# Transcript

## Podcast episode 12 – Neil Barker defines leadership as a lifelong learning journey

Duration: 33:43 minutes

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**ANGELA SCAFFIDI:**

Welcome to the [Bastow](https://www.bastow.vic.edu.au/newsletter-signup) podcast – conversations with big thinkers about the big questions in education and leadership today. I’m [Angela Scaffidi](https://senateshj.com/our-people/angela-scaffidi/).

Neil Barker’s storied career in education has spanned 35 years and diverse settings, from youth justice to emergency management and even the Melbourne Zoo. After 10 years as principal of Wales Street Primary School, he moved into policy work, focused on broad system issues for Victoria’s Department of Education and Training. In 2013, Neil joined the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, where he’s been Director since 2014. His work on national and international collaborations has raised the profile of Victorian educational leadership across the globe. This year, Neil was awarded an Australian Council for Educational Leaders National Fellowship, recognising his outstanding contribution to improving student and organisational outcomes.

Welcome, Neil.

**NEIL BARKER:**

Hi, Angela.

**ANGELA:**

So you’ve been a leader in many learning contexts, including schools, the youth justice system and, obviously, the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership. What drew you to leadership roles in education?

**NEIL:**

Oh, I think it was the work. It’s interesting. I went to this AITSL meeting where we had people from all round Australia and we were talking about educational leadership and when we all talked, we realised that none of us went into education to lead. We went in to teach. So none of us went in to be principals. And so I don’t think that was ever on my mind. It just seemed to be I went from leading one piece of work to then leading a team and leading a larger team and then thinking about, “Well, how can I have a broader reach? So maybe I can do some work in policy.” So originally, that was sort of by myself but then, I was leading a strategic leadership team. And, yeah, so it all just sort of fell into my lap. Well, no, it didn’t fall into my lap. I think I made the opportunities. I was really interested in doing other things. But I think what led me into it was my passion for the work.

**ANGELA:**

So, Neil, what are some of the hallmarks of great leadership, particularly in an education context?

**NEIL:**

Oh, look, it’s a really interesting question ‘cause I’m not sure that there’s a big distinction between educational leadership and other forms of leadership. I think there are some nuances and that’s the thing about good leadership, that it will be context specific. But if I was to say the main things, I think probably the most important thing is your capacity to lead people, your relationships with people, those who are reporting to you and those that you’re reporting to, I think that capacity to work with people is really critical in leadership. Because you can lead but if no-one follows, then your leadership’s not particularly strong, is it? Or it’s not particularly effective.

And this notion of the ‘people’ work. It’s how you collaborate with others, how you work with other people. So I heard someone recently say, “Look, if you’re all in the room together and you’re just talking about a few things and not actually collaborating, then let’s just call that a ‘meeting’ ‘cause that’s probably what it is.” If we’re collaborating, we’re actually really working on the work together and we’re progressing and understanding what we’re doing and sharing and even challenging each other on the things that we’re doing.

So I think it’s about your capacity to work with people but I think, then it goes to a number of other things as well. I think this notion that we have to be perfect leaders is a really interesting one. And recently, I’ve heard people talking about this notion of being the ‘lead learner’. And when I think back on my early days of being a principal, I thought I had to get it all right and I had to be perfect and I had to do it all and, I think, what I learnt was that I wasn’t perfect and I didn’t know it all but I could work with my team to learn what I needed to learn and I could demonstrate that. And that was a really powerful thing for me to understand but also, it sort of opened me and people could see me as someone who’s vulnerable, someone who was prepared to say they didn’t know but work with others to find the answers to things. ‘Cause we can’t possibly know it all. So I think that notion of ‘lead learner’ is really important.

I think the other thing is to have a vision, to understand what you’re really trying to achieve. At the end of the day, what are the really important things? What are the not negotiables? What do you stand for? What’s it going to look like when we start working on the things that we think are really important and what would it look like when we begin to get there? Not that I think you ever get there. But what does the journey look like? What are the signposts on the improvement path that you’re on? So I think those things are important.

