

LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES

Q&A with Jan Robertson

The 2013 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme was “Education and Poverty: Theory, Research, Policy and Praxis” What do you see as the most pressing issues related to educational change and poverty today?

Educational change will not ever be enough on its own. Addressing poverty will require policies to respond to other social and economic conditions, such as minimum living salaries, adequate and healthy housing, feeding children in poverty in schools, the creation of jobs, and financial support for higher education. Countries that have policies based on a social justice ideology, rather than neo-liberal notions of competition and choice in the marketization of education, actually have greater educational equity. We also know countries that have greater equity in wealth and health also have greater equity in education and thus a stronger economy. Education change at the school or district level can make some difference. However, there needs to be a whole system approach. Education and qualifications are still paramount to succeed in life. It is a complex situation, but I believe that educational decision

makers and researchers will have to move beyond the school gates for the answers that they need and recognize they cannot address the challenges alone. Social and economic policymakers are key to this process.

If we could reposition schools to become places of learning and community centers, educational leaders would become connectors in wider community involvement. They would enable, support, and be supported by, local community leadership. Schools could partner with key organizations, employers, and other places of learning in the community to build relationships with leaders of different cultural groups, and initiate and sustain an interactive, public, social and educational response to leading educational change. This would need national recognition and resourcing to become a reality, and not just another loading of yet more responsibility of school leaders to address social problems.

I also believe that the answer to the complex challenges related to poverty and educational achievement will not necessarily be found within our current practice. The mindsets that

EDUCATIONAL CHANGE SIG

Educational Change SIG adopts an interdisciplinary and international approach to understanding many aspects of educational change, including large-scale reform, school-initiated change, school improvement, and classroom-level change.

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Lead the Change series, featuring renowned educational change experts from around the globe, serves to highlight promising research and practice, to offer expert insight on small- and large-scale educational change, and to spark collaboration within our SIG.

Series Co-Editors
Santiago Rincón-Gallardo and
Kristin Kew



created the complex challenges in education may not be the mindsets that find the innovation essential to different outcomes. My work over the last three years as the Academic Director of the Aspiring Principals Program in New Zealand has challenged me to think about what is needed in our next generations of school leaders. Next generation leaders will need the capabilities, qualities, mindsets and dispositions to value diversity of practice, to lead for diversity, to collaborate with partners, and to build learning relationships with one another and with their communities. Important to this is that they understand and embrace the potential impact and positive influence that they have as leaders in these communities. Capacity building of local community leaders and educational leaders for shared leadership is essential. We research and read about social entrepreneurs in communities, and social intrapreneurs in corporations, but I wonder if school leaders actually see the granted positions that they have in being able to make a real difference in the communities that they serve. Leaders of educational change will need to know how to learn from their leadership practice, as they are confronted by diverse views and beliefs, and recognize how their schools are learning ecologies that are part of their communities and part of the national system in their country. I believe that one of the challenges we have is how to develop a generation of educational leaders who will see a key role in working within the national social policies for families within their communities. Equally challenging is the development of a generation of decision makers and policy makers who will enable and support educational leaders to work with communities as a whole toward equity, economic development and community empowerment. High expectations for student learning outcomes, underpinned by the unrelenting belief that all children have inherent capabilities and potential and cultural advantages that they bring to our work, will

always be key to this process, but this belief will not be enough on its own. Policymakers must understand that addressing student achievement cannot be done in isolation behind school gates. School leaders who begin to conscientiously pursue that journey of system leadership or community leadership, working together with local government and community groups with the family at the center of practice, will make more impactful and sustainable change. Existing practices have isolated schools from their communities, and from each other, and this inhibits potential beneficial collaborations. If we cross the schoolyard boundary into families, communities, and across public services, we move into new spaces where we can create new knowledge and provoke the new thinking that goes with such new knowledge. Only then will we be able to do things differently in educational change.

Can you tell us about your model of leadership coaching, lateral sharing of innovation, and crossing boundaries that limit our view of existing structures and practices? What are some major lessons learned for the field of educational change?

This is where my real passion lies. My work, my research and development over the last twenty years, since the time of my own principalship, has been on leadership development and building leadership capacity. The leadership coaching you refer to in your question is a model of leadership and development through the everyday work of leadership. It is about the type of leadership that builds the capacity of others – coaching leadership. This is achieved through building one's own capacity as a leader to become metacognitive in the self-regulation of the development of leadership practice. It is about leaders realizing that they are actually part of the problem in educational change as well as, perhaps, part of a solution. Leaders then recognize that they are not bystanders of the reform but active and integral participants in the

change.

