



John Hattie holds a PhD and is an educational researcher with nearly thirty years of experience analysing academic achievement. He is the author of *Visible Learning*, the largest meta-analysis synthesis on education conducted worldwide, carried out at the University of Melbourne. He has received numerous international accolades for his scientific contributions to understanding real learning impact.

Anna Forés holds a doctorate in Philosophy and Education Sciences and is director of the Chair of Neuroeducation at the University of Barcelona (UB). She is a full member of the Hispanic-American Academy of Doctors and a recognised expert in resilience and didactics. Her research focuses on the relational dimension of leadership, underscoring the importance of affective networks and openness to change.

Pepe Menéndez is a leading figure in educational leadership in school transformation projects and an international advisor. He spearheaded the Horizon 2020 project within the Jesuïtes Educació network and is the author of *Educating for Life*. He advocates for a school grounded in the consent to learn and in the creation of emotionally safe environments.

Carles Monereo holds a doctorate in Psychology and is a Professor of Educational Psychology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). He is a leading authority in the psychology of instruction, coordinates the SINTE research group, and is an expert in the analysis of critical incidents. His approach highlights the importance of authentic leadership and the capacity for dialogic reflection among teachers..

How to lead real progress over academic achievement

54

55

dialogs

DEBATE

moderated by Enric Vidal

CHALLENGES OF LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

Four pioneering voices convened at the 1st Impuls Educació Congress to interrogate the contemporary challenges facing learning-oriented leadership. Moderated by Enric Vidal, the panel featured John Hattie, author of *Visible Learning*; Carles Monereo, Professor of Educational Psychology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona; Anna Forés, Director of the Neuroeducation Chair at the University of Barcelona; and Pepe Menéndez, an expert in school transformation. Their discourse moved beyond administrative technicalities to map the essential conditions required for educational leadership to deeply impact student learning trajectories.

The authentic leader: vulnerability, reflection, and commitment

Carles Monereo opened the dialogue by anchoring authentic leadership in an approachable, non-defensive posture capable of demonstrating vulnerability and navigating critical feedback. He identified two core capacities necessary to cultivate this state: rigorous self-reflection and the ability to unify a faculty around a shared vision. Monereo framed reflection through a dialogic lens, describing it as an internal negotiation among the competing roles an educator embodies—evaluator, communicator, rule manager, mentor, and researcher. Drawing on Hubert Hermans' theory of the dialogical self, he posited that

internal democratic dialogue directly mirrors and informs external democratic practice. Authentic leaders must synthesize these diverse internal perspectives to make balanced, democratic choices. Supporting this with empirical evidence from LOMLOE curriculum mentors in Catalonia, Monereo noted that the most effective mentors avoided manufacturing a superficial consensus; instead, they negotiated clear boundaries to build a genuine, shared institutional narrative. Furthermore, true professional commitment requires viewing colleagues holistically as authentic partners. This demands honoring their individual professional trajectories, granting them genuine agency, and establishing common frameworks for managing institutional crises.

The authentic leader avoids defensive positions: he reveals his own vulnerability and accepts criticism

Consent to learn and moral authority

Pepe Menéndez introduced a highly original concept to the panel: the "consent to learn." Evoking the insights of Begonya Gasch from the Fundació El Llindar, Menéndez argued that young people do not truly become students until they consciously grant this consent. Consequently, a primary obligation of school leadership is to engineer environments rooted in emotional safety, well-being, and a deep sense of belonging. Only within such a culture of trust can leaders establish the moral authority required to inspire personal and academic growth without resorting to

coercion. Aligning his argument with Paulo Freire's philosophy of dialogic education, Menéndez maintained that schools must reject industrial, mass-production methodologies in favor of negotiating progressive student autonomy. Crucially, this principle extends across the entire institution: faculty members must also recognize themselves as visible, highly valued contributors within a collective mission.

Listening, connection, and exploration: the attitude of those who lead

Anna Forés expanded the definition of leadership by prioritizing its relational dimensions. Referencing Nélide Zaitegi's work *Alto y claro*, she argued that effective executives must embody radical openness and active listening. In a hyper-accelerated society where genuine listening is scarce, this receptive posture serves as a profound mechanism for welcoming others.

The young person does not become a student until they accept to learn. The school does not manufacture: it negotiates

This attitude requires leaders to routinely re-evaluate their own assumptions with humility and execute course corrections without fear. Forés emphasized that trust—the ultimate antithesis of fear—must be systematically cultivated across the entire educational ecosystem, rather than exclusively within the central executive team. Carles Monereo built upon this point by citing Néstor Román's framework of fundamental human needs: the need to feel loved, respected, and actively recognized. The overarching



institutional challenge is to ensure that every member of the school community experiences these three affirmations simultaneously. Forés concluded by highlighting the exploratory mandate of leadership, referencing Genís Roca's assertion that sustainable innovation requires pioneers. To drive true systemic improvement, school leaders must act as explorers of hidden opportunities—identifying novel pathways and communicating them to their communities with genuine passion.

The opposite of fear is trust. A leader is an explorer who communicates with passion

The courage to ask the difficult questions

When asked to isolate specific leadership behaviors that maximize student learning, John Hattie focused on a deceptive imperative: the courage to ask difficult questions, diagnose root problems, and relentlessly pursue their resolution. Hattie argued that a leader's core focus must always center on student impact. The primary goal is to empower every child to view themselves as an active learner, and leadership must grant students explicit permission to exercise curiosity while making their learning visible. Achieving this requires leadership teams to remain open to learning themselves. Hattie observed that too many schools are closed to learning, remaining open only to teaching. High-leverage leadership forces a shift in focus toward what students are actually internalizing and whether that knowledge yields a measurable difference. According to Hattie, children are inherently sophisticated learners,

Too many schools are impermeable to learning and only open themselves to teaching. What do students actually learn?

as evidenced by their deep engagement with video games and social networks—spaces that offer immediate interaction and validate their agency. Leadership teams must display the institutional courage necessary to listen to and learn from these authentic voices of learning.

