What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

"No one combines novel insights and precise ideas like Viviane Robinson. Robinson is as comfortable around the details of the trees as she is in stepping back to take in the forest. You won't find a more unique and powerful book on leadership—one suited exactly for our times—than *Virtuous Educational Leadership*."

Michael Fullan
Professor Emeritus, OISE/University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

"In *Virtuous Educational Leadership*, Viviane Robinson has made explicit what I have often described as an X factor in leadership—something that distinguishes excellent leaders from the rest. Her description and portrayal of virtuous leadership provides insights into the dispositions that underpin wise leadership."

Anne Berit Emstad
Professor, Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Trondheim, Norway

"Viviane Robinson is one of my favorite educational leadership researchers and writers, and this book illustrates so well why that is so. The school leader plays an essential role in engaging students in deep learning. Robinson offers invaluable insights for how to foster this type of learning through virtuous leadership."

Peter DeWitt
Author, Leadership Coach, Education Week Blogger
Albany, NY

"Viviane Robinson takes us out of our comfort zone to challenge how we think about the true purpose of educational leadership. Full of insight and analysis combined with rich examples, this book shows us that when school leaders not only do the right things but do them in the right way, it is the students themselves who benefit the most."

Steve Munby
Visiting Professor, Centre for Educational Leadership, University College London
Cumbria, UK

"*Virtuous Educational Leadership* is a gift for all of us searching for guidance in school leadership development. It is both inspiring and practical. Viviane Robinson promotes leadership excellence by showing how virtues are at the very core of leadership and how crucial they are in the face of today's educational challenges."

Anna Jolonch
Director of LID Barcelona, Educational Leadership Centre
Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain

"Making a positive change in any role, from teacher to principal, requires both a 'what' and a 'how.' *Virtuous Educational Leadership* provides a framework for identifying the 'what' (collaborative complex problem-solving) and approaching the 'how' (virtuous leadership). With Viviane Robinson's characteristic depth and rigor, the ideas hidden in these pages will empower leaders worldwide."

Oliver Lovell
Author of *Tools for Teachers* and *Cognitive Load Theory in Action* and host of the
Education Research Reading Room Podcast
Victoria, Australia

"*Virtuous Educational Leadership* is a comprehensive examination of the complex world of school leadership. It draws upon research from a wide range of disciplines, supported by rich analysis, of examples of the work of leaders. Voices from the front lines are expertly interwoven throughout. I highly recommend it."

Tom Rees
Executive Director, Programmes, Ambition Institute
Manchester, UK

"Educational leaders inhabit a world that expects simplicity to be curated from complexity, certainty from unpredictability, coherence from chaos. And, while the existing literature on educational leadership contains plenty of advice and its recommendations seem intuitively compelling, it is, ultimately, lacking in actionable specificity. Thankfully, *Virtuous Educational Leadership* is a work of deep practical wisdom that is anchored in theory, acknowledges the critical importance of context, and illustrates clearly how educational leadership is not simply about doing the right work of leadership but also about doing it in the right way."

Stuart Kime
Director of Education, Evidence Based Education
Sunderland, UK

Virtuous Educational Leadership

Virtuous Educational Leadership

Doing the Right Work the Right Way

Viviane Robinson

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Contents

Conclusion   239

Preface

Educational leadership matters. We know that the excellence of a school's leadership is linked to the learning and achievement of its students. We also know that without it, school improvement is impossible, or at least impossible to sustain. Until we solve the problem of developing and retaining more excellent educational leaders, we will struggle to reduce the long-standing disparities in student outcomes that plague many Western education systems.

But what is excellent educational leadership? Is it possible to specify it in ways that do justice to the complexity and diversity of the role? Is it possible to specify it in ways that go beyond theoretical abstraction and offer practical guidance to policy makers and practitioners who seek to develop leadership excellence in themselves and others?

The Story in the Title

The purpose of this book is to answer those questions. Since the essence of my answers is captured in the title of this book, it is worth unpacking what I mean by "virtuous educational leadership" and "doing the right work the right way."

Virtuous Educational Leadership

While I was writing this book, people frequently asked why I was using virtue theory. My short answer was that I wanted to give more attention to the ethical dimensions of educational leadership, and virtue theory, with its emphasis on character, enabled me to do that. I had become increasingly aware that the language of capabilities, which I had used in my previous writing, did not afford me the tools to discuss what constituted doing the right work in the right way, because it lacked an ethical dimension. Educational leaders are very powerful people, for their decisions influence the lives and learning of hundreds of students and

teachers. I am concerned, therefore, not only with what educational leaders should know and do but additionally with how to ensure their capabilities are used for worthy purposes and in worthy ways. It is that concern that led me to virtue theory.

