# Transcript

**Podcast episode 6 – Simon Breakspear says agile schools are self-improving schools**

Duration 34.42 minutes

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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/).

[Dr Simon Breakspear](https://simonbreakspear.com/) is a researcher, advisor and speaker on educational leadership, policy and change. He is the founder and Executive Director of Agile Schools. They help school and system leaders make meaningful progress in a complex and dynamic environment.

As Research Fellow at the Gonski Institute for Education at the University of New South Wales, Simon is focused on supporting school leadership development at scale.

In his speaking and advisory roles, Simon has worked with more than 100,000 educators across 10 countries. He is also the creator of Learning Sprints, an open‑source approach to professional learning used by educators across the world to enhance their expertise and impact.

Simon, you’ve clearly had a really interesting journey. How did you get to where you are now? How did you get where you are today?

**SIMON BREAKSPEAR:**

Well, not by planning it. That’s for sure! Look, to be honest, I left school and I knew I wanted to have an impact. I knew I wanted to use research and scientific knowledge to try to make an impact on the planet. And I thought I was going to do that in medicine, to be honest. When I finished high school, I went off and I was enrolled in a medicine degree at University of New South Wales and it was towards the end of that year that maybe my idealistic self said, ‘Look, there’s a whole bunch of people who want to be here and to do this work and I’m interested in health but in the end, once a person gets healthy, they’ve got to learn how to live and to develop and to be in a community.’ And I started to think maybe, in the 21st century, education was the place, even more than health, to have that impact.

And, I remember, I went home and I told Mum and Dad, ‘Oh, just letting you know, you know how I’m in med school and you’re kind of happy about that. I’m not doing that anymore.’ And they said, ‘Oh, are you going to do law, like your brother?’ I said, ‘No. I’m going to be a teacher.’ And it was kind of an interesting time, because I remember going back to my old school and they said to me, ‘Oh, Simon, are you sure? You haven’t signed anything yet, have you?’ And even at the university, it was a bit strange for them. And I really learnt a lot at that time, the way that we undervalue the role of educators, the work of the school system because it seemed strange, at that time, to drop out of med school to do teaching although to do the reverse, someone might’ve been, ‘Oh, that’s wonderful.’

And so I really wanted to pursue impact and so I taught for a few years and then I got interested in how research could impact practice and I thought, ‘Oh, look, maybe I should go and chase this down.’ And I got an opportunity to go and study overseas and I said to my wife, ‘Look, do you want to take a break from your primary school job?’ And she said, ‘Alright. Just one year.’ And we took off for a year. And then I said, ‘How about a couple more? I’ve kind of gotten into this doctoral program.’ And I was the worst doctoral student ever at Cambridge because I never turned up. I think I broke all the residential requirements. Because I didn’t really want to do a doctorate. I just wanted to have an excuse to learn as much as possible about global education and meet interesting people, think about new approaches to have that impact.

So at that point, I probably thought, I’ll do my doctorate and go back and try to be a principal. And it was starting to come across the work of Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan, Michael Barber, where I started to say, ‘There are some people who are serving the profession and it’s in a way I didn’t know you could do.’ And it’s a way of trying to synthesise the research base and to turn that stuff and the global insights into practical things that help real people on the ground.

And it was around that time that I started to say, ‘Well, look, maybe I won’t rush straight back into practice post-research. What I’ll do is try to craft the capacity to play the best role I can think of to keep on task with the original intent of why I left med school, which was to impact human lives through the education system.’

And that’s kind of how I’m doing what I’m doing now. So it wasn’t exactly by design but bit by bit, I think, as I’ve pursued that desired impact, I’ve found a place that, at least in this stage, it’s a platform by which I’m saying I’m having an impact, I’m supporting educators and I think I found a unique way to do that.

**ANGELA:**

So, Simon, the term ‘agile’ is thrown around a lot these days. How do you define agile leadership and what are the key strengths of the approach?

