# Transcript

**Podcast Episode 9 – Dr Barbara Blackburn uses rigour to motivate and engage**

Duration: 29.32 minutes

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**ANGELA SCAFFIDI:**

Welcome to the [Bastow](https://www.bastow.vic.edu.au/) 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/).

[Dr Barbara Blackburn](http://www.barbarablackburnonline.com/) has dedicated her life to raising the level of rigour, engagement and motivation for professional educators and students. Barbara’s an educator, an international speaker, a consultant and an author. She’s taught early childhood, primary and high school students and she was a professor at the University of North Carolina. Ranked fifth in the Top 30 Global Gurus in Education in the United States, she’s used her expertise and her experience to train educators and to write 23 best-selling books.

Barbara was in Melbourne earlier this year as part of the Education State School Leadership Conference.

So, welcome, Barbara. Thank you for making the time.

**DR BARBARA BLACKBURN:**

Thank you.

**ANGELA:**

You’ve obviously had a long and varied career in education. Has it always been your passion?

**BARBARA:**

It has. My parents were both educators. My father was a teacher and a coach and also a university professor and my mother was a school secretary at the time. And so, I grew up in an education household and I always knew I wanted to be a teacher and I joke with people that my parents have proof. They have a picture of me, I’m about seven or eight years old and I’m standing at a chalkboard, apparently trying to teach our kittens how to read.

**ANGELA:**

And how did that go?

**BARBARA:**

Not very well apparently! (laughs)

**ANGELA:**

(laughs) Clearly not!

So, you specialise in the areas of rigour and motivation in education. How did those interests develop for you and why?

**BARBARA:**

You know, the motivation developed when I was a teacher because if you can’t help motivate students, then it’s very difficult to do anything else so I was always interested. Several years into my career, I began teaching struggling learners specifically. They were separated out into a different class and that’s who I taught. And a huge issue for them was motivation because they had been labelled as struggling learners and so people didn’t want to teach them. I was very excited to teach them. And so, what I noticed was that they had lost a lot of their intrinsic motivation because people didn’t seem to care about them, and nobody paid attention to what they valued and that’s a real important piece with intrinsic motivation.

And so, I really paid a lot of attention to what it was that they needed. And so, for example, they were very upset with our textbooks because they were green. (laughs) And you’re probably wondering, “What do you mean they were green?” Well, that was the problem. And what I was able to track down was that when they changed classes, all of the students in the other classes had blue textbooks and theirs were green so everybody knew they were in what they called the ‘dummy class’. And so, I immediately went to my principal, said, “Here’s what I need.” And instead of using the textbook for reading, we bought a newspaper for reading and so they would get to read about sports and about the stock market and all of a sudden, they became the popular kids because they were getting to read real news instead of a textbook. And so that piece with motivation really sort of stuck with me.

And the rigour piece, I would say, goes back to the same thing because one of the challenges with those students was that nobody expected them to do very much and I found that when I expected them to do more, they did more. And so it wasn’t what they could or couldn’t do, it was what the teacher does to help them get there.

**ANGELA:**

So, what does rigour look like in a classroom or in a school?

**BARBARA:**

(chuckles) Rigour is not what you expect. Rigour is not double the amount of problems or homework. Rigour is about the quality of what you do and helping you learn at a higher level. So, let’s take an example like vocabulary. You know, when you and I were in school, we probably had to copy the definition, write our own definition, write a sentence. That’s what we did. None of that is learning and it’s certainly not rigour. We memorise it and that’s it. So in a rigorous classroom, what I’m going to do, for them to show that they understand the word, I’m going to have them write a riddle and see if they are able to express the meaning in clues instead of just rewriting it. And so, the students are involved, they’re motivated and they’re working at a much higher level than if they were just sitting there copying. And so that’s what rigour looks like.

**ANGELA:**

So, what would be on a rigour checklist if you were creating a checklist?

