

The Pruning Principle with Simon Breakspear

[00:00:00] Simon, it's really good to see you again. How have you been since the last time we chatted? Which is quite a while ago, I think.

Has been. Sarah, great to be back. Going really well. Family's thriving. And in between our last conversations, I even made my way to Scotland in person. So lots to catch up on. Good, good. And I think that was, um, just a couple of months ago, if I'm correct as well. Yeah, no, just, uh, end of September. I was there early October.

So, uh, yeah, look forward to debriefing that and other parts of my research and work, uh, that'd be good to talk about. Great. Um, and one of the reasons, uh, we were keen to reconnect with you again is, One of the episodes we recorded with you, I think it was the first one around sustainable improvement, has been consistently our most listened to episode and continues to, it continues to grow.

And I suppose it made us curious, um, about why that might [00:01:00] be, why it was so popular, why that in particular resonated with, with people. Um, and I suppose. You know, I would have some ideas and listeners would have some ideas, but I just wonder from your perspective, what do you, what do you think is about that?

That was so, um, captivating for people, that idea of sustainable improvement. Well, you know, you never know what ideas are going to land at certain points. It's funny, Sarah, this is not necessarily a key frame or topic that I often share in keynotes and workshops. It was just something that emerged in our conversation.

Thank you. But I think there is a sense coming out of COVID and people are saying the way we're improving isn't working and they want to return to a more human lens in, of course, we want our schools to keep getting better. And of course, we're nowhere near the limits of how good we could be. But the way we've gone about it, and particularly in the post crisis part [00:02:00] of COVID phase, where we had a pause where everything was held for a moment.

And then we got everything back and a whole bunch of additional things. And I think people are looking at each other saying, I know we can get better and I know we can make progress, but right now I just feel like I'm jumping from one

thing to another. And perhaps I spend most of my time emailing, meeting and managing the work and not feeling like I'm actually progressing anything.

Um, I had one leader here say to me, Simon, I think, um, that, uh, well, he said I'm flat out. I feel really exhausted, and I don't know whether I've achieved anything this week, and I think that's where a lot of people are feeling. So the idea of sustainability says, number one, hey, let's not do things unless we think that they can play out in the long term future of our schools and our local authorities and our regional improvement collaborative.

Let's have the benchmark of, let's think, uh, in decades and not in days.

[00:03:00] And then I think, secondly, let's go about it in such a way that doesn't burn us out in the process. Let's go about it at a natural cadence, with a regular rhythm. We look at each other each term and we progress some meaningful work, but we don't feel like we're always jumping from one thing to another.

And I think that sort of really human lens, that realistic lens of, yes, we want to keep getting better. But the way that we've been working isn't working for us. And funny enough, the more we keep piling on ourselves and improvement, the less we actually get sustainably done. So I think there's sort of awakening happening around, uh, perhaps some of the ideas and some of the norms around.

What it's like to be a school leader, what it's like to be a head teacher, what it's like to be, uh, a leader in a local authority who wants to pursue the equity and excellence agenda in Scotland, but wants to pursue it in such a way that, uh, will actually make a change and that, uh, will ensure that the [00:04:00] workforce isn't collateral damage on the, on the process.

Yeah, I get a sense there's often a tension in there that comes from different places around, um, the need for change being quite strong and the need to do better for our children and young people, rightly so, is at the centre of that. Um, and sometimes there's an expectation and a pressure to deliver that change, that improvement, um, at pace.

And I guess that's a phrase I do hear used, that we need to do things at pace. And I think that creates that tension between how does a leader navigate that, yes, of course we want to make things better for our children, young people, but also to do that, we can't necessarily do it at pace and avoid the pitfalls.

Does that make sense? Well I think we can do it at pace, we can do it at a natural pace. Which is, and that's the key, what's the natural pace, [00:05:00] and the natural pace is something where we can sustain at that level. We can not

just do short term pedagogical diets, but we can actually make long term instructional habit change.

