EMERALD**HANDBOOKS**

THE EMERALD HANDBOOK OF GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION AND LEADERSHIP

CONCEPTS, CASES, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

EDITED BY:
NICOLA **SUM**, PAUL **CAMPBELL**, STEPHEN **MACGREGOR** AND RANIA **SAWALHI**



The Emerald Handbook of Global Perspectives on Educational Innovation and Leadership

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The Emerald Handbook of Global Perspectives on Educational Innovation and Leadership: Concepts, Cases, and Future Directions

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Reflecting on the complexity and dynamism that characterizes many of the contexts represented in this volume, leadership and innovation remain critically important in our education systems. Considering this, we sincerely hope that readers gain insight, provocation, and inspiration from engaging with this volume, and that the conversation, conceptual development, empirical exploration, and possibilities in policy and practice continue to expand in the years ahead.

Introduction – Education, Leadership, and Innovation: The Challenge of Slow Change and Conflicting Expectations

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Abstract

Educational innovation today is marked by a persistent tension between expansive rhetoric and constrained reality. Within a cultural landscape saturated by discourses of creativity, innovation is frequently reduced to technological fixes, efficiency-driven life-hacks, and influencer-mediated notions of disruption. These framings increasingly permeate educational discourse, shaping expectations of change while obscuring the deeper pedagogical, epistemological, and ethical questions at stake. This chapter interrogates dominant narratives of innovation and argues for a shift towards recognizing the evidence of innovation as slow, uneven, and non-linear change, which carries implications for leaders as mediators working within conditions of expectation ambiguity, balancing system coherence with the need for transformation. In foregrounding innovation as relational and interpretive work, this chapter establishes the conceptual and normative foundations of the handbook, clarifying its purpose and framing subsequent explorations of policy, practice, and leadership across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: Educational innovation; educational leadership; expectation ambiguity; educational policy; global perspectives

Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape is currently defined by a profound paradox. We exist in a cultural milieu saturated with the rhetoric of creativity, where 'innovation' is often flattened into a series of digital life hacks and online influencer-driven trends. Our everyday lives bring us into frequent contact with tech-driven representations of life hacking, a term that captures aspirations of improving notions of work/life balance based on strategies that increase time efficiency, or an unexpected solution to a common problem (Potts, 2010). The proliferation of such discourse and tech-driven 'innovations' extends into how the purpose and possibilities for innovation in education are also discussed. Recent scholarship identifies the implications of learning technologies and digital evolution as opportunities to hack education through cultural or temporal practices or furthering historical reverence to the origin story of the classroom (Bachmann & Shah, 2016; Potts, 2024). While Bachmann and Shah (2016) note that 'to hack a classroom is not to break it, replace it or upgrade it, but to understand some of its key functions and to reimagine, reconfigure and recreate them' (p. 458), others argue that hacking is a necessary 'productive destruction' requiring immersion in the pedagogical, epistemological, and philosophical core of schooling to enable the reclamation of that which is lost – 'the adventure' (Smith et al., 2018, p. xiv). It is the nature of such reimagining and reconfiguring that continues to drive the innovation discourse.

Consequently, education sits primed for innovation that reflects a substantial rethink in response to contemporary needs, or potentially vulnerable to quick fixes or empty promises of innovations that either do not meet the moment, or result in unintended consequences that distract from the initial intent. Education sits in the long shadow of a post-pandemic timeline, still bruised by COVID-19, having sputtered through realities of a digital divide, inequities of access and resources, and systemic gaps that failed to address diversities of communities and their learners. A rallying call to re-imagine education (UNESCO, 2022), and subsequently prioritizing leadership for learning (UNESCO, 2024), has catalyzed interest in the novel, the creative, and the role of educational leadership as solution-driven through such inventive approaches. Yet, as Dediu (2014) pointedly observed, all invention is not innovation. Instead, innovation requires an investment in challenges and time to nurture and develop something new and creative into something useful and sustainable. The editors of this handbook, in earlier published work, argue 'innovation is situated and relational, emerging through iterative cycles of reflection, adaptation, and collaboration' (Campbell et al., 2025, p. 2).