**BARBARA:**

One, it would be questioning. And that’s something that people tend to look for is, is the teacher asking higher order questions. That’s not enough for rigour. It’s not only are they asking a higher order question, it’s also what kind of answer are the students giving because if I ask a very complex question and you give me a one-word, simplistic answer, that’s not rigour. So it’s, is there complexity in the questions, is there complexity in the responses. It’s also looking at the depth of the work. So, for example, in a maths classroom, doing 20 fraction problems, there’s no depth to that. They’ve very simplistic. What I’m going to do is maybe do eight of those and then I’m going to give them a question with multiple problems that are already solved and they have to figure out which one is incorrect, solve it correctly, explain why it was incorrect to start with and then explain why they know it’s right now.

And as you begin to look at that, that complexity and depth… And those probably are the two top things I look for, in terms of not just what the teacher’s doing but what is the student doing. And, you know, there are other pieces, for example, how is the teacher supporting the learning because if you ask students to work at a rigorous level, they’re going need help to get there.

**ANGELA:**

So, what gets in the way of rigour? What are the obstacles and how do you overcome them?

**BARBARA:**

I think the first obstacle is expectations. We think a student can’t, so we don’t even ask them to try. I think another obstacle is a lack of understanding – “I don’t know what rigour looks like so how am I supposed to do it?” Or, “I’m already doing rigour. I certainly don’t need to do any more.” So that whole lack of understanding is a piece of it. There is resistance from students at the beginning because, all of a sudden, they’re doing more. And particularly advanced students who are… And I was one of these students, so I totally sympathise. But often times, an advanced student is used to doing something, doing it quickly, doing it well and making an A and, all of a sudden, with rigorous work, they may still make an A but they’re having to work at it, which is great, but not for them necessarily.

So you get some resistance there. Surprisingly, I find resistance from parents, really for the same reason because, particularly if their son or daughter’s used to making As and, all of a sudden, they’re struggling to make a B, they don’t like that. Because I like to be able to go to the store and I like to be able to talk to my neighbour and say, “Hey, my son’s making an A.” And that may not happen as frequently. And then, I think, sometimes it’s just an overall, “I’m tired. This is one more thing. You know, if you really want me to do something, show me how to do it.”

And the principals I’ve been working with this week left very equipped to be able to answer that question and many of them came and spoke to me and said, “I could not have answered that question before and now I know an example to give teachers so I can say ‘this is how you do it’.”

**ANGELA:**

So apart from that sense, maybe, from some educators, ‘we’re already doing this work’, are there other myths, potentially, around rigour that exist?

**BARBARA:**

Oh, sure. I think the first one is rigour is only for certain students so it’s only for advanced students, it’s only for motivated students. So, if a student has special needs or if a student doesn’t show a lot of motivation, well, I don’t need to do rigour with them. Or they’re not in an advanced class so rigour’s not for them. And I find that to be very prevalent, which reflects low expectations. So, for example, with students with special needs, well, of course they can’t do it. You know, they’re just in special needs class. And so, we really begin to write off students without realising, maybe, that’s what we’re doing. So that’s probably the top one and that one is held by educators and parents and often times, it’s held by students -  “I can’t do anything because I’m in a special ed class,” or, “I can’t do anything because my brother was smart or my sister was smart and I’m not.” So that whole expectation piece is huge.

A second myth is that rigour is more – so, again, it’s doubling the homework, like I said earlier – versus rigour is more in-depth versus just more. It’s quality over quantity. I think, sometimes, I meet people who believe that rigour is about having a certain resource, so if you have this book or this computer program or this technology, then you’re going to be rigorous. And it’s never that. It’s what do you do with what you have, whether it is high-tech or low-tech. Because I can have really great technology but if I don’t use it correctly, it’s not rigorous. And I can use very low-tech, even outdated materials and I can make them rigorous if I want to. So, I think those are some of the top ones.

**ANGELA:**

So, we know that leadership plays a major role in shaping a school’s culture. How do you lead for rigour?