**ANGELA:**

And so, if you think about either the point you made around people collaborating or being the lead learner, et cetera, what are the ways in which people build those skills or build those capabilities so they can do those things and do them well?

**NEIL:**

Look, I think it’s really important that people understand that you don’t just magically get the skills that you need, that actually, there’s a lot of work involved. And so, I think, it happens over time. I think that idea that you can suddenly be appointed as an assistant principal, for example, and you’re going to be, as I said before, perfect in the job is probably not realistic. It’s all the things that you’ve done before that, that are going to make the difference, all of the learnings and the people you’ve worked with and the things that you’ve tried and not tried and failed on! A lot of those things are important.

I think the learning’s often in the work. You know, we think we’ll go to a piece of professional learning… But it is about learning in the work and our professional learning does involve that. It IS about how do you take the things that we’re learning about here and actually put them into place. So, I think, learning it in the work is really important.

Feedback’s a really complex one ‘cause I’m not sure as a society we’re that comfortable with receiving it and we’re not that good at giving it.

I remember, I coached under-18 girls football and it seems that young people these days are much better on this notion of feedback. They came to me and say, “Oh, so I want some feedback on how I was playing out there.” And I’d say, “Well, look, it’s really good.” And they’d say, “Yeah, I know it’s good but what could I do better?” So, I think, that idea of feedback is really important. I mean, that can be hard but I know that there are organisations that have worked really hard and it’s when people begin to ask for it that you really start to get some power. So, I think, in the leadership learning, getting feedback from people is really important.

Another idea I think is really important in learning leadership is finding mentors, not just one but different people for different aspects and at different times in your career and for different things that you’re doing. So I’ve had some really great mentors along the way, people , that will help me solve problems but encourage me, give me ideas, find opportunities.

And then, similarly, coaching. It’s slightly different, really. But I’ve really enjoyed the coaching I’ve had over the years ‘cause it’s really individualised development, very challenging at times but it can really get to the things that are important.

The other thing that’s, I think, really important, is taking risks. We ask our students to take risks but we don’t often take them ourselves. And we’re not encouraged, sometimes, to take those risks. We’re expected to get it right first time. Now, that’s unrealistic. So, I think, in leadership learning, having a go, being courageous, “I’m going to lead this – it’s going to be a bit of a challenge and if I fail, that’s OK.” But you need to be in a context where that’s going to be suitable so, sometimes, you need to say, “Yeah, look, I’m happy to give that a go. But you know I haven’t done this before so I’m going to give it a go but I’ll need you to coach and mentor me through this and, hey, I might not get it right but help me stay on the right path.”

Probably two other things I’d add. I think it’s important to be strategic about where you’re going and what your skills and capabilities are and the things you need to focus on. So there are lots of 360 tools and instruments around that you can use to get that information. I mean, Bastow’s got the Victorian Aspirant Principal Assessment. You can do that from an emerging teacher ‘cause it’ll give you really good feedback on the things you’re doing and what you might want to do next.

Now, you might not be heading to principalship but by doing something like that, it actually might help you think, “Oh, yeah, actually, principalship wouldn’t be so bad.” And going back to that idea of over time, then why wouldn’t you spend five or ten years, if you’re interested in being a principal, working on your leadership capabilities for a principalship?

**ANGELA:**

So we hear a lot, these days, about the importance of future-ready leaders. I expect that a future ready leader has many of the attributes you’ve talked about, around seeking feedback and having a vision, et cetera. Are there any other attributes you think are really important for these future-ready leaders?

**NEIL:**

Oh, it’s a really interesting concept. Um, I really like the work that Valerie Hannon’s done about what does future-ready mean, in a way. I mean, that’s not the way she describes it but it’s about what do we want for our students in the longer term. So maybe I’ll start with this notion of what do we want for our students ‘cause I think future-ready leaders need to be able to create the opportunity for students to be future-ready.