Context, concepts, and the connection to people lay the foundations for considering the intersection of education, innovation, and leadership. Having introduced broad tensions stretched across an ever-changing landscape, this introductory chapter addresses the challenge of innovation as a slow change in education, but as importantly, how this comes to be a possible consequence or implication of conflicting expectations. Lastly, we consider the work of educational leaders as the linchpins between the aspirations and the actions. We argue

that it is this consideration of interconnected relationships between education as a sector, schooling as a culture, communities as contexts, and pedagogical, epistemological, and philosophical drivers of concepts and language for innovation, that frame the contributing chapters of this *The Emerald Handbook of Global Perspectives on Educational Innovation and Leadership: Concepts, Cases and Future Directions*.

Innovation in Education Is an Uneven and Non-linear Change

Given the landscape of tech hacks and rapidity of digital technology, the education sector remains inherently conservative despite global pressures to modernize (Fuad et al., 2020). Our previous work, through a comprehensive environmental scan, found that professionals in sites of practice were commonly perceived as constrained by entrenched institutional habits that limited openness to change (Friesen et al., 2025). Zhao (2020) argues that such structural norms establish a 'grammar of schooling' (p. 30), which scholars note as further reinforcing the slow rate of practical development or realization for potential educational innovations (Serdyukov, 2017). Furthermore, entrenched institutional norms often persist and remain untouched by superficial reforms, meaning that successful implementation frequently requires difficult unlearning and new professional learning opportunities (Rikkerink et al., 2015; Zhao, 2020).

The pace of change is further aggravated by the apparent nature of innovative interventions. Innovation in education is not a discrete act but a dynamic, multi-stage process involving the generation, adaptation, and implementation of new or improved ideas, practices, or structures over time (Baregheh et al., 2009; Campbell et al., 2025). Consequently, educational innovation is best understood as situated and relational, emerging through iterative cycles of reflection and collaboration rather than immediate, universal adoption (Campbell et al., 2025). This process-oriented view suggests that while innovation may be embedded within the learning capacity of teachers and schools as learning organizations (Rikkerink et al., 2015), frequent and overlapping top-down implementation can generate initiative fatigue, which further exacerbates the time lag (Campbell et al., 2025; Friesen et al., 2025). Lastly, where policies are perceived as misaligned with local needs, staff may only engage in superficial adoption to meet basic accountability requirements rather than pursuing deep structural transformation (Campbell et al., 2025).

Within education, the relational and contextual constituents of successful innovation adoption and implementation reflect an underlying need to engage teachers, students, and the broader school community in the leadership labour of co-design, vision building, and strengthening organizational support to improve instructional outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020). In an early study of initiatives to lead innovation, Harris (2008) noted the organizational shift from tacit to explicit knowledge sharing, a co-construction culture that integrates broader networks and nurtures flexibility, and deep leadership that enriches practice within and across schools. From the extant literature, instead of viewing change itself as

inherently slow, a more critical interpretation is that the support structures and policy environments surrounding innovation are often what lag behind. Rather than treating education as simply resistant to innovation, it may be more accurate to ask whether meaningful change is slowed by the fragmented and conflicting policy environments in which schools are asked to innovate. The discourse must account for the varied, complex, and ever-changing expectations of students, teachers, educational leaders, and their communities.

Innovation as a Vehicle for Conflicting Expectations

Clear foundations are essential for setting meaningful expectations. However, despite its widespread use in education policy and aspirations, innovation continues to be a vague and unevenly articulated concept. Such incoherence exacerbates the gap between supranationally driven, top-down policy narratives and the lived realities and priorities of educators and local communities (Campbell et al., 2025; Friesen et al., 2025). This dynamic situates educational leaders in a double bind, requiring them to champion transformative, and inherently risky, practices while remaining bound to standardized accountability structures (Friesen et al., 2025). It represents the first configuration of conflicting expectations, most visibly enacted through the role of educational leaders, who are required to prioritize high-stakes testing and centralized accountability mechanisms that reduce leadership to a narrow, instrumental model of instructional oversight, while simultaneously being expected to advance transformative and innovative practice.