We can make the organizational routine change. What's the point of making a short term change that reverts to default once the pressure comes off? Because there's a change in leadership at a local authority level or change in leadership in department ministerial level. We need to find a way of working at a natural pace.

And I think the other piece there is just to say, Yeah. There's been a lot of quality leaders who've cared about the things that we care about right now in Scotland, who've really tried to do things quickly, who've tried to heed the moral imperative and respond to that by going at an unnatural pace, and, well, the leaders who are still here, they're working on the same problems, so I think it's worth Uh, thinking seriously about doing less, uh, focusing in on the most important things and then taking a [00:06:00] trajectory of more like two, three or four years to do them well.

Then, um, as Vivianne Robinson says, we have to unlearn the quick fix, and I think if people's desire to make an impact results in another round of quick fixes, then they leave their schools, they leave their local authorities, they leave their regions in a place that other leaders are going to come in and have to begin the work again, just with a more overloaded, more exhausted and change fatigue workforce.

Yeah. And when you visited Scotland, what sense did you get of where we are with that? Well, number one, it was so lovely to be there. Um, I'm, I'm somewhere between a quarter and a half Scottish, so it was lovely to re engage with my roots. My great, great, great grandfather, I think, was born just outside of, um, Edinburgh and Fife.

And, um, yeah, it was lovely to kind of just be there. I've been to Scotland before when I lived in England for five years doing my postgraduate [00:07:00] work and other things. But it was lovely to return and really engage. You know, my first day I just wandered Glasgow and enjoyed myself. Uh, getting to know that wonderful and vibrant city, uh, and then my first day of work was just straight into school visits, um, picked up by a wonderful, uh, leader in Glasgow, who's doing some student achievement work and Callum took me straight into Clyde Primary School.

We had a great visit there and seeing the terrific work happening and some of my work in teaching sprints being embedded there by the leaders and I headed

across to drum chapel high school and got to meet with senior leaders there and understand the complexity of what they're working through. And I say this because.

Whilst as a policy person, a researcher, I can give you some, uh, global perspectives. I'll tell you all the richness for me came, uh, embedded in conversations, talking to those leaders, then following through in, in some of the sessions we ran, um, where sure I was [00:08:00] sharing ideas, but very much sitting at tables, listening to what's occurring.

So what do I think you are? Well, I think you've got a wonderful platform. I describe the platform in Scotland as a really strong around the moral imperative, particularly around obviously language of equity and excellence. You can't move more than a couple of meters in education in Scotland without someone mentioning equity and excellence.

I was a little bit worried I wasn't be allowed to leave the country without my equity and excellence tattoo. I love it. It's there. I would say then have a really strong set of collaborative structures. Whether it be the work of how schools are interacting together, the RICs, obviously the regional improvement collaboratives, the work of regions, it's still really strong.

And you are a geographically small place, at least in comparison to New South Wales, where I'm from, which we're the size of Western Europe. And so I think the relational capital is strong. [00:09:00] You know, I see people like Gillian Hamilton, you know, terrific. Leader that I've known since I work at scale and she knows the people and so the distance between a head teacher and the leader of a system is, is quite, it's quite, um, small, actually.

So, all of that is in a really, really good place. My very short visit and lots and lots of conversations led me to probably think around three things, Sarah. I think the next stage for me, um, if you wanted to take that platform and really make progress on equity and excellence, uh, harness that collaboration would be mostly about precision.

It would be really to say we've got to get really precise about our understanding of the definition of the problems to be solved. Why haven't our collaborative structures and our, you know, real belief in the profession and the work we're doing, why hasn't that necessarily [00:10:00] resulted in some of the changes?

Okay, so it's not a lack of belief or vision or effort. We need to get to a new level of precision in the problem or challenge definition, particularly at the school

level factors. And then we have to start asking what is the evidence based suggest would be the best bets to be able to make real progress on those things.

