# Transcript

**Podcast episode 5 – Viviane Robinson calls for quality conversations**

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**ANGELA SCAFFIDI:**

Welcome to the Bastow 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/), and in this episode my colleague Matt Foran interviews [Distinguished Professor Viviane Robinson](https://unidirectory.auckland.ac.nz/profile/vmj-robinson).

**MATT FORAN:**

Viviane Robinson is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Auckland. She is passionate about doing rigorous research that improves practice. Since completing her doctoral study at Harvard University, she has worked as an organisational psychologist in many countries, including Chile, Denmark, England, Singapore and Australia.

Viviane’s specialties include leadership and organisational improvement in education. Her research has been published in leading international journals and she’s the author of five highly regarded books. Viviane developed the theory and practice of Open-to-Learning™ Leadership to help leaders tackle difficult issues while building trust.

Hi, Viviane. Welcome.

**VIVIANE ROBINSON:**

Thank you.

**MATT:**

First off, as an organisational psychologist, what drew you to education?

**VIVIANE:**

Well, that’s a good question and maybe there’s a couple of answers. The first is I come from a family of teachers. My father was a primary school principal, my mother was a secondary school teacher, my uncle was principal of a small country school where most of the student enrolment were his own children. And so I grew up in a teaching/education environment.

And then, when I went to university and studied psychology, in those days, the university I went to – the University of Auckland – the study of psychology was mostly the study of the behaviour of rats and pigeons and I wanted to study people. So in order to study people, I switched into education. So I ended up doing a double major in education and psychology and then I became, over time, with the doctorate, an organisational psychologist.

But I had a passion for schooling and teaching and students and helping in that area, rather than in the corporate area, which is where most organisational psychologists end up, and I became an academic. I really focused my research on how could I study schools and do research on problems of practice that would help teachers and school leavers do a better job for student outcomes? And that’s what took me into being an organisational psychologist and bringing that background of my study and my research and my field research in schools into education.

**MATT:**

And were you in your father’s class?

**VIVIANE:**

Yes! And my mother’s! At intermediate school, I was in my father’s class and that, of course, had an upside and a downside and the upside was that I had parents who were teachers. In those days, teachers were revered, you know, by the community. It was a higher status occupation than it is now, unfortunately. And my father loved nature study and geography and social studies and so I was in a class where we had lizards and insects and animals and fish and I learned a whole lot about that. But then, at times, I think, I was probably held to a standard that was just a wee bit unfair. And my mother taught Latin and so I had her for a while, till I dropped Latin in about year 11.

**MATT:**

How can educational leaders influence student outcomes?

**VIVIANE:**

Well, this, of course, is a question that’s been central to me for quite a long time in my research and I was fortunate enough to win a contract to write a synthesis of all the research on the relationship between leadership and student outcomes. And so that process led me to understand what the cumulated evidence – research evidence – said about how leaders impact student outcomes. And they impact student outcomes, to cut a very long story short, by examining a whole lot of evidence about what’s happening in their school and particularly for students, on a whole basket of indicators.

And then, with others, with other leaders and with the community deciding what that evidence tells them about what key challenges are for their students and then setting goals around improving student wellbeing, achievement, academic outcomes, social outcomes, reducing bullying, whatever it is, so goal setting is a key way that leadership set, improve and affect student outcomes. Then, having set goals, they need to resource the achievement of those goals. But they should be able to track the relationship between the school budget and the way money is spent, the way teachers’ time is used, the type of staffing hires that are going on at the moment, so resourcing the goals.

The third way they affect student outcomes is by getting close to teaching and learning. So getting involved in monitoring the quality of the planning in the curriculum and of teaching and assessment in the classrooms. Then, a quite powerful way, additional way they affect student outcomes is by getting involved with the teachers in the teacher learning. Learning with their teachers in the priority areas that teachers need to learn about in order to achieve the goals.

And all of this has to happen on a foundation of a safe and orderly environment and I mean safe and orderly for both the students and the staff. So those are about five ways in which the evidence tells us about how leaders make a difference to student outcomes.