And it’s not just this dialogue we’ve had for many years about 21st century skills, you know, computers, all of those sorts of things. You know, they’re important skills and capabilities you’ve got to have but she’s really broadened the conversation – and I hope she excuses me for not quoting her as well as I might – but she talks about a much broader set of skills, I mean, understanding the environment, the world in which we live, which is being challenged in so many ways. There’s this globally connected community. How do we have the skills to negotiate that, you know, to understand what’s truth and not truth in media and how do you understand those things in social media? And how do you connect with other people?

There are so many opportunities and so many ways in which all of that’s connected, that they’re the sorts of things that we really want for our students.

Yeah, so specifically, then, from our leaders, I think we need a capacity for them to really have skills in the sort of strategic systems thinking, so to think much more broadly about how they’re constructing the learning for students, er, allowing students to have opportunities to understand systems more broadly so to bring knowledge together. So for leaders, it’s creating learning communities in which, the learning is context driven.

So I think leaders need to have a really strong understanding or capacity to really challenge their notions about good learning theory ‘cause I think students bring something very different from that very globally connected world. So it’s being able to lead a curriculum and a way of learning that’s quite different.

And, probably, the other bit is the sort of interpersonal dynamics. What are the sorts of things you want to be happening in the school that bring people together but allow them to work on the work together and allow them to, er, take that work and generalise it into other places. So, I think, they’re probably the main things. So it’s sort of about system, good learning design and that really strong interpersonal work.

**ANGELA:**

You’ve already talked about the fact that collaboration is central to effective leadership in an education context but in a context more broadly, both within and across schools but also obviously, of course, across jurisdictions. Can you tell us a little bit about your work with the International Educational Leadership Centre Network?

**NEIL:**

This was a network that Bastow established in the middle of last year. Our aim was to challenge the Institute a bit more by engaging more broadly with others, so we invited people from a range of jurisdictions across the world that were doing similar but sort of different things to Bastow.

So we invited representatives from a range of leadership centres across the world, to Bastow for a couple of days for a symposium, to see if there were possibilities for us to collaborate on various things. So we had representatives from Ontario, Washington, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Singapore, Hong Kong and we also had the OECD and the WISE program out of Qatar involved, and also AITSL and some people from New Zealand – so we had quite a collective of people that were involved in educational leadership. And we had a two-day dialogue where we identified the things that we were all interested in working together and we actually came up with four. And we began to work on those four and we, I think, within about three to six months, we realised that the geographic distance between us, working remotely on four things was just too much. So we were looking at things like rethinking leadership capabilities, redesigning professional learning, the policy environments that we operate in, and impact evaluation.

So we were looking at those four and then we thought, “Actually, what’s probably the most important thing here?” And we all agreed that it was about impact evaluation. How do we understand the impact of our professional learning? ‘Cause it’s a very difficult thing. Someone does a piece of professional learning and then, you’ve got a student outcome. Can you prove a relationship between that piece of professional learning and an improved student learning outcome? Well, no, it’s almost impossible ‘cause you’ve got all these variables in the way that you’ve got to regress. You’ve got to get them out of the way to prove a causal relationship.

So we’re all really interested in this work. The OECD were particularly interested because they said, “There’s not a lot of literature here.” So that has become the focus of our work. And interestingly enough, we were talking about future-ready students. We’re actually thinking about an impact design to understand whether our leadership institutes are, um, providing [the sort of learning that we would want to be happening in our centres to create future-ready leaders for future-ready students, so we’ve sort of tied up a couple of things in there.

**ANGELA:**

What a great project to collaborate on.

**NEIL:**

Yeah. Really interesting. So we did meet earlier this year and we’d all shared the various forms of evaluation that we were doing. Some was quite basic so I won’t name any jurisdictions! (chuckles) And some of what people were doing was much more mature. But there were some really great ideas in there. So we’re probably at the place now where we’re thinking about, well, so we’ve got a bit of a frame, so we understand what we might want to measure or get some evaluation on – but how we do that‘s probably the next step for us.

