

A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO ORGANIZING EDUCATION

School Leadership Reflection Manual

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A relational approach to organizing education: School leadership reflection manual

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Introduction	4
Using the guide	4
Structure of the document	5
A <i>relational</i> approach to organising education	6

Relations

Cultural relations	8
Social relations	10
Political relations	12
Historical relations	14
Future relations	16

Appendix

Sample reflection sheet template	18
Background research	19

INTRODUCTION

There is a substantial body of literature arguing that school leadership is a relational activity. Rarely however does this literature go beyond telling educators how to go about their work and provide resources for reflection and ongoing professional learning. This guide has been developed to support educators, and particularly school leaders, in the application of the *relational* approach to organizing education developed by Dr Scott Eacott from UNSW Sydney.

The *relational* approach provides a methodology for thinking differently about the world. In this guide the focus is on how the theoretical insights of the *relational* methodology can be mobilized by educators to lead school reform. It translates the *relational* methodology and theoretical resources (*organising activity, spatio-temporal conditions, and auctor*) into a language that can be readily understood and applied by educators without compromising the integrity of the work.

The strength of the *relational* approach is that it synthesises a substantial body of research from multiple disciplines. By not prescribing a single way to do things, the approach is applicable across all types of schools (e.g., primary, secondary, central, special purpose) and all sectors (e.g., public, catholic, independent). In doing so, the approach articulated in this guide is of use to all educators in building a basis for ongoing professional learning.

Using the guide

This guide has been developed to support educators, and in particular school leaders, in reflecting on their practice. It is not intended as an evaluative instrument, rather as a pedagogical tool for reflection on and refinement of practice that best meets the needs of the school, communities, staff, and most importantly students. To this end, the guide can be used in two main ways.

First, it is intended to guide educators' **reflection** and **analysis**, where educators, individually or in groups, can use the guide to analyse current activities and decision making in order to understand how these might be improved.

Second the document can be used to guide the **planning** and **redesign** of reform initiatives. Again, working together or individually, educators can consider how different relations (cultural, social, political, and temporal) might influence their planning in order to maximise the work of educators.

It is important to reiterate that the purpose of this guide is to support educators' professional learning and practice. It is not intended as an evaluative instrument, rather as a pedagogical tool for reflection on and refinement of practice that best meets the needs of their school, communities, staff, and most importantly, students. Any use for evaluative purposes has the potential to undermine its value in supporting professional learning and dialogue.

Structure of the document

This guide is organised around five key relations (cultural, social, political, historical, and future). Each relation is elaborated with a description, continuum of practice, notes, suggestions, and a key reflective question. They are set out as shown below.

Description

Each relation is described in general terms to indicate what might be observed when a high level of understanding is evident.

Continuum of practice

A visual representation and accompanying text is included to articulate what a low through to high level of understanding might look like. This provides a framework for reflection.

Notes

A short series of notes are provided for each relation to highlight certain reminders for educators and in response to commonly asked questions about the meaning and application of the relations.

Suggestions

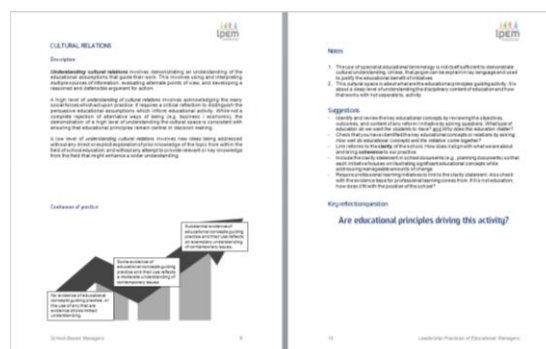
While educators should aim for a high level of demonstration across all relations, it is unrealistic to expect that every activity. Nonetheless, we encourage educators to consider what it might take to move to a higher level of demonstration. The suggestions provide offer some ideas for achieving this.

Key reflective question

To assist educators in using this guide to reflect and refine activity, each relation concludes with a key reflective question.

Sample reflection sheet

Included in the appendix of this document is a sample reflection sheet to assist educators with structured reflection.