So I'd say precision, that there's a lot of low hanging fruit in the precision of problem definition. Whilst there is a lot of conversations about the use of research and evidence. I believe that there is further to go in being able to say what is the evidence that would have that is likely to help us solve the highly specified problem that we've got here.

So I reckon specificity and precision is number one. I think number two alignment for a small system. You've got a lot of people in the middle. You've got local authorities, you've got regional improvement collaboratives, [00:11:00] you've got people in regions, you've got wonderful folks from Education Scotland, you've got those on the achievement challenges, and it took me a little bit of time to get my head around, who do you work for and how do you do this, and you're coming in from the local authority here, but you're coming in as one of the national achievement kind of leaders here, and I think there's a real opportunity for alignment, Thank you, Aaron.

That even though everyone has that real moral imperative, people are still working a little bit at split purposes. So, I note where schools are leading great professional learning and networking together, often RICs really well intentioned, but are trying to get people to really lean in and do that work.

So, they might be offering something else to try to attract people over here. Maybe other people working on national agenda around achievement might be coming in. And I think through the lens of a head teacher, there's that real sense of I'm, I know we're all on about the same thing, but we've been pulled in different places.

So the second big takeaway for me was alignment and [00:12:00] coherence making in the, in the middle, uh, that, that messy middle in all systems, but particularly in Scotland, I think there's an opportunity for real alignment. For anyone outside of a school to make sure we're lining up, uh, you know, local authority, region, national people working in that way.

And then the last one would be sustainability, which comes back to your first question, uh, that, you know, precision, alignment, sustainability. I would really encourage moving into the next five years of reform to do it in such a way that, um, can be sustained and that is not key person dependent. And that often means, I think, moving towards putting a real focus on organizational rhythms and routines.

Um. Finding ways to reduce individual teacher workload by really teaming up in new and different ways, you know, in development of high quality curriculum, materials and resources, we need to find ways to [00:13:00] work in different ways to make it sustainable. So there's some of the things a great platform, uh, I would definitely say precision and problem definition and the use of evidence.

There's further and low hanging fruit there, alignment and coherence, particularly around how people who are trying to support schools work together in a coherent way that doesn't interrupt schools, but there's one core agenda around that capacity building. And then I think rethinking sustainability, you can't get to further improvement just by working harder.

Yeah, yeah. Um, I think there's always. You know, we speak to various people and there's a common thread that comes through, which is we have a really good platform and foundation for doing great things in Scotland. We just need to do the great things as well. Um, so yeah, I think there's, there's always that sense that we've got a lot of the right things.

Sometimes it's just making them work in the right way together to actually deliver those great outcomes. [00:14:00] Yeah, I think so. And let's be clear, you know, um, final outcomes in terms of learner outcomes, the sorts of things we might particularly track and literacy and numeracy and secondary graduation. We have some serious headwinds that we're working against in broader challenges within families and society.

So we're actually going to have to work with more precision alignment just to stay where we are. And then we're going to have to work out. Um, how do we actually, you know, really get to that precision or, you know, if you actually want to solve for seven and eight year olds reading, do we really have an opinion in Scotland about what the evidence suggests is the best way to do that?

We actually wanted people to be higher order mathematical problem solvers. Do we have an opinion about how you get to automaticity on big ideas and numeracy and then how you build fluency across a range of strategies? Or to be honest, there's a tendency in Scotland to [00:15:00] always want to jump into the deep end of the pool as though learners can go straight to applied work, interdisciplinary work, straight into voice and agency, knowing the next steps in learning.

And one of my reflections is. We speak a lot in Scotland about the impacts of poverty, the impacts of some of those challenges, but then in the conversations,

I feel as though sometimes we jump over the evidence base about what that means about the level of vocabulary development around the need for really key, routine, explicit Support for those students about what we know about early years literacy development around oral language, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness.

