Premier’s PwC Leadership Scholarship

Keeping it real: How can an educational leader maintain a connection with teaching and learning?

Grant Scarborough

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*The closer educational leaders get to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on students’ outcomes.*

—Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe, 2008, p.664

The tension in educational leadership

Educational leaders make a difference. There is a growing body of evidence across countries and contexts that demonstrates the impact of effective school leadership on student learning (Barber, Whelan and Clark, 2010; Robinson, 2011; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009), school effectiveness and teacher quality (Dinham, Collarbone, Evans, & Mackay, 2013).

Learning is the central focus for educational leaders but with the increasing demands and complexity of the role it is challenging for an educational leader to maintain a connection with teaching and learning. There is a large amount of information about *what* an educational leader can do to maintain a connection with teaching and learning. The information about *how* an educational leader can maintain this connection and fulfil all the requirements of the role is still being examined. To explore this question I embarked on a five-week study tour to Victoria, Tasmania and New Zealand from February to March in 2015. The context of the study tour was kept local to assist with translating findings and because there have been significant advances in education in this part of the world.

Focus of the study

My study tour had three main focus areas:

* + to find and observe educational leaders who were maintaining a connection with teaching and learning
  + to explore what it is that enables educational leaders to maintain a connection with teaching and learning
  + to explore leadership development programs that support educational leaders to maintain a connection with teaching and learning.

Implementing the AITSL Principal Standard (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership) has provided an opportunity to look at a common language for leadership and leadership development across Australia. The challenge is to implement this standard, to understand what a connection with teaching and learning looks like in practice, and to provide support to principals in maintaining this connection.

Significant learning

*Leadership development*

Educational leaders need to be involved in learning to stay connected with teaching and learning. To do this they need to be supported with professional development opportunities commensurate to their stage of leadership. State and national bodies must facilitate these programs.

The educational institutions I visited in this study tour provide leadership development programs from emergent to system level leaders.

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, Melbourne

During the study tour I had the privilege of visiting the AITSL headquarters. AITSL provides resources to assist with leadership development, but a personal responsibility is placed on every leader for their own personal growth. The principal standard is aspirational. The power of the AITSL tools involves grasping each resource and applying it in context. The ‘how’ of this development is up to each individual to form networks, take part in professional discussions and learning.

**Bastow** Institute of Educational Leadership, Melbourne

Bastow provides programs for emerging through to system level leaders. At Bastow the focus is on leadership growth. Some of their courses use a vertical team model where schools send teams with representatives from each level at school, e.g. teacher, middle leader, senior executive and the principal. This is to support the transfer of learning and change within the school.

**The University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education.**

The graduate school of education has a strong focus on using best practice to inform the instruction of teachers and educational leaders. The school has had a significant impact on my leadership development through the recent completion of a masters degree. In 2015 I enrolled in a research certificate to further the learning from this study tour. Throughout the five weeks I undertook studies in research and received expert guidance and support in exploring this topic on educational leadership.

**Tasmanian Professional Learning Institute**

This institute aims to develop a whole of career plan. Areas for development are addressed and coaching is used to support a school-based project. The institute has a focus on leading teaching and learning and uses the work of Robinson and ‘student centred learning’. In addition to professional development the institute also recognises the key role of principals and network leaders (NSW – directors) in providing in-school support to build the capacity of educational leaders through coaching and modelling.

**University of Auckland Centre for Educational Leadership**

The student centred leadership framework is at the centre of the work at UACEL. It aligns very closely with the themes emerging from this study tour. The focus is on teaching and learning and it looks at not only what leaders need to do through the dimensions but how they apply these dimensions in practice through the capabilities. One of the highlights of the study tour was the 10 days I spent at UACEL visiting schools and meeting with the team as well as attending the first day of the Growing Great Leaders™ course and two days of Open-to-learning™ Leadership training in Melbourne. UACEL is informing the practice of educators and is being informed by the practice of educators.

Case studies

I had the privilege of visiting many schools, but the five stories that follow capture the learning from across many of the school settings.

**A high school literacy program.** How? The principal with the vision, the design teacher who became a literacy leader and the school that made a difference.

The change at this school began by articulating and demonstrating to staff the importance of data and the power of feedback to students. It had been identified that students were struggling in literacy skills. The change was to implement a literacy block for one period a day for years 7 to 10 for this high school in Victoria.

The principal maintained a connection with teaching and learning through knowing the goals of the school, identifying a need and then through strategic resourcing with finances and appointing a literacy leader who had a background in design and technology. The literacy leader developed a literacy continuum, a consistent literacy program and then an assessment tool that gave almost immediate feedback to staff and students.

