were small, ordinary, day-to-day observations — but as they answered, held in my mind were the countless other people I had spent time with across this region. Their observations turned out to be threads in much larger phenomena across communities facing disadvantage in the North East. Structuring the work around those shared patterns, rather than around schools or weeks, is what made my work legible to people who had not been in the rooms with me.

Leadership Skills Applied and Developed

3.1 Adaptive problem-solving and judgement under uncertainty

In my first week I attended the annual SHINE Network & Learn event, where I heard keynote speaker Louise Quinn say something that became the discipline of the whole project: "Everything works somewhere, and nothing works everywhere". Spoken with reference to designing education interventions, this is a lesson in humility and perseverance, acknowledging that any programme can work very well for children under specifically suited conditions, but fail entirely under different ones. It is a useful thing to remember in cases where AI is sold as a universal solution for everyone. I took this to heart as I iterated my project to uniquely suit the context of each school I worked with, as well as SHINE's mission as an innovation-focused charity.

The same principle governed how I handled evidence. The research on artificial intelligence's benefits and pitfalls in learning is often contradictory, and I had to learn to act under that uncertainty without pretending it was resolved. Uncertainty is not a sufficient reason to wait to tackle a topic, as students are already growing up in a world shaped by it. Moving forward with an awareness of the current landscape, with a balance of optimism and pragmatism, became both my working method and one of the principles I ultimately recommended.

3.2 Communication and influence

Growing up, I struggled immensely with spontaneous speaking. I used to wonder why I was less able to do things that others seemed to manage on a whim. The most important lesson on communication I learned through the final outputs of my LiA project is not to compare what you can do with what someone else can do better, instead focusing on honing your own strengths. For me, that includes being curious, learning, investigating, connecting ideas and new perspectives, so I went all in on those traits. This taught me that you do have the ability to speak spontaneously when you are a subject-matter expert on something you've worked hard to understand. Reflecting on how all these interactions had moved and changed me, I decided to speak from the heart and it all began to click. My presentation, designed for participation from the team, ran for hours because of how much we were able to discuss and unpack.

3.3 Cultural humility

Recognising and challenging my own biases. The central developmental work of this placement was a journey of recognizing my positionality and ultimately using it to strengthen the project rather than minimize it, with a reminder that the best thing I could do in these communities was listen.

There is a distance between each person's frame of reference to understand the world. All of us hold many identities within themselves that form who they are. For me, those include the role of an eldest daughter and a first-generation immigrant, who has access to many privileges thanks to the safety and the resources afforded to her by an education in Canada. The opportunities I have had to travel, meet and learn from people at the top of their fields and to have my perspectives continually challenged come from my access to education. Travelling to London mid-project, I

realised I had lived more varied experiences in forty-eight hours than many of the students I'd spoken to have in the first twenty years of their lives. Returning from London to the North made the contrast between our circumstances land with me sharply and suddenly.

Recognising this changed how I interpreted what I heard in my focus groups. It meant treating a limited response from a child as a limited frame of reference or exposure rather than a limited child. Several teachers described that the world these children move through is measured in streets rather than in miles, and that many have never visited their local skating rink or been to the beach a short drive away. Children with few models of people from their own neighbourhoods succeeding still understand success, but as something that belongs to other people in other places. The consequence is not an absence of ability, nor of ambition, but an absence of demonstration and exposure. This led me to one of the most important reframings of the project: aspiration is better understood as a form of information than as a matter of attitude. Children are not failing to work hard enough for things they want. They are often working from an incomplete picture of what is available for them to want for their futures.

Engaging with diverse perspectives. I deliberately sought the full range of vantage points inside school life, holding semi-structured interviews with schoolteachers, headteachers, pastoral and e-safety leads teaching across Reception to sixth form, and running focus groups with students from Year 2 to Year 12. I sought out adults whose role affords long-run knowledge of individual children: pastoral leads, safeguarding leads and long-serving headteachers alongside classroom teachers, to provide a longitudinal view that cannot be constructed by visitors.

