esha HEADLIGHT

February 2026

European School Heads Association

Leadership in Times of Complexity

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Concrete Action

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CHALLENGES AND PRESSURE

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PIONEERING SOIL LITERACY

We are looking for visionary school heads – help us with your expertise!

The Future
of School Leadership in Europe

STIG JOHANNESSEN

I am deeply grateful for the trust placed in me through the election as President of the European School Heads Association. I accept this role with humility, a strong sense of responsibility, and genuine optimism for what we, together, can achieve in the years ahead.

ESHA is, at its core, a community of leaders who believe that leadership matters – not as an abstract concept, but as a lived practice that shapes learning environments, professional cultures and democratic values across Europe. The presidency is therefore not an individual position, but a collective responsibility to strengthen our shared leadership culture, ensure that every member's voice is heard, and further develop ESHA as a professional learning organisation.

Leadership in Times of Complexity

Across Europe, school leaders are navigating an increasingly complex and demanding landscape. Expectations are rising, resources are often under pressure, and schools are asked to respond simultaneously to academic achievement, inclusion, wellbeing, digital transformation and rapid societal change. These challenges are not isolated; they are shared realities across our education systems.

My own professional experience – as a school principal, organisational leader and representative of school leaders at national and European levels – has consistently reinforced one key insight: sustainable improvement in education depends on strong, supported and professionally confident leadership. Leadership is the crucial link between policy and practice, between vision and daily reality, and between organisational structures and the people who bring them to life.

This understanding is closely aligned with ESHA's vision. By empowering school leaders, we strengthen equity, democratic values and the capacity for sustainable transformation in education systems across Europe.

ESHA as a Learning Organisation

The ESHA vision reminds us that *we are all leaders, and we are all learners*. This principle should guide how we work together in the coming years. A central priority for my presidency is to further develop ESHA as a professional learning organisation – one that reflects the kind of schools we advocate for. This means

encouraging professional dialogue across borders, collecting and sharing evidence, experiences and best practices, and creating spaces where school leaders can reflect, learn and grow together.

Leadership development cannot be reduced to individual training alone. It must be understood as collective capacity-building, where leadership teams, networks and associations support one another in navigating complexity and change.

Strengthening Voice and Influence

Another key ambition for the period ahead is to strengthen ESHA's role as a representative and influential voice for school leaders at the European level. While the importance of school leadership is increasingly recognised, the conditions under which leaders work vary significantly across countries and systems.

ESHA has a unique role as a platform *from members, for members and with members*. By strengthening regional dialogue, developing ambassador roles and deepening engagement with European institutions, we can better reflect diverse national realities while speaking with a stronger collective voice. Our influence must be grounded in professional legitimacy – built on listening carefully to members, understanding local contexts and basing our advocacy on professional knowledge and lived experience.

Connection, Belonging and Shared Leadership

Finally, the future strength of ESHA lies in connection and belonging. Many school leaders experience increasing pressure and professional isolation. In this context, international professional communities are more important than ever.

ESHA should continue to be a space where leaders feel supported, recognised and connected across borders. Promoting shared leadership, professional solidarity and mutual trust is not only a value-based commitment; it is a strategic foundation for sustainable leadership in European education.

Looking Ahead – Together

I step into this role with great respect for the work that has already been done and with strong confidence in ESHA's foundation. At the same time, I am convinced that the years ahead call for renewed focus on leadership as a collective, relational and systemic endeavour. Together, we have the opportunity to strengthen school leadership as a vital force for quality, equity and innovation in education. I look forward to working with you all – listening, learning and leading together – as we continue to shape the future of school leadership in Europe.

European Parliament Intergroup on the Future of Education and Skills

As we start 2026, it is an opportune moment to take stock of the work of the European Parliament Intergroup on the Future of Education and Skills, reflect on where we stand, and highlight the progress made over the past period. The year 2025 has been a truly foundational year for the Intergroup, dedicated to putting in place the structures, partnerships and priorities that will guide the work throughout the parliamentary mandate. From 2026 onwards, this solid base will allow all to move decisively into a more action-oriented phase, with regular updates on the Intergroup's activities and impact.
educationandskills-ep.eu

First and foremost, it is great to see how all partners and supporters showed their engagement during this first year. The commitment has been essential in establishing the first-ever European Parliament Intergroup fully dedicated to education and training. In this context, the founding role of the European School Heads Association (ESHA) deserves our particular recognition. ESHA has been instrumental from the outset and continues to play a key role as a partner and as an active member of the Intergroup's Advisory Committee, ensuring that school leadership perspectives and on-the-ground realities are firmly embedded in the Intergroup's work.