**MATT:**

You make a very interesting observation in one of your books around traditionally researchers doing research and teachers responding and reacting to that research and how, if you can get teachers to be researchers, it’s much more impactful.

**VIVIANE:**

Yes. I think that’s seen, really the notion of teachers as researchers is not to turn teachers into academics. But it is to say that that disposition of inquiry and curiosity and wanting to know the impact that they’re having, that part of teachers as researchers is really central.

So for those teachers that are doing academic study, they will add to that disposition of inquiry by knowing quite a lot more about how research works and how to find answers or possible answers to their questions about how to improve outcomes in their own classrooms with particular sets of students under particular conditions. They’ll be able to navigate their way through the knowledge base that we have in education much more easily.

**MATT:**

Now, you’ve had the privilege of seeing and working with a broad range of education systems right across the Western world. Are there common leadership challenges that you’ve seen?

**VIVIANE:**

Yes. Very common leadership challenges. One of them is just how to keep a focus on teaching and learning. And let me use the example of New Zealand schools. We’ve had a quite radical school self-management structure in our country for nearly 30 years now and it’s just being reviewed at the moment. And one of the challenges for leaders under that system is how do you find the time when you’re responsible for everything from the bus schedule to the plumbing to the engagement with the community. How do you find time to lead teaching, the improvement of teaching and learning at all? That’s just a huge challenge for leaders and the more that systems devolve leadership to the school level, the greater that challenge.

In a more centralised system you’ve got the opposite problem of how does the centre actually enable the schools and make sensible decisions that recognise the contextual differences between schools so that you’re not imposing and doing a one-size-fits-all for school leaders? So getting that balance between autonomy and self-management and central provision is hard for every system. And a lot of the decisions we have to make in education, especially when you’re talking about improvement, require highly technical specialist knowledge.

And, I mean, I’m a Professor of Education. There are a whole lot of areas in education where I don’t have enough knowledge to make good decisions. So the assumption that local devolution is best – and this is true in all organisations, probably – because the people in the organisation know best, well, sometimes they do and sometimes they don’t.

**MATT:**

And I suppose too, regardless of the balance, it all comes down to the leadership of the individual people involved in the system as well.

**VIVIANE:**

Yes, whoever’s making the decisions, whether they’re leadership at the regional or central level or whether it’s leadership at the school level. So another challenge is actually building the capabilities of leaders at all levels. And I think, in education we’ve been quite reluctant to recognise just how critical leadership is. Partly because showing the causal links between leaders influencing teachers and in large schools that’s multiple layers, so in a large school, that’s senior leaders influencing middle leaders influencing teachers influencing students. So maybe, that’s why in education, as opposed to in the corporate world, that’s a much harder relationship to track and that may be why, in education, we’ve struggled to really accept the importance of leadership.

**MATT:**

Is it a case of it being very difficult to find the quantifiable examples or is it that it’s easier to talk intuitively about what good leaders in the education space do?

**VIVIANE:**

Well, there’s no shortage of intuitive talk. So there’s heaps of anecdotal and qualitative evidence about the importance of leadership. But what’s been hard is to actually, as you say, quantify that and find the evidence not just that leadership makes a difference but what is it about what leaders do and not do that makes the difference? So, yes, the international challenges are, one, getting that balance right between central control and local autonomy. The other is just building capability of leadership and having a pipeline of good leaders.

**MATT:**

Change in the educational sector has often been looked upon as a uniformly good thing, yet in your latest book, you write about reducing change to increase improvement. Why is this important?