A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO ORGANISING EDUCATION

Previously, the *relational* approach has been articulated theoretically¹, and in a broader applied sense². This guide is the most comprehensive, yet accessible, articulation of how the *relational* approach can be used to reflect and refine practice in schools.

The foundational ideas of the *relational* approach as applied to practice are:

1. Effectiveness begins with **clarity**

Many debates about the effectiveness of schools and/educators come down to differences in the purpose/s of schooling. In the absence of an explicitly identified purpose means that others will assume a purpose and make judgements based on that. To this end, the first step towards effectiveness is having clarity of purpose and being able to articulate that purpose. This means that you generate the conditions / criteria in which you are assessed. It also this means that others may be pursuing different purposes to you.

2. You are judged in relation to **coherence**

Explicitly articulating the purpose of education provides the basis from which to judge performance. That is, with clarity comes judgement based on the coherence of your activity against that purpose. Importantly, this becomes not about right / wrong and instead whether the activities of the school are consistent with the articulated purpose/s.

3. You generate the **narrative** for your school

Having established the purpose/s for which you are working towards and demonstrating coherence (or at least naming the criteria by which you wish to be judged) you generate the narrative for your school. This narrative need not be the same as other schools. It is not about consensus but crafting unique stories about the work of educators. Mobilising narrative can be as content (when the story of the school is presented in a narrative form) or as a process (where the actual work of the school is constructing a narrative of learning).

Significantly, the above approach allows for reflection and refinement without the need to prescribe any one-way to go about education. As such, it recognises that the context of every school is unique and needs to be acknowledged.

To apply this principle to the work of educators in bringing about school reform there is a need to draw attention to the web of relations at play in education. To navigate these relations and lead school improvement and change, educators must have an understanding of the **cultural** (educational) assumptions of their work, the value placed on their work by a diverse range of **social** groups, **political** relations within and beyond the school, and a view of the **future** for the school taking into account its unique **history**.

¹ Eacott, S. (2018). *Beyond leadership: A relational approach to organizational theory in education*. Singapore: Springer.

² Eacott, S. (2019). Empowering educators through flipped school leadership. In D. Netolicky, J. Andrews, & C. Paterson (Eds.), *Flip the system Australia: What matters in education*. London: Routledge.

