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Reclaiming ‘Fun’: A school leader’s reflexive account of a social and emotional learning initiative in primary education

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Reclaiming 'Fun': A school leader's reflexive account of a social and emotional learning initiative in primary education

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Abstract

In an era where schools are under immense pressure to deliver top academic results and meet performance expectations from stakeholders such as government departments, parents, and school boards, the idea of prioritising 'fun' over academic outcomes might appear unconventional. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, exposed the fragility of traditional schooling models and underscored the urgency of addressing students' social and emotional well-being. This South African leadership narrative reflects on how the principal and leadership team, in the first 'normal' school year following the pandemic, implemented a year-long initiative known as the Fun Project. Designed to rekindle joy, connection, and emotional recovery, the project centred on fostering Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) through creative, collaborative, and academically aligned cross-curricular learning experiences. Drawing on a reflexive autoethnographic and pracademic approach, this study situates the author's lived leadership experience within wider educational leadership theory, exploring the tensions between academic accountability and student well-being. The narrative demonstrates how integrating SEL and joy into school culture can reframe educational priorities, cultivate resilience, and model a form of leadership grounded in reflection, relational trust, and hope.

Keywords: *Educational leadership; reflexive autoethnography; pracademia; Social and Emotional Learning (SEL); student well-being; post-pandemic schooling*

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept across South Africa, I, like many school leaders, was thrust into a period of profound uncertainty. Overnight, I found myself leading a community in crisis: students, staff, and parents, all looking for stability when the very foundations of schooling had shifted. Within months, remote teaching replaced face-to-face connection, and every decision carried emotional, pedagogical, and ethical weight. My primary responsibility as a principal was no longer simply to sustain academic performance but to protect the well-being of children and teachers navigating trauma, isolation, and fear. As Harris and Jones (2020) argue, the pandemic did not only disrupt education; it demanded a rethinking of what leadership means in times of crisis.

During this period, I experienced an ongoing tension between institutional expectations and human realities. Parents wanted reassurance that learning would continue uninterrupted; teachers needed empathy and flexibility; and children required emotional stability before they could meaningfully engage in learning. The accountability systems that once guided my leadership offered little help. Instead, my daily work became an exercise in balancing structure with compassion, consistency with care. Research by Netolicky (2020) and Pashiardis et al. (2024) resonates with these tensions, highlighting how crisis leadership requires adaptability, courage, and the ability to lead through ambiguity rather than control it. Thornton (2021) similarly underscores that effective leadership in times of crisis is relational, distributed, and grounded in trust; principles that increasingly shaped my own decisions.

As a leader, I began to question what "success" meant when academic benchmarks no longer felt appropriate. I had long believed that strong relationships form the heart of effective teaching and learning, but the pandemic forced me to make this belief operational, to lead with empathy first and pedagogy second. The challenge was not merely logistical but philosophical: could a school dedicated to excellence embrace vulnerability, joy, and emotional healing as core components of learning? These reflections mark the foundation of this study. Through a reflexive, autoethnographic lens, I examine how my leadership team and I sought to rebuild a school culture centred on social and emotional well-being

rather than academic competition, and how this shift both affirmed and challenged my existing leadership philosophy.

This narrative therefore moves beyond recounting events; it explores the dilemmas, values, and adaptive strategies that defined my leadership during one of the most destabilising periods in modern education. As educational leaders globally reimagine their roles post-pandemic, I offer this reflection not as a prescription but as an invitation to consider how leadership grounded in care, critical reflection, and relational trust might better sustain both people and learning in times of disruption.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

As a school leader emerging from the pandemic, I came to understand Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) not as an optional enhancement to schooling but as a vital framework for rebuilding a fractured community. SEL, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020), encompasses competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. While I had encountered these ideas in theory during professional learning, the crisis forced me to translate them into practice. In my leadership, SEL became both a moral and strategic imperative, a means of reconnecting children with one another and restoring teachers' confidence in their work after months of uncertainty.