A virtue is a desirable quality of character—evident in a reliable tendency to respond to situations in excellent ways. Virtues are deep-seated personal qualities that are central to the way of being of the virtuous leader. A leader demonstrates the virtue of respect, for example, by acting in a respectful way not only with powerful parents and administrators but in all interactions, including with students. Furthermore, the virtue of respect is evident not just in face-to-face interactions. The respectful leader *characteristically reasons, acts, and reacts in respectful ways* (Annas, 2011).

In short, virtue theory requires us to consider not only what our leaders should know and do but also what type of person they should be. Since virtues are rich concepts that include all these aspects, I no longer needed separate consideration of leadership capabilities, which in my previous writing I had understood as knowledge and skills. Virtues could express what educational leaders need to know, do, and be, all in one integrated package.

Doing the Right Work the Right Way

Since the virtues I concentrate on are those that are of particular relevance to the work of educational leadership, it is time to turn to the subtitle of this book and explain my argument about the nature of the right work and what it means to do it the right way. I argue that the right work is the dedicated pursuit of the proper purposes of education. After a brief discussion of the debates among philosophers of education, I settle on three proper purposes: **preparation** of children and young people through mastery of the competencies they require to lead fulfilling and productive lives; **socialisation** into particular cultures and communities; and the development of **autonomy** by enabling children and young persons to exercise choice without surrendering to the will of others or to uncontrolled inner drives. Since these purposes are distinctive, the practical wisdom that is central to virtuous educational leadership requires substantial educational knowledge and teaching experience. Generic leadership knowledge and experience will not build the virtues that are required for excellent educational leadership.

In modern curricula the three purposes are pursued through the development of students' competencies—clusters of knowledge and skills

that can be applied to the analysis of real-world problems. Developing such competencies requires students, teachers, and leaders to embrace what has been called deep or deeper learning—terms that I use interchangeably throughout this book. Through deep learning, students become experts in a particular knowledge or skill domain and know when, why, and how to apply that knowledge in solving newly encountered problems within that domain.

If the right work for educational leaders is the dedicated pursuit of the three purposes by ensuring deep learning for all students, then my next challenge was to identify the virtues that leaders needed to do that work. My approach was to backwards map by arguing that, if the purpose is to ensure deep learning, then leaders need to know the science of deep learning and of teaching for deep learning (see Figure 0.1). From this science, I then derive, through logical argument and reference to empirical research, broad descriptions of the right leadership work.

In leadership, context is critical. Leaders need to do the right work guided by the science and adapting to the requirements of every situation in which they are making decisions. Those requirements are not adequately specified by the usual categorical accounts of context—size of school, urban versus rural, and so forth. Instead, I argue that context is everything that needs to be taken into account in solving particular problems, and that context shifts every time something new or different has to be taken into account. I then explain what problems are, how

Figure 0.1   A Process for Determining the Right Leadership Work

Derive broad descriptions of the right leadership work

backwards map

Leaders learn the science of deep learning and teaching for deep learning

backwards map

Purpose: Ensure deep learning
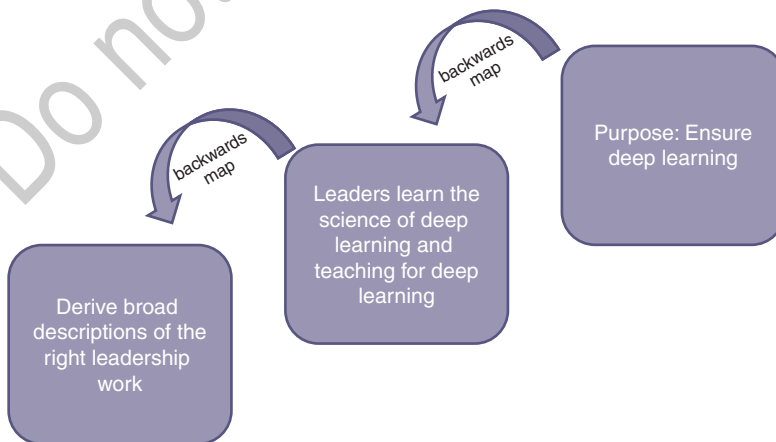
they are solved, and illustrate the process with real school examples. Leaders do the right work by solving or re-solving problems that prevent pursuit or achievement of the purposes. They also do the right work by ensuring the smooth operation of the hundreds of routines that are the result of prior problem-solving efforts.