**BARBARA:**

Oh, that is something we have been talking about for the last three days and it was interesting because in the session, we did not actually talk about ‘here are three things leaders can do’ until the end. And the first part was about what is rigour, what does it look like in the classroom, what are activities you can go back and share with the teachers and intermixed in there, I talked about what you can do as a leader but I didn’t just stop and talk about a leader because if you don’t understand rigour and you’re not grounded in it, you can’t lead it. So shaping culture, celebrating success, having a shared vision, building ownership, all of those things that are really important – if you don’t understand rigour and if you don’t know how to explain it to somebody, I don’t care what you do with those others, it’s not going to happen.

**ANGELA:**

So, it’s that important?

**BARBARA:**

Absolutely.

**ANGELA:**

So, if you were trying to improve the level of rigour in a school, who would you bring together to have that conversation and how would you work with them?

**BARBARA:**

I would start with a select group of teachers or maybe teacher leaders. And it’s different in every school so I think principals have to determine who that is. But what you want, once I understand it, I need to broaden that. And some people make the mistake of let’s just throw it out there for everybody. And I tend to find, in schools, that if you can get a little bit of support and momentum going, then it’s easier to get the support from other people. Because many times, teachers will resist something the principal’s doing because it’s coming down from the administration but if I can get a group of maybe five or six teachers on board and they’re the ones sharing it out, then it’s perceived very differently.

So I want my leadership people on board, but I really want to try to identify selected teachers and THEN move out. And I think, one thing I’m careful about – we all have those hotshot teachers who are the best at everything, and the reality is they’re going to be on board no matter what. And so, it’s nice to talk to them about giving other people an opportunity to be on a leadership kind of team. And I also think you have to think hard about your most resistant teacher because if you can get them on board by involving them, that’s great, but too often, they become a distraction and a deterrent. And so, I think, sometimes, you have to think about it and say, “if their goal on any new initiative is going to be to destroy it, that’s not who I need to involve to start with. I need to get some people excited so I can move forward.”

And really, a good way to think about it, in the literature on leadership, is that if you have…let’s say you have a certain number of teachers, you’ve got 5 per cent to 10 per cent that’ll do anything you ask and they’re on board no matter what. You’ve also got 5 per cent to 10 per cent that will do nothing you ask, no matter what. Then, you’ve got 80 per cent to 90 per cent in the middle and those are the ones you need to convince and that’s where you need to spend your time. And so, I’m going to try to pull together a team somewhere there, with maybe one or two from that top per cent, just for some leadership and momentum. But I’m going to really put that there, put that momentum there so that then, they can begin to carry it schoolwide.

**ANGELA:**

Because we used to probably put a lot of energy in the resistance.

**BARBARA:**

Absolutely.

**ANGELA:**

And probably, it was a distraction in some ways, as you say.

**BARBARA:**

I mean, I’m not saying totally ignore those teachers because there’s value in working with them and trying to coach them along. But the mistake we make is that we spend 90 per cent of our time with 2 per cent resistant teachers and we lose out on all of the ways we can make a difference with the rest of the teachers.

**ANGELA:**

So, what strategies would you recommend for motivating educators and students, including leaders who may be struggling with rigour?

**BARBARA:**

Well, motivation is actually pretty easy! (laughs) Making it work out is not but how to do it, it actually really boils down to two things. Everyone, whether it’s a student, a teacher, a parent, an administrator, everyone is motivated by two things. They’re motivated by value and they’re motivated by success. So, we are all motivated by two things. We’re motivated by value and we’re motivated by success. So we are, first of all, motivated by value and that encompasses a couple of things. First, is relevance. If I want to meet with a principal and I want him or her to look at some new resources, if I can’t show that principal why that’s important to him, her or their school, then they’re not going to pay attention to it. If I’m training teachers, if I can’t help them understand why it’s relevant, they’re not going to pay any attention. And the same thing’s true for students.