Relations

Cultural

Social

Political

Historical

Future

CULTURAL RELATIONS

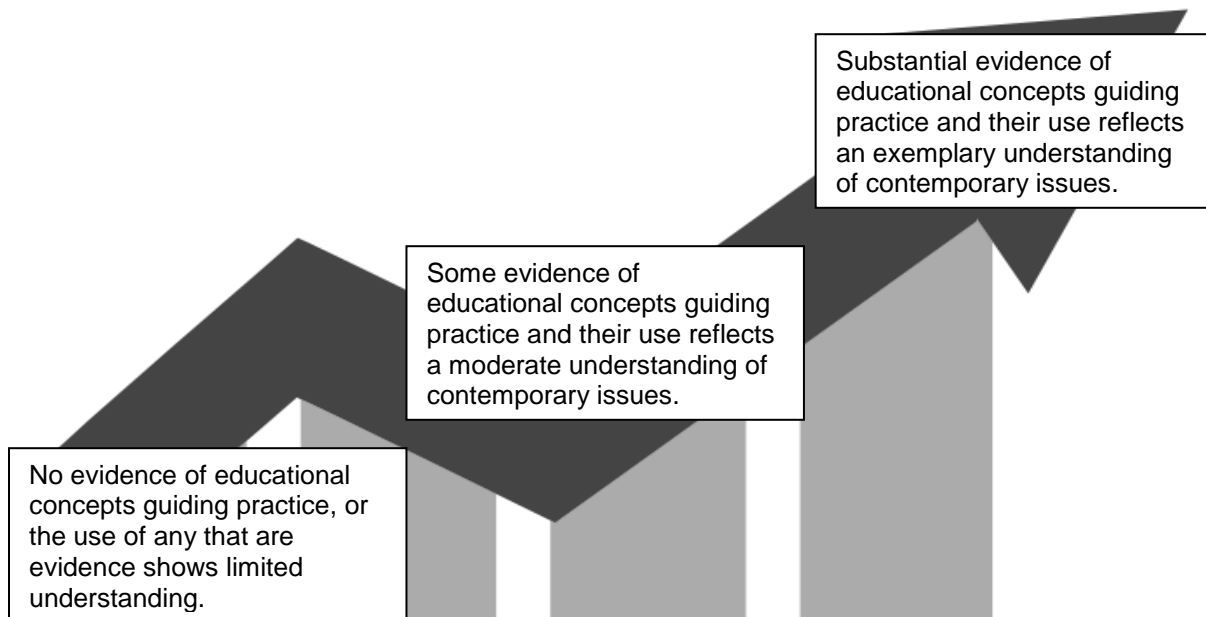
Description

Understanding cultural relations involves demonstrating an understanding of the educational assumptions that guide their work. This involves using and interpreting multiple sources of information, evaluating alternate points of view, and developing a reasoned and defensible argument for action.

A high level of *understanding of cultural relations* involves acknowledging the many social forces which act upon practice. It requires a critical reflection to distinguish the persuasive educational assumptions which inform educational activity. While not a complete rejection of alternative ways of being (e.g. business / economic), the demonstration of a high level of understanding the cultural space is consistent with ensuring that educational principles remain central in decision making.

A low level of *understanding cultural relations* involves new ideas being addressed without any direct or explicit exploration of prior knowledge of the topic from within the field of school education, and without any attempt to provide relevant or key knowledge from the field that might enhance a wider understanding.

Continuum of practice



Notes

1. The use of specialist educational terminology is not itself sufficient to demonstrate cultural understanding. Unless, that jargon can be explain in lay language and used to justify the educational benefit of initiatives.
2. This cultural space is about what are the educational principles guiding activity. It is about a deep level of understanding the disciplinary content of education and how that works with not separate to, activity.

Suggestions

- Identify and review the key educational concepts by reviewing the objectives, outcomes, and content of any reform / initiative by asking questions: *What type of education do we want the students to have?* and *Why does this education matter?*
- Check that you have identified the key educational concepts or relations by asking: *How well do educational concepts and the initiative come together?*
- Link reforms to the **clarity** of the school. How does it align with what we are about and bring **coherence** to our practice.
- Include the clarity statement in school documents (e.g., planning documents) so that each initiative focuses on illustrating significant educational concepts while addressing manageable amounts of change.
- Require professional learning initiatives to link to the clarity statement. Also check with the evidence base for professional learning comes from. If it is not education, how does it fit with the position of the school?

Key reflection question

Are educational principles driving this activity?