Secondly, the conceptual ambiguity drives a tech-heavy agenda as innovation, even while policy-makers seek to establish communities of practice and professional learning networks as a means of strengthening the collective capacity of human-centred enterprise in education. This contributes to a fundamental conflict between the neoliberal expectation of education as a production line for economic development, producing students shaped for the global economy, and the ethos of creative ingenuity and 'productive destruction' noted earlier by Smith et al. (2018) to encourage learning as an end in itself. Serdeyukov (2017) refers to the former as a technocentric syndrome, where it is assumed that educators will know and address all the problems or complexities that result from the continual influx of technology in the classroom. What is less clear, and was made most evident through the global pandemic of 2020, is that there is little time or any professional learning of a substantive nature to support the expectations of a technology-driven innovation agenda, with school leadership often recognizing the value of returning to the core practice of teaching and learning. Market-oriented expectations often frame technological tools as expedient remedies; however, meaningful innovation requires that these tools remain subordinate to sound pedagogical foundations and human agency (Serdyukov, 2017).

Lastly, innovation expectations are often complicated by imported models that do not align with local socio-cultural, political, or institutional contexts (Campbell et al., 2025). What may be envisioned at global or national policy

levels are limited in their applicability and effectiveness for leadership and their immediate school communities at the local level (Campbell & Sum, 2026). Diversity of culture, identity, geography, and economic investment in education challenges the relevance of global mandates, leading to further resistance or fragmentation of practice (Campbell et al., 2025; Friesen et al., 2025). In this regard, the conflict lies with the aspirations for innovation and the limitations of financial resources for educational leadership to be able to implement and sustain initiatives.

Educational Leadership Bridging Innovation and Expectation Ambiguity

Regardless of whether education is slow to innovate or is subject to conflicting expectations, the remit to lay down the road and set a path that shapes a community to overcome such gaps is the work of educational leadership. Strike (2004) proposed the value of schools as communities of coherence, cohesion, care, and contact, which is reinforced through Leithwood et al.'s (2020) revisited claims for successful leadership, such as responsiveness, building relationships, and developing people, influencing the conditions for teaching and learning, and acting in emotionally appropriate ways. In this way, leadership operates as a pivotal conduit, converting broad and frequently ambiguous policy aspirations into practical actions that align with the unique cultural dynamics of individual schools (Campbell et al., 2025; Friesen et al., 2025). Effective leadership entails balancing system coherence with the imperative for transformation, such that leaders often function as gatekeepers who filter and interpret policy influxes to safeguard professional autonomy at the school level (Campbell et al., 2025). Furthermore, leaders strategically create scope for professional risk-taking and experimentation within tightly regulated, high-stakes settings (Friesen et al., 2025).

In addressing conflicting expectations, leaders work to build conditions of psychological safety and relational trust, which enable educators to take risks and learn from failure without fear of reprisal from accountability measures (Hojeij, 2024; Rikkerink et al., 2015). Often, such conditions have included strategies of distributed and transformational leadership to enhance the innovation capability of educators. In low-capacity or high-accountability contexts, establishing such conditions evolves over time, beginning with centralized approaches to provide stability before moving towards shared governance (Campbell et al., 2025; Hojeij, 2024).

Through establishing a community culture and mediating seemingly incoherent expectations, effective leadership is grounded in ethical, normative, and equity-oriented frameworks to ensure that innovation does not inadvertently reinforce existing systemic inequities (Campbell et al., 2025). Such an approach prioritizes the elevation of marginalized perspectives, positioning students and families as collaborative agents in change processes rather than as audiences for reform.

Purpose and Structure of This Handbook

At a minimum, the preceding discussion serves as a launchpad for the author's contributions, which follow. We hope it also provides an introduction to the complexity of studying and addressing the relationship between educational leadership and innovation. The conceptualization of this book draws upon a comprehensive scoping review of literature spanning 63 peer-reviewed studies from diverse global contexts, conducted by the editorial team (Campbell et al., 2025), and a parallel environmental scan mapping the policy landscape in relation to innovation, education, and leadership (Friesen et al., 2025). This volume is also informed by ongoing dialogues within the Educational Leadership Network group of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI), particularly through emerging conversations on innovation that brought together scholars and practitioners from diverse contexts. The Handbook seeks to bridge the gap between discourse and practice, encouraging more deliberate, reflective, and context-sensitive approaches to educational innovation and leadership. We posit that innovation in education is best understood not as a singular or static concept, but as a dynamic, contextually embedded process encompassing the generation, adaptation, and implementation of new or improved ideas, practices, or structures that enhance learning, equity, and systems (Friesen et al., 2025; Fuad et al., 2022). This could be manifest in the form of a product, a process, or a cultural condition, and is shaped by the interplay of leadership, policy, professional agency, and socio-cultural context (Campbell et al., 2025). Accordingly, contributing authors were invited to address these aspects through one of four themes: conceptual foundations; systemic and contextual influences; practice, case studies, and examples; and future directions. The contributions update the story arc on the discourse of education, innovation, and leadership to its contemporary contexts and implications.