The staff began to conference with the students so the kids owned their results; they were more motivated when they got to see their results quickly. The kids became more settled and independent in their learning and the staff began sharing their progress with each other and becoming reinvigorated. This principal and literacy leader influenced student learning and brought about a change in staff.

**Victorian primary school.** How? Leadership—connection with learning.

The principal at this school was aware of the needs of not only the learners but of the teachers and the parents. The focus at the school is not only on achievement but also on growth.

The leader showed the ability to adapt to the needs of the school. They maintained a connection with teaching and learning by supporting new initiatives with funding, professional learning and their presence around the school. They were involved in weekly data analysis with the distributed leadership team, checking progress towards goals. The principal knows what quality teaching looks like and how to assess it. If the kids are learning, teachers are teaching and leaders are leading. To measure whether leadership is having an impact on learning they start with observing the learner.

The role of the principal will be different every day. At this school it was evident that regardless of disruptions there is a clear plan and agenda that has a focus on learning and it is led by the leader and by the leadership.

**A principal’s story.** How? Open to learning. Relationships. Data.

Several years ago this school was facing low student results with a culture of staff complaining and blaming others. When the principal asked staff how the school was performing he received a positive response. This concerned the principal as he knew that there were problems and the staff responses were not based on valid information or an internal commitment to change. The principal looked for a way to bring about change and discovered double loop learning to challenge beliefs and assumptions:

* 1. The first step in changing the culture of the school involved addressing the cycle of staff blaming each other for any issues. The principal established protocols for conversations to build respect for colleagues. As a result the staff began to realise that it would not be acceptable to talk to the kids in this manner so it was not acceptable to talk to each other in this way.
  2. School improvement team. This team used Kotter’s guiding coalition to found sources of valid information to challenge the assumptions and beliefs held by the staff. The team focused on the belief held by staff that the school was functioning effectively. They searched for evidence to support this belief or to question it.
  3. Student growth. The team used effect sizes with matched cohorts and found that the students showed little or no growth by coming to school. The staff looked at the data and realised that something was profoundly wrong.
  4. The principal realised that they needed to look at new ways to change behaviours and practices. He investigated the concept of double loop learning to look at underlying values and beliefs. The school formed professional learning communities to look at curriculum and teaching. They developed an agreement of what was to be taught and when and how it would be assessed to assist teachers to work better.
  5. Coaching as a group. During this time the principal trained in Open-to-learning™ Leadership and then trained the staff in the method. Also as a part of this process the principal explored the aspects of authentic leadership. Did they believe that all kids could learn? Did they believe that learning was possible for all students regardless of background? As a result of this process the staff began to look at the values underlying their actions. They began to have difficult conversations with each other. The staff slowly started to build trust with each other, the negative interactions reduced and staff started to work together and share their struggles. The staff can now begin to understand why they might think or act in certain ways and are more prepared to learn. The school has won awards for their cohesive team and school results. This principal maintained a connection with teaching and learning by developing a deep understanding of staff and student needs and by being directly involved with learning and the change process needed to bring improvements for teaching and learning.

**Community –** How?Creating educational powerful connections*.*

Educational leaders need to be aware of the social and emotional needs of their students, staff and community along with fulfilling all the other demands of their role. It is important to understand the background of students as all these factors impact on the school and ultimately student learning.

This high school in Auckland has worked hard to connect with their community and provide learning opportunities for every student. The principal values the knowledge base of the larger community of the school. She promotes the mindset that the school is not the keeper of all knowledge. Community members are actively involved so that they bring their knowledge and wisdom into the school. The principal works with staff to engage with students and families to build relational trust in order to know their needs and aspirations. The school has worked hard to create a safe and orderly environment by having high expectations of all students. There is a clear focus on learning and what students can achieve that is supported through giving students and staff what they need to learn. Any behavioural issues are quickly refocused on how they affect learning and the achievement of goals. This has meant that the school has worked hard on providing access for students to pathways beyond school and has formed partnerships with medical providers to develop a health science academy. With a vibrant young leader in place this academy has high standards and expectations for learning. The program provides a pathway to further studies and employment in the health industry.

The principal is involved in leading professional learning at this school and other schools. She has been involved in the UACEL scholarship program in 2014. There was a sense of purpose and passion in this school that looked beyond a student’s background to the potential in each person.

**The class with no roof**. How? Flexibility and academic conversations.

The deputy principal at this high school in Auckland was a UACEL scholarship recipient in 2014. This school has an amazing classroom. It has no roof! The class is a year 11 construction course that meets requirements for completion of year 11. This allows the school to tailor courses and subjects to meet the students’ needs. The classroom literally has no roof as it is an outdoor construction site. It also has ‘no roof’ because the constraints of a standard classroom have been removed for these students who at times can be challenging, demanding and not always fit with the standard curriculum. This pathway has given these students a chance to not only be involved in school but beyond to a career in construction. There is a licensed builder involved so the project meets industry standards. The teachers for this course have a natural rapport with the students and they have differentiated the curriculum to meet their needs. The school is keeping it real as the educational leaders and teachers are connected with learning. The staff have worked together to remove any barriers to learning for these students.