The principles of coaching leadership are that leaders enter the relationship of leadership with the willingness to learn from the interaction of leadership. They recognize the power of reciprocal learning relationships. By reciprocal learning, I mean practices where leaders are learning from colleagues, the community, and students, as they are involved in the practice of leading. Teachers and students are also learning from one another and so it becomes a model of teacher as learner, and learner as teacher throughout the system. It is a model that I believe actually enables the lateral sharing of innovation as leaders move between organizations to get greater perspectives on their own context and on their own leadership. Sadly, there are still too many one-way relationships in education – people telling others what to do, telling them how to do it, and then telling them how well they have done it. Reciprocal relationships challenge everyone to be far more self-regulating and metacognitive about their own learning and leadership, encouraging a shift in paradigm, and transformative thinking about the role of education.

Crossing boundaries into this new context may be, for some, as close as the classroom next door. For leaders, it might be the school next door or the public service corporation in the community or the local indigenous association. In New Zealand, and also from my experience internationally, very little lateral sharing or creation of knowledge goes on within schools and even less between schools. This is particularly the case in self-managing systems such as New Zealand where schools are very individual entities, with no real sense of being part of a regional, district or national system. The research I conducted with Charles Webber in Canada on developing a boundary breaking model of leadership, highlighted that when we move across boundaries, such as those found between roles, organizations, cultures, countries and sectors, we move into spaces

where we experience some degree of dissonance and hence where new knowledge can be created. Coaching leadership works in these boundary-breaking spaces of innovation and creativity where our current ways of thinking, knowing, and being are likely to be challenged. It is in this space of dissonance and discomfort that we can critically reflect and learn and be challenged to think about our practice in different ways. We need opportunities like these to be able to surface and critique our own values, our own beliefs and assumptions about education, learning and leadership. This is a new paradigm for leadership practice. In my international research and development work, I have found that leaders often have difficulties becoming learners in their leadership, being observed and gaining ongoing critical reflection on their practice within a trusting learning relationship. This new paradigm requires new skills, new abilities, new mindsets, and new social and emotional intelligences. An unrelenting focus on the continual improvement of the quality of teaching and leadership is essential to the process - teachers coaching teachers; schools coaching schools and policymakers resourcing education systems sufficiently to support the mindsets and the new practice.

What are the most relevant accomplishments in your work and research on building leadership capability and capacity?

When my coaching leadership work is dissected to its very essence, it is all about relationships: the relationship of leadership, the relationship of learning, and indeed, education as relationship – to community, to society, to the land. My work has encouraged educators to examine how they enter relationships so that their interactions with others are engaging, powerful and influential in the work of teaching and leadership. I chose to work between policy, theory, and practice, because I feel that these three stakeholder voices and their interplay

within and across education communities will be more likely to lead to system-wide change. Leadership capability and capacity is not only about the cognitive, but, as I said earlier, it is also about the social, emotional and spiritual within the leadership context. I began my work on coaching leadership in 1992, when the word coaching was seldom used in educational contexts. Indeed, I even called it professional partnerships. It was peer-assisted leadership development where two leaders - whether they were CEOs or consultants, school leaders, school teachers or students - worked together to critically reflect on their practices and move from the single loop learning of the doing, to the double and triple-loop learning of critical reflection and examination of values and assumptions that underpin practice. My work has had a major influence on appraisal systems and on the development of principals and aspiring principals, both nationally and internationally. Coaching and mentoring in leadership is now seen as important in many leadership programs, and my own work is influencing system policies throughout the world, including, in particular, England, New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia, Canada, and Lithuania. My two books, one on *Coaching Leadership* and one co-edited with Helen Timperley called *Leadership and Learning*, receive a lot of correspondence from individuals and policymakers talking about how this work has influenced their own. I find it quite hard to talk about what my relevant accomplishments are, but I think, for me, it has been about working at that interface between theory and practice and the translation of knowledge for those working within education change. This in turn has informed the theory I have developed through my research – another reciprocal learning relationship! I work in many countries as an international consultant and academic based on my work on building capacity for learning relationships.

What are some key educational changes that you see New Zealand engaging in (or, should engage in) going forward?

New Zealand needs educational leaders who understand and have the skills and disposition to work, learn, and lead in a new paradigm, particularly to adapt to rapid global changes, respond innovatively to create fresh possibilities, ensure the focus is kept on equity, and address under-achievement. I hope to see continued interest in equity, in education and for the country as a whole. New Zealand has often been a leader in global innovations in education – for example, in child-centered learning, decentralization, indigenous education, the digital revolution and the use of information communication technology in education. We have an education system that is one of the best in the world in terms of student achievement. We also have one of the worst and longest tails of under-achievement of particular groups. The challenge for us will be to continue searching for new answers to increase equity. It will require holistic professional learning for educators. We will need professional learning that, on the one hand, helps to develop and regenerate the agency, efficacy and capacity of our teachers and leaders and, on the other, strengthens the moral purpose of equity within the profession. We know that the majority of educators go into the education profession to “make a difference.” I believe moral purpose is equally important - the moral purpose of addressing inequities, not only in education, but also in society.