The timing of this volume coincides with the intersection of the post-COVID-19 context, the shift to the Education 2030 agenda, and the rapid developments with technology and AI. This book offers timely insights on how educators, leaders, and policy-makers can navigate the convergence of these potentially transformative forces. This book brings forth critical conceptualizations of leadership, innovation, and educational thinking while acknowledging their complex evolution in the current flux of globalized change.

Drawing on a range of contexts from around the globe, this book provides clarity for complex challenges through the significant diversity of perspectives, problem-solving, and leadership approaches for educators outlined. Initial chapters offer current and considered analyses of the foundational principles of innovation and its relationship to leadership practice and education. Conceptual contributions in the book extend extant scholarship through novel theorizations of innovation and leadership. Further chapters provide empirical studies illustrating systemic enablers and challenges from a vast range of contexts, matched by several different contributions on policy, practice, and context imbedded examples. These precede a focused and specific final section on future directions, which

itself challenges the field, policy makers, and educational practitioners to rise to the invitation of shaping what innovative leadership could look like in the future of education around the globe.

Accordingly, this collection celebrates authentic and diverse approaches. Contributions from colleagues across the education sector provide theoretical and empirical implications drawn from a range of countries, with multiple chapters providing global or regional comparative analyses. These contexts and economies represent a cross-sectional view across the world, tackling our understandings and contributing to new knowledge on notions of equity, outcomes, and impact in educational settings. By examining the inhibitors and enablers of innovation through diverse perspectives, and situating these within broader policy and political contexts, this volume advances theoretical understanding, deepens empirical insight, and informs practice and policy towards meaningful and sustainable educational change at this critical juncture. Within each chapter contribution, readers will find clear conceptualizations of innovation and its relationship to education and leadership. Contributing authors draw on considered and inspiring frameworks and theoretical approaches to highlight implications for practice, policy, and research. Furthermore, each chapter concludes with a set of questions intended as provocations for further reflection. These have been developed by the individual contributing authors and seek to inspire ongoing dialogue and engagement with the themes of work presented across this handbook.

The book is divided into four key sections, focused on conceptualizations, influences, practice, examples, and future directions. Each section commences with its own introduction clarifying the scope and rationale for the sequencing of chapters, to demonstrate how the progression of ideas deepens understanding, bridges from the previous section, and sets up the conceptual trajectory of the next. We provide an overview of each section here and invite readers to plan their own pathway through preferred focus areas or across the four thematic arenas of work.

Section I: Introduction – Conceptual Foundations of Innovation and Leadership

Section I interrogates the conceptual foundations of innovation and leadership in education. Across chapters on adaptive coaching for a changing workforce, emotional reflexivity as a driver of innovation, related higher education frameworks, contextual transformation, and emergent leadership praxis, the section examines how innovation is defined, distinguished from creativity, and embedded in diverse traditions of educational leadership. Contributions explore the personal, political, and professional dimensions of innovation, showing how conceptual clarity shapes leaders' practices, decision-making, related policy, and the possibilities for meaningful innovation.

Section II: Introduction – Systemic and Contextual Influences on Innovation

Section II examines how innovation is shaped by the systems, structures, and contexts in which educational leaders work. Across chapters on governance, political pressure, teacher well-being, AI, trust, gender equity, policy translation, and collective leadership, the section shows that innovation is mediated by both individual leadership practice as well as the broader conditions that enable and constrain change.

Section III: Introduction – Policy, Practice, and Examples of Innovation

This section analyses the ways through which innovation is fostered through a confluence of policy, practice, and context. This section provides concrete illustrations of how policies and practices work within different educational contexts. In doing so, it illustrates how policies and practices can be conducive to innovation.

