Leading education into the future

Deidre M. Le Fevre

University of Auckland

Effective leadership is key to addressing enduring education issues in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our education system needs to be responsive within rapidly changing, uncertain, and complex contexts in which we face significant societal and global challenges. Key questions are provided to provoke critical and urgent conversations. These may lead to the development and implementation of effective policy and include an intentional focus on what we need to stop doing, what we need to keep doing, and what we need to start doing.

Keywords: leadership, inquiry, emotion, complexity, implementation, policy, partnership, adaptive leadership, voice

Introduction

How do people learn? What makes a good leader? Why is it challenging for leaders to bring about change? What leadership practices promote equity? Education for the future faces enduring questions and issues that have been with us for decades. Responding with effective policy and practice to address these enduring issues is central to the work of those leading education into the future.

Albert Einstein was handing out exam papers when one of his students challenged him. "But these are the same questions as last year" the student exclaimed. "Yes," replied Einstein, "they're the same questions but the answers will be different this year."

Enduring questions and issues persist in education, but the ways leaders need to respond to them are complex and changing. It can be tempting to think "let's move on to something new," however, these and other enduring questions and issues need to remain core to the work of policymakers, leaders, researchers and educators in Aotearoa New Zealand if we are to bring about substantive improvement in the learning and wellbeing of those our education system is intended to serve. Provoking urgent and critical conversation into how to effectively address these and other enduring issues through leadership is the goal of this position paper. The focus is on underlying conceptual ideas that are important to focus on if we are to improve our education system into the future.

Leadership context

Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced decades of changes in leadership policy and reform. Aligned with findings from other countries, some of these initiatives have been successful, however, many have failed to create and sustain the meaningful change and improvement they were intended to bring about (Hargreaves, 2022). There are numerous reasons for this including the tendency for new policy initiatives to have a hierarchical locus of control, to be inadequately resourced, and for there to be limited opportunities

built in for critical inquiry into effectiveness and opportunities for improvement. This paper explores some possible foci that might guide the direction of leadership policy and practice in the coming decades in an intentional effort to stop doing what doesn't work, keep doing what does work, and begin new approaches not yet considered.

First, it is important to consider the context leaders are facing today and into the future. Educational leaders face significant, complex, and ongoing problems which demand they lead in spaces where disagreement, uncertainty and ambiguity often prevail (Le Fevre, 2022). The French philosopher Renouvier once said, "there is no certainty, there are only people who are certain." The problems leaders need to address and the uncertainty in the contexts they work in appear tougher than ever. Key features of our global community today and going into the future have been described as volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Hadar et al., 2020). These features have significant implications for educational leaders as they create ways to lead effectively in these changing contexts.

The pace of change in education has accelerated and is predicted to continue accelerating. Educational leaders today are experiencing shifts, disruptions, and change at a level and pace that is unimaginable to their predecessors (White & Carter, 2022). These shifts or disruptions include, for example, global warming, accelerated IT developments, a global pandemic, the ready availability of misinformation, increases in poverty and inequality, changes in family and societal values, and inadequacy of government resourcing of education.

Leadership matters now more than ever and leaders who understand how to navigate through complexity and uncertainty amidst major global and local challenges with a rapid pace of change can have a powerful impact.

What will it take to lead us into the future?
The work of Heifetz et al. (2009) and his colleagues at Harvard can inform us of how we might think about responding to enduring challenges (see Table 1).

Table 1

Adaptive leadership

Routine or Technical Challenges (Routine Expertise)	Adaptive or Complex Challenges (Adaptive Expertise)
Can be solved with new information or a new skill-set	Cannot be 'fixed', but can be navigated through
Are relatively easy to identify	Usually feel uncomfortable to identify and are easy to deny or resist
Have known solutions	Have no known solution
Solutions can be taught	Solutions usually require changes in how we think, feel, and act and take time to develop
Can identify a solution and implement it for results	Possible solutions require new knowledge, experimenting and ongoing inquiry to evaluate changing outcomes

Adapted from Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009) *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Techniques for Changing your Organization and the World.* Harvard Business Press.

Here we see the differences between routine challenges and complex challenges. Most of the challenges educational leaders currently face and will face in the future are complex challenges. One of the main problems is it is human nature to respond to problems as routine challenges when they are complex challenges. The temptation to try to solve complex problems with simple solutions has been one of the major pitfalls of policy and leadership across sectors within Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. Effective leaders and policymakers understand that some problems cannot be easily solved, and that many of our existing ways of working and existing theories and beliefs won't serve us into the future. Next, this paper will explore three underlying concepts that can support the development of effective leadership policy and practice. These are creating a vision for the future, being open-minded, and responding to emotion.