SOCIAL RELATIONS

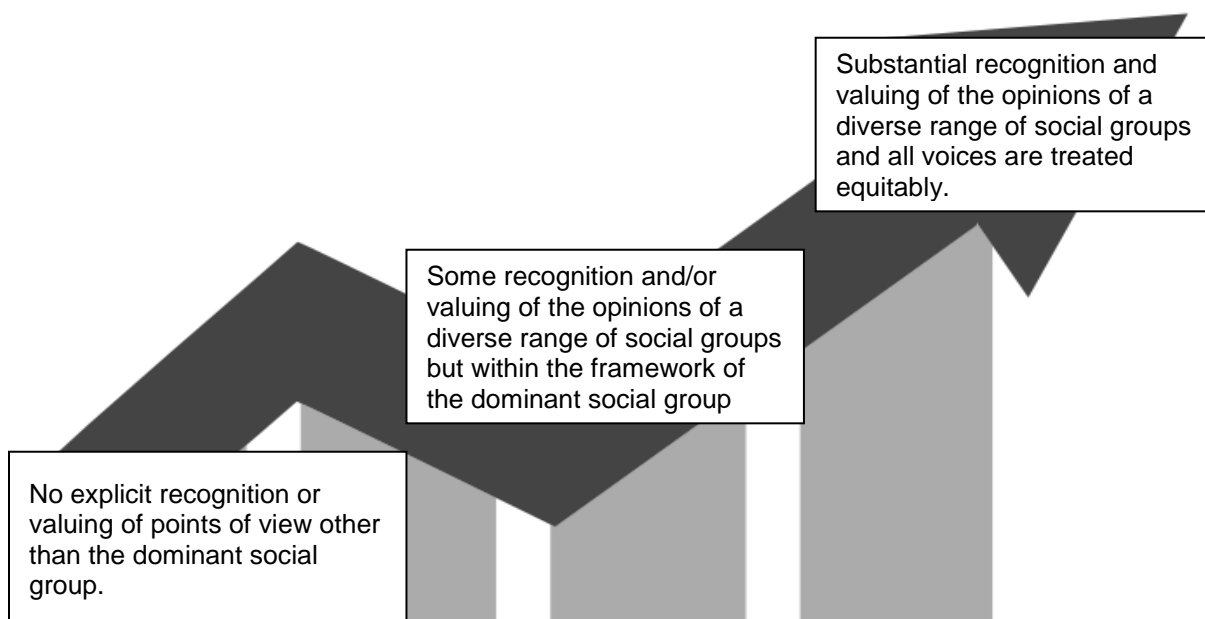
Description

Understanding social relations involves demonstrating an understanding of the value placed on their work by a diverse range of social groups. It involves using and interpreting multiple sources of information, evaluating alternate points of view, and developing a reasoned and defensible argument for action.

A high level of *understanding of social relations* involves acknowledging the many social forces which act upon practice. It requires an explicit attempt to make accessible the value placed on certain symbols, practices and artefacts by diverse groups. Through the recognition of alternate values and the valuing of alternate points of view it is possible to move beyond the reproductive practices of existing power relations and provide a greater commitment to the principles of social justice. This item operates at two levels, the first is the recognition of alternate points of views and the second is valuing all positions.

A low level of *understanding social relations* involves little or no understanding, valuing and acceptance of knowledge, skills and understandings of diverse social groups. Social space understanding is low when diverse social groups are compared on the basis of superficial characteristics or not recognised.

Continuum of practice



Notes

1. Expressing personal opinions and/or differing points of view do not necessarily demonstrate the social nature of *organizing activity*. This can only be achieved if these views and/or opinions are subjected to analysis in relation to what they mean and the implications for the school, community, staff, and most importantly students.
2. Contributions from different social groups can come from just about anywhere – from their individual experiences, their prior learning (in or out of school), knowledge obtained within their own families and communities and from their experiences of life. The main focus of the social space is whether or not these contributions are valued.
3. Some social groups experience prejudice and disadvantage but social space is not an indicator for disadvantage. Instead, the social space is about recognising different social groups are a valuable resource from which schools can build.
4. Tokenistic or contrived events / actions to include different social groups should be avoided as they can be self-defeating for a school and/or community. Recognition of different social groups can be legitimately integrated to strengthen *organizing activity* and the generating *spatio-temporal conditions* necessary for equity and excellence.

Suggestions

- Identify and explore the assumptions underpinning different social groups when presenting an issue.
- Provide tools to support different social groups to challenge and question claims in order to identify assumptions.
- Model language and actions which demonstrate respect for others' ideas, opinions and work.
- Provide opportunities for social groups to know, understand, and value different perspectives through discussions, groupings, support networks, and participation in school events.
- Consider how school resources and practices reflect and value the diversity of social groups within, and beyond, the school.
- Where appropriate, include members of the school community as a resource in activities.
- Use multiple methods to engage the school community as meetings / online surveys do not reach all communities.
- Move beyond raw counts in school polls. The dominant group will always have the numbers.

Key reflection question

Have a diverse range of social groups been recognized and valued in decision making?