**SIMON:**

Yeah, well, I guess, agile is about being nimble, responsive, flexible and so when we apply it to education leadership, we’re talking about leaders who have the capacity to intelligently adapt and respond through the change journey in order to get to a final impact. And really, I think, the benefit is school leaders that have been effective for decades have known they’ve got to be flexible and responsive and really, in some ways, agile is just giving language to what great school leaders have done for a very long time, and that is they plan well and they think clearly about the impact they want to have but when they get into the complexity of school life, they’re willing to adjust and adapt, not to jump from one thing to another but to find a way to get to their intended impact.

**ANGELA:**

So what first inspired you to apply agile processes in the education sector?

**SIMON:**

Look, I’m a former teacher – high school teacher – spent some time in educational research. And it was some accidental trips to Silicon Valley, where I was engaging in education technology, where I started to realise that the teams were using certain processes and engaging together to try to solve complex problems. And at the time that I was starting to look at what was going on in the technology sector, I started to realise the work I was also doing with school teams was also about complexity. How we could team in new ways, how we could sort of tackle ambiguity and be able to make progress even when the path wasn’t clear. And that’s when I started to get interested about how we could not so much bring ideas wholesale from outside of education inside education but learn from this approach that was first, of course, being taken up in software and then a whole range other teams learned from that as a way that educators could also respond to complexity in a way that was appropriate for our sector.

**ANGELA:**

Very interesting. So how important is the human factor in leading meaningful and effective change?

**SIMON:**

So pretty much everything that matters in educational change is the human stuff. A lot of the outcomes that we want to achieve in education systems are, of course, about human development and learning. It’s the human stuff. When we’re focusing on instructional leadership, we’re focusing on helping our teacher colleagues develop higher expectations, new mindsets, new knowledge, new skills. When we’re engaging with parents, caregivers and community, again, we’re about raising educational aspirations, partnering in new ways. Almost all the variants in improving student learner outcomes is actually to do with the people stuff.

And this is, for me, where I see the great beauty in agile approaches because as educational leaders, we know that most of the complexity of educational change is about human complexity. And too many of our education improvement processes just try to ignore that complexity. Where I say, ‘Well, stop ignoring it. Lean into that complexity.’ And therefore, the right response to human complexity is to increase our leadership agility, to be able to get into the work, to learn, to seek out feedback from the people this is actually impacting, and then to take that feedback on board to create a new iteration of the change we’re trying to lead.

**ANGELA:**

What techniques do agile leaders use to create clear and strategic plans for improvement, particularly when they’re working, obviously, in complex environments?

**SIMON:**

Can I just say, I’m a little bit sceptical of putting any word in front of leadership and I both love agile leadership and I’m incredibly sceptical of here I am adding more adjectival leadership, you know? So in some ways, when I describe this, I’m not trying to describe something that’s utterly different to what we’ve seen before.

I had one principal come up to me after a program and she said, ‘Look, I’m a seasoned professional. I’ve been in this game for a long time. I’ve always been agile. The one thing I know when I got into the car in the morning as a principal, is that I’ve got a plan for the day and by the time I get in the car when it’s dark again, in the evening, I will have had an impact but it won’t have been exactly what I planned to do. We’ve got to stay agile.’ So I want to say, in some ways, whether you call it agile leadership or not, I’m really talking about adopting a set of values and a certain type of approach – an agile way to lead through that human complexity.

So I reckon there’s sort of three parts of adopting a more agile way of leading. The first one I talk about is about impact thinking, about getting much clearer and sharper about our desired pathways towards impact. Secondly, it’s about iterative action. So once we’ve actually got really clear about what we hope to occur, clear about what we’re going to do and what we hope to see, then we’ve got to get into the world. We’ve got to avoid analysis paralysis, thinking we’ll get the answer by just doing more planning and realise that the world’s too complex for that. We’ve got to get into the work through iterative action, rapid cycles, getting feedback and seeing what’s working.

And then lastly, I think, the agile approach is about responsive teamwork.  If the world is complex, it’s too much for instructional leadership superheroes. We need leaders who are able to team with others to be able to do this work, really being bounded by a set of shared values and a deep sense of psychological safety, that this is complex work and if it doesn’t work the first time, it’s not because anyone’s not trying hard enough. It’s because the work’s hard and we’ve got to have that safety to be able to say, ‘It didn’t work this time, but let’s go have another go and another go until we get to that impact.’