**VIVIANE:**

Because we have too much change and not enough improvement! And I’m on a mission to reduce the amount of change, and by change, I mean deliberate, planned interventions into schools and systems. Because there’s a lot of evidence that changes, many changes don’t make a difference. They don’t make the intended improvement. In some cases, they make things worse. They are hugely disruptive to schools. Change is a very complex process because it requires rethinking and realigning dozens if not hundreds of practices. So you want teachers to change the way they teach mathematics, for example, because the results aren’t good enough. Now, quite often that change is not just about learning to teach maths differently, it’s about changing the assessment routines, it’s about changing the grouping practices in your class, it’s all the units of work that have to be planned, maybe a change of text and resources, maybe a change of timetabling so that we can bring teachers together to learn together about how to teach maths differently. Now, you just think about the number of routines that are being disrupted by just that one thing in a school organisation. Now, in some schools, especially large schools, there might be between a dozen and 15 such changes going on at once. And what happens is that people are not pursued intensely enough. People don’t have time to learn.

Because improvement is about making things better, not just making things different. So we better make a distinction between change and improvement and not assume that the one leads to the other.

**MATT:**

Why do you think it is, with the growing body of evidence that change for change’s sake isn’t necessarily improving, that that hypothesis still tends to stand?

**VIVIANE:**

Because in our language, ‘change’ has become what philosophers call an ‘honorific’, okay? It’s assumed to be desirable and so the desirability of it goes with the word ‘change’. And another reason… Same for innovation. Innovations are just new things. They could be better or worse than the things you had before. So that’s one of the reasons.

**MATT:**

You’re right too, because there’s a real propensity to ascribe a positive connation to change or innovation when they’re actually just things happening.

**VIVIANE:**

They’re just things happening differently and then, we get into this… We take for granted the fact that it’s a good thing and we celebrate schools and leaders that are innovative. Well, actually, I don’t want them to be innovative unless the innovation is producing improvement. Just dangling the innovations out there for PR purposes, marketing purposes or whatever, I don’t want to be… There’s too much of that. And the downsides of it are awful for burnout of teachers and leaders, for millions and millions of dollars being spent in ways that produce disappointing results, for the lack of careful and rigorous thought about why we’re changing. A number of teachers that engaged with change. And I ask them what is the problem for which this change is intended to be the solution. And they can’t answer the question and nor can the leaders who’ve brought that in. So that’s one of the things I want to interrupt.

**MATT:**

Yes. So how can leaders tackle issues rigorously and still build trust?

**VIVIANE:**

By having high-quality conversations about the need to improve.

**MATT:**

And what does that high-quality conversation look like?

**VIVIANE:**

So a high-quality conversation about improvement, the leader doesn’t start by saying, “And what do you think about what’s happening with these students over there?” That’s an important question but if I ask that without first saying why I’m asking you the question, that’s going to reduce trust, not build it because I’m going to feel, “Where’s this going? Why is he asking? Why is she asking me this question?”

So disclosing concerns without blaming, what I call ‘constructive problem talk’, is really important, then giving grounds for those concerns - what is it that leads you to be concerned, why do you think that’s a problem. And then, going into asking, checking whether you think it’s a problem, whether you’re concerned about it and then, together, inquiring into what do we know, what do we need to learn about why this is happening? And not doing anything about it, in terms of bringing in the quick fix, until you have a shared understanding of the causes of that problem.

**MATT:**

Have you got any examples where you’ve seen that work particularly well?

**VIVIANE:**

Well, we are, my colleague and I, we are currently running a year-long program for the system leaders in Victoria and what we’re doing… And many of them have had training in conversation theory and practice, which we call ‘Open-to-Learning™ Leadership’, of how do you have conversations that build trust while doing the hard work. Not building trust and then doing the work but how you build trust and respect by doing the work together, of tackling the tough improvement issues. So they’ve had all of that. And then, now, what we’re doing is we are teaching them, together, how to tackle and attempt to improve long-standing persistent problems that they’re responsible for in identified schools. And one of the key things we’re having to focus on is that they should not spend any money, bring in any solutions, do any quick fixes until they have agreement with the relative school leaders that there is a problem that needs to be solved and then agreement on what the school-based causes of that problem are likely to be.

**MATT:**

How are they responding to that?