My role in New Zealand has been influential in the development of principals and aspiring principals. At this critical point in my commitment to educational leadership, the opportunity to be academic director of our national aspiring principals program was exciting and daunting at the same time. “Well here’s your opportunity to develop these new

generations of school leaders for New Zealand's schools." We have a very strong curriculum around developing self, leading change, leading people, innovative learning spaces, and the multifaceted role of the principal. However, it is the *design* of that professional learning that ultimately makes the difference to these leaders to have the disposition to learn and to become culturally responsive. They need strong agency and efficacy about their moral purpose to lead change with colleagues in varied complex situations, particularly in settings where colleagues may not have the same values, beliefs and assumptions about teaching, learning and the desired changes as they do. Essential to this process is to support these leaders nationwide to develop and sustain not only their strength of moral purpose for New Zealand's education at a system level, but also the capabilities and skills to lead the type of change that we are calling for. The following key principles of professional learning underpin the design of the experiences in New Zealand's National Aspiring Principals Programme.

- Personalized, self-regulated, reflective meta-cognitive learning;
- Connected and networked leaders sharing and creating knowledge together;
- Coaching leadership capacity in self and others
- Inquiry-focused leadership; and learning, informed by research and evidence.

Every participant has a coaching leadership relationship with a partner. They also have a reciprocal coaching relationship with an experienced leader. There are regional professional learning groups of colleagues, and also a national online professional community where all participants debate, coach, dialogue, create and build on ideas in the pursuit of solutions to the complex challenges in the multi-faceted role of principals in their own school and in New Zealand as a whole. Every participant is focused on addressing inequities in their own school context through an inquiry approach to their leadership learning. They

develop an online portfolio of reflections and dialogue with their two coaches (and often with other colleagues.) By the end of a year or more working in this way, the hope is that not only will the practices and structures be in place for continued learning, support and challenge in their leadership practice, but also that their disposition to share, create and build on ideas with their colleagues, as they strengthen their moral purpose for addressing inequities in New Zealand education will be fully developed. I would like to see more lateral sharing of innovation regionally and nation-wide in New Zealand, where leaders are able to break down the barriers of competition that are inherent in our system to say that we can find the answers to the challenges our communities are facing by working together.

In your more than 30 years of work internationally in the field of educational change, what models/ideas promise greatest success for large-scale educational improvement?

I am convinced that the most powerful models are those that embrace leaders learning from and with each other, with their communities, nationally and internationally. For me, the work around leadership, leadership development and professional learning go hand in hand. One of the big models and ideas for creating success is the notion of equity stemming from, for example, David Hopkins' work around the idea that every school needs to be a great school, and for every student, a great teacher. That has to be our bottom line. I believe that, as educators, we are only as successful as the least successful students in our school, or as successful as the least successful school in our system. Another big idea that has influenced my work is the importance of system change rather than engaging in another project or another contract or strategy. Prominent promoters of this idea include, for example,, Michael Fullan, Andy

Hargreaves and Ben Levin. Also promising are the ideas around networks and learning communities with, for example, Lorna Earl, Louise Stoll, Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert, and all the work that they and other colleagues are doing around the lateral sharing of knowledge. It's about leaders learning from and with each other, with their communities, nationally, and internationally. Then there is the work on the importance of leadership development, from people such as Darling Hammond, Hallinger, Leithwood, and Hargreaves and the work that they and other colleagues have undertaken around professional practice and leadership practice.

The importance of forward-thinking learning spaces in my research with Charles Webber around boundary breaking leadership where we explored different spaces for leadership learning, challenging the thought that learning spaces are four walls of a classroom and inside school buildings. Examining the 'space' in the learning relationship between teacher and student is the most important starting point. There are many, many learning spaces available to us when we are creative in our approach to the leadership of learning, and it can begin in our approaches to the learning of leadership. The work of Valerie Hannon, the Innovation

Unit and the OECD work around innovative learning spaces are also influential here. The research and work of scholars such as Russell Bishop and Carolyn Shields around culturally responsive practice goes to the heart of learning and indeed to the heart of leadership practice. Until we do more work with educators around their own culture, so that they recognize how their own knowledge is socially and culturally constructed, will they be able to effectively support young people across the many, many cultures and communities that they work with. And of course, that is where coaching through reciprocal relationships and critical reflection on one's practice comes in as one of these ideas that promise greatest success for large-scale educational improvement – but then, I would say that, wouldn't I!

There are so many influential ideas that hold promise for systemic education change, that I cannot possibly list all the researchers and developers here who have contributed to my thinking and that of others over the years. Actually, I believe that we know all we need to know for large-scale educational improvement – the knowledge is all there – what is needed is the determination, the capability, the resourcing, and the disposition to put it into practice.



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