**ANGELA:**

You’ve said there are three critical questions that every initiative should have an answer to. Could we talk about what these questions are and why you think they’re so important?

**SIMON:**

So agile leadership is about taking action, it is about avoiding analysis paralysis, having a bias towards action, saying all the interesting learning will come from learning by doing. But I’ve got to be careful in saying that we don’t want to take action until we at least have a first hunch or a hypothesis about what change we’re trying to create. And, I think, a lot of educators would say that they’re experiencing change fatigue. There’s a sense where they’re overloaded, they’re overworked and they’re moving from scepticism to cynicism around educational change, as though it’s almost change for change’s sake, another leader who’s been to a conference and got inspired and, ‘Here’s a solution that’s looking for a problem and we should just do it.’

So whilst I’m a big fan of taking action, part of an agile approach is to minimise the work, to focus on a few things and I have just three basic questions that I think are the gateway before you’re allowed to get into the work. So the first one is, what are we trying to achieve? Very simple, I know. But what are we trying to achieve? Secondly, how are we trying to do it? And thirdly, how would we know our change is actually leading to an improvement? And they’ve very simple questions, but often I find that people with 20-page improvement plans can’t give me the answer to those three questions on a Post-it note.

Too often, we get caught up in long plans, detailed thinking but actually it’s not clear about what we’re trying to do, how we’re trying to do it and how we would know our change is actually leading to improvement. And if we can get a simple, first-cut answer to those questions, I think we’ve got licence to both use the professional time of others and start to engage, in a small way, to test out that idea in the real world.

**ANGELA:**

So what do you see is the main challenge to educational change in Victoria and how would this agile approach help?

**SIMON:**

Well, I don’t want to overstate it but one of the biggest challenges is you’re doing so well. Here in Victoria, you led the world in educational leadership development. Lots of centres all round the world now are trying to set up a leadership centre. Bastow’s being doing this for a decade. Areas of teacher practice, giving schools some autonomy to solve local problems – Victoria actually has done a lot of the things that other systems are only just getting around to starting to do. And so, I think, the challenge for Victoria now is where do the additional marginal gains come from? How does a great system move towards true excellence, by being open to seeing areas that they’ve overlooked before, and being willing to do work that, to be honest, they might be a 7/10 at something and say, ‘What will it take us to get us to an 8 or an 8.5? What would it take us to get these marginal gains?’ Because all the easy stuff, in some ways, has already been done.

So I think, for me, the challenge is how do you keep pushing towards excellence when you’re already good, how do you have a commitment that says the best always look to get better, and how do you be willing to look for those opportunities where there are marginal gains?

So how would an agile approach support all of this? Well, you can’t mandate greatness, you can’t mandate excellence. And so, I think, agile provides a set of values and processes that says we’ve got some of the best educators on the planet and what we want to do is empower you with the capacity to think sharply about the areas that we need to work on next, test best-practice evidence approaches but do it in a way that you’re adapting it to work for your local context and then, to start to team in new ways, both within a school, where every school sees themselves as an agile school, a self-improving school, but they’re also teaming with the other schools down the road and across the state, where together, we’re starting to learn about these new approaches that could have an impact.

**ANGELA:**

So how can we prepare and enable our educational leaders to lead this work? Is it mindset, is it behaviours, is it processes? What needs to happen next?

**SIMON:**

Well, look, I think it is all of it. There’s a sense where I talk about agile leadership being a mindset, which is about the stance that we get to take. This dynamic stance that’s curious and open to learning and can deal with ambiguity. I think it’s a set of skills with the capacity to engage in iterative action, to test and to learn. And then, lastly, I think it’s a set of tools. And I’m a big fan, actually, in my work, of providing practical visual tools that help leaders get their thinking clear and explicit, start to move away from meetings where we’ve just talked for a long time but where did we progress things? By using visual tools to capture that thinking and make it open to scrutiny, we try to really find ways to support those leaders to get more benefit out of the meetings and the time they’re putting aside for strategic development.