Creating a vision for the future

Many of the enduring ways education and schooling have been viewed have persisted across time even though there is evidence that they no longer or perhaps never served the needs of our young people. Sometimes referred to as the 'grammar of schooling' (Jal & Datnow, 2020), the ways of understanding what it means to be educated and assumptions about what it means to lead and learn often remain uncontested. It is important now more than ever that leaders question these underlying assumptions. What does it mean to learn beyond the classroom? How can we take a critical approach to new digital tools (such as the use of artificial intelligence) while also engaging with these for what they will afford to learning? How can we break down power structures and gate-keeping that maintain the inequities in participation and outcomes of our current education system?

Although the future will always remain uncertain and unknown, it is critical to create a narrative of what the preferred future is. What are our visions for a better world, for a strong society in Aotearoa New Zealand, for education and leadership? Without a strong narrative of a preferred future, the grammar of schooling – or in other words the ways things are currently done around here (Schein & Schein, 2016) – is likely to continue to take hold and to direct future policy and practice in unintended ways. Without a strong narrative of a preferred future, we will continue to stumble through pockets of improvement rather than bringing about transformational change. "The transformation of society and education is not possible without the transformation of how we see and imagine our futures (Milojevic, 2005, p. 13).

Engaging people in creating this narrative will demand engaging diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives (Netolicky, 2022). It will involve engaging the voices of those who are not currently heard. It will involve engaging our learners and their diverse values and beliefs (Berryman & Eley, 2018). It will demand envisioning alternative futures which are more just and sustainable.

Being open-minded

To create a vision for the future that encompasses diverse and often under-represented views requires leaders hold a stance of open-mindedness and engaging in genuine inquiry. Inquiry that is genuine is about taking a stance of wanting to learn, to find out, to check assumptions, to explore new ideas, and to learn to improve.

Genuine inquiry involves seeking to understand other perspectives, holding a stance of 'curiosity' of wondering and of trying to understand rather than to explain. Open-mindedness is a willingness to reconsider your own views in the face of new information

(Hare, 2003). These sound like attributes leaders would aim to hold, yet research in Aotearoa New Zealand reveals educational leaders engage in minimal genuine inquiry (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015). This is not surprising as research by Argyrys & Schon (1996) undertaken with tens of thousands of people clearly shows we are not good at inquiring and being open-minded even when we value this as an attribute.

What do we do instead of being open-minded? Predominantly we engage in inquiry that is manipulative or we engage in inquiry that is testing. Inquiry that is manipulative is when you appear to ask a question, but really you are making a statement or request. It's like when I ask my son, "do you think it's time the lawns were mown?" Actually, there is no curiosity there, I don't want to know his perspective on how fast the vegetation grows, but I do want him to mow the lawns and I want him to mow the lawns today! Testing inquiry is when we ask a question to which we already know the answer, or at least think we know the answer, such as, "Who is the current Minister of Education?" There is no curiosity or open-mindedness, instead there is a right and a wrong answer and we are fishing for it. Genuine inquiry and open-mindedness on the other hand is when we really want to understand another perspective, when we are willing to learn even when it feels uncomfortable, and most importantly when we are willing to change our own views and practices based on what we've learned. Engaging in genuine inquiry across all levels of the system is central to leading our education system into a stronger place in coming decades.

Responding to emotion

When people are involved in change there is emotion involved. For example, one common emotion is a perception of risk (Twyford & Le Fevre, 2019). A perception of risk is when you have the sense that what you have to lose from the change outweighs what you have to gain, and this causes people to be reluctant to engage in the change. Maybe their perception of risk is that they will lose their sense of competence, or their control over their own time, or they will have to give up working in a way they really value.

Perceptions of risk are different for different people. Let's consider an example outside of education. Imagine a town that is covered in snow for much of the winter. Each year the first day of the winter snow brings young people racing outside, excited to play, to ski in the streets, to play. These young people are full of positive emotion. This same event may be experienced very differently for elders in the community who look out the window concerned that they might slip on the ice and perhaps break a hip. They experience negative emotions due to worry that they might become isolated because they are now fearful of how to move easily.

It is the same in policy development and implementation. A new initiative can be welcomed by some and not by others for very different yet valid reasons. Research in Aotearoa New Zealand indicates when leaders talk about the role of emotion and understand the perceptions of risk that they and others might be feeling, this opens the door to actually talking about change processes in ways that lead to more effective engagement with change (Twyford & Le Fevre, 2019). Talking about emotion and responding to how people are feeling will be central to the work of leaders as we question our existing assumptions about our education system and collaboratively work to promote a vision for the future that can be enacted.