Section IV: Introduction – Future Directions: Research, Methodology, and Implications for Change

The final section advances a future-focused understanding of educational innovation by positioning leadership as relational, ethical, and collectively enacted practice. Building on themes illustrated and grounded through the preceding sections, contributions examine how innovation is shaped by context, mediated through the complexity of everyday interactions, evaluated against ethical purposes, and sustained through whole-school cultures. Collectively, the section challenges instrumental views of change and offers future directions for how researchers approach the dearth in empirical studies on innovation, and how leaders navigate complexity to support responsible and enduring educational innovation.

Conclusion

If innovation is too often imagined as a breakthrough, this volume suggests a different picture: innovation as relational, interpretive work. Educational leaders stand at the centre of that labour as those who must translate ambition into action under conditions of uncertainty. What follows, then, is a careful account of how innovation is understood, enacted, resisted, and reworked across varied educational settings and systems.

By examining innovation as relational, interpretive work, a more critical examination is possible of the surrounding conditions, drivers, and influences both of innovation and of the work of leaders in our education systems. In doing so, this handbook does not offer a singular account of 'how to innovate', but a collective and critical examination of how innovation is led and practiced across a range of contexts around the world. Often framed as essential to improvement, equity, or system renewal, the chapters in this volume illuminate the varied ways

innovation imperatives are interpreted and operationalized, and the intended and unintended consequences this generates for leadership practice. Together, the contributions of this volume clarify the conceptual terrain of innovation and educational leadership, while attending closely to the contexts in which both take shape. The focus on leadership is thus accompanied by a careful consideration of what innovation is for, whose interests it advances, and whose voices are amplified or marginalized in its pursuit. In doing so, we hope that the persistent focus on the leadership of innovation is matched with a more careful consideration of the nature and purpose of innovation, the systemic conditions that mediate, enable, or constrain the possibilities of it, and the implications of this for our collective aspirations for our education systems and their role and impact on our communities and society more broadly.

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Section I

Introduction – Conceptual Foundations of Innovation and Leadership

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Section I sets the conceptual foundations for this volume by asking what innovation in education and its implications for leadership really means, as well as why clarity is so necessary. Across contexts, innovation is invoked as a policy imperative, a rhetorical shorthand, or a promise of improvement, yet it is often left undefined, conflated with reform, or treated as a universal good. This ambiguity has consequences: leaders are tasked with delivering innovation without agreement on what it entails, for whom it is novel, or under what conditions it becomes legitimate. The chapters in this section collectively respond to this dilemma. They argue that innovation must be understood as a dynamic, relational, and contested process, shaped by conceptual precision, cultural and emotional conditions, and systemic structures of power and practice. Taken together, they cultivate pluriversal perspectives, showing that our understanding of innovation should move beyond singular universalized assumptions to multiple, socio-culturally mediated possibilities, and that leadership must be understood as both an enabler and a mediator of innovation.

The first theme this section addresses is the importance of conceptual clarity. Without seeking precise universal definitions, this section, and the handbook more broadly, identify common conceptual characteristics that could prevent innovation from becoming a slogan, and emphasize it as being a substantive and meaningful process to do and achieve things differently in our systems. Ndindeng examines how innovation is framed in further and higher education across the UK and Commonwealth, distinguishing creativity as the generation of novel ideas, from innovation as the implementation of those ideas to create demonstrable value. They show how governance structures, funding arrangements, and accountability regimes shape what counts as innovation, underscoring the need for definitional clarity and conceptual precision in the leadership of innovation.

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Building on this, Alsulami and Alenazy advance a framework for contextualized innovation leadership (FCLI), which organizes innovation into four dimensions: problem framing, capacity and culture, coordination and governance, and equity and ethics. Comparative evidence from OECD nations and the Global South reveals that trust processes and moral commitments underlie both. Their framework blends creativity with justice, arguing that sustainable innovation and the reform that results from it seldom hinges on novelty alone but on moral awareness and equity.