And what’s interesting is that relevance, sometimes, is different for us and for them. So, for example, when my niece, Jenna, was in year one, she was not excited about math and they were learning how to add and the teacher kept talking about how, “You’re going to use this at home. You’re going to get to add things together to make cookies.” And all of these things. Jenna didn’t care about any of it. And then one night, Jenna calls me, she goes, “Aunt Barbara, Aunt Barbara, I LOVE addition.” And I said, “Really, Jenna? What happened?” She said, “We took a test!” At which point, I was a little stunned! (laughs) Because that’s not usually how people get excited. And I said, “Well, what happened?” And she said, “There was this problem on there, and it had the name of my dog in it and so now, I love addition.” OK? So, relevance for her was very different from relevance for her teacher. And so, I think, when we talk about relevance, we’ve got to consider that.

So if I’m a principal, I may be pushing, “We need this initiative because this is how it’s going to improve our school.” But I may have a teacher who just got a divorce, who’s trying to single-parent four kids, has an aged mother that she’s trying to take care of and she’s just trying to get through the day. And it doesn’t mean she doesn’t care about the school. It’s just that she can’t get there right now. So, when I talk ‘relevance’, I have to look at what you’re concerned about and meet you where you are. And ironically, we do that with students. We know to meet them where they are. We forget to do it with teachers.

And so value can be relevant. It also can be activities and relationship. So, most of the time, if I’m going to do something with kids, if I can get them to do an activity, it’s better. The same way with teachers, instead of just saying, “We’re going to do this,” if I can get them involved in the decision-making. And relationship, everybody’s more motivated by relationships. If you have a good relationship, you’re going to be more motivated to work with that person and the flipside is also true. And then, you’ve got success. We are all motivated by feeling successful and if we don’t feel successful, then we don’t want to try. And that is very true. Many, many students, their experiences in school have been failures so we have to learn to coach them into success.

And for many teachers, they may have experienced success but I don’t want to try something new because I’m risking that I’m going to fail and if I’m a teacher, I’m failing in a very public forum and I may need assurance from you that if I try something and it doesn’t work and parents call, you’re going to have my back. So, we’ve really got to look at value and success.

**ANGELA:**

So, Barbara, our listeners love to hear stories of where the work is being done and the impact that it’s had. Are there stories that you could share about either work you’ve led, or work you’ve seen happen in this kind of rigour space?

**BARBARA:**

I’ve worked with so many different schools and districts and what’s interesting is they all do it a little bit differently. They all have their own path to creating a rigour school but there’s some things they all have in common. First, they all focus on building shared vision, so they don’t talk about how we’re going to get there until they figure out what does ‘there’ look like. Because we just start doing things and then, nobody’s on the same page about that vision. So, everybody has a shared vision. There’s usually broad teacher involvement so it’s not just the principal or a district leader making a decision and handing things out. So, there’s definitely broad teacher leadership.

And then, I think, third is the focus on the students. So, the reason we want to increase rigour is because it’s going to benefit the students. And so, between vision and really pulling people together, in terms of involvement, and looking at the student impact, those three things are common across everybody I’ve worked with.

**ANGELA:**

If you were a leader in a school or a network today, where would you focus your energies? Particularly, I guess, if you were starting this work, where would be the- and you may have just talked about it.

**BARBARA:**

I’d start with grooming teacher leadership. I’d start grooming those teachers who *can* make changes. And that’s probably not what you were thinking I was going to say because people tend to jump to, “I’d get teachers to implement things in the classroom.” Well, if you groom your teacher leadership, then they’ll implement things in the classroom. So, I’m going to back up and take that step first.

**ANGELA:**

So, you’ve published 23 best-selling books.

**BARBARA:**

(chuckles) Yes!

**ANGELA:**

Just going to say that again. 23 best-selling books! What is it about your books that resonate so much for your readers?