Throughout 2025, the Intergroup focused on building credibility, visibility and inclusive governance. The year began with the first meetings of the Intergroup Secretariat, bringing together the offices of the co-chairs and the coordinating stakeholder organisations, notably the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) and the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP). These early discussions laid the groundwork for cooperation and for the development of a shared Work Programme.

The official launch of the Intergroup in February, marked by a high-level reception in Strasbourg with Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu, set the tone for the year. ESHA was represented by Thomas Minder, president of our Swiss member VSLCH. A common vision was established and the kick-off opened early exchanges on the forthcoming Union of Skills. In the months that followed, the Intergroup positioned itself. The input from the educational field so far was advocating for stronger investment in education and training, a reinforced Erasmus+ programme, enhanced citizenship education, and a right to education and training for all.
eshalink.eu/europarl

Engagement with stakeholders has been a defining feature of the Intergroup's work. An information session in April brought together more than 150 education and training stakeholders. Also, an Advisory Committee was composed. This body, where ESHA has a seat, ensures that the Intergroup's activities are evidence-informed and closely connected to learners', educators' and school leaders' realities.

Policy influence and cross-sectoral dialogue were reinforced through meetings with several Executive Vice-Presidents, contributions to the Renewed Manifesto for Lifelong Learning, and the dissemination of a strong Declaration on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, calling for dedicating 20% of the EU budget to education and training. The formal approval of the Intergroup Work Programme in October marked an important milestone, providing a clear strategic framework co-created with stakeholders.

The year concluded with renewed leadership, the identification of priority actions for 2026, the launch of the Intergroup's first website, and active support for Lifelong Learning Week and its side events. Together, these achievements confirm that 2025 has laid a robust foundation. Building on this, 2026 will focus on translating shared priorities into concrete action, ensuring that education and skills remain at the heart of Europe's future.

ESHA will do its best in contributing and giving input the coming year. We will keep you posted about all activities.

Why School Heads Are Drowning

(And 5 Simple Actions That'll Keep You Afloat)

HÉLIO VOGAS

What I should also have told you in Rome

Before putting up my Keynote at the ESHA Biennial in Rome, I interviewed the presidents of several national school head associations, from Italy to Norway, Switzerland to Bulgaria, France to the UK, to prepare myself well and connect to the specific challenges of school heads.

Every conversation revealed the same truth: most of you are drowning in all the challenges that are coming towards you. Not because you're weak, but because it is hard to lead decisively under the massive number of challenges and pressure. The system has turned you into firefighters who never get to prevent fires only put out the most dangerous ones. But there are some directions to help you being more in charge.

So let me connect the dots I tried to connect on the stage once again, with the outcomes of the interviews more pronounced. Here are the five Ps of which three were addressed at the conference and an extra two to complement your framework, and how they can solve YOUR specific challenges.

What is prediction?

I almost drowned once.

I was surfing in Rio de Janeiro as one of a shortboard crew, when a big wave caught me wrong. One second, I'm sitting on my board, the next I'm underwater with no idea which way is up. My lungs are screaming. That panicked voice in my head is yelling *DO SOMETHING*.

I came ashore safely. But the math of that day showed 20 surfers on that day… 5 longboarders totally safe, 15 shortboarders wiped out in the sand.

How could this be? The explanation was simple: The longboarders saw that wave coming. They paddled out early, positioned themselves perfectly, and avoided it. That's PREDICTION! My shortboard crew? We reacted when it was already too late, we apparently did not see it coming...

How does this connect to school leadership?

1. PREDICT | See the wave before it hits you

The longboarders survived because they read the ocean. You need to read your environment the same way and see the waves coming.

Your association leaders told me what's coming: declining enrolment, AI disruption, worsening staff shortages, rising special needs with flat resources.

P1 Action | Grab your leadership team. Ask: "What's the crisis we all see coming but haven't planned for?" Write it down. That's your starting point.

2. PREVENT | Stop fires before they start

Most crises come from silos — when experienced teachers won't collaborate with younger colleagues,

when departments isolate themselves, when leaders work alone instead of networking.

One leader said it perfectly: “What doesn’t work are isolated, one-off events. Lasting change requires ongoing dialogue.”

