

Inclusion, Innovation, and Impact in Education

An Interview With Nam Ngo Thanh

In the September/October 2025 issue of *Childhood Education Innovations*, we featured an article by Nam Ngo Thanh about the Everyday Kindness Project, an initiative that fosters a culture of empathy and kindness in schools. A dedicated educator, innovator, and community leader, Nam is passionate about transforming education and solving the social challenges facing Vietnamese youth. He currently serves as Principal of Elite School, Vietnam, where he integrates health education and sustainable development into the curriculum, focusing on students' physical and mental well-being. Driven by a mission to reform education, Nam has launched several initiatives, including the Everyday Kindness Project and the Five Safe Fingers Project — a global child protection program. He is also the co-founder of the Vietnamese Innovative Educators Foundation (VIEF), a thriving community of over 177,000 teachers. Nam continues to expand his leadership capacity in integrating education and health while championing systemic reform. He envisions a future in which education is a tool for healing, empowerment, and enduring social change. In the interview below, Nam shares his thoughts about his role as a school leader.

Why is leadership in education important, particularly in terms of promoting inclusion and driving innovation?

Educational leadership is not just about managing systems. It's about shaping values, nurturing people, and creating environments where growth and transformation can truly happen. In today's world, inclusion and innovation are essential, not optional. A leader must be able to see each learner and educator not just as part of a system, but also as a whole person with potential, challenges, and dreams. Promoting inclusion means creating spaces where every student, regardless of background, ability, gender, or belief, feels they belong and can succeed. Driving innovation means challenging outdated structures, embracing new ideas, and being open to creative risks. As a leader, I've seen how inclusive policies can shift school culture and how small acts, such as honoring student voice or redesigning how we assess learning, can unlock profound innovation. Leadership rooted in empathy, vision, and action is the key to building schools that do more



than transfer knowledge — they transform lives.

What are some of the key challenges to fostering leadership in educational settings today?

Fostering leadership in education faces several persistent barriers. One of the biggest challenges is the traditional mindset that sees leadership as a role for a few, rather than a shared capacity that can be developed in many. Teachers are often overwhelmed with daily tasks, leaving little time or energy to reflect, grow, and lead beyond the classroom. Another obstacle is fear: fear of failure, fear of judgment, and fear of disrupting the status quo. In some systems, innovation is welcomed in theory but punished in practice. Additionally, there is often a lack of ongoing, context-relevant professional development that nurtures leadership from within. I believe that fostering leadership requires more than formal training; it requires trust, mentorship, and space for experimentation. When educators are empowered to lead change, even in small ways, they begin to see themselves not just as instructors, but also as co-creators of a better future for their schools and students.

In your view, what distinguishes a transformative education leader from a traditional one?

A transformative education leader is someone who leads with heart,



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courage, and vision. While a traditional leader may focus on rules, results, and structure, a transformative leader looks deeper, seeking to understand people, question systems, and inspire change. They don't see leadership as a position of power, but rather as a platform for empowerment. A transformative leader listens more than they speak, includes others in decision-making, and constantly reflects on their own growth. They are not afraid to make difficult choices if it means creating a more just and meaningful learning environment. They also embrace uncertainty, knowing that real change is often messy but necessary. In my journey, I've learned that transformative leadership means leading with vulnerability and integrity, and being willing to ask: "What needs to change, and how can I support that change together with others?"

How has your own leadership journey shaped your views on what schools should become in today's world?

My leadership journey began with the belief that learning should be joyful, purposeful, and human-centered. As someone who grew up in a rigid, exam-focused system, I constantly questioned why school couldn't be more relevant and inspiring. That question has stayed

with me throughout my career. As I moved from teacher to mentor to school leader, I saw firsthand how much potential is lost when schools focus only on content and scores. I believe schools today must evolve into ecosystems of growth where both students and teachers are encouraged to explore, express, and connect with the world beyond the classroom. Schools should foster not just academic knowledge, but also empathy, resilience, and global awareness. We need to prepare learners for life, not just for tests. That requires schools to be more flexible, inclusive, and grounded in real-world learning.

How can educational leaders increase agency, motivation, innovation, and growth not only among students, but also among teachers?