Collaborating across the world doesn’t happen quickly ‘cause everyone’s got other things that they’re doing and when we come together, it’s our opportunity. So I’d like to think we can progress that more quickly in the coming months.

**ANGELA:**

So obviously, through that work and other work that you’ve done over the years, you’ve built really strong networks with leaders in education across the globe. What advice would you give to other leaders on making those connections and on building networks? And they might be local networks, they might be national, they might be global. But what advice would you give on how to build a great network?

**NEIL:**

My initial thinking is it’s probably a set of dispositions. You’ve actually got to want to do it. You drag someone to a network, they’re not going to be a great contributor and you’re probably not going to want them in the group because they’re not contributing. So you’ve got to want to do it. That’s your sort of first disposition. I think the second is you’ve got to be open to other people’s ideas. You can’t come to a collaboration thinking, “We’re all going to collaborate on my idea.” It’s about being open and being prepared to listen to others and shift your ideas and be challenged and challenge others in respectful sorts of ways.

And then it’s about listening to others but learning from it. And then, as we said before, true collaboration, it’s not a meeting. It’s actually where you begin to do the work together, so there’s some sort of action research, some sort of productive cycle of doing something together and testing it and understanding it and modifying it. So that’s, I think, when true collaboration begins…

Probably, my other piece of advice is there are some really good resources out there, some really good rubrics. So Bastow has one for its Communities of Practice approach. You’ll find that on the website. It’s easy to find. But there are other ones around as well. So there’s some quite good information and literature about this so make your approach a bit more strategic. Don’t just come together and create and agenda and off you go. Actually begin to look at, well, what does good collaboration look like and can we self-assess ourselves on this? Can we understand how do we build trust, how do we share our data, how do we work together as a team of learners, what is the learning we want to preference?

I think that the best collaboration happens when people come together for a particular purpose. So, I think, in our international leadership centres example, we all came with a passion to be able to improve what we were doing. We worked together to identify what made most sense so that we were all on board with the sort of collaboration we were going to do, and then we kept doing it and we kept doing it. And so, I think, that’s the other thing – it’s persistence. Because in the persistence you get to know each other better and you can’t expect collaboration to work when you get together twice, you know, or two or three times over six or eight months. You’ve got to keep persisting in getting to know each other and working together and the stronger your relationships become, I think, the better the work and the collaboration becomes.

**ANGELA:**

So it sounds like it’s a sort of dispositions or mindsets and some behaviours, some ways of doing things. It also sounds like a little bit of kind of ‘leave your ego at the door’.

**NEIL:**

I think you’re exactly right. It can often be pretty hard for people to do ‘cause they think they’ve got it right and the moment you think you’ve got it right, you probably haven’t.

**ANGELA:**

Yes, well, it goes to your earlier point about we’re always learning and growing and improving and you never actually get there, do you?

It’s the journey.

**NEIL:**

Yep. Yeah.

**ANGELA:**

What lessons have you learnt about leading during periods of rapid growth? ‘Cause I think Bastow’s a good example of an organisation that has grown rapidly. What are some ways in which we might think about how one would lead during periods of rapid growth?

**NEIL:**

I think the most critical thing is that you keep clarity about what you’re there for. What’s your vision, what’s your mission and what are you trying to achieve? Because as the growth happens, it’s really easy for people to bring new ideas in and go, “Well, we could do this and we could do that.” And often, if you’re growing, then it means that you’re being asked to do more. So doing more’s OK but if it’s not aligned with what your central purpose is, then there’s a really strong possibility that you’ll begin to sort of broaden to too many things and then, you’re less likely to be achieving the sort of vision that you’re after.