P2 Action | Pick ONE silo. Maybe it’s the generational gap between your veteran and new teachers. Or the disconnection between your leadership team and the teaching staff. Schedule them to solve one shared problem together. Perhaps designing a response to an upcoming policy change or creating a joint professional development session. Don’t overthink it. Just get them in the same room, working toward the same goal.

3. PREPARE | Build systems that don’t break

You can’t control the waves, the constant reforms, the political changes, the policy chaos, the societal transitions. But you CAN control how your school absorbs those shocks.

The best schools aren’t the ones with strong plans. They’re the ones with adaptive systems — teams that flex under pressure instead of shattering.

P3 Action | Identify your weakest system (communication? decision-making? conflict resolution?). Make it 10% more resilient this week by sharpening your plan for it. One small improvement.

4. PERFORM | Lead decisively when chaos hits

Most times you need to collaborate. Sometimes you need to take decisions or command. The best leaders know which moment calls for which style.

You did not become a school head to drown in consensus paralysis.

P4 Action | Notice your default style. Too collaborative? Too top-down? This week, deliberately use the opposite approach in one situation. See what happens.

5. PROTECT | Take care of your people (and yourself)

When you’re doing things that don’t serve students or staff, but you keep doing them anyway — that’s not dedication. That’s drowning.

Leadership means protecting your team’s wellbeing and your own by drawing boundaries around what actually matters.

P5 Action | Stop one thing this week. Delegate it, delete it, or do the minimum required. Reclaim that time for actual leadership.

Your next moves

You don’t need to do everything at once. Pick ONE P that addresses your biggest pressure point right now:

Incoming crisis you’re ignoring? ➜ PREDICT
Teams that won’t collaborate? ➜ PREVENT
Systems breaking under stress? ➜ PREPARE
Stuck in decision paralysis? ➜ PERFORM
Burning out from doing everything? ➜ PROTECT

Master one. Then come back for the next. Consciously working on yourself by changing some habits even a little bit, will make you more resilient and ready to see the waves coming and act upon it!

Want to bring this framework to your team?

Work with school leadership teams through workshops and coaching to build pressure-proof systems that actually stick. Whether it’s a team-building session on crisis leadership or ongoing support for your leadership group, let’s talk about what your school needs. Reach me at [helio@heliovogas.com] or connect on LinkedIn.

Youtube Video | eshalink.eu/surf-accident-story

Leading the Change

How School Leaders Bring Cyber Awareness into Europe's Classrooms

School leaders know the scene all too well: a teacher rushes in because a student has clicked something suspicious in a game; a parent calls to say their child received a worrying message from an unknown account; a class group chat turns toxic overnight. Digital life isn't happening "somewhere else" anymore. It is happening constantly, woven into children's friendships, their schoolwork, their identities — even into the hallways and playgrounds of our schools.

The SuperCyberKids project recognises this reality and meets it head-on. Rather than treating cybersecurity as a purely technical issue or something to be managed after incidents occur, it places it where it truly belongs: at the heart of school leadership, teaching, and wellbeing. Designed specifically for children aged eight to thirteen, SuperCyberKids transforms cybersecurity from a set of warnings into a meaningful learning journey that fits naturally into school life, and spreads awareness about how we can mitigate the online risks.

What sets the project apart is its insistence that cybersecurity is not just an ICT responsibility. It is a whole-school priority that requires vision and action from school heads. Leadership shapes whether teachers feel confident addressing digital risks, whether safeguarding extends into online spaces, and whether pupils understand the permanence and power of the digital footprints they leave behind. Without school leaders' involvement, cybersecurity remains fragmented.

With it, schools can build a coherent culture where digital safety becomes part of everyday conversations and decisions.

The project's outcomes have been distilled into two practical publications within ESHA's HEADstart series: *HEADstart #23* on cybersecurity in schools and *HEADstart #24* on cybersecurity education. These are direct reflections of SuperCyberKids' findings, designed specifically for school leaders who need actionable guidance rather than lengthy theoretical reports. They frame cybersecurity not only as a safeguarding requirement, but as an essential dimension of modern pedagogy, school identity, and digital citizenship.

At the core of SuperCyberKids lies a carefully developed European learning framework. The project team mapped out hundreds of relevant skills and structured them into a clear progression that makes sense for pupils just beginning to shape their digital lives. This framework then informed the creation of eighteen teaching modules covering everything from password habits and misinformation to online behaviour, reporting harmful incidents, managing abusive content, and responding to cyberbullying. Seven of these modules include full four-part lesson plans that can be taught with minimal preparation and adapted easily across subjects and school systems.