I also sought perspectives from communities outside the schools, spending time with the Laidlaw Schools Trust and the Pennywell Fellowship in Sunderland, an initiative SHINE also supports. This gave me a view of the same problem from the other side of the funding relationship. I met the School Improvement Partner driving the Fellowship, a community connector who grew up in Pennywell and now works across the town's local partners, and the chief executive of a community action group, once a single mother who built her life up from scratch and now dedicates it to their community centres that bring people together. This visit taught me that the people best positioned to reach communities are often those who came from them. As a Canadian working in the North of England for the first time, I was an outsider to the region's history, its norms and its institutions. Spending time getting to know the people and places this way was the most meaningful and eye-opening part of the LiA project.

The most instructive perspectives came from the students themselves, though they rarely converged. One Year 6 girl who prefers to write and draw by hand described feeling "angry" watching her older sibling generate work using AI, as it pained her to see technology replace that effort and worries her to see it valued just the same. This indicates understanding of the value of the creative process. Others were enthusiastic users, describing AI as useful for revising for tests or reimagining characters from books they were reading. Some would rather their teacher's marking even knowing it might be flawed or affected by mood, others would rather the outcome be as objective as possible, and many proposed a middle position of an AI marking with a teacher proofreading. Asked what would make an AI tool genuinely useful, they consistently described one that shows you how to do something rather than one that gives you the answer—a pedagogically sophisticated position we had not expected to hear from children as young as 8. The principle underneath all of this, one that I saw modelled by the teachers I worked with, is treating children's ideas as intelligent contributions from equal partners, regardless of their abilities, each capable of enriching the classroom in their own way.

Ethical Considerations

The observational bias built into research on disadvantage was a significant ethical consideration I kept in mind to build the methodology of this project more intentionally. Policymakers, funders and researchers meet children almost exclusively within schools, the one setting in which they are reliably safe, fed, supervised and supported. This produces a systematic observational bias, since most national evidence on disadvantage is gathered under those conditions. Any account of disadvantage built only from what is visible will be incomplete, erring optimistically in predictable ways. In a short focus group with engaging questions and fun activities, children will often present as highly regulated, secure and at a level playing field with their peers.

I saw this demonstrated most clearly at an annual schools' awards ceremony, where polished, poised children received awards on stage with ribbons in their hair and uniforms perfectly ironed. So much of the credit for that belongs to their teachers, who spent hours making sure they felt confident and presentable for the occasion, so that anyone watching from outside would never guess at their hidden struggles. The conclusion I drew from this and built the project around, was that a single school visit may yield an accurate picture of a school but an inaccurate picture of a childhood. This is why the project prioritised time and proximity rather than sample size: lengthy conversations instead of surveys, and repeat visits to a smaller number of schools were preferred to breadth of coverage.

Representing disagreement honestly. The subject matter produced positions that pointed in different directions, and with the encouragement of my team, I decided the goal was to preserve that tension rather than resolve it into tidy, easy, but superficial conclusions. Not one teacher interviewed was negative about AI as a tool in their own professional practice. They described it as transformative for adaptive teaching, principally because schools in areas of disadvantage often cannot fund specialist provision for every child who would benefit from it. The same teachers, however, were sharply sceptical of national proposals to provide AI tutoring to disadvantaged pupils. National survey data shows only a small minority of state school teachers support the initiative, which corroborates what I heard. Underlying this was a consistent diagnosis: every educator interviewed attributed the disadvantage gap to socioeconomic factors like poverty, attendance, quality of life at home, exposure, self-esteem and motivation rather than to a shortage of access to educational content or good teaching. Reporting apparent tensions like this faithfully meant treating a divided evidence base as a finding in itself, inevitably leading to deeper and unexpected connections.