It’s not just about thinking about the capabilities for leaders, it’s also about how do we set up an enabling system? If I want agile leadership where we’ve got risk taking and intelligent learning and the ability to adapt, then I need a system that’s enabling that type of activity. I need a system that says, ‘We’re open to you demonstrating your performance in different ways, as you start to articulate the evidence that you can share about what’s working, what’s not working. We’re open to you iterating and adjusting your plan even halfway through a school improvement cycle because, yes, you have learnt, now, the strategies that will be more effective. And rather than sticking with the plan, we’d love you to update it based on what you’ve now learnt.’ And I think it’s about systems saying how can we enable this type of leadership at the same time as trying to develop those capabilities?

**ANGELA:**

So, ‘learning sprints’. What are they?

**SIMON:**

Well, I’ve got to tell you, there is no exercise involved – and this is important.

**ANGELA:**

That’s good news!

**SIMON:**

I was doing a lot of work on leadership development and I’ve got a huge academic respect for Viviane Robinson’s work on instructional leadership and it’s been absolutely seminal in my own thinking. And of course, in her landmark study on the impact of instructional leaders, she was really pointing to instructional leaders design and participate in professional learning development. And I was often sharing her research with leaders and they were saying, ‘Look, I’ve got it. I get it. But I’ve allocated the time. I’ve got teachers coming together but our collaborative professional learning time isn’t getting the impact that we want.’

And so I started to co-design with a group of schools a process that could work within a typical professional learning community or a faculty team, whatever the time had been set aside for collaboration for practice improvement, and started to think could we design a process that was both rigorous – and by ‘rigorous’ I mean based on evidence and engaging with the research, requires us to engage in deliberate practice, helps us check our impact – but it was also human, that it kind of worked for overloaded educators that felt practice improvement was just one more thing on their to-do list. And so learning sprints sort of emerged out of that.

The core focus is around teacher expertise. We say that, ‘Actually, we know that the quality of teaching is the number one factor in supporting additional gains for our students in the classroom’. And so, if we believe in that, we need to invest in our current teachers, not just tell them to teach this way or pick up this program but actually esteem and enhance their expertise – their adaptive expertise, they’re capacity to make the right decision at the right time – to help their students make progress in learning.

So the learning sprint is about saying, ‘Teachers, why don’t you work on one very small area of your expertise? I know you want to go after big things because you care so much about student learning and you want to solve all challenges for all students in all areas. But the best way to do big change is to actually focus on small, critical points that add up over time.’

So the sprint run’s about one to four weeks. Teachers work in teams to decide what they specifically want to build their expertise in. They go and they deliberately practice in their classroom with their students over one to four weeks and they try out that new approach. Then they come back together as a team, after four weeks, review the evidence of their impact and talk about how they want to transfer some of the things that they’ve learnt into the rest of their craft.

**ANGELA:**

And so what is expertise development and how does it drive improvement, particularly in student outcomes?

**SIMON:**

Well, one of the problems with teaching is it’s… And I’ll use it again. It’s complex. That, unlike other things, we can’t just say, ‘Well, if all teachers would just do these five research-based strategies, we would get this improvement.’ If that worked, we would already have done it already. Teaching and learning are unbelievably complex and so what we need in every classroom is not a teacher sticking to the script but a teacher who has the adaptive expertise to make the right call at the right time. And let me really take this to a clear point. Let’s take feedback, which says research is pretty clear around feedback having a high impact on student learning. But actually, feedback’s not powerful. It’s the response to feedback that’s powerful. It’s whether or not that student does anything with that feedback.

I mean, ask any secondary English teacher how many essays he or she might’ve marked and how many times they give that feedback and whether or not the kid responds to it. We know feedback is relationally mediated, that is if I’m not in a strong relationship with you and you give me feedback, I’ll experience that as criticism or judgement. It might actually lead me to do less work for you. So even a strategy like feedback, which most people in education would say the research is very strong on, we actually have to think about how that’s relationally mediated, how that would actually be implemented in the classroom. So there, we need an expert, not just someone who knows they should do more feedback but actually they know when to use feedback in certain ways, when they’ve developed the relationship with a student to a level where that feedback can actually be acted on.

So expertise is about knowing how to use your knowledge in an adaptive way in your classroom content, to help those students develop. And I think, for me, we’ve lost our focus in our school improvement work on the teachers. We often talk about, ‘Oh, yeah, teachers are great. Teacher quality’s so important’, and then we jump straight to the students and straight to the student learner outcomes. And I want to say the best long-term hope we have for sustained improvements for student learning is to systematically enhance the expertise of our teachers so we have experts who make the right call at the right time in their unique context.