And for me, at Bastow, I always tried to pull people back to the fact that we’re here to improve student learning outcomes. Sure, we’re building leadership capability but we’re building that capability to improve student learning outcomes. So that’s why we’re here so let’s try and make sure that we’re measuring everything we do based on that. Keeping that central purpose of why you’re there is really important.

I think understanding the authorising environment as you grow because there’s much more happening and it goes to sort of my third point – some agility. But there’s this sort of relationship between the authorising environment but also maintaining some agility, so understanding what do I need to get permission to do and what don’t I need permission to do that I can just go ahead and do? So it’s good to have those clear conversations with the people who authorise your work so that you know, “I’m not going to come and ask you about everything but I’ll ask you about these things”. I think that authorising environment’s important and it’s a bit of who’s the authoriser, what are you getting authorised and when do you need to do that?

So there is that old saying, sort of, ‘Do the work and seek forgiveness later’. I would never ascribe to that, Angela.

And then, I think, probably, the other thing is, as the organisation grows, it’s communicate, communicate, communicate. I don’t think you can over-communicate. And we saw Bastow go from sort of 15 to 18 staff, when I took over as director, to sort of more than 75. That’s big change and it’s really important that everyone knows what everyone else is doing. We haven’t always got that right. Don’t get me wrong. But we needed to communicate well and you need to if you’re going to grow in a healthy sort of way.

My good friend and colleague Steve Munby told me this once, when I was talking to him about how he, um, ran the leadership centre and college in the UK. And he said, you know, “People will tell you how fantastic you are. The question to go back to them with is, ‘Yeah, but what could we do better? What’s not working well?’ Because that’s what you really want to know.” So, I think, testing what you’re doing and if it’s working and how you could be better is really important, not just allowing people to tell you, “Oh, it’s great. It’s great. It’s great.” Yeah, but what could we do better? Thanks. I know it’s great. But what could be better?

**ANGELA:**

Yes, I once participated in a school review where the principal kept getting all this positive feedback and at about 11 o’clock in the morning, she said, “Let’s just stop there. That’s all great. What are we going to do better?” It’s that idea about absolutely celebrating what’s worked but also, how do we keep improving?

**NEIL:**

Yeah. That’s right. Because we like to hear the good things and sometimes, we avoid hearing the bad things. But you need to hear them because, er, you can’t improve them if people are not prepared to tell you. And by opening up on that, by actually asking them for the feedback, I think you give them license to tell you things that you might not necessarily want to hear but it is important to hear.

**ANGELA:**

What about leading during periods of uncertainty? What are some of the lessons you’ve learnt in your career, around how you might lead through uncertainty?

**NEIL:**

Vision and purpose again. You need to keep checking in on that and checking and remembering why you’re there and what the purpose of the organisation is and what you’re trying to achieve. I think that’s really important and coming back to that.

I think, sometimes, you need to sort of have plans A, B, C and then often, you throw it out and you do D, er, which is about being, again, a bit agile. Sometimes, you can over-plan things and then you lose your capacity to really respond to the things that you need to do. Because the uncertainties will be producing anxieties amongst people and some unclear understandings about the way in which things might operate and how we might proceed. It goes back to some of those other things I was talking about before. Being prepared to listen to others and not just think, “We’ve got our plan. I’ve got this right. We’re just going this way.” Oh, we’ve got some uncertainty. “No, no. Just stick to the plan. Stick to the plan.” ‘Cause the plan might not be right. The uncertainty might’ve adjusted or the things that are going on might mean that you just need to adjust to all of the other things that are happening around you. So, being prepared to be a bit flexible is really important.

Probably, the most important thing is caring for people, being aware of how people are feeling and what they might be feeling and that’s not always easy because, sometimes, when you’re the leader, they don’t want you to know. They want to protect you from that or they’re worried that, you know, you’re the boss and they might seem to be not doing well or failing in some way.

So I remember, early in my leadership career – and I can’t remember who wrote it – but one of the ideas was ‘notice the dying sparrow’. Sounds really awful, doesn’t it, the ‘dying sparrow’?! But it was. It was keep your eye out for the people that aren’t doing well and make sure you’re bringing them in and being open to that. So it’s the people leadership stuff that is incredibly important in times of uncertainty, I think.