Going forward

For the education system in Aotearoa New Zealand to be effective in responding to enduring issues and questions we need leadership practice and policies that are informed

and shaped by those who are most impacted by policy and leadership, that is, the learners and communities involved. Engaging people with diverse perspectives in creating the narrative of what we value in education, and how we see education and leadership taking us into the future, is essential if future policy changes are to have an impact.

Leadership in education is about more than those who hold positional responsibility and 'official' leadership roles. We are all responsible in contributing to the future of education in Aotearoa New Zealand. To enable policy initiatives to respond to the enduring questions and challenges we face in education, there are some questions we might ask ourselves whatever our position. For example, when we think about creating a vision for the future, we might ask ourselves:

- What values are driving this vision for the future?
- How does this vision serve vulnerable learners?
- How will we know when we need to change direction?

When we think about open-mindedness, we might ask ourselves:

- What motivates me to be curious?
- How do I respond to information that doesn't align with my thinking/actions?
- How do I deal with ambiguity and uncertainty?

And when we think about the key role of emotion in change, we might ask ourselves:

- What might others perceive as a risk in this situation?
- How can I check?
- How can I respond?

In order to effectively respond to the enduring issues that face our education system here in Aotearoa New Zealand, we need to continually ask these and other important questions. In addition, there are some things we need to stop, some things we need to start, and some things we need to keep doing.

What do we need to stop? Weick (2007) studied the learning and behaviour of fire fighters in the USA. These were the people who fight fires that rage for weeks on end and destroy entire forests and towns. They are trained to carry huge loads of equipment that weigh them down, but these are the tools they use to fight fire and the tools that keep them alive. Weick studied these firefighters because they were dying, they were dying doing the work they were so highly trained to do because they didn't 'drop their tools' when they needed to. There is a point of time in this type of firefighting where you have to drop your tools and run from the fire to keep yourself safe, but they didn't. They died because they held on to their tools for too long.

In education we tend to hold on to tools too long as well. We hold on to beliefs and ways of doing things that no longer serve the people they were designed to serve. For leadership to be effective into the future there is a need to identify some of the tools we need to drop, in other words, what we need to stop doing.

This paper is not intended to list these things that we should stop (an impossible task) but rather to provoke conversation and action on this. For example, we know leadership and educational change in Aotearoa New Zealand has suffered from 'initiativitis' and the tendency to be buffeted by continual new initiatives and policy changes. If we are to have the time needed to bring about sustainable and meaningful change then leaders need to be protected from political buffeting. Perhaps, for example,

there is a need for longer-term strategy that transcends potential changes in government if there is to be a chance of creating a sustainable and effective innovation.

What do we need to keep? There are some things we do well, and we should keep doing these things. Change for change's sake is not helpful. Leadership and change to improve valued outcomes is what we need (Zepeda & Lanoue, 2021). It is important that we can identify what is working, what we should hold on to, and what we should keep.

And finally, what do we need to start? It can be easy to be trapped by past and current ways of responding and to respond to new problems with past practices, but this is rarely effective. So, the question is what do we need to begin doing? Again, there is no easy answer to this and to return to the work of Heifetz et al. (2009), we need to treat this as a complex adaptive challenge. What do we need to begin doing to enable ourselves and others to think beyond our current frames and reasoning so that we can respond effectively to the complex, ambiguous and uncertain problems into the future?

This paper has not provided an overview of what leadership policy should look like. Instead, it has provided some questions and provocations intended to promote important conversations that engage diverse voices and views so we can head into the future with ways of leading that can promote effective policy development and implementation. The enduring questions and challenges we face are adaptive and complex challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009) and they do not have known solutions. If we are to be effective in responding to these in the coming decades, then there is a need to be open-minded so we can experiment and gain the new knowledge required. The work may feel uncomfortable (Heifetz et al., 2009) as we navigate through different and contested visions for the future, and leaders, policymakers and educators who understand and embrace this will be in a strong position to lead education into the future.

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Professor Deidre Le Fevre is a researcher and academic program leader for postgraduate studies in educational leadership at the University of Auckland. Her research and teaching focus on leadership, learning, and policy for organisational change and development. She explores practices that support practitioners address complex leadership problems. Deidre brings knowledge and skills in understanding organisational change, the development of professional capability, and effective leadership to her work consulting with leaders and organisations. Her research includes several large-scale projects investigating leadership, professional learning, and educational improvement. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7422-0431