POLITICAL RELATIONS

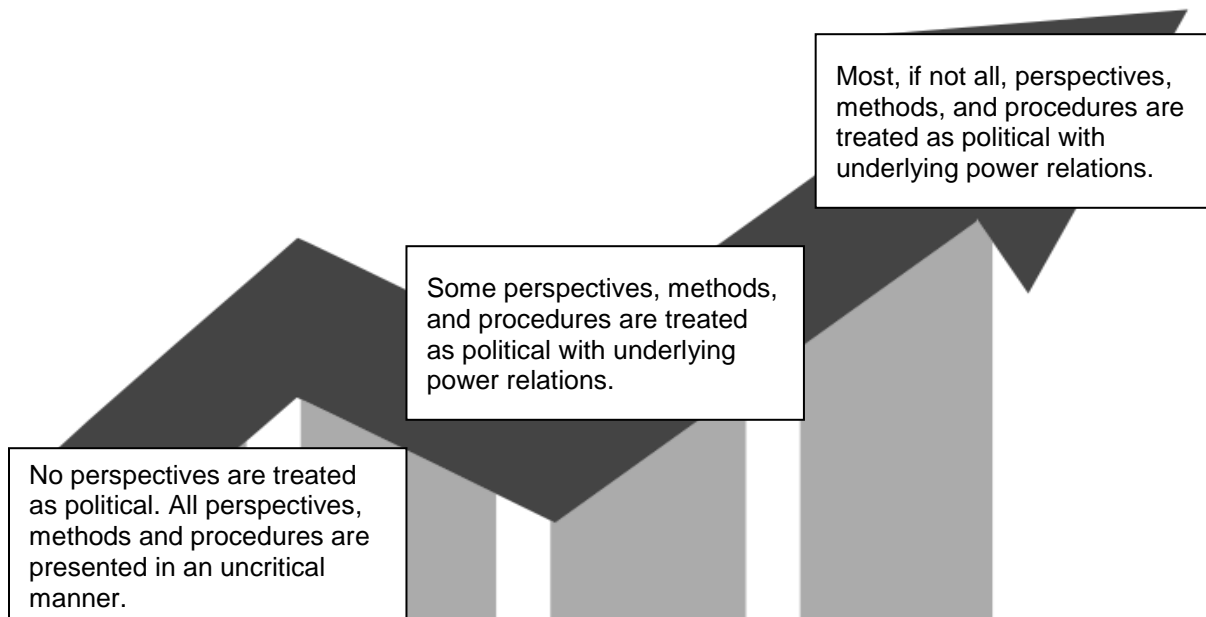
Description

Understanding political relations involves demonstrating an understanding of the power relations at play within and beyond the school. It involves using and interpreting multiple sources of information, evaluating alternate points of view, and developing a reasoned and defensible argument for action.

A high level of *understanding of political relations* involves acknowledging the power relations in which a school operates. That is, educating is a political activity. All reform initiatives whether they are top-down systemic mandates or ground-up innovations utilise power as a means to achieve their goals. As with the cultural and the social, a high level of understanding of the political space exists when seeking to make visible the power relations at work in any activity.

A low level of *understanding political relations* involves an uncritical engagement with power relations. School and staff performance and reforms are represented as fact or as a body of truth and not open to interpretation. Decisions impacting on the school are viewed as static and not open to question.

Continuum of practice



Notes

1. Arguing different points of view, as in debates, can assist in demonstrating that *organizing activity* is political. However, debates do not necessarily lead to understanding the political nature of decisions and actions. To do so requires opposing views be analysed in such a way that their cultural, social, political, historical, and future focused assumptions are made explicit.

Suggestions

- Record in meeting minutes who is making decisions and on what grounds. Where does the information come from and what is at stake.
- Articulate how reforms met the need of multiple social groups, and where some groups stand to benefit or be disadvantaged than others. This can be communicated and justified in relation to the **clarity** statement and how it brings **coherence** to activity.
- Explicitly stating where decisions were made, how, and on what grounds. This is more than transparency and instead about an openness (even if something you do not want to hear).

Key reflection question

Who has the most the gain and lose in this activity?