To increase agency and motivation, leaders must first create an environment of psychological safety where people feel trusted, heard, and free to try new things. For students, this means giving them voice in how and what they learn, allowing choice, and connecting learning to their interests and real-life challenges. For teachers, it means respecting them as professionals, supporting their ideas, and encouraging experimentation. In my work, I've seen that professional learning communities,

teacher-led projects, and peer mentoring are powerful tools to unlock educator growth. Motivation grows when people see that their work matters and when their efforts are recognized and valued. Innovation happens not from a top-down push, but from a shared sense of purpose and the freedom to act on it. Growth requires trust and leaders must model that first.

In your experience, what practices or structures best support a culture of creativity and autonomy in schools?

One key practice is giving time and space for reflection, collaboration, and creation. Too often, teachers are expected to innovate while managing full teaching loads and administrative demands. I've learned that dedicated time for shared inquiry, such as design thinking workshops or regular collaborative planning meetings, can re-energize teachers and spark creativity. Structures like flexible timetables, interdisciplinary projects, and student-driven assessments also open up space for autonomy. But more than any policy, it's culture that matters: a culture where mistakes are welcomed as part of learning, where curiosity is encouraged, and where leadership is distributed. When teachers and students feel ownership of their work, they are far more likely to take initiative and explore new paths.



How do you ensure that your initiatives translate into lasting mindset shifts, not just short-term campaigns?

Sustainability starts with purpose. If an initiative is just a trend or event, it fades. But if it addresses a real need, is built collaboratively, and evolves over time, it can shift how people think and act. For example, with the “Five Safe Fingers” project on child protection, we didn’t just train students once we created a system of student ambassadors, ongoing workshops, and integration into everyday classroom life. Similarly, “Everyday Kindness” isn’t a campaign, it’s a value we model, celebrate, and embed into relationships and policies. I also invest in feedback loops, listening to what’s working and what needs to change

and then adjusting accordingly. When people feel they are part of the change, not just subjects of it, their mindsets shift more deeply and sustainably.

How can school leaders sustain long-term impact for both student and teacher success, especially in complex and ever-changing contexts?

Long-term impact requires leaders to be both visionary and adaptive. In times of uncertainty, people look for stability but not rigidity. As a leader, I focus on holding true to our core values — like equity, joy, and learning as empowerment — while staying flexible in our strategies. Supporting teacher well-being and growth is essential, because without strong, motivated teachers, no initiative

can thrive. For students, we focus on relevance connecting learning to real-world problems, future skills, and personal meaning. We also engage families and communities, recognizing that education doesn’t happen in isolation. And perhaps most important, we invest in building systems that can outlast individuals through shared leadership, ongoing mentorship, and a learning culture that continues to evolve.

How do you personally measure success as a school leader and changemaker, beyond conventional academic indicators?

While test scores offer one dimension, they barely scratch the surface of what education is about. I measure success by the depth of engagement I see in students who ask hard questions, collaborate across differences, and apply their learning to real challenges. I see success when a shy student finds their voice in a project, or when a teacher who once feared technology becomes a digital mentor to others. I listen closely to stories, reflections, and the sense of shared pride within the school. I also look at whether we are building systems of equity. Are more students feeling seen and supported? Are teachers growing in confidence and capacity? If we are helping people thrive not just perform, then I believe we are succeeding.



How do you integrate feedback from students, teachers, or external partners into the way you lead and refine initiatives?

Feedback is essential to any meaningful form of leadership. I see it not as critique, but as a form of co-creation. To gather feedback, I create open channels: anonymous forms, regular dialogue sessions, and informal conversations where students and teachers feel safe to speak honestly. From students, I listen to their lived experience to learn what excites them, what frustrates them, what they wish could be different. From teachers, I value their insights on what works in practice and what challenges they face. With external partners, such as educational networks, I treat collaboration as mutual learning, not just support. Once I gather feedback, I act on it. I communicate clearly about what will change, what won't, and why. This transparency helps build trust. Over time, people begin to see feedback not as a task, but as a shared responsibility for growth. When leadership is responsive, initiatives evolve from ideas into movements that are rooted in the needs and strengths of the community.

What role does community engagement and intergenerational dialogue play in your leadership approach?