**ANGELA:**

How do you – not necessarily identify the ‘dying sparrow’ – but how do you really get a bit of a sense of how people are feeling, whether they have the support they need, whether or not they’re kind of on track? How do you do that as a leader?

**NEIL:**

Oh, one of the things that’s really important is I don’t stay in my office. I get out and I wander round when I can, when I’m not in a meeting! I wander round and I spend some time with people and I say, “Hello. How are you going and what are you doing?” And because we’ve got three buildings, I try to get around to those three buildings every couple of days. Doesn’t always work that way. Usually. But at least once a week, I’ll try and get into other places and go and say hello and have a bit of a chat to people. And then, I think, you get a strong sense of how they’re feeling, what’s going on. And you put yourself in situations where you’re actually a bit more available so people can talk to you a bit.

And sitting in meetings and watching. Sometimes, it’s good just to watch and you’ll pick up people that are just looking a little bit disengaged. And then, being brave enough to follow that up later and say, “Oh, just, Angela, I noticed you were sitting right back in that meeting. Are you OK? Is there something that you’re not happy with that’s going on there or somewhere else?” So just opening that door. People don’t always respond to that but they might a little bit later.

Then, checking in with other people. Sometimes, it might be, you know, “Hey, Angela, I noticed that Neil was looking a little bit glum the other day. Do you know of anything that’s going on?” I mean, we don’t want people dobbing on people but just those opportunities to check in with other people. And then, I think, there’s how do you create the culture – ‘cause you can’t do it all, you can’t be there for everybody – but it’s a culture where you’re role-modelling that and you would hope that, then, the leaders that you’re working with in the leadership team are role-modelling that same thing and that people right across the organisation, whether you’re in a formal leadership position or not, are also looking out for each other. That’s not easy in big organisations ‘cause it doesn’t come naturally to everybody. So it’s about a culture. Yeah.

**ANGELA:**

So earlier, you talked a little bit about sort of finding mentors and coaches and finding people who might inspire you and support you and sort of help drive where you’re going. Who has inspired where you’re thinking? Who are the people that inspire you? You’ve mentioned a couple. Valerie Hannon is one, Steve Munby is another.

**NEIL:**

Yes. They’re inspiring. Those inspiring thinkers are amazing. Yeah. But through my career, having worked in juvenile justice, it was the students, I think, that inspired me. ‘Cause that was very early in my teaching career. So I felt really inspired by these young boys, ‘cause it was a residential institution for boys, who had lived in really difficult circumstances and yet were surviving and getting on with life. Some of them were even thriving under those conditions. So they inspired me. And young people just generally, as I’ve worked with through my career. It’s the students themselves.

But it’s other people, other teachers I’ve worked with. He was a leading teacher and then, an assistant principal. I worked in two different schools with this chap. And I loved his passion for really helping young people. He was totally driven by that. And he was really caring and, inclusive. So he really inspired me in a lot of ways. And I told him this once and I think he was a bit embarrassed by it. But he was almost my father figure in an educational context, you know, because of what he did.

I think, when I was a principal, I was really inspired by some of my colleagues and the great work that they were doing. I remember one who was a really good mentor of mine but I was inspired with the way in which he had organised the school and his really strong focus on teaching and learning and student outcomes, in quite difficult circumstances. It was a school community that wasn’t particularly well-off and yet it was a great school so that was incredibly inspiring.

Then, when I came into the central office and worked at the Department, I worked in policy. It was some of the young people who didn’t have an education background but had a public service background and they were passionate about good public policy. And I went, “Oh, yeah! This is a totally different career for me.” And good public policy? I hadn’t thought about that. So I was inspired by them.