Connected to this, Booth and Harmon conceptualize innovation as adaptive transformation, building on this notion of innovation and a relational process, not just a technical or outcome focused process. Presented with the backdrop of educator burnout, generational shifts in professional expectations, and the growing imperative for psychological safety, they introduce the NextGen Coaching framework. This model positions coaching as a lever for relational innovation and systemic adaptability, emphasizing generational literacy, relational sustainability, and adaptive professionalism. Together, these chapters establish the conceptual terrain when examining the leadership of innovation, emphasizing that innovation is not a self-evident good but a process requiring conceptual clarity, theoretical grounding, and moral seriousness.

A second theme this section addresses highlights the cultural and emotional dimensions of innovation. Innovation is deeply human, embedded in traditions and sustained through affective relationships. Chiu develops the idea of Herz-reflexive leadership, arguing that emotions are ethical guides in leadership for innovation, not barriers. Drawing on Brentano's intentionality and Nussbaum's capabilities approach, they call for emotional reflexivity as a central dimension of leadership practice in the pursuit of innovation. Innovation in this view requires leaders to cultivate emotional awareness alongside technical and strategic skills.

Mumtaz turns to Indonesian pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), institutions with centuries of educational tradition. Their analysis reveals that innovation in such settings is not the work of a single leader and is instead a networked, collective achievement. Structural brokers and stabilization efforts navigate Niche-Regime dynamics to protect innovations from inertia, demonstrating how innovation and resulting change depend on collective agency. This case illustrates that innovation is always situated, shaped by cultural continuity and collective negotiation. These chapters remind us that innovation is relational, pluriversal, and inseparable from the emotional and cultural conditions that sustain educators and communities. They challenge technocratic understandings of innovation, proposing that leadership must attend to the human dimensions of innovation and the change that can result from it.

The third theme this section addresses explores how leaders navigate innovation in practice, often under notable constraints. Adnett and Leonard study Australian independent schools, where leaders balance transformative aspirations with business-as-usual demands. They introduce dynamic tools that function as epistemic objects, provoking reflection and enabling leaders to navigate tensions between stability and change. These tools foster epistemic and paradigmatic fluency, which is the capacity to integrate diverse ways of knowing and respond adaptively to complexity.

In France, Lazar examines how principals foster pedagogical innovation within a centralized system. Using Crossan et al.'s 4I model of organizational learning, they show how leaders move from intuition to collective action but face bottlenecks during institutionalization due to systemic constraints. Lazar identifies the resilient identity of the Pragmatic Pilot, leaders who leverage social intelligence and informal influence to sustain innovation between the lines of national mandates. This chapter illustrates how innovation is enacted in constrained environments, offering lessons for leadership learning and policy in similarly centralized systems.

McTaggart and McTaggart analyze innovation in higher education through the typology of the 'Three Ps': personal, people, and politics. Their chapter shows how individual agency, collective workplace dynamics, and internal political structures interact to shape innovation. They demonstrate how alignment with dominant leadership cultures and informal power structures can both enable and inhibit creativity, often diluting or deferring promising ideas. By integrating the role of power across the Three Ps, they highlight that innovation is multifaceted, requiring leaders to recognize and address the personal, interpersonal, and political dynamics that determine whether creativity and the resulting innovation(s) flourish or falter.

Finally, Khumalo proposes a conceptually hybrid leadership framework for navigating disrupted schooling ecosystems. Their model integrates socio-just, digi-tech, strategic agile, and endurant leadership, offering a systemic approach to generating, adapting, and diffusing innovative practices. Khumalo argues that effective leadership for innovation in disruptive times requires interdependent capabilities instead of isolated traits. Their framework provides both a theoretical contribution and a practical roadmap, showing how leaders can deploy technological capacity ethically, remain strategically agile, and foster inclusive, sustainable educational contexts amidst uncertainty.

These chapters demonstrate that innovation is political, negotiated within systems of power, and dependent on leaders' ability to mobilize agency under constraint. They show that leadership for innovation is not a style, but a process and a space requiring navigation of tensions between aspiration and reality, equity and efficiency, and creativity and compliance.