HISTORICAL RELATIONS

Description

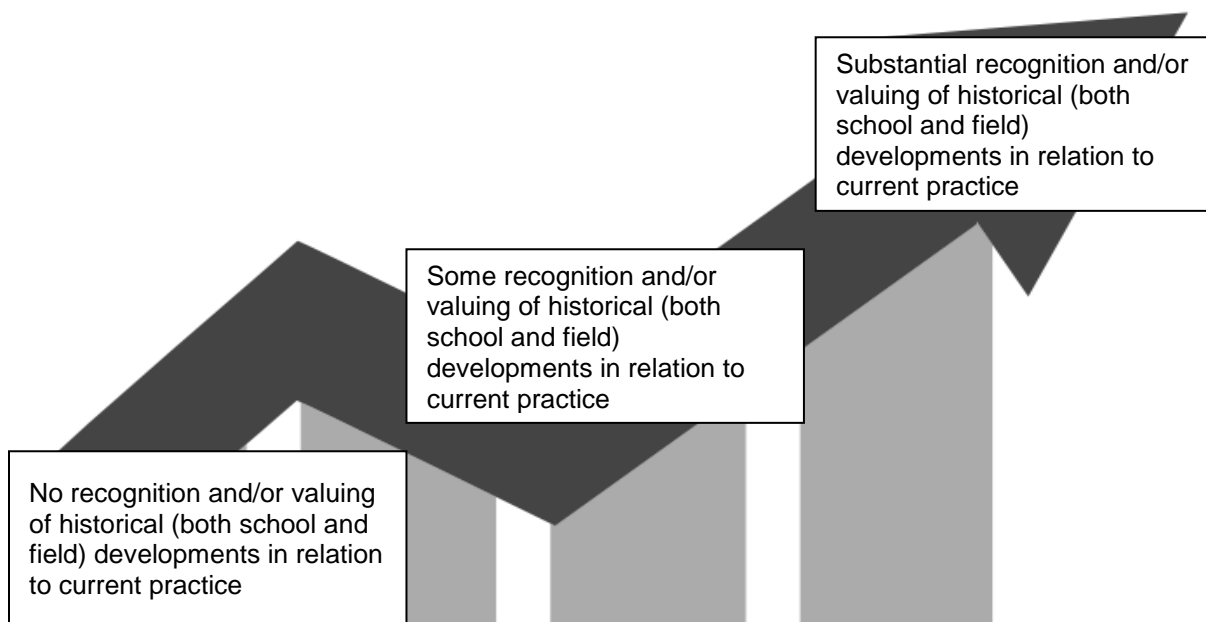
Historical relations are about recognising that any given moment represents a point in time, the product of historical and contemporary decisions and actions. Any activity represents a decision integrating both the conscious and the unconscious, based on trajectory.

In education, this historical space requires an interpretation of the 'state of play', and the interplay of multiple relations. Schools must critically engage with the historical developments of any initiative and focus on doing the right things at the right time. It is also equally important to know when to abandon a course of action.

A high level of understanding *historical relations* involves recognising and valuing the contributions of organisational members, past and present, in relation to current practice.

A low level of understanding *historical relations* involves a failure to take into account the work of others previously and the impact that historical decisions and actions have on current practice.

Continuum of practice



Notes

1. Demonstrating an understanding of the historical space is more than mere recounting of key historical moments for the school / field. It is more concerned with a sustained thought where activity is located in a trajectory of the school.

Suggestions

- Include statements about the school's history in reform documents to demonstrate how initiatives fit the **narrative** of the school and how the historical work of all in the community are being reflected in the current activities.
- Audit symbols across the school to show where the history is represented. How are past contributions from staff, students, and community members reflected in contemporary activities, written documents, and the physical / digital appearance of the school?
- Some examples include the displaying of the original school gate outside the new library following a re-build. Similarly, sustaining the original school bell as an historical artefact on the school grounds after moving to electronic bell system. Inclusion of a hall of fame for staff, students, and community members. Acknowledgement of contributions from the past at major school events. A history week where classes reflect on the history of the school, its staff, students, and communities.

Key reflection question

How has the history of the school been recognized in this activity?