The forging of new leaderships: legacy, network, and mentorship

The panel offered three distinct, complementary models for cultivating successor leadership within schools. Carles Monereo described the human mind as a complex social laboratory. When navigating organizational conflict, an effective leader must mentally simulate scenarios to comprehend alternative viewpoints and build sustainable agreements. He noted that systemic transformations inevitably trigger friction due to the emotional toll of change. Often, empirically validated methodologies fail to endure because they are imposed without considering the school's unique culture. Consequently, leadership development must prioritize the capacity for sophisticated negotiation, ensuring leaders treat teachers as authentic partners rather than mere compliance agents. Pepe Menéndez focused on executive accountability, urging current directors to establish structured succession pipelines before completing their tenure. He framed this as an ethical obligation to leave a legacy rooted in exemplary practice. For Menéndez, educational leadership is the manifestation of a shared life project built on common values—an endeavor that demands vision, enthusiasm, and a willingness to take calculated risks. Anna Forés added a structural perspective, warning leaders against the trap

of isolation. In complex systems, organizational components behave non-linearly. High-impact leadership depends on surrounding oneself with exceptional talent to sustain the collective vision. A leader's true strength resides within the affective and effective support networks they intentionally build around their office.

A leader must surround themselves with powerful people. Their strength lies in the affective and effective network

Vulnerable performance: prioritizing progress over results

When addressing underperforming schools, John Hattie introduced a critical distinction: the most pervasive executive error is obsessing over absolute achievement metrics rather than longitudinal progress. Leadership must focus heavily on value-added growth. Every school houses localized pockets of success where specific educators generate exceptional student growth. The core task of leadership is to identify these high-impact practices and scale them, ensuring their underlying expectations permeate the entire institution. This strategy requires the institutional courage to reward demonstrative student progress over mere faculty seniority. Leaders must secure short-term wins by ensuring students understand how to learn and by accurately diagnosing learning gaps. Hattie emphasized that underperformance is rarely solved

The first mistake: becoming obsessed with achievement. Identifying pockets of success and scaling them

by rewriting curriculum; it is solved by actively supporting the educators who move the needle.

Carles Monereo proposed a complementary strategy: target the school's institutional zone of proximal development by scaffolding existing high-leverage practices. Systematically documenting these internal successes ensures they survive faculty turnover, allowing a school project to advance through secure, iterative steps.

Pepe Menéndez highlighted organizational communication, noting that leadership dictates the dominant narratives within a school. When professional meetings focus on student potential and pedagogical efficacy, a positive culture gradually reshapes the entire institution. He reminded the panel that a faculty is continuously trained by the way its meetings are managed.

Anna Forés concluded by emphasizing the power of visual symbolism. When an institution deploys evidence-based strategies, it must communicate them clearly to its community. She shared an example of an underperforming school with historically low graduation rates that began displaying a star for every student who completed secondary education. This simple visual symbol motivated the student body and offered proof that academic success was attainable.

Families and learning: the transformation of questions

Regarding family engagement, John Hattie advocated for shifting

the questions schools prompt parents to ask. Rather than focusing on grades, parents should ask children what specific feedback they received from teachers and what cognitive difficulties they overcame during the day. Educators have an obligation to provide families with clear evidence of authentic learning progress while building confidence in the instructional methodologies deployed. Pepe Menéndez aligned this with organizational practices, noting that traditional parent-school meetings focus heavily on technical or logistical compliance. Reframing these community dialogues around the actual mechanics of learning builds a much tighter, more productive alliance between families and the school.

Time, bureaucracy, and resilience: sustaining the teaching profession

Addressing the challenge of transforming vulnerable schools while managing heavy administrative workloads, Anna Forés noted that time is fundamentally a reflection of institutional priorities. If a leadership team fails to dedicate time for collaborative dialogue, sustainable professional learning becomes impossible.

Changing the questions: from what grade did you get, to what difficulty did you overcome

Carles Monereo offered a data-driven approach: maintaining clear analytics on student trajectories allows leaders to personalize instruction and anticipate critical incidents, reducing the reactive crisis management that often consumes the workday. John Hattie focused on collective responsibility. Echoing Andy Hargreaves, he noted

that Martin Luther King Jr. did not capture the world's imagination with a strategic plan, but with a dream. A faculty needs to understand the overarching dream of its leadership; if management is reduced to bureaucratic compliance, the school fails. Hattie challenged the narrative surrounding administrative overload, noting that empirical evidence often reveals that required regulatory compliance consumes minimal time. Instead, bureaucracy frequently serves as an excuse for redundant, internally perpetuated practices. The panel concluded by discussing community resilience. Pepe Menéndez argued that resilience is directly linked to organizational purpose. When a school community shares a compelling dream, it can navigate severe adversity, a process accelerated by the non-verbal cues and mindset of the leadership team. Carles Monereo added a final tactical recommendation: leaders must intentionally protect and reward highly dedicated teachers who take on the most complex institutional tasks. Providing organizational recognition and support to these frontline educators is vital to prevent professional burnout. Anna Forés synthesized the debate by identifying the two pillars of educational resilience: a unified, shared organizational purpose and a robust, supportive community network. Every other leadership initiative, she concluded, builds upward from this foundation.

Teaching staff need to know the dream of those who lead them