But what makes SuperCyberKids truly compelling for schools is its game-based approach. The project

uses interactive games to help children make sense of digital dilemmas in a safe, playful way. Children learn to question suspicious messages, recognise fake profiles, and think critically about online choices — without fear, and with the kind of enthusiasm that traditional worksheets rarely inspire. These games work just as well on a single projector in a modestly equipped classroom as they do in a digital-rich setting. Teachers guide the experience, but the pupils lead the discovery.

To support implementation, the project includes a comprehensive digital platform available at [eshalink.eu/digital-platform]. Once teachers or school leaders register and enter the invitation code [**2047Sup3r!**], they gain access to the entire ecosystem: lesson plans, games, community resources, tutorials, a competency-based search tool, and a knowledge test that helps schools assess pupils' understanding before and after a module. The platform is intentionally designed to be friendly for non-technical teachers. Everything is visual, clear, and ready to use.

The project's pilot schools — spread across Italy, Estonia, Germany, and EU-based English-speaking settings — demonstrated something essential: the schools where leadership actively engaged saw the most transformative impact. When school heads treated cybersecurity as part of their educational mission rather than a technical problem, teachers felt empowered and pupils felt supported. Conversations about digital life became normal, not reactive. Families were included. And the school's culture slowly shifted toward openness, safety, and shared responsibility.

SuperCyberKids is the practical pathway that turns awareness into action. It doesn't overwhelm schools with new systems or abstract frameworks. Instead, it offers a realistic, joyful, structured way to help children grow into confident, responsible digital citizens.

We need to prepare our schools, teachers and students that cybersecurity is no longer optional. It is part of what it means to educate a child in the 21st century. SuperCyberKids gives school leaders the tools to lead this change — calmly, confidently, and with the support of a European community walking the same path.

Bridging Sustainability and Education

Why School Leadership Matters More Than Ever

Across Europe, school leaders are navigating a world defined by rapid digitalisation, ecological urgency, and social change. **Education no longer prepares students only for exams, but for life in a complex, interconnected world.** Nowhere was this clearer than at the ESHA Biennial Conference 2025 in Rome, where school heads from over 25 countries across Europe came together.. During the visionary workshops on Sustainability Citizenship and related European Policy frameworks, the shared reflections point to a simple but powerful truth: **sustainability in education is no longer optional — it is foundational.**

Participants, many already familiar with initiatives such as **SYNAPSES**, looked back on the progress of recent years and forward to what lies ahead. Three priorities consistently emerged.

➜ First, the accelerating role of **digitalisation and online learning**, which reshapes how sustainability topics can be taught and shared.
➜ Second, the need to **embed sustainability across the curriculum**, rather than confining it to isolated projects or subjects.
➜ Third, the importance of **concrete, visible action** – from reducing water and energy use to tackling waste – so that sustainability is lived, not just discussed.

Yet a critical question remains: ***Is sustainability truly a priority in national and regional curricula across Europe?*** The answer, voiced by many participants, was nuanced. In practice, much depends on the convictions of individual educators and leaders. As one school director from the Netherlands put it:

"It depends on teachers. If they think it's important, it becomes a large part of the curriculum."

This reality highlights both a strength and a vulnerability. On the one hand, many schools already integrate elements of Sustainability Citizenship in meaningful ways. On the other, implementation is uneven. Some countries are calling for deeper, more systematic embedding, while others — Germany was mentioned explicitly — do not yet feel ready to scale up. Awareness of European frameworks such as **GreenComp** and the **European Green Deal** varies widely, and their translation into educational policy is often unclear. One participant admitted bluntly:

"No idea how the Green Deal is translated into education policies in the Netherlands."

Despite these challenges, the workshops made one thing clear: **we know what works**. Schools that embrace **Open Schooling**, **school gardens**, **project-based learning**, and strong **peer collaboration** see higher engagement from both students and teachers. When

learning is connected to real-world challenges, sustainability stops being abstract and becomes urgent and meaningful. As one school head observed:

"*Projects with real problems [work], if students have to present solutions to a company, make impact real.*"

Looking ahead, school leaders identified three levers for change:
- ➜ **clear policy direction**,
- ➜ **targeted teacher training**,
- ➜ **innovative leadership** that dares to connect vision with practice.