In aligning my leadership with SEL principles, I found myself moving away from traditional leadership practices toward relational and participatory ways of leading. Research highlights that SEL fosters inclusive, supportive school environments that nurture belonging, emotional literacy, and resilience (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021; Cipriano et al., 2023). Yet implementing it required more than introducing programmes or classroom activities; it meant reorienting our school culture toward empathy, dialogue, and care. This approach challenged the established norms of our high-performing school, where success had long been equated with measurable outcomes and competitive achievement. As I reflected on our practices, I began to recognise how easily a culture of excellence can obscure emotional exhaustion, especially in post-pandemic schooling. The tension between maintaining academic standards and honouring the emotional recovery of staff and students became the central leadership challenge I had to navigate.

Critically, embracing SEL required me to hold a mirror to my own leadership philosophy. I had to ask difficult questions: what does it mean to lead with compassion in an environment that prizes performance? How do I invite teachers to prioritise well-being without diminishing their sense of professional rigour? Harris and Jones (2020) and Pashiardis et al. (2024) argue that leadership after crisis must be responsive and human-centred, fostering cultures of trust and psychological safety. I found this to be profoundly true. The decision to embed SEL across our school was not a quick fix but a deliberate challenge to the performative and compliance-driven dimensions of schooling. It represented a values-based assertion that emotional well-being is inseparable from learning. This reorientation required courage, transparency, and a willingness to confront the discomfort of change, both mine and others'.

Leading in context

When I reflect on the period following the COVID-19 pandemic, I am reminded of how profoundly it magnified South Africa's deep educational inequalities. The impact of school closures was uneven. In the country's two-tiered system, well-resourced private schools were able to pivot quickly to online learning, while many public schools lacked the digital infrastructure to maintain continuity (Soudien et al., 2022; Spaul & van der Berg, 2020). Yet, even in privileged contexts, like mine, the pandemic created a different kind of deficit, an emotional and relational one. Children, regardless of background, returned to school carrying the weight of isolation, disrupted routines, and grief. As the principal of an all-girls independent primary school, I recognised that my leadership had to address not only gaps in learning but the invisible wounds that shaped how students and teachers re-engaged with school life.

Our school had long been associated with academic excellence and high parental expectations. Achievement was woven into our identity, celebrated in prize-givings, examination results, and scholarship awards. Yet, as the first "normal" school year after the pandemic approached, I sensed that returning to a purely academic agenda would be tone-deaf to what our community needed. Feedback from parents and staff reflected a collective sense of exhaustion and loss.

Children exhibited mood swings, withdrawal, and diminished motivation (Lee, 2020). My understanding of these challenges was drawn from a range of everyday interactions: informal conversations with parents in the school car park, comments shared during parent committee meetings, and posts and messages on school social media pages. I documented these through regular reflective journalling. Teachers too shared observations in staff meetings and corridor discussions, often describing classroom dynamics marked by anxiety and disengagement. Although largely anecdotal, these accounts were consistent and revealing, providing a qualitative picture of the community's emotional state.

The emotional climate required healing before learning could truly resume. For me, this realisation was both intuitive and ethical: learning could not flourish in an environment starved of joy. However, embedding "fun" as a leadership priority in a high-performing school was not without its tensions. The notion of fun challenged deeply ingrained norms about what constituted serious learning and effective leadership. Some teachers embraced the idea immediately, viewing it as an opportunity to reconnect with their students and rekindle creativity in their classrooms. Others, however, expressed concern that focusing on well-being risked falling behind. For a small group, the term "catch-up" became a rallying cry, a reminder that we had lost precious academic time and needed to return to measurable outcomes. As a leader, I found myself caught between two legitimate concerns: the desire to restore academic rigour and the moral responsibility to rebuild emotional safety.