Having identified the right work, I then identified virtues that are required to do that work the right way. I propose three clusters of virtues that have particular relevance to the work of educational leaders (see Figure 0.2). In the first cluster are leadership virtues. Leadership virtues are evident in the worthiness of the educational purposes being pursued and in the sources of influence that are employed in their pursuit. Virtuous leaders recognise that leadership rests on fundamentally consensual rather than coerced influence processes and, therefore, that the sources of their influence lie in their knowledge and ideas, their admirable personal qualities, and in the reasonable exercise of any authority that their role accords them.

The problem-solving virtues that constitute the second cluster comprise strategic, analytic, and imaginative virtues. Strategic virtues are applicable to every problem, not just to those described as "strategic" in strategic and annual plans. Strategic virtues shape how leaders think about all their work because they are continually asking, "How does this meeting, activity, project, or resource add value to the most important goals we are pursuing?"

Analytic virtues are apparent in leaders who are motivated to test rather than assume the validity of their own and others' key beliefs, who are skilled in doing so, and who can explain why such testing is important to them. Virtuous leaders are very aware of the ethical dimensions of their decision-making—that mistaken assumptions and taken-for-granted beliefs can produce poor-quality decisions that waste resources, do not solve the problem, and may have negative impacts on students. The stance of leaders with strong analytic virtues is that of truth-seeking rather than truth-claiming.

Figure 0.2   A Taxonomy of Virtues

Leadership Virtues

Problem-Solving Virtues:
Strategic, Analytic, Imaginative

Interpersonal Virtues:
Integrity & Respect
Courage & Empathy

While analytic virtues are required to gain an accurate understanding of the elements of a problem and their interrelationships, imaginative virtues are required to reconfigure and integrate those elements in ways that suggest how the problem could be solved. Imaginative virtues are seen in the creativity with which some educational leaders are able to reimagine apparently conflicting solution requirements so that they can be integrated in ways that advance multiple educational purposes. Such creativity requires a foundation of deep knowledge of the relevant concepts, because such knowledge enables flexible yet principled interpretations of solution requirements.

Doing the right work the right way nearly always requires productive collaboration with others. The challenge for educational leaders is to develop the types of relationships that advance the proper purposes by addressing the complex problems that stand in the way of achieving them. What must be avoided are good relationships with teachers that do not serve students well because the adult relationships are not sufficiently focused on achieving the purposes.

In the third cluster of interpersonal virtues, I have highlighted two virtues that build trust—integrity and respect—for without trust it is difficult to resolve the problems that prevent achievement of the purposes. Leaders with integrity can be relied on to tell the truth, not only about external situations but also about their own thoughts and feelings. For educational leaders, integrity requires not only congruence between words and actions but also that their words and actions be educationally worthy because they serve the interests of students.

Respect is evident in the way leaders treat others as having goals and interests of their own, and as entitled to pursue them in an autonomous and self-directed manner, as long as such autonomy is compatible with the pursuit of agreed educational purposes and role responsibilities. Virtuous educational leaders strive to be respected rather than liked, and their respect is evident in the way they pay attention and listen, especially to views that differ from their own.

Two additional interpersonal virtues, courage and empathy, are essential to addressing the problems that prevent achieving the purposes. Courage is needed to overcome the fear and anxiety that may be experienced when giving or receiving negative feedback, facing opponents, or challenging the status quo. But leaders also need empathy to deeply understand why others disagree, or why their expectations have not been met.

Since interpersonal vices, of which we all have plenty, prevent the consistent exercise of interpersonal virtues and their deployment in collaborative problem-solving, I give considerable attention to how such vices can be overcome, and the learning involved in doing so. I explain how various vices contribute to the dilemma that so many leaders experience between addressing the quality of teaching and learning and maintaining the trust of their staff. Leaders with strong problem-solving and interpersonal virtues are able to avoid this task-relationship dilemma by treating their opinions as fallible rather than as truth and by treating others as people with whom they can inquire and learn rather than as objects of persuasion.

I have learned from my experience in leading hundreds of workshops for educational leaders that there are situations in which being virtuous is particularly challenging. That is why I have included a chapter on being virtuous in tough situations (Chapter 12), including a nine-step guide to more virtuous communication of critical evaluations.

