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Our experiences with these individuals have convinced us that many schools around the world are being led by extremely competent, caring and committed educators, a message about our educational systems that often is overlooked by the media, the public and policymakers. Therefore, we dedicate this book to them for teaching us the true meaning of reflection.

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Foreword

What educational practitioners should know about reflection

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Principals' and lead teachers' work lives can be characterised as frenetic. Schools are complex, active, exciting, difficult places to lead, described by Mintzberg (1973) many years ago as diverse, fragmented, short-term, verbal and action-oriented. Principals and lead teachers oversee teachers' work, inspire curriculum innovation, guide student counselling and community service initiatives, and respond at a moment's notice to pressing issues at varying levels of crisis. Often, we ask how one can apply knowledge about effective instruction, interpersonal relationships, planning and budgeting, community relations, or curriculum in this press for immediate and decisive action.

Reflection is the process through which leaders assure effective professional practice, protecting against the constant demand for an answer now, a decision yesterday, absent of thoughtful application of knowledge. This volume confronts the issues of reflective practice in depth. In this brief overview, I will lay out the core principles that I have found through research and practice are fundamental to school leaders who seek to be more thoughtful and reflective in applying what they know to what they do. What should educational practitioners know about reflection? I suggest the following areas are critical to becoming a reflective practitioner.

Analyse and diagnose dilemmas and problems

The concept of reflection-in-action was developed by Schon (1983, 1987) as a way to describe the application of knowledge and learning while adjusting behaviour in the midst of action; a technique used by adept professionals. Retrospectively, professionals engage in reflection-on-action. They return to an experience carefully and thoughtfully after it is over to see what can be learned from the outcome. These two approaches



to reflection allow leaders to define and solve problems and expand expertise at the same time.



Less experienced leaders often feel overwhelmed, unable to identify what they do not know – an important step in active learning. A focus on identifying challenges can help you learn to discover what you do not know while shaping your own inquiry, your professional ways of knowing and your personal theorising and action. Tie knowledge to your beliefs, values and behaviours in leadership roles.



Embrace expertise using experiential, empirical and theoretical knowledge



Knowledge can come directly from experience, be acquired through systematic research and inquiry, and be conceptually organised as theory. Reflection systematises all forms of knowledge for professionals. As you become more adept at applying knowledge to decisions and actions in your work as school leaders, you may find it difficult to retrace your own thinking process to explain your reasoning and knowledge application. Expertise defined as deliberate action assumes that leadership ability develops with experience only when practitioners learn from experience and develop expertise. In this sense, reflective practice is not analogous to the development of systematic professional knowledge. Tacit knowledge can be powerfully applied by some individuals, but is out of reach to others.



Reflection thoughtfully applied builds all forms of knowledge. As experiences and learning accumulate and inappropriate inferences and judgements are reduced, knowledge improves. As knowledge increases and you learn to draw inferences from past problems and features of new situations, the ability to draw appropriate inferences improves. The more difficult the problem, the more accelerated the learning if the problem is successfully resolved. This is especially true when difficult problems and surprises challenge existing preconceptions. You should confront relevant deviations from the expected and habitual and establish a connection between action and memory.

Remember that tests of experience take on new meaning and worth when surprise is an ingredient. The more careful and systematic the

process through which experience and outcomes add to accumulated knowledge and result in adjustments to professional assumptions and beliefs, the more intense the learning.

Researchers have demonstrated that this accumulation of knowledge patterns creates expertise. Experts, for example, take no more trials and consider no more alternatives when making decisions than do novices. However, they notice patterns that recur and make better choices as a result of pattern recognition (Frantz 2003; Simon 1993). Reflection will allow you to more effectively recognise patterns of failure as well as patterns of success and learn from both.

Manage the press of work

One of the most powerful features of school leadership is the press and immediacy of work. It becomes difficult to seize control over one's own activities and time as others press for immediate attention and action on one issue after another in rapid succession. I offer a few injunctions that are easy to state but hard to practise. Act, don't react. While everything educators do is important, very little of what we do is a true emergency. Some of the most important challenges leaders face do not demand immediate action, but allow time for consideration. So decide what is immediate and what is important and know the difference. Finally, for reflection to become a part of thoughtful school leaders' professional work, they must seize control over their own activities and time. By doing so, they will combat overload and experience their professional work with more pleasure and gratification.

Apply your values

Part of who you are and what you know is what you believe to be valuable and worthwhile. The reminder that educators seldom must choose between good and bad, right and wrong may seem simplistic; it also is true. Competing 'goods' are often pitted against each other in the actions educators must take – a form of triage. Successful reflection will require you to have a strong sense of the values and ethics that ground you as you confront this reality.



**Summary**

Preparing to be a reflective practitioner requires early and continuous learning with increasing complexity and multidimensionality. You should be prepared to try out strategies, test actions and ideas, and connect experiments to desired outcomes. When you apply professional expertise, in turn, knowledge develops. The journey is a fulfilling and interesting one.

Chapter 1

Reflection as a source of growth and renewal

Reflection. Such a simple word, yet it is a term we routinely use when speaking and writing. In our everyday conversations, it is common to hear such remarks as ‘Reflecting back, I wonder . . .’ or ‘As I reflect on . . .’. We tend to treat reflection almost like the act of walking, another action we perform constantly and routinely. Except for when we are serious about race walking, jogging or hiking, most of us spend little time contemplating the way we walk or how we can be more efficient walkers. We just continue to walk day after day, month after month, year after year. The same might be said of reflection. We tend to do it all the time, but do not really spend much time contemplating its value or concentrating on how to improve our reflective thinking.

Ann Hart’s sage advice in the Foreword reminds us that reflective practitioners are more proactive in confronting the daily situations they encounter. As reflection becomes more habitual, practitioners shed their novice, reactive tendencies and realise the benefits of becoming expert problem-solvers. Similarly, in working with educators in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States over the past ten years, we have found they have a clear sense of the importance of reflection; however, they also feel they are not always able to realise the full potential of reflection due to personal habits and workplace conditions. When asked about reflection, they reveal important insights about what it means to be a reflective practitioner, the underlying value of reflection and the barriers to becoming more reflective. We provide some of their insights in the following pages.



What does it mean when we ‘reflect?’

When asked to define reflection, many educators focus on the *importance of self-evaluation*. ‘Interpreting’, ‘reviewing’, ‘thinking’, ‘verbalising’, ‘clarifying’, ‘empathising’, ‘weighing consequences’ and ‘looking at our work in new ways’ often are used to capture the meaning of reflection. One assistant principal used a powerful metaphor for describing reflection:

The ultimate instrument used for reflection is the mirror. The mirror reflects light and colors so that we can see what others see when they look at us. Mirrors in our lives are used in two ways depending on your self-esteem at the time. You either look into the mirror and see all your flaws, or you see how great you look. Even though the reflection from the mirror is the same in both instances, what people draw from it depends on their frame of mind when they reflect.

How do we benefit by reflecting?

Most teachers and principals are very articulate about the reasons why reflection is a powerful learning tool. Typically, the underlying theme of their responses indicates reflection is about *change and improvement*. Common phrases include:

- ‘Doing things differently to improve’
- ‘A way to move forward’
- ‘Making better decisions for teaching and student learning’
- ‘Making deliberate decisions’
- ‘Confirming and affirming my actions’

In the words of another vice-principal:

The value or benefit of being a reflective practitioner has afforded me the opportunity to look realistically at what has gone correctly then repeat the activity or what has not gone well to enhance the skill. Being reflective has caused me to not repeat the same mistakes.