To navigate this resistance, I adopted a relational approach grounded in dialogue, empathy, and trust. I drew on the same SEL principles we hoped to model for students, holding space for teachers' fears while reinforcing the rationale for change. Through staff meetings, informal conversations, and professional learning sessions, I invited teachers to co-construct the initiative, contributing ideas for classroom-based activities that aligned with curriculum goals. This participatory process transformed scepticism into shared ownership. Over time, even those initially resistant began to see that joy and learning were not mutually exclusive. In many ways, this was the most significant leadership learning of my career: that resistance often signals not defiance but fear, and that leadership grounded in empathy can turn uncertainty into collaboration.

I recognise that integrating fun into a high-performing environment became a test of both philosophy and practice. It required courage to reimagine what success looked like, humility to listen deeply, and persistence to keep the conversation centred on student well-being. This period of leading in context reaffirmed my belief that leadership is not about maintaining control but about creating conditions where people, students and teachers alike, can reconnect with purpose and joy in learning.

Methodology: A reflexive autoethnographic and pracademic inquiry

In this study, I adopt a reflexive autoethnographic approach, drawing on my lived experience as the principal of a South African independent school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Autoethnography provided a way for me to make sense of my leadership practice and the decisions that shaped it. As Ellis et al. (2011) explain, autoethnography situates the self within culture, allowing personal experience to reveal broader social and institutional dynamics. My reflections therefore extend beyond personal narrative, engaging critically with the educational context in which leadership was enacted. This approach aligns with Adams et al. (2015) who describe autoethnography as both analytic and evocative, connecting the emotional realities of leadership with theoretical and practical insight.

Writing as both researcher and practitioner, I sought to understand how my leadership evolved through the intertwined pressures of post-pandemic schooling and the pursuit of student well-being. Reflexivity was central to this process. Keleş (2022) reminds us that reflexivity is not a single act but a sustained practice of questioning assumptions, values, and power relations. By documenting my reflections through reflective journalling, I was able to surface tensions between institutional expectations and human realities, and to examine how my leadership philosophy was reshaped through these encounters.

Reflexivity, therefore, operated as both a methodological anchor and an ethical stance throughout this study. It required me to continually interrogate how my positionality as principal, shaped by privilege, gender, and the high-performing nature of the school, influenced what I observed, prioritised, and interpreted. This process involved

oscillating between immersion in experience and analytical distance, maintaining awareness of how my assumptions and emotions interacted with leadership decisions. Reflexivity thus served not merely as self-awareness but as a disciplined practice of accountability, ensuring that my interpretations were transparent, contextually grounded, and ethically responsible.

Autoethnography, as Williams (2021) argues, enables leaders to examine the emotional, ethical, and relational dimensions of decision-making, providing a legitimate framework for generating knowledge from within practice.

Alongside autoethnography, I position this inquiry within the emerging field of pracademia, which bridges scholarship and practice. The concept of the pracademic, as described by Posner (2009), captures the space occupied by professionals who draw on both theoretical and experiential knowledge to address complex, real-world challenges. Hollweck et al. (2022) further argue that pracademics challenge the false divide between practitioner and academic, reframing lived professional experience as a valid form of research and theory-building. This perspective resonates deeply with my own professional identity. As a school leader and academic, my inquiry is not detached from practice but grows out of it, where theory and experience are in constant dialogue. Campbell (2022) describes this as developmental pracademia, a reflective stance in which practitioners generate new insights by critically engaging with their own contexts.

Pracademic inquiry is, at its core, a reflexive process. Dickinson et al. (2022) emphasise that such inquiry requires openness about positionality, inviting practitioners to make visible the values and assumptions that shape their leadership. Throughout this study, I have examined how my positionality as a principal in a high-performing, achievement-focused girls' school influenced my interpretations and actions. This dual identity required me to balance scholarly analysis with the authenticity of lived experience. By articulating how these perspectives informed one another, I contribute to the growing conversation about the role of reflective practitioners in knowledge creation within educational leadership.