**ANGELA:**

I’m sure our listeners would love to hear about an example of a learning sprint. What happened and how it worked and the impact it had.

**SIMON:**

Yeah, great. Well, let’s think about an area like secondary writing. Across so many schools, people are working on an area of writing. Teachers say that students know content but they’re not demonstrating it in paragraphs and extended answers and it’s really frustrating them. So say, OK, well, a group of teachers might come together and they might look at some of the literature about how students learn to write, they might look at some of the literature about strategies that might be successful for supporting students and they might get down to something really specific, like how to help students respond to challenging verbs like ‘evaluate’. And any teacher listening in to this, or leader, would know how much of a struggle it is to not just get kids to be able to respond to something they describe but bring their opinion, weight evidence and evaluate.

So you might say, ‘Look, we’re going to run a short sprint and we’re going to be particularly focusing on developing our expertise’, if it’s about the teacher, ‘and the ability to teach in such a way that students develop this capacity’. One way that we help teachers think about what’s worth sprinting on is we say, ‘What do you teach and they don’t learn?’ All the teachers say, ‘I’ve been teaching this for years’. Have they learnt it? No. Or sometimes we say, ‘What’s essential to learn but hard to teach?’ And in ‘hard to teach’, we’re not saying that it’s hard to understand. We trust that the teacher gets it, himself or herself. We’re saying that you’re teaching it and the kids aren’t getting it. We never want to waste a sprint. We might only run two a term. Maybe we get six done a year. So we carefully choose something that really matters. Those teachers, after sharing some ideas about what they might have found worked before, also looking at the research, will then find an opportunity in their teaching to try to practice that new idea.

Here, we call this ‘performance practice’. Unfortunately, we don’t have a practice classroom in education. I find it very annoying. And it’d be great if we could send all the kids home and then we could have some practice kids and just like in any sports team, you only have to play one time a week. And so, what I’d love, we’d have a practice field, a practice classroom and I can just practise this new approach to teaching writing and then, when I feel like I’ve got it, my kids can come back in the room and then I can do it. But unfortunately, we can’t. So what we do in sprint, we say, ‘Choose a slice of your normal teaching that’s also going to be your practice.’

And so maybe there’s a Year 8 class and I’m a secondary teacher and I’m going to try out this new approach to support students’ writing. Particularly around responding to these verbs. And I might do that over a couple of weeks, trying it out. I have a check-in meeting once a week with my colleagues. ‘How’s it working?’ ‘Oh, I haven’t even done anything. Forgot about that.’ ‘Hey, don’t miss twice. Have another go.’

And I’m trying, I’m actually engaged with what the literature would call deliberate practice. Whether you want to get better at piano, surgery, soccer – there’s only one way to develop expertise. It’s called deliberate practice. And so I’m engaged in deliberate practice for four weeks and then at the end of the four weeks, I stop. I bring some of the evidence of what I’ve learnt about my impact on students and I meet with my colleagues for a review meeting, just for 30 minutes, and we say, ‘Well, what seemed to have worked and for what students and what hasn’t worked the way we planned?’ We think then, about what we might want to transfer into future practice. I might want to transfer what I’ve just done in this sprint into another class that I teach, into other future practice and we’ll just share with each other and say, ‘Well, what do we want to do next?’ And so we call it: prepare, sprint, review.

Prepare is about choosing something that’s worthy of developing our expertise in. Sprint is where we’re engaged in deliberate practice. And review is where we do developmental reflection, where we say what worked, what didn’t work, what we want to take into our future practice?

**ANGELA:**

How future-ready do you think the educational workforce is in general, given, your work and your experiences and working with practitioners?