**BARBARA:**

They’ve very practical. What I tend to do is take a complex subject, such as rigour or such as rigour and assessment or rigour and differentiation, so I take a complex subject and I make it very practical and easy and I know that sounds- “How can you take a complicated concept and make it sound easy?” Well, you just need to make it clear and show a lot of examples and make sure people understand exactly what they can do. And I’m always real clear that what I’m suggesting is just a suggestion and the best thing they can do is take these and adapt them to meet the needs of their schools or students. And so, it’s really interesting because that’s the number one thing people comment on.

But I’m also going to tell you a secret. This is my test of the books! (laughs) And I always do this with my editor. I have this wonderful editor in New York. And she and I will get a copy of a new book and we’ll both stand there and you can hear us flipping the pages and we do the ‘flip test’, which is when we flip, is there a chart or a graph or a subheading on almost every page so that it doesn’t look hard. So, we have lots of practical tools. And then we’ll flip it and we’ll both go, “OK! It looks good!” And so, we have a lot of fun with that. And that sounds little but, again, it makes it real easy and it makes it seem like ‘I can do this’ and that’s really, ultimately, my goal.

**ANGELA:**

It does sound, from what you’ve talked about, that it is really about what are the two or three things you can do, where do you start, how do you compile it in a form that resonates for people. Is that right?

**BARBARA:**

Absolutely. Absolutely. Because, you know, when we try to read a book and go do 50 things, we do none of them well or we read something and we go, “Wow. That was really good, but I have 20 other things to do. I can’t look at any of these.” But if I can say, “Here are two things,” or, “Here are three things. Figure out which one you want to try and not only do I want you to try it, I’m going to give you a chart or a table that guides you through how to try it and gives you some questions,” then you’ll go try it. And so that’s what I do.

**ANGELA:**

Great. So, who has influenced your thinking along the way?

**BARBARA:**

You know, I thought a lot about that when you told me you were going to ask me that because for everyone listening, I’m sure you’re going, “OK. Who’s that researcher? Who’s that book I need to go buy?” And there are absolutely people that I buy their books regularly, you know, Marzano and Hattie. And then, I go for whatever the subject is. If it’s differentiation, I go to Carol Ann Tomlinson. So, I do that. But the person who has influenced me the most is my father. He was my first teacher. He has always been my best teacher. He has modelled so many different things for me.

One that I remember, I was in secondary school and my father, as a second job, worked as a referee for basketball games. And I went to a game with him and it was very… You know, the fans were a little bit you know – I don’t know if your fans get this way – a little bit strong! (laughs) And so they were yelling at him and making all… And I was so upset. I’m sitting in the middle. I’d been listening to them yell out all this stuff and I was so upset. And we get in the car to drive home and I’m like, “Dad, how could you just listen to all that?” And he said, “I don’t.” He said, “I shut out what is negative that I don’t need to hear, and I pay attention to my job.” And that has always served me well because it’s too easy to get drawn off your focus. So whether it’s negative or just something that’s good, as opposed to great, you want to keep your focus right where it is.

And then, the other real key that he taught me was what the real purpose of education is. Because we talk a lot about, well, it’s to prepare students for life, it’s to prepare them for university, all these things. And this is what he told me the purpose of education was and he said he heard it from a third-grade teacher. He said, “The goal of education is to be able to figure out what to do when you don’t know what to do.” And I love that because, if you think about it, that encompasses everything. And for me, that’s what rigour is. And he has always been my best teacher. For years, he read drafts of every book I wrote. That has had to stop because he’s developed Parkinson’s so he can’t really read and process as much. But he still has me tell him what’s in every book so that he can give me feedback. And I think that, for me, not only has he been a role model, but he shapes my thinking every day.

**ANGELA:**

So, Barbara, how did you get to where you are today?