Ethical responsibility is central to this approach. Because autoethnographic and pracademic work draws upon personal experience, it carries an obligation to protect the dignity and privacy of those whose stories intersect with the author's. Consistent with the principles outlined by Ellis et al. (2011), this study relies solely on my reflections and professional documentation. No direct data were collected from students, teachers, or parents. While the evidence is inherently subjective, its strength lies in the systematic questioning of experience, the triangulation of insights through professional dialogue, and the anchoring of reflection in established educational leadership theory. This reflexive practice aligns with Finlay's (2002) view that credibility in qualitative inquiry arises not from objectivity but from transparency and depth of engagement.

By employing a reflexive autoethnographic and pracademic methodology, I aim to show how school leadership can function as both an act of service and an act of inquiry. The process of writing and reflecting helped me see leadership not merely as administration or strategy, but as a relational and ethical practice grounded in care, learning, and human connection. In doing so, this work contributes to the growing understanding that educational leaders, through reflective self-study, can expand both theory and practice, bridging the space between what we know and what we do.

Introducing the Fun Project: Design and planning

The Fun Project was not a continuation of an existing programme but a deliberate departure from the school's usual academic rhythm. Traditionally, the start of the academic year had focused on performance goals, assessment schedules, and curricular planning. However, following the disruption of COVID-19, I recognised that re-establishing emotional connection and belonging needed to precede any academic recovery. During a strategic planning session with my two deputy principals, we began to imagine what a year might look like if joy, rather than pressure, guided our practice. From this reflection, the *Fun Project* was born.

The initiative began with a question: *What would it mean to create a culture where learning was joyful again?* We chose the theme *Girl on Fire*, inspired by Alicia Keys' song (Keys et al., 2012), because its message of courage,

resilience, and self-belief spoke directly to our students' emotional realities. The lyrics, "Nobody knows that she's a lonely girl in a lonely world, but she's going to let it burn," captured the sense of loss and quiet determination many of our girls had voiced during the lockdown period. The theme symbolised rekindled hope, empowerment, and collective strength.

Although enthusiasm for the idea was high within the leadership team, translating it into school-wide practice required intentional groundwork. We knew that sustained change depended on collaboration and trust. Staff were invited to a series of workshops to co-construct the initiative. These sessions provided a forum for teachers to share their observations of students' post-pandemic behaviours such as withdrawal, heightened anxiety, and fluctuating motivation, and to consider how teaching might respond differently. The leadership philosophy underpinning these conversations was relational and inclusive. Rather than issuing directives, I facilitated dialogue. Teachers were encouraged to bring forward ideas for integrating elements of social and emotional learning into their subject areas, ensuring the Fun Project became an expression of collective creativity rather than a top-down reform.

While most teachers responded with enthusiasm, a small number expressed hesitation. Some felt that the school needed to "get back to normal" and focus on *academic catch-up*, echoing wider public discourse at the time. This tension revealed the deep cultural attachment to measurable academic success. As principal, I recognised that addressing such resistance required transparency and empathy. I met with the concerned teachers to listen to their perspectives and shared research demonstrating that social and emotional well-being enhances academic performance. Rather than framing the Fun Project as a replacement for academic rigour, I positioned it as the foundation for sustainable learning. Over time, these conversations shifted attitudes, and teachers began to see the initiative as an opportunity to rebuild community, motivation, and focus rather than as a distraction from teaching.

Leadership also extended beyond staff to the parent community. Much of the feedback I received came through informal channels; conversations in the school car park, exchanges during parent association meetings, and interactions on social media platforms. Parents spoke of their daughters seeming flat, unmotivated, and emotionally distant, often describing a noticeable decline in enthusiasm for school activities or social interaction. These shared stories, though anecdotal, painted a consistent picture of emotional fatigue and disengagement. As a leader, I viewed these accounts as a call to reimagine what recovery could look like in a school setting. I chose to act on this informal but authentic data by placing well-being at the forefront of our strategic direction. Parents were kept informed through newsletters and briefings that outlined the educational rationale for the project and its alignment with research on student well-being and learning engagement. This open communication built trust and helped ease concerns among those who feared that the emphasis on fun might compromise academic progress.