**VIVIANE:**

They are responding really well. No quick fixes, interrupting the quick fixes, interrupting the racing back and forth between different schools, focusing on one school in order to trial and learn this new process. Plus, not only the process of problem solving but the conversations that they need to have with school leaders, maybe different conversations from what they’ve had in the past, talking to school leaders about why, no, they’re not going to be suggesting solutions or quick fixes until they’ve agreed on the major school-based causes of the problems.

And so the test will be to what extent have those problems, tough problems in their focus schools, to what extent have they been progressed, if not resolved.

**MATT:**

It’ll be fascinating to watch the process. In your book, you talk about leaders being too nice. What’s going on or what’s going wrong there?

**VIVIANE:**

It’s really quite hard, giving and receiving negative feedback. It’s tough. And so in what we call Open-to-Learning™ Leadership, we see a lot of people talking about these issues and their concerns in ways that protect the adult relationship. So leaders often get stuck on, “How do I talk to you about this problem I perceive without damaging our relationship?”

**MATT:**

I don’t think this is unique to the educational sector!

**VIVIANE:**

It’s universal. But in education, if you go with protecting the adult relationships and you do that in a way that prevents you from talking about the work issue, which is the students, you’ve ended up sacrificing the students for adult relationships. So instead of having what I call student-centred leadership you’ve got adult-centred leadership. So one of the main things we do in our Open-to-Learning™ Leadership training is we teach people how to do both at once because you’ve got to have good relationships with the adults but you’ve got to build those good relationships while tackling the tough stuff together. You build. And you’re not looking for being liked. That’s the wrong motive. You’re looking for being respected. And that’s a reframing that leaders sometimes have to get their head around as well.

**MATT:**

And I guess it is the leader but it’s also the person receiving the feedback as well and both of them have to be in a position where they can understand that it’s not personal, it’s not about the individual, it’s about the system and what’s happening.

**VIVIANE:**

Right. Yeah. And quite often people say, “Well, this won’t work with this person because they’re particularly defensive or difficult, or whatever.” And then what we do in the workshops, we put you in the situation where you’re trying to be that person who is so defensive and what we find, most of the time, is the more skilled the leader is, the less defensive the other person will be. It’s really hard to maintain your wall of defensiveness in the face of somebody who’s really open and honest but really genuinely wanting to hear your point of view.

**MATT:**

Which brings me to another question which I find quite interesting, which is when do you know if leaders are open or closed to learning as well?

**VIVIANE:**

That’s really interesting. “When do you know?”. In our workshops, we know largely around how they react to feedback, actually. Particularly feedback that’s, shall we say, disconfirming their view or challenging their view, in other words protocol or negative feedback. But people are open to learning when they receive it and take it on board and maybe think about it and then they may need some time and then to come back and they…or as trust grows, they’ll say, “Yeah. I recognise that.” Or, “Yes,” and they’ll talk about why they did it. People that are more closed to learning and have more difficulty are the people that immediately go into justifying-themselves mode. So that’s one of the key ways you tell how open someone is, is what happens when they are given negative feedback.

**MATT:**

You’ve identified goal setting as an essential element to effective leadership but how can school leaders establish goals and expectations that are both realistic but also challenging?

**VIVIANE:**

Well, that’s called a ‘stretch goal’ so a stretch goal is… And setting good stretch goals is about deeply understanding what the current reality is. So if you’re setting a goal around reducing bullying in the school or reported bullying, then you should know what the current state is, from your student voice survey, or something like that, so you know how much bullying is currently happening and even at what year level and where it’s happening. And so then, you share that and discuss it with relevant colleagues and you set a goal that you think is challenging but attainable. If you just pluck a goal out of the air, well, it’s likely to be either not a stretch goal or an unrealistic goal. So you have to know something about the current situation.

**MATT:**

The empirical foundation is very, very important, isn’t it?

**VIVIANE:**

Yes.

**MATT:**

Who should be involved in that process ideally, as well, that goal-setting process?