**BARBARA:**

Oh, my goodness. That is a roundabout question! I’ve already told you I always wanted to be a teacher, so I became a teacher. That was what I did. I taught different grade levels, just for a variety of things. And then, when I went back to get an advanced degree, I became certified as a school principal. And I wouldn’t say it was necessarily because my dream was to be a principal. My principal came to me and said, you know, “Unless you get this degree, there’s really nowhere for advancement so you need to get that particular degree.” And I liked it. There were a lot of things I liked about that. And I trained under him to be a principal.

And an opening came up in his school, in our school and he was going to hire me, and he came in one day and he says, “I need you to go find a different job.” (laughs) And I was like, “What have I done?!” And he said, “Well, the Superintendent has just told me that you are twenty-seventh in line, in terms of experience, and I’m not allowed to hire you because you aren’t senior enough.” And he said, “You really need to go find another job because you’re too good to wait that long.” So, I actually became a consultant. I did training and presentations for textbook companies. And I did a lot of training with teachers on how to use the materials. I did one technology-based company that way. So, I did that for, I don’t know, about ten years.

And then, I went back to work on my doctorate because I always wanted my doctorate, probably because my dad had his doctorate. (laughs) It was probably that reason. So, I went back to get my doctorate and while I was working on it, I also taught at the university level. And then, when I graduated, I got a job at a university, not teaching undergraduate students but teaching teachers who wanted a master’s degree, so they’re coming back for that advanced degree. And I loved it. One of my favourite things in the world was getting to do that. And I became so close to those teachers and saw such a passion for learning because they not only wanted to help their kids learn, they wanted to learn, and they wanted to model learning for their students. And so, I did that for about 12 or 13 years.

And about ten years ago, I got married and my husband lived two hours away. And so, I got married, I inherited a new stepson, who was 12 years old at the time, I am writing books, I am on the road speaking and I’m driving two hours each way to the university to teach. And one day my husband looked at me and said, “You know what, something has to go, and it can’t be me and it can’t be Hunter.” (laughs) “Other than that, figure out what’s going to go.” So, I left my university position so for the last ten years, I write, and I speak full-time, and I absolutely adore it. Every day, I get to know that somewhere in the world, someone has read something in my book that is making a difference with some student.

And I get to know that every day. So, I may not be teaching students directly but I’m teaching them indirectly and I’m getting to do it every day. And then, the bonus is I get to travel sometimes and work with teachers and principals and help reinvigorate them and inspire them and just help them know that they can do this. They can take something that everybody thinks is really awful, like rigour, and they can go use it to make a difference.

**ANGELA:**

Barbara, have you ever been tempted to send your 23 books to the person who decided that you were 27th in line? Just a little gift.

**BARBARA:**

(laughs) No, I have not ever been tempted. And you know what, let’s go back to my dad. You keep your focus where it’s supposed to be. You don’t look at everything else. And so, I have just stayed really focused. And ironically, where I taught was also where I grew up so people there know me and my parents and so they’re all about, you know, “Oh, your mom said you’ve got another book,” or, “Your dad says you’ve got another book,” and, “How many is this?” So, people know me and know that, so she probably does know. But I have decided not to be mean. (laughs)

**ANGELA:**

Sounds like a very good strategy and your father sounds like a fabulous human being.

**BARBARA:**

(laughs) I will tell you that one of the highlights of my books is that four years ago, before he started going downhill with Parkinson’s, we wrote a book together. And he had never written a book. That was one thing he had never done. And so we wrote a book that’s very geared for the US market on how to be an advocate, how do you work with the government to advocate for children, how do you advocate to parents. And my co-author on my leadership books joined with us. But I was able to give my dad a copy of a book that had his name first and my name second. And you know what, there’s nothing that beats that.

**ANGELA:**

Would that be the favourite book, Barbara?

**BARBARA:**

Oh, now, don’t ask me that! That’s like asking which child is my favourite one! No. I refuse to say that! (laughs) Do not make me pick!

**ANGELA:**

Thank you.

**BARBARA:**

Oh, thank you for having me. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed myself.

**ANGELA:**

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