The Fun Project marked a decisive shift in our leadership practice. It demonstrated that leadership during recovery required courage to resist institutional inertia and to place student humanity at the centre of school life. Although the initiative was novel to our context and not formally trialled elsewhere, it reflected a global reimagining of schooling that prioritised connection over compliance. As a leader, I learned that fostering joy was not a soft alternative to rigour but a powerful form of restoration that reignited both learning and hope.

The Fun Project: Implementation and roll-out

Having laid the groundwork through staff collaboration and community engagement, the implementation phase of the Fun Project represented a pivotal moment in our school's post-pandemic recovery. Launching the initiative was not merely about introducing a theme; it was about leading a cultural shift from fear and fatigue toward hope and reconnection. As the principal, I recognised that sustaining momentum required visible, consistent leadership and a

willingness to model joy and vulnerability. This meant being present, participating alongside staff and students, and reinforcing the message that fun, far from being frivolous, was a serious pedagogical commitment to re-engagement and well-being.

The theme, *Girl on Fire*, was unveiled on the first day of the new school year and immediately set a tone of excitement and belonging. The ten-day orientation programme served as both an introduction and a symbolic reset. The school campus was transformed into a space alive with colour, music, and imagery designed to reignite curiosity. Teachers dressed in themed attire, students sang, danced, and collaborated, and learning spaces reflected warmth and creativity. Yet beneath the excitement, there was an intentional pedagogical design; each activity connected directly to curriculum outcomes and the wider goals of social and emotional learning (See Table 1).

Table 1: Themed learning experiences

LEARNING AREA	LESSON AIM	ACTIVITY	OUTCOMES
Design and Technology	Study traditional and modern fire-based cooking methods.	Design a simple solar oven using aluminium foil, a pizza box, and plastic wrap.	Empowerment link: Discuss how solar cooking can support sustainable living in communities with limited electricity.
Mathematics	Measuring and graphing temperature changes	1. Conduct a temperature experiment (e.g., measure how different materials heat up over time in the sun). 2. Create line graphs and bar charts to compare results.	Discuss the impact of heat on climate, weather, and daily life.
Coding and Robotics	Designing a firefighting robot	1. Explore real-world firefighting robots (e.g., drones used in wildfires). 2. Task: Design and prototype a robot using LEGO Mindstorms, VEX, or simple materials like motors and sensors.	Discuss how robotics empower firefighters and save lives.
Dance	Explore how fire's characteristics (flickering, growing, consuming, raging, smoldering) can be expressed through movement.	1. Use dynamic movements to represent different fire stages: - Small flickers (tiny hand movements, tiptoeing) - Growing flames (expanding arms, sweeping legs) - Raging fire (quick, strong, powerful jumps and turns) - Dying embers (slow, controlled movements, sinking to the ground) 2. In small groups, choreograph a 30-second movement sequence that transitions through different fire states.	Discuss how fire represents energy, transformation, and destruction. How does dance reflect these ideas? How does movement convey cultural meanings? How does fire symbolize different emotions in these traditions?

Table 2: Themed Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) experiences

OBJECTIVE	DISCUSSION	ACTIVITY	REFLECTION AND TAKEAWAY
Help students recognise their inner strengths and passions, using fire as a metaphor for personal resilience.	What does "fire within" mean? How can fire symbolise motivation, perseverance, and passion?	Give each student a paper flame. Ask them to write or draw things that "ignite" their inner fire (e.g., hobbies, skills, dreams, personal values).	1. In small groups, students share their flames and discuss how these strengths help them navigate challenges. 2. Students create a "Fire Jar" by placing their flames in a jar, symbolizing their inner light to turn to when feeling discouraged.
Create a supportive environment for students to express emotions and build trust. <i>(Arrange chairs in a circle around a small "campfire"- real candles, LED lights, or a projected flame video).</i>	Use fire-related prompts, such as: 1. "What is something that fuels your energy and happiness?" 2. "Have you ever felt like a fire was burning out inside you? What helped reignite it?" 3. "What 'sparks' joy in your life?"	End with a deep-breathing visualization of a flickering flame, focusing on stability and calmness.	Students can write down a takeaway from the session in a "Campfire Journal."
Help students process and release difficult emotions using fire as a symbol of transformation.	Fire can 'burn away' old things to make space for new growth. What are some emotions or experiences we'd like to release?	Students write down worries, fears, or negative experiences on small pieces of paper. Symbolic Release: If possible, use a safe burning bowl (under supervision) to burn the papers as a symbolic act of letting go. If fire isn't an option, use a water bowl (letting ink dissolve) or shred the paper as an alternative.	Journaling Prompt: "After releasing this, what new energy do I want to invite into my life?"