This program is a powerful example and is particularly relevant to NSW with the current initiatives encouraging schools to look at strategic resourcing, flexible delivery and autonomy in a system model.

This high school is participating in the Starpath program which aims to ‘address New Zealand’s comparatively high rate of educational inequality with Māori and Pacific students, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds’ (Starpath, 2014). During the week I visited the school the staff were having academic conversations with students to show them if the grades they were receiving would enable them to achieve their goals. Tutor teachers meet with families to discuss student progress, which also assists with fostering relationships. The leadership team then gathers results to acquire an overview of progress across the school. The leadership team stays connected with learning through analysis of this data.

*The more leaders focus their professional relationships, their work and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes.*

—Robinson, 2007, p.12

Conclusion

How can an educational leader maintain a connection with teaching and learning? Viviane Robinson captures crucial aspects of leadership in the statement above.. These factors align with the themes that have emerged from the author’s study tour. While there are many challenging factors associated with being a leader it has been found that the following four areas also support leaders to maintain a connection with teaching and learning.

*Shared Purpose*—A sense of purpose that is shared by staff and students

School leaders and schools that maintain a connection with teaching and learning still face the same array of challenges that many schools face, e.g. administrative demands, crowded curriculum, student wellbeing needs, community relationships and externally imposed change. The difference in schools and school leaders that maintain a focus on learning is that the school community has together developed a clear and shared understanding amongst staff and students of their purpose and despite any challenges and distractions the attention remains on learning.

*Coherence*—Aligning resources, learning and mindsets with the shared purpose

Once a school has developed a shared purpose they need to ensure that all decision making, resourcing and professional learning is aligned with this shared purpose and the goals that form it. If this is not the case there will be dissatisfaction and confusion amongst those who have been involved in setting the shared purpose.

Coherence also includes the mindsets of staff and students. Do staff at different levels know the goals and can they articulate them? Is there coherence between perceptions of how senior executive are managing and leading amongst all staff?

It is also important to recognise that instructional leadership can demonstrate coherence when a principal demonstrates an understanding of teaching and learning through strategically resourcing in the greatest areas of need. This is particularly relevant in secondary schools, as discussed by Bendikson, Hattie, and Robinson (2012).

A key factor in enabling coherence is inviting feedback from staff and students to ensure that all stakeholders in learning are involved in the shared purpose of the school. The school leaders that I found to be maintaining a connection with teaching and learning have demonstrated a deep and applied understanding of coherence, not just in theory or planning but in practice.

*Relationships* – Building relational trust

To achieve coherence a school leader must have an understanding of managing and supporting all relationships in their school. This requires not only systems and structures within a school but a deep personal desire to know and understand people and a mindset that is open to genuine enquiry.

This requires courage and trust and a respect for others and self. These are some of the core values of Open to Learning Leadership (OTL™) run by UACEL, which provides guidance in progressing a problem whilst maintaining a relationship.

School leaders report that their goals are on teaching and learning but the vast majority of leaders report that it is relationships that occupy their minds for the majority of the time (UACEL, 2015).

To build relational trust leaders need to be willing to share their point of view and listen to the views of others to find a solution together. This involves genuine enquiry to explore the underlying beliefs and values that drive actions. When leaders support relationships in the school they maintain a connection with teaching and learning through a genuine understanding of people and an ability to lead others in a coherent manner towards the shared purpose.

*Courage*

One of the most profound conversations I had during my study tour was with an educator in Tasmania. He spoke of the key aspects in leading a school but ultimately he summed up leadership with the following words: ‘A leader can have skills, knowledge and wisdom, but to lead it takes courage.’

This theme ran through all the leaders and leadership programs. The principal leadership is not for everyone; it takes courage to lead. If a principal walks past something they don’t agree with and don’t make a comment, they have accepted it. They need to speak up and address any issues with staff or students that are not right.

The AITSL principal standard is providing a guide for educational leadership in Australia. It is more effective as an aspirational standard rather than a legislative one. Leaders need to see this as an opportunity to lead with courage through continuing to be involved in learning and maintaining a connection with teaching and learning themselves. Leaders need to make decisions, have open conversations and deal with challenging issues. Leadership takes courage to keep it real.

Further contact information

Further details of my study tour are available on my [blog](http://grantstudytour.blogspot.com.au/).

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