These key themes in Section I, conceptual clarity, cultural and emotional dimensions, and systemic navigation, put forward the proposition that innovation requires conceptual precision: without clarity, leadership risks being tasked with rhetorical goals rather than substantive practice. In addition, innovation is relational and pluriversal: it is shaped by cultural traditions, emotional reflexivity, and collective agency, not just by technical reform, or universalized perspectives or beliefs about innovation and its implications for leadership. Finally, innovation is political and systemic: it unfolds within structures of governance, accountability, and power, requiring leaders to navigate dilemmas, mobilize agency, and sustain equity.

In this way, Section I provides some conceptual provocations and foundations for the volume. We believe that it equips the field with sharper tools for analysis and debate, while setting the stage for Section II, where systemic conditions, political mediation, and institutional pressures are critically examined.

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Chapter 1

Rethinking Innovation and Leadership: A Conceptual Framework for Educational Transformation

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Abstract

Innovation is often framed as the remedy for systemic problems in education, but its relationship to leadership is under-theorized and is frequently collapsed into a technocratic and managerial lens. This chapter challenges dominant discourses on innovation and argues that these perspectives are inadequate because they neglect the ethical, relational, and contextual dimensions in which forms of educational change transpire. To that end, this chapter presents the framework for contextualized innovation leadership (FCIL), positioning innovation as a social and value-laden process emerging from four interdependent spheres: problem framing; capacity and culture; coordination and governance; equity and ethics. Based on a conceptual analysis, the chapter illustrates the shortcomings of policy transfer and stresses the importance of contextually intelligent interpretation and adaptation of innovation across varied educational contexts. It asks an important question: can leadership be reframed part of the moral ecology? That is, as enabling systems and actors to contend with complexity and to negotiate meaning for a way forward, facilitating equitable and contextually appropriate transformation? This chapter, therefore, provides a well-integrated, grounded framework for approaching innovation leadership in current educational settings.

Keywords: Educational innovation; innovation leadership; equity and ethics; distributed leadership; systems thinking; contextual intelligence

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1. Introduction: Reimagining Innovation–Leadership

Even though innovation is a common topic in debates, attempts to clarify how it relates to leadership often end in ambiguity. It is also commonly touted by governments and organizations alike as an answer to complex, systemic challenges, but ultimately, some part of it ends up framing these questions through the lens of efficiency, digitization, or measurability (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). These framings risk presenting educational change as a technical process, when underlying relational, cultural, and ethical purposes shape how innovation unfolds in practice (Ball, 2023; Selwyn, 2022).

Recent scholarship that contradicts this dominant framework makes the case for context, power relations, and policy agendas shaping innovation (Biesta, 2022; Hallinger, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2023). Innovation is not implemented per se but interpreted and negotiated in concrete institutional and sociocultural contexts.

In this regard, this chapter reinterprets innovation leadership as a relation and value-based practice. Instead of regarding innovation as a technical intervention, it is perceived as a cooperative process in which leaders and stakeholders make sense of challenges and co-design context-sensitive solutions. This lens asks us to foreground values of trust, community and ethical deliberation in the pursuit of sustainable educational reform.

This reconceptualization builds on the FCIL, a novel conceptual model introduced in this chapter. Innovation is conceived through four interdependent arenas: problem framing, capacity and culture, coordination and governance, equity and ethics. These arenas function as an organic, integrated whole that embodies the complexity and nonlinearity of educational change.

This chapter has three main contributions. First, it offers a definition of innovation that is conceptually rooted and thus goes beyond technocratic interpretative frameworks. Second, this section presents the FCIL as a structure incorporating ethical inquiry with distributed leadership and systems thinking. Third, it positions innovation leadership more contextually and highlights the influence of contextual intelligence on how innovation is perceived and acted upon in reality. All together, these contributions orient innovation leadership as a relationally engaged process with ethical orientation and complexity mastery.

2. Unpacking Innovation and Its Relationship with Leadership

Although policy discourse attributes innovation to matters of efficiency and improvement, such interpretations reduce it to an operational function, removed from the social, cultural, and ethical frameworks that define educational contexts. To understand innovation, these narrow definitions should be moved far beyond the literal sense of the word and also be understood as how innovation relates to leadership, organizational structures, and institutional conditions.

2.1. A Definition of Innovation: From Rhetoric to Contextual Praxis

Innovation in education is frequently summoned but remains conceptually nebulous. It has frequently been invoked to justify reform not grounded in an explicit

theory (Campbell et al., 2025; OECD, 2023). Although organizations often frame innovation as essential to progress, such definitions tend to privilege features such as efficiency, scale, and tangible end products, leaving out broader social conditions in which educational systems operate (OECD, 2020, 2022).