These lessons illustrated how academic rigour and creativity could coexist. Teachers began to see how their subjects could become vehicles for emotional reconnection, transforming the traditional classroom into a site of healing and discovery.

While the themed curriculum activities provided opportunities for joy and connection, it was the *Sister Circle* initiative that provided the deeper emotional anchor of the Fun Project. Developed collaboratively with the school's educational psychologist and pastoral care team, these sessions were structured, trauma-informed spaces where students could process their experiences of loss, anxiety, and disconnection. The intention was not simply to "add" well-being to the school day but to integrate psychological healing within the rhythm of learning itself. *Sister Circle* became a ritual of safety and reflection, ensuring that students' emotional worlds were acknowledged as central to their learning lives. These experiences were designed to nurture self-expression, empathy, and emotional regulation through guided reflection and symbolic activities (see Table 2).

Sister Circle quickly became one of the most significant aspects of the project. Teachers reported that students began articulating their emotions with greater clarity and demonstrated improved peer relationships and empathy. As a leader, I recognised that these outcomes reflected a shift in our collective culture; from a focus on performance to a recognition that well-being underpins achievement. The Fun Project continued to evolve beyond the orientation period, embedding itself throughout the year in assemblies, classroom discussions, and school-wide celebrations. It became a living framework through which students and teachers explored themes of strength, courage, and connection. What began as a leadership initiative developed into a sustained cultural change, one that blurred the boundaries between learning and healing.

From a leadership perspective, implementation revealed the complexity of sustaining enthusiasm while balancing external expectations for measurable progress. Ongoing communication with parents, staff reflection sessions, and visible leadership participation were essential to maintaining coherence and credibility. There were moments of fatigue and doubt, particularly when accountability pressures resurfaced, but these became opportunities for reflection on what meaningful leadership entails in post-crisis schooling. Ultimately, the project affirmed my belief that authentic leadership is relational, values-driven, and deeply human; that leading through joy can be as powerful as leading through strategy.

Learnings and reflections

Leading this work required me to confront a taken-for-granted orthodoxy in high-performing schools: that academic acceleration should eclipse all other priorities in the wake of disruption. I came to see "fun" not as a soft alternative to rigour but as an ethical and pedagogical commitment to re-engagement. My reflections align with evidence that emotions such as interest, curiosity, and joy broaden attention and support flexible thinking, which are preconditions for complex learning (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). When classrooms felt relationally safe and purposeful, students re-entered demanding tasks with greater persistence and self-direction, a pattern consistent with work linking positive climate to academic engagement and attainment (Wang & Degol, 2016; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). These insights did not arise in a vacuum. They emerged in the ebb and flow of daily leadership, as teachers reported livelier participation and as students reconnected with peers and learning after months of dislocation, echoes of findings that link emotionally engaging environments with deeper strategy use and motivation (Lauricella & Edmunds, 2023; Yon, 2024).