Like, we have a precise research base and support, and I think there is still a tendency to elevate the conversation to the conceptual, to the moral imperative, to use words like equity and close the gap. But actually, as practitioners, yeah, of course, it's policy talk. What are the [00:16:00] mechanisms by which we can close the gap?

And what is the best available evidence? And how close are our current practices to that best available evidence? And I would really suggest that there's a lot of knowledge that our field has that's grounded and it's not new research, you know, 20, 30 year old grounded research around what we could do.

That is still probably only, um, uh, inconsistently applied. And if you're really serious about changing long term disadvantage trajectories, then we know a lot about what you need to do with four, five, six, and seven year olds. And we know a lot about what you need to do from there. And I just think there is an opportunity to apply.

They're evidence based on human development, on learning, on literacy development, and really build that knowledge and then say closing the gap will be mostly about closing a practice gap between what we already know works and how we see that turning up consistently across Scottish classrooms. I wonder if that kind of [00:17:00] connects with what you were saying before about, um, kind of doing less well.

I wonder if sometimes we do use the conceptual stuff and we stay at the big ideas or the, the, the principles because we can hold more of those things. We don't, um, what we're trying to do is kind of hold all the things in our head or hold all the things in our plans rather than actually letting some of that go and actually drilling down into the specifics and the detail and the integrity of fewer principles.

Yeah, I think that's really well put, Sarah, and let's just sort of play it through. Interestingly enough, if you want to change the most things for the most number of people, you have to change by, you have to make that change by going resolutely around. A small number of things for probably a subgroup of the population and so what it means is you might look at each other and say, oral

language development, phonemic development, so phonological awareness, phonemic awareness for our [00:18:00] 5 year olds matters, the foundation of our, of our literacy.

So what would it look like to really put a circle around what Lisa Rogers, who's now the secretary and, um. Of education in Western Australia, but was a terrific senior leader in New Zealand when I first met her and she taught me this phrase they had in New Zealand, which was we need to know the numbers, names and needs.

And that is Scotland small enough to know the numbers, names and needs of every 4, 5 or 6 year old. Who isn't yet on trajectory, not for some test, but in their own human development, particularly in the English language, this crazy language that we have is quite difficult to learn in comparison to others.

And we can know the numbers, names and needs of kids who are not yet. Building that understanding, because we can know that then they're going to find it very, very hard and their phonic knowledge and fluency, it's highly predictive of their efficacy and identity as readers. I'm not [00:19:00] talking about standardized test scores and reading, I'm talking about, are you going to release and unleash people who can read for pleasure, which is my 7 or 8 year old or 9 year old sitting on a couch or in a car in Scotland and reading for pleasure?

And I can predict that pretty well as a researcher for the five and six year old, based on their phonemic and phonological awareness, unless we're tracking and thinking. So, I'd also say in Scotland, there's this, it's this strange tension that we're all facing, which is, if you really care about equity and excellence, how could you ever go after a small set of problems with a smaller set of the population?

Or you might say, you know, if we really care about equity and excellence, how can we just limit the conversation to. Early years literacy development, or how can we limit the conversation towards some of the big ideas in number? Or how can we limit the conversation towards really developing, um, uh, efficacy and confidence in senior writing?

And [00:20:00] because it feels like there's a trade off between. Airing about all and doing some, and I don't think we've matured in our application yet as a profession, as a sector. I think medicine understands that, you know, if you're running a research institute in Scotland. And you want to make the biggest impact possible in the lives and vitality of Scottish citizens.

You don't do that by saying, we want to close the gap. So we're going to allocate our hundred million dollars, and we're going to give a million dollars to a hundred different issues. And of those million dollars, each of those will be divided out equally against the population. And so in the end, a whole bunch of scientists are holding 40, 000 saying, what can we do with this?

And we can put on our medical Institute. We care about everyone. And can you see how we care about everyone? We allocated it to everyone. It's just not how you solve complex problems. You've got to make hard trade offs to say my values is I care for all my values is I care about these [00:21:00] things. And we think we can solve this problem in this sub.