By bridging initiatives such as SYNAPSES and forwards building in BRIDGES, school heads can make sustainability visible at every level — from European frameworks to classroom realities. This alignment sends a powerful message: **sustainability matters, it is supported, and it belongs at the heart of education.**

For today's school leaders, the task is not merely to comply with policy, but to shape meaning. By leading for Sustainability Citizenship, schools can empower young people to understand the world they inherit — and to take responsibility for shaping its future.

Pioneering Soil Literacy

Call for School Leaders to Pilot the CURIOSOIL MOOC

As school leaders, you are constantly seeking innovative tools to prepare your students for a sustainable future. The CURIOSOIL Project invites you to be at the forefront of this mission by piloting a new Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on soil literacy.

Soil health is not just an environmental issue; it is a critical component of our future food systems, climate resilience, and biodiversity. To support educators in bringing this vital topic into the classroom, the CURIOSOIL consortium is developing a comprehensive digital learning tool — and we need your expertise to perfect it.

Become a Pioneer in Education

We are looking for visionary School Heads and educators to join our piloting team. By volunteering to review this MOOC before its official European launch, you will play a crucial role in shaping a resource that will be used by educators across the continent. This is your opportunity to ensure the tool is practical, engaging, and relevant for schools like yours.

How to Participate

We invite you to step into the role of a pioneer and provide your generous feedback.

See the Info Pack for Piloting

Visit this page to view the process and access the MOOC.

Deadline

We kindly ask for your feedback **by 16 February 2026**.

The Result

By early March, you will receive the fully polished MOOC — incorporating your insights — ready to share with your colleagues.

Join us in making soil literacy a fun and fundamental part of education. Your leadership can help plant the seeds for a more sustainable tomorrow.

Leading For Diversity In Education

Vivid discussions at the ESHA Biennial in Rome

Inclusive leadership: a strength to develop

Inclusive leadership in education starts with the belief that diversity is not a challenge to manage, but a strength to develop. Schools are places where differences in background, identity, and perspective meet every day, shaping how teachers teach and belong, how students learn and belong. Effective school leadership creates conditions in which these differences are recognised, valued, and used to improve learning for all. This requires reflection, dialogue, and the courage to question established norms. Leadership for diversity is therefore not an add-on, but a core responsibility of every school leader.

How do you lead for diversity in your school?

This was the central question that 40 school heads asked themselves during the *Leadership for Diversity* workshop held at the ESHA Biennial Conference in Rome in October 2025. The question resonated strongly, as participants came from very different school contexts and brought a wide range of experiences to the room.

In two large circles, Petra van Haren and Myrthe Stienstra facilitated parallel conversations on leading in diverse school environments. Participants explored their own associations with the concept of diversity, reflected on diversity within their leadership teams, and examined the diversity wheel as a shared analytical framework. This helped make visible which dimensions of diversity were already present and which often remained unspoken or overlooked. Although each participant had a unique story, two dominant perspectives emerged. On the one hand, were the leaders of highly diverse schools and teams, who struggled with the question of how to be truly inclusive and ensure that everyone feels seen and valued. On the other hand, were the school leaders who perceived little to no diversity among staff or students and recognised this absence itself as a pressing issue. Both perspectives revealed different, but equally complex leadership challenges.

There is no single, universal definition of diversity

By building a shared reference framework and taking time to understand one another's backgrounds, the group developed a deeper awareness of how differently diversity can be understood and experienced. A key insight was that there is no single, universal definition of diversity. Acknowledging this created a safe space in which participants felt able to discuss doubts, tensions, and concrete dilemmas without judgement.

Diversity goes beyond policy and strategy

The conversations made clear that diversity plays a role far beyond policy or strategy. In both private and professional life, aspects of identity influence how people move through society, respond in social situations, and collaborate at work. When these differences remain unspoken, misunderstandings easily arise. When they are explored openly, they can become a source of learning and growth.