Community is the heartbeat of education. A school cannot truly thrive if it's disconnected from the community it serves. That's why I see engagement as partnership. I regularly invite parents, local leaders, and community members into the school for events, and also for learning. Intergenerational dialogue is especially powerful. When

students hear stories from elders or collaborate with younger peers, they develop empathy, cultural understanding, and a deeper sense of connection. I've seen this in action during projects where students interviewed grandparents about childhood experiences, or when we co-hosted events around local environmental issues. These moments don't just enrich the curriculum, they build bridges. They help young people see themselves as part of a larger story in which they have both roots and agency. As a leader, I believe one of my roles is to open those doors and create the conditions for meaningful, sustained connection across generations.

don't just focus on digital tools, I consider language, access, and whether the pedagogy reflects our students' realities. In my leadership, I often localize global frameworks (e.g., project-based learning or social-emotional learning) by embedding them in culturally meaningful contexts, such as Vietnamese proverbs, local histories, or family traditions. I also involve teachers and students in shaping how these innovations unfold, so they feel like co-designers of the change. In this way, innovation becomes something grounded and authentic — not a disruption, but an evolution.



As someone working to bridge global trends with local realities, how do you balance innovation with cultural and contextual relevance?

Balancing global innovation with local relevance is one of the most important and delicate tasks in education leadership. I always start by asking: "What is the real need in this context?" and "Will this approach uplift the voices, traditions, and identities of our community?" Innovation, for me, is not about importing a model and applying it blindly; it's about adaptation. For example, when integrating technology, I

What have been some of the biggest surprises, either positive or challenging, that you've encountered in your journey as an educational leader?

One of the biggest surprises in my leadership journey is how deeply students and teachers can transform when they are simply trusted. I've seen quiet students become powerful advocates and hesitant teachers blossom into changemakers just because someone believed in them and gave them space. On the challenging side, I've learned that change is often slower than we expect, and resistance can

come from unexpected places. Sometimes, even well-meaning people are afraid of losing what feels safe or familiar. I used to take resistance personally. Over time, I've come to see it as part of the process. It pushes me to listen more deeply, to adapt, and to stay patient. Leadership is not about pushing faster, it's about walking with others — even when the path is uneven. The moments that surprise me most are the quiet breakthroughs — a student who speaks up for the first time, a teacher who tries something new. Those are the moments I cherish.

Looking ahead, what excites you most about the future of education, especially with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and learner-centered models?

What excites me most is the possibility of creating an education system that truly honors each learner as unique. With the rise of AI and personalized learning platforms, we have tools that can adapt to individual strengths and challenges in real time. Beyond the technology, what inspires me is the shift in mindset as education moves away from standardization toward humanization. Learner-centered models open up space for student agency, voice, and purpose. They invite young people to explore who they are, what they care about, and how they can contribute to the world. AI can support this shift by handling routine tasks, analyzing data to inform instruction, and expanding access to learning. Of course, we must use it ethically, with a strong focus on equity and inclusion. If we do it right, we can create schools that are more responsive, more inclusive, and



more joyful places where every child is empowered to learn in their own way, at their own pace, and for their own purpose.

What advice would you offer to education leaders who aspire to create inclusive, innovative, and impactful learning environments?

My first piece of advice is to lead with purpose, not just position. Know why you do what you do, and let that purpose guide your decisions, especially in times of challenge. Second, start with listening. The best ideas often come from the voices we hear the least. Whether it's a quiet student, a new teacher, or a parent from a marginalized group, listen to them with humility and act with care. Third, create space for others to lead. Inclusion and innovation flourish when leadership is shared. Build trust, model vulnerability, and celebrate small wins. Finally, never stop learning. Stay curious, stay connected, and don't be afraid to question old systems. The world needs leaders who are brave enough to imagine better, and kind enough to bring people along with them. If you can be that kind of leader, you'll

not only change schools — you'll change lives.

If you could leave one legacy as an educator and leader, what would you want it to be?

If I could leave one legacy, I would want it to be this: that I helped create a world where every child felt safe to dream, every teacher felt empowered to lead, and every classroom was a place of possibility. I hope people remember me not just for projects or awards, but for how I made them feel heard, valued, and inspired. I want the students I've taught, the teachers I've mentored, and the communities I've served to believe in their own power to create change. I want the initiatives I've started, like Five Safe Fingers, Everyday Kindness, and VIEF, to continue growing and adapting, led by others who care deeply. Most of all, I hope my work has helped shift the narrative of education from compliance to compassion, from fear to curiosity, from silence to voice. That would be a legacy worth leaving.

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