**VIVIANE:**

Well, ideally, the people who are involved in the goal-setting process are the people whose efforts are required to achieve it. So, you know, if it’s about reducing bullying, across a particular year level, then your senior leaders and all the teachers of that year level. If it’s across the school, then senior leaders and all the other relevant leaders. And those goals need to be linked to things that people think are important. So commitment to a goal means, “I’m committed because, actually, it’s linked to something I value, which is making school a better place for students and this data on bullying suggests that we’re way ­short of where we want to be.

**MATT:**

Do you think that the goal setting in schools at the moment is very much driven like that or is it still goals from on high, not really anchored to any sort of empirical foundation? Are you seeing a shift?

**VIVIANE:**

Yes, I am, in Victoria. Quite a large shift, actually. Goal setting in Victoria is mostly very grounded in evidence, a range of evidence across schools. And what we’re pleased to see is a reduction in the number of goals, incredible reduction in the number of goals. I’ve been working in the system about 10 years and I’ve been looking at annual implementation plans, which are their improvement plans, for about three years and in that time, the number of goals has really reduced.

**MATT:**

Less change, less innovation?

**VIVIANE:**

Less change, less innovation, more focused, persistent, detailed effort on the one or two priority goals and that’s much more likely to lead to improvement and not just change.

**MATT:**

That’s great. Who’s influenced your thinking over the years?

**VIVIANE:**

I suppose the major intellectual influences are the two social psychologists Chris Argyris and Donald Schon. Donald Schon was a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Argyris was one of my professors at Harvard. And those two invented the theory and practice of around single loop. There’re all of these concepts which are really embedded in social psych and organisational psych. The other most important influences, apart from my family, which I’ve talked about, my family of teachers, were and are the practitioners that I work with. I’m passionate about helping them resolve the problems that they experience in their work.

**MATT:**

It’s got to have a practical application.

**VIVIANE:**

It’s got to have a practical application and, indeed, it’s got to be tested in the context of their improvement work. So that’s actually a test. As well as my challenge to them about applying and using it, it’s a challenge back to me. Is the material and the ideas and the concepts that I’m sharing with them, is it relevant, useful and valid in the context of their problem? And if it isn’t, I have to think more.

**MATT:**

So if you were a leader in a school or a network today, where would you focus your energies?

**VIVIANE:**

On the priority problems. Yeah. On the priority problems and then, through that work, I would be creating a culture of good quality conversations, of persistence around problem solving and improvement, around being evidence-based and data-based, around working together and building trust through succeeding together in solving priority problems. So that’s where I would start.

**MATT:**

If you could recommend one key development area that emerging leaders should be focusing on, what would it be?

**VIVIANE:**

Well, I’ve got… Am I allowed to have three?

**MATT:**

Yeah. You can have three.

**VIVIANE:**

Because I think there are three critical leadership capabilities and one is that you grow your knowledge base in education. And it’s not just… And a lot of that knowledge is not found in the education literature, like the knowledge on how to set good goals is not… That’s not education theory. That’s the social psych of goal setting. So you grow your knowledge base and your capability to use that knowledge in solving complex school-based problems while building trust. So that’s your people skills, your relational skills and you grow each of those but you also, through your practice, you’re learning how to integrate those and put them together in an integrated way.

**MATT:**

And creating a very balanced leader in that process as well.

**VIVIANE:**

Yes. So I am not a fan of putting leaders through courses where they learn to categorise themselves as this type of leader and that type of leader and this is the style and that’s the style. It’s far too abstract, it’s far too removed from the actual work that they’re responsible for. So those are leadership theories which I’m not convinced are strongly connected to the practices of leadership. So that’s why I focus on these three capabilities.

**MATT:**

Terrific. Viviane, thank you so much for your time today. It’s been an absolute pleasure.

**VIVIANE:**

Okay. Thank you so much for your interesting and challenging questions.

**MATT:**

No problem.

**ANGELA:**

Thank you for listening to the Bastow Educational Leadership podcast. If you’ve enjoyed this conversation, why not tell your friends and colleagues. And join us next time! You’ll find episodes on the Bastow website, and you can listen or subscribe wherever you find your podcasts.