At the same time, I needed to account for the weight of counter-arguments. A small but vocal group of stakeholders urged a singular focus on measurable "catch-up." Their concerns were understandable, particularly for families navigating high-stakes transitions to secondary schooling. I learned to treat that resistance as an invitation to examine purpose, not only tactics. Framed through a leadership lens, the question was less "Does fun belong in school?" and more "What counts as worthwhile education after collective trauma, and who decides?" My stance converged with scholarship that positions learning recovery and well-being as interdependent rather than competing aims. Targeted

academic supports are effective, yet they work best when integrated with social and emotional competencies that enable students to engage, persevere, and regulate effort (Mahoney et al., 2018; Allensworth & Schwartz, 2020). I also remained alert to the critique that the post-pandemic “learning loss” narrative can narrow the aims of schooling and domesticate SEL within a compliance agenda, rather than opening space for more liberatory, humanising practices (Robbins & Cipollone, 2023). Holding these tensions sharpened my leadership judgment: I came to argue for SEL not as an add-on, but as the condition under which rigorous learning becomes sustainable.

A second learning concerned the kind of leadership this moment demanded. I experienced the work as emotional labour in the fullest sense of the term. It required attending to fear, fatigue, and hope in staffrooms and car parks, listening without defensiveness, and protecting time for practices that might not yield immediate metrics but rebuilt trust and belonging. This resonates with accounts of leadership as ethical and relational practice, especially in contexts of inequity and disruption (Steilen & Stone-Johnson, 2023). My philosophy shifted from directing change to convening it. Co-construction workshops, teacher-led adaptations, and the ritualised *Sister Circle* created what felt like a shared holding environment. Over time, colleagues who initially worried about lost instructional minutes began to see that the themed academic tasks and SEL structures were not competing with curriculum but stabilising it. That movement from scepticism to ownership mirrored my own learning: courage and care are not opposites in leadership; they are mutually reinforcing.

I also learned to scrutinise integration rather than assume it. The most successful designs were those where SEL principles were inside the academic work, not adjacent to it. The mathematics escape-room sequence and the “Fire and Energy” inquiry were intentionally curricular, assessed against programme outcomes, and simultaneously oriented to collaboration, agency, and meaning-making. This approach is consistent with research indicating that well-designed gamified and inquiry experiences can lift motivation and deepen processing when the cognitive demand remains high (Hamari et al., 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Equally, I remained attentive to cautions in the literature: SEL that is decontextualised or culturally thin can marginalise core learning or become superficial (Humphrey, 2013). Jagers et al. (2019) argue for culturally responsive and equity-centred SEL so that emotional work strengthens, rather than dilutes, academic purpose. That argument helped me keep integration and cultural relevance in view as design principles, not slogans.

Further learning emerged around evidence and accountability. As a reflexive autoethnographic account, this paper does not present formal student-level outcome data, and ethical considerations precluded drawing on evaluative records that could compromise privacy. Still, I learned to make my reasoning auditable. I documented patterns that recurred across informal channels, such as teacher reflections in debriefs, parent conversations, and leadership journal entries, and I used those patterns to iteratively adjust practices across the year. The absence of formal metrics did not mean the absence of rigour. It demanded disciplined reflexivity, triangulation of practitioner knowledge, and alignment to established theory. In pracademic terms, I treated the school as a site of inquiry where professional judgment and scholarship informed one another in real time.

Finally, I confronted the politics of leading for joy in a system that often equates seriousness with worth. The Fun Project asked me to contest a narrow imaginary of excellence and to argue that joy, connection, and dignity are not decorative frills but public goods of schooling. That stance is not universally popular, and it requires ongoing negotiation with parents, boards, and colleagues. Yet it is precisely in the space between competing goods that educational leadership becomes most educative. My learning, therefore, is less a set of tips than a set of commitments: hold purpose above pace, integrate SEL within rather than beside curriculum, honour community voice while resisting reductive

metrics, and practise leadership as relational, ethical work. In doing so, I found that students re-entered academic challenge with greater steadiness, and staff rediscovered professional imagination. Those outcomes, though qualitatively derived, are consistent with evidence that belonging and positive emotion are not enemies of rigour but its preconditions (Wang & Degol, 2016; Lauricella & Edmunds, 2023; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

Taken together, these reflections move me beyond “what worked” toward “what it means to lead” in times of disruption. The work tested my philosophy and reshaped it.