And then, I know it sounds probably a bit corny but I was actually inspired by my parents, who didn’t have an opportunity for an education and were proud of myself and my sisters and our opportunities and the things that we’re able to do. So I think I was inspired by their politics, for a better community.

**ANGELA:**

Not corny at all. In fact, there’s been a number of people in this podcast series who’ve referenced their parents as being their inspiration.

**NEIL:**

They’re our first teachers, aren’t they? And, yeah, we can be lucky.

**ANGELA:**

Absolutely. You’ve worked with leadership institutes around the world. What trends are you seeing? What do you find exciting, Neil?

**NEIL:**

Well, there’s a really strong focus at the moment on principal preparation. I think there’s strong acknowledgement around the world that the principal role, if it’s working really well, just has such impact in a school that, if we can get that right, that we can make a big difference in schools. So a lot on principal preparation. There’s a lot of literature around and there’s a lot of work and some really great work happening in different contexts, nuancing what we know about what works in principal preparation.

 I think the other interesting thing – there’s a growing understanding of this, that you can’t just do principal preparation. You can’t just turn someone into a great principal with a 3- or a 12- or an 18-month program.

So how do we identify people with the leadership talent, then how do we develop them over time, through that sort of pipeline of an emerging leader, a middle leader, an assistant principal, principal and then, right into system leader? And we’ve done some work at Bastow in our Talent Management Framework that sort of shows that you move from self-leadership to leadership of work, to leadership of people, to leadership of larger organisations and it’s a nice little progression.

The trend, I think, internationally is how do we scale that leadership pipeline without spending a whole lot of money? What value-for-money ways can you scale that sort of…that development to ensure that we’re not just trying to do a principal preparation program in the last few moments, to get someone to be a great principal. Because the other bit of the investment in the pipeline is that if principals have got really good leaders to work with in their leadership team, then, er, that’s really important ‘cause a principal can’t do it all by themselves, so…

So that leadership pipeline work. And, as we were talking about before, I think, probably the really interesting piece is that impact evaluation. How can we understand what professional learning works well in what context or what elements work better than others so that we can then make sure we’re investing our resources on the things that make the biggest difference? So, you know, is it coaching in this context? Is it mentoring in that? Is it a formal program here? Is it a less formal program here? Is it something in the school there? There’s great interest in that impact evaluation work. So, I think, that’ll be really rewarding over the next couple of years, if we’ve got people that are bringing us a bit more literature around that.

And probably, the final thing is, as I said before, I think what we’re seeing around the world is that some jurisdictions can invest more money than others but what are the ways you can get bang for your buck, in terms of the professional learning that you’re developing? There’s a really strong dialogue about learning in the work. How do we help people learn in the work? It doesn’t always have to be in a formal leadership program where people come out. But it’s how do we help them when they’re actually doing the job or when they’re about to do the job or just before they’re doing the job but in a school context?

**ANGELA:**

So we’ve talked a little bit today about new leaders and developing new leaders. If you were a new leader in a school today or even in network today, where would you focus your energy?

**NEIL:**

I think one of the things – and there’s a strong narrative around this – is good data, understanding what’s happening in the school. So really good data so you know what’s working well but what could work better in that school or that network. Then, having a really good look at, well, is there any evidence around the world of the things that we might do to make a difference or that we might focus our effort on, where we need to get improvement? And that’s really complex, understanding the literature and knowing how to take it. So then it becomes how to use that evidence in a really good way. So it’s not…not just having the evidence but actually being able to use it in your context, to nuance it to make a difference ‘cause what works in one place might not work in another. So the literature might be great. there might be some really good information in there but you need to know how to take that and actually then use it in context to make a difference anywhere.

So I think that’s probably where I would begin ’cause, I think, for me, that’s probably something that wasn’t as strong in my years of being a principal. it wasn’t a strong narrative and if I was going to do something differently, that’s what I would do differently. The people stuff, all of that I’d do the same! (chuckles) I could probably do it better but, er, yeah, I’d probably concentrate there.

**ANGELA:**

Great.

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