

# Game changers

Many educators complain about the direction of education policy, yet so few actively engage in any form of meaningful advocacy or activism, writes Scott Eacott.

**T**he Australian education context is arguably experiencing its most critical junction since the adoption of mass schooling. We have seen the implementation of a national testing regime, a forthcoming national curriculum, the My School website, and the professional standards movement, just to name a few. Of particular relevance for school leaders is Julia Gillard's commitment to the roll out of school autonomy by 2018. All of these developments have a significant influence on the day-to-day work of school leaders. For this piece, I am going to pick up on some issues I raised previously about the state of school leadership preparation and development (*ER*, March 2011) and relate that to what I see as the core role of the school leader, public intellectualism.

For me, and arguably many others, school leadership is about having a vision for quality education and then pursuing that vision. While in an aspirational country such as Australia the traction of working hard and getting ahead remains dominant, the leaders who garner the most attention are arguably those who not only rose to the top but also significantly altered our way of thinking. The elation surrounding the election of Barack Obama was less for what he represented on a policy front and more to do with the significant re-shaping of American politics as a result of the first African-American president. This represents a disruptive moment, one in which existing ways of thinking are put aside and novel alternatives not only put forth but taken up. This is not about playing the game better, but rather playing a completely new game. In this sense, leadership is about doing something different, disrupting the status quo.

Many educators complain about the direction of education policy, yet so few actively engage in any form of meaningful advocacy or activism. Recent blogs on the University Council for Educational Administration website ([www.ucea.org](http://www.ucea.org)), not to mention countless academic papers over an extended period, have highlighted the lack of engagement in policy debate by educators. Sure, professional associations such as principal groups or the Australian Council for Educational Leaders make some noise regarding policy moves, but the level of change or influence they are able to enact is limited. This brings me back to my original stimulus, the preparation and development of school leaders and the goal of public intellectualism.

Much of the school leadership preparation and development industry – the choice of industry is deliberate here – is focused on the technical skills of running a school. Let's not be mistaken here, I

am not suggesting that the technicist skills of educational management are not important, in fact there is substantial literature arguing that school leaders that do not get the administrative side of things right frequently lose their jobs. Instead, what I am arguing is that these technical skills need to be decentred in the preparation and development of school leaders. I argue that if school leaders are to reclaim the role of active definers of culture, then public intellectualism is imperative. By public intellectualism I mean the capability to critically engage with current policy and practice for the purpose of contributing to debate and professional critique of existing practices.

For example, as a result of a series of recent seminars with practising educators, both aspiring and current leaders, I have become acutely aware of how very few educators are aware of the policy structure of Australian federalism. The difference between national, federal and state level policy is

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lost on many educators. Even an awareness of the Melbourne Declaration is limited. This type of knowledge is pivotal to being able to engage with policy debate. Additionally, the capacity of school leaders to locate and critically engage with current research is of great concern. I mean this not in the sense of merely criticising research, rather critically reading research and being able to identify its core assumptions and what they mean in relation to findings – arguably something that should begin in initial teacher education. The distinction that is of greatest importance here is that of learning to lead and learning for leadership.

The value of learning to lead is obvious. The acquired knowledge and/or skills can be directly applied when the individual returns to school. In contrast, the value of learning for leadership is not as easily identified. Just as the non-academic skills and knowledge acquired by students through schooling, the results may not be evident for some



time. What learning for leadership does is foster an intellectual puzzlement. It moves the goal of school leadership from problem solving – the focus of the preparation and development industry – to problem posing. This is the ability to identify things that are happening, both explicitly but more importantly implicitly, and asking questions. It is about challenging existing practices and asking the tough questions of both yourself and colleagues and holding one another to the highest standards of performance.

As a parent I expect schooling to offer my children more than just the three Rs. But to provide more than just the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic requires engagement with the broader conversation of the world. For my children to be introduced to this conversation requires exposure to staff who are already engaged in such dialogue. This is arguably the most significant role of the school leader, providing the intellectual environment for staff to meaningfully engage in the conversation of the world. It is only within this space that educators can begin to not only engage, but participate in debate regarding policy and practice.

As our world is gripped with significant environmental, economic and fiscal issues our children deserve the broadest education – not training – as possible. This education should not be left for others to decide what is important but rather given life through the educative space that is school. While I understand the attraction of short courses and immediately transferable knowledge and skills, I encourage all Australian school leaders to ask themselves whether they are public intellectuals or not. At the end of the day, I believe that this is what Australian education, and, more specifically, our children deserve. To accept anything less is to reduce the Australian education system to little more than industry commissioned to produce literate and numerate citizens for the workforce, not the kind of world shapers we aspire to be. ■

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