Leadership for diversity starts with awareness, reflection, and intentional action

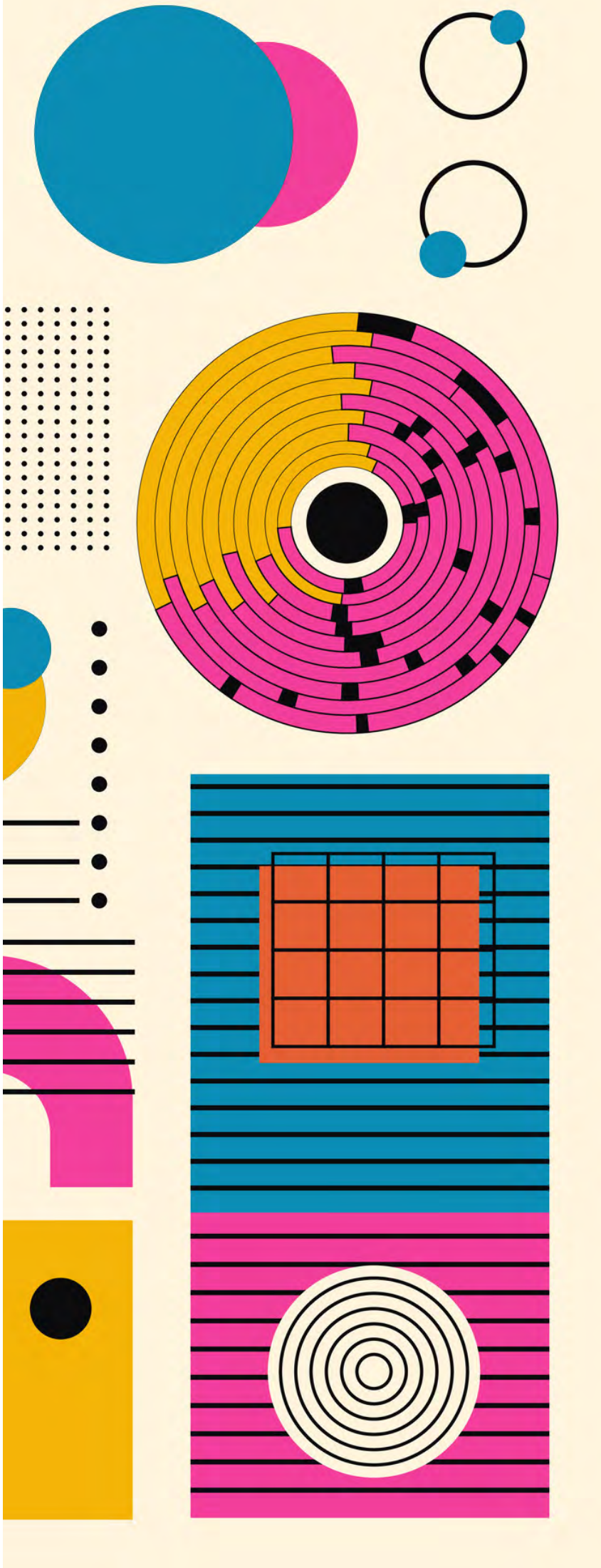
As the discussions deepened, two recurring and closely connected questions surfaced:

➜ How can schools attract more diverse teachers, and
➜ How can schools themselves become more diverse?

These questions did not lead to quick answers, but to a shared understanding that leadership for diversity starts with awareness, reflection, and intentional action. For school leaders, this means continuously examining their own assumptions, the culture of their organisation, and the systems that either enable or hinder diversity to flourish.

Are you interested in learning more about this topic or in exploring practical activities related to diversity and inclusion in your school?

On the website [leadershipfordiversity.eu], you will find a professional development handbook on leading for diversity. The handbook includes practical guidance and clear recommendations to support you in your role as a school leader.



Holistic School Leadership for Preventing (Cyber)Bullying

Insights from the PARTICIPATE Project

One of the popular mini symposia of the Rome ESHA Biennial was *Cure cyberbullying headaches by engaging with parents*. It showcased research from the PARTICIPATE project, a Marie Skłodowska-Curie doctoral network, that places a strong emphasis on understanding (cyber)bullying through the combined perspectives of parents, teachers, other professionals, and young people. For school leaders, its emerging findings offer important guidance for shaping whole-school strategies that address not only student behaviours but also the wider adult environment that influences them.

A central contribution of PARTICIPATE is its recognition that **adult behaviour, including teacher bullying** – a close to universal experience of students as victims or witnesses in the countries where research has been conducted –, can shape the bullying dynamics in schools. One of the project's research strands investigates how adult bullying — whether by teachers of other staff, or by the families and communities around students — can contribute to children themselves becoming involved in cyberbullying. For school leaders, this highlights a crucial truth: creating a safe school climate begins with the adults. When students observe disrespect, intimidation or other behaviour that can be identified as bullying by staff, the school's anti-bullying message loses credibility if it addresses peer-to-peer bullying only. Leadership must therefore monitor, address and prevent bullying by teachers with the same seriousness as bullying by students.