**SIMON:**

Look, I think the core of being future-ready is being set up to continuously learn. I would say one of the biggest challenges right now is not so much with the people who work in the sector but whether our organisations are set up to allow not just the students to keep learning but the adults to keep learning. And so really, a future education system needs to be saying, ‘Yeah, we want students to be future-ready and learning, well therefore, we’re going need our teachers to have the capacity to keep learning and having new experiences and challenging our school leaders and all the way through to the upper level system leaders.’ So I really say if we’re going to be future-ready or increasingly be able to be ready for the future that’s going to keep changing on us, we need to think about the dynamics of organisational learning and how we’re setting up opportunities for the adults to keep learning. It doesn’t reduce any focus on the students, but I think our long-term commitment to students is going to be best served by making sure that the adults who work in those systems are, indeed, getting a chance to keep learning and developing.

**ANGELA:**

What’s needed to ensure that our educational workforce is future-ready? What do you think’s needed?

**SIMON:**

Well, the if the future’s going to keep changing on us, I don’t think it’s a matter of saying, ‘These are the three things that our teachers and leaders need to know and let’s train them for it.’ Actually, the key capability we’re going need to be future-ready is the capacity to continuously learn, to continuously improve, whether in consistent context or a changing context. So, I guess, for me, it’s about saying, ‘Hey, keep the focus on the student learning. They are at the centre of what we do.’

But we also need to build organisations and processes that put a real focus on adult learning. Helping adults to be engaged in continuous improvement, helping them learn about their practice but also have opportunities to learn outside of the sector so they can bring some of that thinking and that experience back in.

And so, I would say, future readiness is about learning and if we want our schools to be future-ready, we need organisations that help our adults to keep learning, improving and growing to be thriving places. And that’s why I like the idea of schools needing to become agile. Agile schools that are self-improving learning organisations.

**ANGELA:**

So if someone was listening in today and the concept of agile leadership really resonated for them and they thought, ‘Yes. This is something that I want to engage in,’ where would they start?

**SIMON:**

I think, number one is to acknowledge that they already demonstrate approaches that are inherently agile when they’re able to demonstrate some flexibility, when they’re demonstrating some sort of responsiveness. I mean, great teaching is very agile. You have a good plan for what you’re going to do and then 10 minutes into a lesson, you realise, ‘Well, this isn’t going to plan and now I’m going to adapt and adjust based on the formative evidence that I’m collecting and adjust as we go.’ So one of the things I want to say to leaders is agile is a new word, perhaps, but the way of working – that flexible, being responsive to human complexities – great teachers have always done this kind of work. So number one, I want to say, you know, acknowledge that actually, probably, you demonstrate a lot of these approaches in the classroom and other parts of school life.

After that, I’d say that one of the ways of getting into this approach is using what I call just a three-phase change model, which is saying when we first get into some change, we’ve got to clarify it – what are we trying to do? And then we should incubate it, try it out in a small way. If we can get it to work in a small way, start to amplify. So I’d say to someone, ‘Hey, think about something that you’re already trying to lead change in, a change initiative that might’ve been going for a little while or you’re about to step into and think about those three phases.’ In the clarify phase, maybe get a colleague together and say, ‘Hey, let’s try to answer those three questions about what are we really trying to do and how are we trying to do it, and how will we know if this is working.’

And then, if you can get a decent enough answer for those, give yourself the freedom to incubate for a while. And incubation is about being a bit more playful. Say, ‘Hey, the world’s complex. Let’s try this out.’ And for me, incubation is about going much smaller than we normally would. And so if agile seems a bit daunting or running these experiments, just work in with one or two other colleagues, work with one team. Don’t go over the whole school straightaway. And give yourself this freedom of an incubation time and during that period, whether it’s maybe a term or two, try to help it work with the people who’d be willing to come with you. This is about saying, ‘Work with people of higher skill and higher will.’ It’s not because if it works for them, then it definitely will work for everyone else. But, hey, if it doesn’t work for them, there’s no way it’s going to work with anyone else.

And at the end of incubation, what I’d say is you’ve got a nice little proof point, a social proof point that your change idea can work in your unique context. Once you’ve got that, you start to spread it to others. And I use the word of ‘spread’ rather than ‘scale’. You don’t scale human things. And so amplification would be about saying, ‘Once we’ve got it working in some pockets, how do we take that knowledge and make it easier for others, who might be more naturally resistant to it, to pick it up and apply it and see progress?’ So, clarify, incubate, amplify wouldn’t be a bad way to start, particularly if you can apply it to something that you’re already doing.