FUTURE RELATIONS

Description

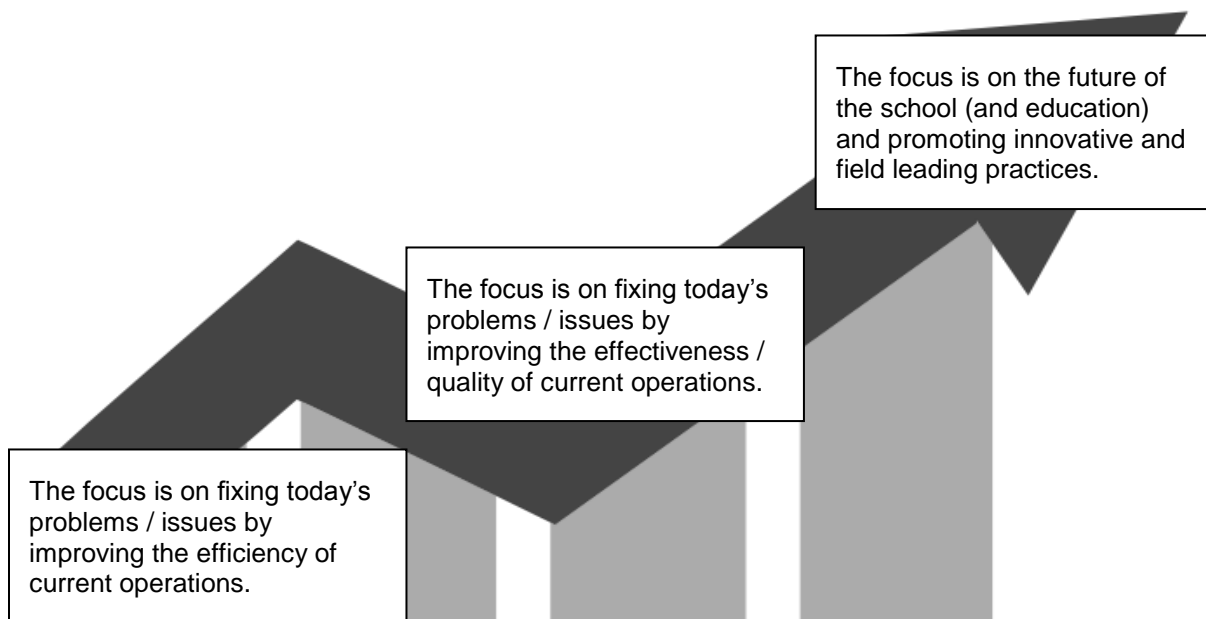
Future relations involve demonstrating a future focus and challenging incumbent modes of operation with the unrelenting goal of creating a field leading organisation.

While educational institutions often operate within large bureaucratic structures and rigid regulatory frameworks, leaders are able to move beyond the blind conformity to rules and enact leadership strategies which actively promote and support innovation.

A high understanding of *future relations* is evident in the moving of debates from the day-to-day operations of the school towards a desired future state. As such, it requires a focus on the future of the school through challenging incumbent practices and promoting innovation in the aim of being a field leading institution. In this case, the focus is on fundamentally changing the nature of the game.

A low level of understanding *future relations* involves focusing on the here and now. Attention is given to the problems / issues of today and addressing those through attention to efficiency and effectiveness. In this case, the focus is on playing the same game better.

Continuum of practice



Notes

1. The key matter here is how activities are offering something new and not simply a better way of doing the current work of the school. In many cases, this means not how is the school going to play the current game better but instead challenge the rules of the game and its formula for success.

Suggestions

- Articulate how activities take the school into the forthcoming and recast education. This is fundamental to bringing the **narrative** of the school to life. What is the path your **clarity** and **coherence** is leading towards?
- It is important to tie activities to the now while projecting into the forthcoming. A major impediment to this work is when the future is projected as some far off place and the connections to the now are too weak. Here, we need to tie current activities on a trajectory towards a desired future.

Key reflection question

Are we offering something new or just a better (more efficient / effective) way of doing what we are currently doing?

Sample reflection sheet template

	Evidence	Impact
<p>Cultural Are educational ideals driving this reform initiative?</p>		
<p>Social Have a diverse range of social groups been recognized and valued in decision making?</p>		
<p>Political Who has the most the gain and lose in this activity?</p>		
<p>Historical How has the history of the school (department) been recognized in this activity?</p>		
<p>Future Are we offering something new or just a better (more efficient / effective) way of doing what we are currently doing?</p>		

Background Research

Eacott, S. (2019). *Relational inquiry in educational leadership*. Singapore: Springer.

Eacott, S. (2019). What if we flipped school leadership? In D.M. Netolicky, J. Andrews, & C. Paterson (Eds.), *Flip the system Australia*. London: Routledge.
<https://www.routledge.com/Flip-the-System-Australia-What-Matters-in-Education/Netolicky-Andrews-Paterson/p/book/9781138367869>

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Further background readings and work can be found at <http://scotteacott.com>