Collaboration and Team Dynamics

I believe SHINE's impact can be attributed to having a close-knit family at work; their passion flows quickly between them this way. Due to the scale of their projects, each member of the team wears many hats of responsibilities, their common fabric being genuine care and commitment to the communities they work for. As a small but mighty group, their job titles go only part of the way in describing the depth of their relational work. They operate with a deep commitment to the communities they serve, seeing their projects in action, iterating based on real needs and constantly spending time with stakeholders, all of which I strived to emulate throughout my LiA. The most valuable thing I learned about working with others came from observing SHINE's Chief Executive: her grace and passion paired with a firm sense of direction in a small team that feels like a family. She is someone who makes every decision with the people she serves in mind, who meets challenges with grace and encourages all of us to treat mistakes as learning. I was privileged to shadow, observe and learn from various manifestations of leadership — whether CEOs, headteachers or local community liaisons. They taught me that leadership isn't about making every decision yourself. It's about making space for different perspectives and drawing them together into a cohesive step forward for everyone. It's about making people feel heard and valued while remaining grounded in the organisation's principles, and taking care to implement that vision, not just your own.

I aimed to reflect this in my final presentation. At the beginning and end of the session, I ran a Mentimeter word cloud (inspired by the Oxford Character Project) asking the same broad question: What feelings, thoughts, hopes or worries come up when you hear the term 'AI'? The results were strikingly different. The team had moved from thinking largely out of emotion, fear and uncertainty before the presentation toward viewing AI through the lens of societal factors, sustainability, safeguarding and relationship-building after it. This shift helped us move towards key principles for SHINE and build a sense of confidence or newfound understanding within the team. It was gratifying to know my work had been meaningful and helped connect the dots between innovation and lived realities.

Conclusion

Several lessons from my LiA will stay with me. The first is that the divide I went looking for was not the most important one. Access to knowledge is not the central problem. For years, anyone with an internet connection has been able to search for almost anything, learn a language for free or study the finer points of advanced mathematics independently. Yet most of us do not, because access alone does not create motivation. What moves us to learn is often bound up with how we see education and, crucially, how we see the people delivering it. We begin to care about achievement not only for ourselves, but also for the person who knows us, encourages us and shares in our progress. AI can be a powerful lever for education, but it can never replace the relational connections on which all learning depends.

The second is about proximity as a source of judgement. Distance from the classroom is what allows a new innovation to sound plausible when it may not be, while closeness is what exposes the gap between how a tool is described and how it behaves in practice. The discipline I would carry into any future work is to stay close enough to the ground to be corrected by it, and to treat practitioners' and children's accounts as highly valued insights.

The third is a new way of conceptualising leadership. My project was about giving a platform to voices that are rarely heard and bringing them to the strategic level of a charity committed to supporting them. It was gratifying to know that my work helped connect those unheard voices to one another, while connecting the team's own thoughts and concerns to those voices. This was an entirely new way for me to see, conceptualise and practise leadership: from the bottom up, focused on communities and for communities, bringing people together toward a shared goal.

For my future practice, I will be sure to build in opportunities to contextualize and gain an organic understanding of the communities I hope to serve, with the aim of proving any unfounded assumptions of mine wrong before taking them too far. A treasured habit from my LiA that I would hope to expand is keeping a daily log, which helps to see my independent experiences more objectively, analyze and learn from them, as well as reflect on these transformational memories for my growth as a leader and scholar with the bigger picture in mind.

Finally, I came away from my Leadership-in-Action project seeing education, and its intersection with rapid technological change, in a new and more fundamental light. During focus groups, children often asked "but what is the point?" of working something out themselves when a machine can do it for them. This is a fair question, one that people in every affected profession are asking about their own work, and students can generally tell when an adult is answering it badly. Something ironic about artificial intelligence is that it directs attention onto what it means to be human. If a large proportion of what people do can be augmented or replaced by a machine, then there must be something more that makes human creativity, ingenuity, empathy and the pursuit of understanding so unique. Extending this logic to education, there is something about the process of learning that is deeply human and meaningful in its own right, even in an age of instant answers – something that education systems often quash. If we aim to raise a generation of youth with aspirations for their learning and a healthy relationship to technology, we must consider what innovative design of these systems could look like in our current era. ■

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