Another major insight from PARTICIPATE is the **critical role of parents**, a group that has historically been under-represented in cyberbullying research. The project aims to generate the largest dataset on parents ever used in this field and to develop a practical toolkit for professionals working with families. For school leaders, this reinforces that parents cannot be treated as optional partners. Effective bullying prevention — both online and offline — requires coordinated action between home and school.

Strengthening collaboration begins with communication. School heads should establish clear, consistent channels for dialogue with parents about online risks, school policies, and early warning signs of conflict or aggression. Importantly, this communication must be inclusive and at eye level: culturally responsive, accessible, and designed to engage parents from diverse backgrounds, partly by acknowledging their knowledge and using them as training assets for school staff.

PARTICIPATE's work also reinforces the value of **whole-school approaches**. Bullying and cyberbullying do not occur in isolation, and they are most often interlinked. They emerge from a broader climate shaped by relationships, digital behavioural norms, expectations, and adult role modelling. School leaders must therefore embed anti-bullying efforts,

focusing on bullying by teachers at least as much as on peer bullying of students, into all aspects of school life: staff training, curriculum design, disciplinary processes, and community partnerships. Leadership is not only about managing incidents but building the structures that prevent them.

Addressing **teacher bullying** specifically requires courageous and transparent leadership. This includes establishing clear behavioural expectations for staff, providing training on respectful communication and conflict resolution, and implementing confidential reporting mechanisms for students and colleagues. When issues arise, leaders must respond swiftly and fairly. A positive adult climate strengthens student wellbeing and models the relational skills young people need online.

Finally, PARTICIPATE's cross-national perspective reminds school leaders that bullying is shaped by societal and technological contexts. Digital platforms evolve quickly, and so must school strategies. Leadership teams should stay informed about emerging risks, work closely with technology professionals, and ensure that their policies remain current and relevant.

PARTICIPATE – that ESHA is an associated partner of – reminds school leaders of the importance of uniting all educators (including parents) and students in building a respectful, safe and digitally responsible school community. The team has produced some relevant guidance included in the recently published HeadSign. You can also visit the project website for more information: msca-participate.eu

Sensing
Democracy-As-Becoming

What School Leaders Can Learn from an Embodied Approach to Education for Democracy

KARINE OGANISJANA

Professor and leading researcher at Riga Technical University (Latvia), heads the Latvian national team in the Horizon Europe project AECED

What if democracy is not only something we teach, discuss, or regulate — but something we *sense*, *experience*, and *become* together? This question lay at the heart of the interactive workshop **"Sensing Democracy-as-Becoming"**, delivered on 21 November 2025 at the Conference on Education for Democracy in Barcelona. Organised as part of a parallel session by the AECED project team, the workshop invited participants to explore democracy not as an abstract system, but as a lived, relational and embodied practice — highly relevant for those leading schools in complex and diverse contexts.
The workshop was facilitated by *Karine Oganisjana (Latvia)* and supported by *Kardelen Dilara Cazgir (Germany), Uldis Dūmiņš (Latvia)* and *Sandra Wallenius-Korkalo (Finland)*. Together, the team created a space where educators, researchers and practitioners could experience what democratic values *feel like* when enacted through the body, the senses, and shared meaning-making.
For school leaders, this approach offers a powerful reminder: democratic leadership is not only enacted through policies, meetings, or governance structures — it is lived daily through relationships, atmospheres, and the ways people experience belonging, voice and agency in school communities.

Democracy as a Process of Becoming

The workshop introduced participants to the concept of **democracy-as-becoming**, grounded in four interrelated principles drawn from Philip Woods' framework of holistic democracy:

- **Power sharing**
- **Transforming dialogue**
- **Relational well-being**
- **Holistic learning**

Rather than presenting these principles solely through explanation or debate, the workshop deliberately combined **cognitive reflection** with **aesthetic and embodied experiences**. This mirrors what school leaders increasingly recognise in practice: values are not internalised through words alone, but through experiences that engage emotions, bodies, and relationships.

Engaging the Senses: Learning Beyond Words

After an initial analytical introduction, participants were invited to "let their thinking minds rest" and explore democracy through the **five senses and movement**.

Hearing and Vision

Listening to Karl Jenkins' *Palladio* and watching a choreographed Paralympic performance revealed how participants instinctively associated sound and movement with leadership, dialogue and shared responsibility. Many recognised familiar school dynamics: moments when leadership shifts, when voices blend, and when collective harmony emerges without explicit instruction.