In response to this limitation, this chapter frames educational innovation as a socially conditioned and ethically directed process through which new or adapted practices are collectively conceived, interpreted, and enacted to enhance learning, equity, and systemic coherence. Instead of viewing innovation as a stepwise product or a managerial tool, this definition frames it as an iterative and ethical process, reflecting perspectives that emphasize care, inclusion, and responsiveness to context (Noddings, 2023; UNESCO, 2021).

2.2. Innovation and Creativity: Closing the Implementation Gap

Creativity is the birth and the generation of new ideas, and innovation is a formalization process that embeds them in organizational practice. The issue within education, then, is not the lack of good ideas but how we embed these in practice, our hands frequently tied (Harris & Jones, 2023; OECD, 2023) by organizational cultures and structural factors (Fullan & Quinn, 2024; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). It thereby becomes a leadership challenge and requires environments that support testing ideas, reflecting together on experience, and learning collectively.

2.3. Leadership and Innovation: A Relational Interdependence

Innovation leadership is a relational and contextual practice, not solely a matter of exerting formal authority. The FCIL draws on three interrelated lenses to conceptualize this connection. Distributed leadership conceptualizes leadership as an across-actors practice and, hence, facilitates innovation through collaboration rather than hierarchy (Harris, 2024; Spillane, 2022). Adaptive leadership focuses on learning in conditions of uncertainty and requires leaders to sense the complexity rather than implement a pre-set solution (Heifetz, 2023). Systems leadership places particular significance on the interrelation between organizational elements and the need for alignment, feedback, and coordination to maintain innovation (Senge, 2025; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

2.4. Reframing Agency in Education Systems

One of the primary issues with innovation leadership is who has permission to innovate and how agency is spread throughout the education sector. This tension makes achieving calls for innovation more difficult because dominant policy frameworks typically restrict innovation to senior leadership, in conjunction with internal or external reform actors (Fullan et al., 2023).

The FCIL disputes this premise, framing agency in a distributed, relational, and negotiated manner. Innovation emerges not from individual leaders but from interactions between teachers, students, communities, and institutional actors. Such an approach is significantly more sustainable than treating educators as

passive implementers of externally defined changes (Fullan & Quinn, 2024; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2024; Sahlberg, 2023).

However, agency is not equal and is subject to policy limits, institutional structures, and cultural patterns. This, therefore, means that innovation leadership is about making space for agency to thrive, but also about tackling the power relations that help dictate whose voices shape change.

3. The Framework for Contextualized Innovation Leadership (FCIL)

3.1. Reframing Leadership as the Infrastructure of Innovation

Innovation in education is commonly a managerial and technical process aimed at implementing policy, setting targeted performance indicators, and achieving their outputs. In these conceptualizations, leadership is often treated as an administrative task, executing externally defined reforms. Critical policy scholarship, however, critiques this characterization on the basis that it exemplifies a more generalized logic of performativity in which innovation leads to accountability and standardization but not substantive change (Ball, 2023).

In response to these limitations, the FCIL reconceptualizes leadership as infrastructure that facilitates innovation. From this perspective, leadership is embedded in innovation – defining the ways through which systems construct challenges, aggregate knowledge, and coordinate actions. What is more, this is consistent with research that has framed educational systems as complex and adaptive, in which change is non-linear, emergent, and based on interaction (Mason, 2023). Leadership in these systems is about enabling learning, contingent relationships, and sustaining coherence despite complexity.

It re-frames the focus from individual leaders to leadership practice itself and its social conditions, such as governance arrangements, professional norms, or organizational culture. Innovation, then, is not seen as an outcome of isolated choices but emerging from interconnected processes contained within the system (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

3.2. A Four-arena Model of Innovation Leadership

Four Interdependent arenas constitute the foundation on which the FCIL is organized.

- Problem framing
- Capacity and culture
- Coordination and governance
- Equity and ethics

Reflected in these arenas is the character of innovation, acknowledging the reality that change arises through the interaction of values, structures, relationships, and meaning.