**ANGELA:**

I see some themes here, around the power of three – three questions, three steps.

**SIMON:**

Simple Simon! I can’t remember more than three things. But to be honest, the work is too complex, and so often the frameworks that we’re given add to that complexity. So, what I try to do on behalf of the profession, is to get what I like to call ‘elegant simplicity’.

Anything over three, most of the time, for busy people, we can’t keep in our working memory. So three, for me, is about distilling things down to the essential bits. If I could get to two, I would. Maybe, I haven’t got there yet. But it’s about being in service to the profession because if you can make frameworks not simplistic but elegantly simple, you can hold them in your mind and you can have a shared language together. And anything that’s too complex, you just spend your whole time working out what this framework or process is trying to get you to do, rather than getting on with the real work.

**ANGELA:**

So you talked earlier about Viviane Robinson, who’s joined us in one of our podcasts. Who are the other thinkers who inspire your thinking, who inspire you in your work that you do?

**SIMON:**

Yeah, so many. So I’ve got to say, practitioners have all the best ideas. So whilst a lot of the names that people know in the educational sector, one of my jobs is to go and be a stickybeak for good ideas, to spend deep time with principals and assistant leaders who are doing the work on the ground and to try to surface some of that thinking back and share it. And so who do I derive inspiration from, who’ve done that? I think Michael Fullan has really set the standard over the last three years of being able to make sense of the complexity, create frameworks that are usable and practical and then, actually turn that into something that helps people both understand the work they’re doing and to take better action.

But other areas? You know, I’m a big fan of work outside of education like The Lean Startup, Eric Reeves’ work and that was a big inspiration to me in and around this idea of when you’re dealing with complexity, don’t try to work it all out. Get into the world, see yourself as a chief scientist where you’re running experiments, testing and learning, testing and learning. Tony Bryk, who’s the head of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the US, he’s brought a lot of ideas out of improvement science in healthcare and is really starting to codify those.

I think in my work, I’m definitely drawing upon those who are starting to think about improvement science or implementation science perspectives. I think Viviane leads the way in kind of that empirical basis, I think Michael has really influenced me in being able to learn from practitioners and synthesise and make sense of complexity and then, outside of education, those who are thinking about how startups run or how healthcare improvement works. I try to bring those perspectives together and turn it into practical things that are useful for school leaders.

**ANGELA:**

So you obviously do lots of work overseas. What are you seeing and hearing overseas that’s kind of exciting that we can learn from?

**SIMON:**

Yeah, as I’ve said, I’m committed to Australian education. We’re not going to copy a Finland or a Canada or a Shanghai or a Singapore, we can get inspired, not so much by the things that they do but the thinking that led them to do that.

At the moment, I’m dedicating most of my international time into Canada and particularly Western Canada. I love working alongside and learning from Canadian colleagues. I think that Australia and Canada are really great matches to learn from one another, similar kind of system histories and set-up, a shared language, at least across Western Canada. And I’m definitely learning a lot there. So in places like British Columbia, I think really their curriculum is leading the world in trying to say could we pare it back to its essential elements? Could we really embed cross-cutting capabilities? And I think they’ve really been leading the way in that area.

And then, in the middle of Canada, across the prairies in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, places, to be honest, often edu-tourists don’t end up going. They sort of go to DC and they pop across to Alberta and Banff and they head into Ontario.

But actually, I’m learning a lot in some of those provinces that serve the greatest proportion of students living in poverty, particularly in places in Manitoba. Cities with very high proportion of First Nation, Metis and Inuit students and they’re saying, ‘Actually, we want to apply some of these processes, Simon, not just to innovate into greenfield new approaches. We want to serve the underserved and we want to support those who have been most disadvantaged. And we want to use these approaches, be more agile, be more iterative because, to be honest, the old “plan, implement, evaluate” thing hasn’t helped us move where we want to.’ And so we’re seeing educators now grab hold of these approaches and try to deploy them, really in the sake of lifting equity in the system.

**ANGELA:**

So, Simon, it’s been a great pleasure speaking with you today. Thank you.

**SIMON:**

Thanks so much. I’ve really enjoyed it.

**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.