The Scope and Organisation of the Book

It is unusual for a book on educational leadership to range so widely across disciplines. Despite its wide range, it is tightly structured and organised. I draw on the philosophy of education, the science of teaching and learning, and the philosophy and psychology of virtues to develop an argument about what constitutes the right work and how to do it in the right way. The tight structure and argument mean that this book is best read from start to finish. For those readers who are short on time, I suggest they read the summaries in chapter order first, for that will give them the essence of the argument and enable them to decide which chapters to study in more depth.

In Part A I draw on the philosophy of education to identify the proper purposes of education and note how these purposes are represented or not in modern curricula (Chapter 2). Since achieving the purposes requires learning to apply well-organised bodies of knowledge to real-world problems (deep learning), Chapter 2 summarises the science of deep learning and its implications for classroom teaching. This knowledge is critical, for the right work of educational leadership is that which the science of learning and teaching suggests is needed to achieve the purposes of educational institutions—ensuring the development of self-directed and well-prepared students.

In Part B, I spell out what doing the right leadership work involves. My account of this work in Chapter 3 is organised under five dimensions

of leadership practice that are included in the frameworks that guide leadership development and policy in many jurisdictions. The description of each dimension emphasises the work that is required to ensure that students have high-quality opportunities for deep learning. Guidance about how to tailor that work to different contexts is provided in Chapter 4.

Part C enriches the story with eight chapters devoted to describing and illustrating how to do the right work the right way. In Chapter 5, I provide an accessible explanation of virtues and explain how they are learnable despite their deep-seated personal quality. I then explain my selection of three clusters of virtue as being of particular relevance to the role of educational leaders—leadership, problem-solving, and interpersonal virtues. In Chapter 6, I discuss the first cluster, which is largely concerned with more and less virtuous leadership motivations. I also explain the sources of leadership influence and how leadership is not confined to those with positional authority.

The second cluster, problem-solving virtues, comprises strategic (Chapter 7), analytic (Chapter 8), and imaginative (Chapter 9) virtues. I explain how all three categories are essential to solving the problems that prevent achievement of the proper purposes of education. At least half of each chapter shows the application of the virtues, often in combination with one another, to the real work of educational leaders. Since virtuous leadership requires virtuous thinking and action, many of the excerpts, from meetings and conversations, include leaders' thoughts as well as their speech. In addition, I have included detailed annotations and commentary to make explicit how virtues and vices are shaping the problem-solving.

I take the same approach in the chapter on the third cluster of interpersonal virtues (Chapter 10), and in the subsequent two chapters, I show how situationally relevant interpersonal and problem-solving virtues are integrated in excellent ways (Chapter 11), even in tough spots (Chapter 12).

The case of complex collaborative problem-solving in Chapter 13 brings all the strands together to show how the collective virtues of high school leaders resolved a long-standing attendance problem. The leaders were not perfect—they made some mistakes by succumbing to their vices on occasion—but they were collectively sufficiently strong in their leadership, problem-solving, and interpersonal virtues to analyse the complexity of the attendance problem and craft and sustain a solution.

Despite the considerable scope of this volume, there are many further questions to be answered. In my view, one of the more important ones is the role of institutional (education) and organisational (schools and school districts) cultures in enabling and inhibiting virtuous leadership. Individually virtuous leaders are not the whole answer, for in too many contexts it is too hard to be virtuous while swimming against a virtue-inhibiting tide. Virtue-inhibiting educational cultures include those in which a tight focus on educational purposes is hindered by constantly shifting and distracting policy priorities; those in which there are too many undiscussables except in the car park; those where too much weight is given to the "optics"; and those where there is too little understanding of and respect for the depth of educational knowledge and experience that is required to do the right work the right way.

While the creation of more virtuous institutional and organisational cultures is not the focus of this book, suffice it to say that such an endeavour requires leaders who have a deep practical understanding of relevant virtues, a strong personal motivation to be virtuous, and at least moderate skill in doing so. Without such knowledge and commitments, those leading cultural reform are unlikely to know what a virtuous institution looks like, let alone know how to design the structures and processes that would make it a practical reality.

The Book's Features and Benefits

Several features of this book are designed to ensure that readers will see strong connections between its theoretical content and their own leadership challenges:

- Strong connections are made between relevant published research and practical implications.

- Numerous examples of leaders' thinking and action are provided, so readers can see what virtuous practice looks like.

- Examples of leadership practice are analysed to show how theoretical concepts are evident in practice.