For school leaders, this raises an important reflection: *How often do we attend to the emotional and aesthetic climate of our schools – not just the formal structures?*

Movement and Touch

Through simple mirroring exercises and tactile experiences, participants explored leading and following, attentiveness, trust and mutual respect. These activities made visible what is often implicit in schools: leadership is relational, dynamic, and dependent on sensitivity to others. As one participant noted, these moments created a sense of calm connection — an embodied experience of **relational well-being** that many leaders strive to cultivate but rarely name explicitly.

Smell and Taste

Even everyday experiences — like the aroma of coffee or the unfolding flavours of a sweet — became gateways to reflection. Participants linked them to moments of collegiality, shared pauses, and informal dialogue: the often-overlooked spaces where school cultures are built and sustained.

Creating Meaning Together

In the final part of the workshop, participants worked in pairs to *create* representations of democracy-as-becoming using simple materials: yarn, paper, movement, sound, and gesture. What emerged was striking. Without lengthy discussion, participants produced powerful symbolic expressions of dialogue, shared responsibility and belonging — demonstrating that democratic understanding can emerge through co-creation rather than instruction. For school leaders, this has clear implications:

➜ Democratic culture grows when staff and students are **co-creators**, not just recipients.
➜ Shared meaning often emerges through **doing together**, not only through planning documents or meetings.
➜ Creativity and vulnerability are not weaknesses in leadership — they are catalysts for trust.

Why This Matters for School Leadership

Leading a school today means navigating uncertainty, diversity, and increasing demands — while holding space for dialogue, inclusion and well-being. The workshop offered a lived example of how democratic leadership can be **felt**, not just managed.
Participants repeatedly highlighted how the embodied approach:

➜ deepened understanding beyond intellectual agreement
➜ strengthened relational trust
➜ made abstract values tangible and memorable

As Professor **Hanife Akar** reflected:
"The workshop creatively connected our being and existing among others… appreciating the uniqueness of being together and acting together as 'us'."

A Reflection for School Leaders

Perhaps the most important takeaway is this: **Democracy in schools is not only something we organise — it is something we practice with our whole selves.**

Moments of listening, sensing, moving, creating and reflecting together shape school cultures just as much as policies or strategies do. By attending to the aesthetic and embodied dimensions of learning and leadership, school leaders can foster environments where democracy is not only taught — but lived.
As this workshop demonstrated, democracy-as-becoming is not a finished state. It unfolds through relationships, shared experiences, and everyday actions. And schools, guided by thoughtful and reflective leaders, are among the most powerful places where this becoming can take shape.

This article is inspired by the "Sensing Democracy-as-Becoming" workshop developed within the AECED project. More resources, reflections and pedagogical materials can be found at [aeced.org].

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Wellbeing:

a simple word or simply necessary?

School leadership is one of the most meaningful roles in education — and at the same time one of the most demanding. As a school head, you carry responsibility for students, teachers and staff, parents, policy demands, inspections, and the wider expectations of society. In the constant flow of decisions and pressures, one crucial element is often pushed aside: your own wellbeing. No matter where I speak to school leaders, I find the same in every country.

Wellbeing is not a luxury or an afterthought. It is a prerequisite for strong, sustainable leadership. A school leader who continually ignores their own limits will eventually lose clarity, energy, and perspective. Leadership then becomes reactive rather than intentional. This does not only affect you personally; it influences the climate, culture, and quality of the entire school. Leadership is contagious — how you show up emotionally and mentally sets the tone for others.

Many school heads are highly committed, resilient, and used to putting others first. While admirable, this mindset can become a trap. Constant self-sacrifice is not a sustainable leadership strategy. True, long-term leadership requires self-awareness, reflection, and the courage to slow down when needed. Wellbeing does not mean that leadership becomes easy or stress-free; it means developing the resilience to deal with complexity and pressure without losing yourself along the way.

When school leaders actively invest in their mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing, something shifts. There is more space to think clearly, to listen deeply, and to make thoughtful decisions rather than rushed ones. That calm presence spreads through the organisation. Teams feel safer, trust grows, and unnecessary tension decreases. This way, wellbeing becomes more than a personal concern — it becomes a strategic choice that strengthens the entire school.

Good education starts with healthy people. As a school head, you should lead by example in this. Not by being flawless, but by being human: acknowledging limits, setting boundaries, and taking care of yourself. This is not a weakness. It is leadership at its best, grounded, and powerful.

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