Recommendations

This experience reaffirmed that educational leadership is far more than a managerial task; it is an ethical, relational, and moral endeavour. The pandemic did not create fragility in education; it revealed it. Fun, when purposefully integrated, became a pedagogical strategy for healing, curiosity, and academic persistence. It disrupted traditional hierarchies that equate seriousness with value and invited both staff and students to see learning as a relational act of hope. These insights align with research demonstrating that positive emotions enhance cognitive flexibility, resilience, and engagement. The decision to prioritise play and connection was, therefore, both pedagogical and political: it resisted deficit-driven discourses of “catch-up” that risk reducing learning to the recovery of content rather than the restoration of humanity. From this reflection, several lessons emerge for future leadership practice.

Leadership after crisis must remain human-centred and systemically attuned

Even as the immediate crisis of COVID-19 subsided, schools continue to face trauma daily, whether from social inequity, environmental disruption, or conflict. Crisis, in its many forms, has become a persistent feature of educational life. This reality underscores the need for leadership that is responsive, compassionate, and critically self-aware. Leaders must cultivate cultures where trauma-informed and social and emotional learning principles are embedded into everyday practice, ensuring that care and academic excellence coexist.

Fun and emotional engagement are leadership tools for renewal, not distractions from learning

Integrating joy into the curriculum reframed fun as a catalyst for academic depth rather than a detour from it. The deliberate infusion of creativity and collaboration into mathematics, science, and the arts demonstrated that playful inquiry can sustain cognitive demand and relational trust simultaneously. For leaders, the task is to legitimise joy as an educational value; to design learning that engages both intellect and emotion, recognising that curiosity and belonging are prerequisites for persistence.

Reflexive and pracademic leadership is vital for navigating complexity

The challenges of contemporary schooling require leaders who can bridge theory and lived practice - those who operate as pracademics. Reflexive leaders move beyond procedural management to inquiry-driven leadership, where decision-making is continuously examined through ethical, emotional, and scholarly lenses. Documentation, dialogue, and reflective analysis transform experience into professional knowledge, ensuring that leadership growth is evidence-informed but also deeply human.

The world remains marked by ongoing trauma and disruption. Natural disasters, wars, inequity, and social unrest continue to redefine priorities within contemporary schooling. These conditions reinforce the growing need for reflective and pracademic leadership that can interpret complexity, respond to human need, and sustain learning communities through instability. The most powerful learning from this journey is that leadership capable of sustaining learning through turbulence must also sustain hope. Hope is enacted in everyday leadership choices; to listen before defending, to prioritise connection over compliance, and to measure success by the rekindling of curiosity and confidence as much as

by performance data.

Conclusion

The Fun Project revealed that joy and well-being are not opposites of academic excellence but essential conditions for it. Through deliberate, reflective practice, I learned that sustainable school leadership involves more than restoring what was lost; it requires reimagining what education can be. The lessons drawn from this experience extend beyond the pandemic, offering insights for leaders navigating ongoing social, emotional, and global disruptions. As crises of many kinds continue to shape the educational landscape, the role of the reflective and pracademic leader becomes ever more critical. Such leadership bridges research and lived experience, balances accountability with humanity, and transforms schools into communities of learning and hope. Ultimately, when leaders choose connection over compliance, education moves closer to its transformative purpose.

Declarations

AI use declaration

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used only for grammar, syntax, and formatting refinement during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, *ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025)* was employed to review sentence structure and grammatical accuracy. No AI tools were used for conceptual development, argument generation, data analysis, or interpretation of findings.

Example prompt used: "Please check this paragraph for grammar and syntax accuracy while preserving academic tone." All intellectual content, critical analysis, and conclusions presented in this manuscript are entirely the author's own work.

Author contribution statement

The author confirms sole responsibility for the conception, design, analysis, and writing of this manuscript.

Ethical considerations

This study is based on the author's personal reflections and professional experiences as a school principal. No data were collected from students, staff, or parents, and no identifiable information is disclosed. Ethical approval was therefore not required.

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Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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