Additional features help readers understand, remember, and use the book in their own contexts:

- A detailed table of contents helps readers see the sequence of ideas and how the argument unfolds.

- Summaries at the end of each chapter assist recall and review.

- Reflection questions at the end of each chapter support individual or group book study.

- Readers can select those leadership conversations and meetings that have particular relevance to their current challenges and use them to practise more virtuous approaches. Since many excerpts include leaders' thoughts as well as their speech, readers can identify and practise the type of thinking and talking that will help them to be more virtuous.

Acknowledgments

My inspiration comes from practitioners, and it is to the many hundreds who have done me the privilege of sharing their challenges with me that I owe the greatest debt. In particular, I thank those leaders who gave me permission to use excerpts of their speech, whether real or role-played, to illustrate the points I make in the text. As a student of Chris Argyris at Harvard University, I was held to a tough standard—"If you can't illustrate your advice, don't give it." By giving permission to use excerpts from audio and video recordings we have made over the years, these practitioners enabled me to bridge the enormous gulf between giving abstract advice and showing leaders what that advice could look like in practice.

I am grateful to the organisations and individuals who have encouraged and supported my new venture into virtuous educational leadership. The Melbourne-based Bastow Institute of Education Leadership, now integrated into the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, gave me my first opportunity to write about those virtues that were critical for school leaders, and after presentations to and feedback from school leaders, those virtues are now included in the Victorian Leadership Framework that guides the statewide leadership development curriculum.

The New Zealand–based company Evaluation Associates gave permission to use excerpts from audio and video transcripts that we made during the development of Leading by Learning—a series of workshops that build capability in building trust while tackling complex problems. In particular, I thank the CEO of Evaluation Associates, Anna Sullivan, and staff members Jacqui Patuawa, Allan Powell, and Cleve Shearer for permission to use speech excerpts. Permission was also granted by Jodi Devine, Siliva Gaugatao, and Margaret Palmer.

This book has taken me into new philosophical territory, and I am deeply grateful to Christine Swanton for being my guide through the minefield of virtue theory and virtue ethics. It was a pleasure to discover in doing so that Aristotelian virtues are deeply practical, flexible, and context sensitive. Christine helped me to appreciate how virtue theory could provide a rich framework for meeting my goal of giving more emphasis to leadership character. Her critique and support have been invaluable.

My research and development on complex collaborative problem-solving would not have been possible without my long-standing collaboration with my friend and colleague Jacqui Patuawa. While Jacqui was completing her doctoral thesis, I worked with her and her cosupervisor, Claire Sinnema, on early versions of Table 13.1 and on resources to teach leaders how to be more systematic in solving the complex problems that have been barriers to the achievement of their improvement goals. The case study in Chapter 13 had its origins in a course Jacqui and I taught Victorian system leaders, and that course, and the subsequent case, would not have been possible without our collaboration.

Rachel Cann, my research assistant on this project, saved me hours of work by completing literature searches, checking references, and helping with diagrams. Her speed, accuracy, and research skills are greatly appreciated. Finally, I thank the team at Corwin, who have been infinitely patient and supportive of this project. Feedback from Desirée Bartlett made this a better manuscript, and Nyle De Leon helped me obtain the many permissions that were required.

I am fortunate to live in a family where spending hours thinking and writing about tough stuff is accepted and encouraged. My husband David encouraged me in multiple ways—by understanding how important this work is to me, by helping me to get through the blockages right to the finish, by listening, never pressuring, and being patient. Virtues indeed!

About the Author

Viviane Robinson is a distinguished professor emeritus at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and visiting professor at University College London. She completed her doctorate with Chris Argyris and Donald Schon at Harvard University and then dedicated her career to improving educational leadership policy and practice through a programme of research and development focused on the impact of educational leaders on the learning and well-being of their students.

Viviane's academic research programme on how leaders build trust while attempting to improve teaching and learning has informed the profession through her numerous academic articles and widely translated books (*Student-Centered Leadership*, Jossey Bass/Wiley; *Reduce Change to Increase Improvement*, Corwin) and professional development resources (Leading by Learning).

Viviane remains closely connected to the realities of educational leadership by working as a leadership facilitator and coach and by consulting on leadership policy and development for professional and government bodies in England, Norway, Singapore, Chile, Israel, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

She has received awards from national and international professional and academic organisations. In 2011 she was made a fellow of the American Educational Research Association for sustained excellence in educational research. In 2017 she was elected as a fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand and awarded its Mason Durie Medal in recognition of the international impact of her leadership research.