Population and make a real difference. And so we choose to disproportionately deploy our resources and knowledge in this area to solve that issue. And then we can move to the next issue. And that's a really different pragmatic way of living out closing the gap, which is what's an area in Scotland. You know, you've got.

You've got a really good evidence informed answer to and that your terrific profession could pick up and apply with consistency over the next few years. Um, I find there is no willingness at the moment in Scotland to have the debate, for example, about what is the best way to teach four to nine year olds to read in the English language.

No one wants to have that actual, is there an answer, or is there a better answer at the moment in the evidence? And the evidence will change over time, but is there a better evidence answer, or what are the best ways to help? And I'm using these early years examples in [00:22:00] primary because we know in the evidence, if you don't solve it, then you cannot solve it later on.

Yeah, right. You cannot solve it later on. You can't expect 7, you're at 7, 8, 9 teachers to be doing pull out intervention around reading at a grade 3 level and be teaching the content. It just creates unbelievable challenges. So, yeah, I just kind of being a bit provocative here, but I just think. You can't be serious about closing the gap unless you define the problems to be solved.

And once you solve the problems, if you are someone who says you care about evidence, which is just what are the best bets we think we have. Yeah. I'm not talking about prescribed teaching. I'm talking about strategies and approaches that can be adaptively, um, uh, adjusted to context. Uh, I don't think you'll close a gap unless you actually have an upfront conversation about whether or not you think there is a more effective way of securing those kind of foundational

pathways to learning for every, every one of your [00:23:00] young people, and particularly those that you care about most in your discourse, which is those that are most impacted by socioeconomic disadvantage.

What you're, what you're saying there, um, reminded me of the conversation we had a while back with Vivianne Robinson around her reduced change to increase improvement and her engage and bypass model and that idea of really deeply understanding the challenge, the problem, the issue and spending time exploring what that theory of action.

Is so that you are going with the best bet. But also, as you say, being able to come back and review the impact of that and change your theory if that one wasn't working. If you needed something else. And that's the scientific method at play. You know, anyone who thinks, oh, Simon's saying we should prescribe to teachers pragmatists.

Who first don't just give lip service to evidence, but say, maybe there is really strong findings [00:24:00] here around the highest likelihood about how to support the students that we say we care about most well, let's then as Vivian would say, go and understand what are the prevailing beliefs that are sustaining the current approach.

Let's not do any quick fixes. Let's come to understand the school level causes of the challenges that we face. Not at the system level, you need the schools to do that problem analysis and then the system or the local authority or the RICs I think should be enablers of saying, well, as we, as you at the school level have really come to a rigorous understanding of the school level challenges you want to solve, we can be partners with you in surfacing.

The best available evidence examples and tools, which then you're going to have to go on an adaptive journey to work out how to make it work in your context. Yeah, you talked there about the 3rd element being that idea of sustainability, which of course takes us back to, you know, that. That [00:25:00] episode that has been so popular, um, and I suppose I want to weave into something I know you've been exploring and sharing as well around the pruning principle.

Um, because I guess our tendency is often to layer things on to add more to, to create more things that we need to do. Um, how does the pruning principle because we've come to love you and know you for. giving us really tangible, practical ways of doing this stuff and making it kind of embodying, I guess, the pruning principle help us in that space?

Well, thanks for raising it. This is a new area of research and development for me. And it really comes from realizing that we're in what I'm calling the additive trap in educational change, where the default for head teachers, for Local authority leaders in regions, nationally, if we haven't closed the gap, or if [00:26:00] we really care about making a difference.

The default is we must add something in addition, and so there's a default to say, Well, what we're currently doing isn't isn't sufficient. And so somehow, if we care, we'll do something additional and you see this in all sorts of ways. We think about the funniest example. I see what people say. Oh, we've got to really care about teacher well being.

So, yeah, I agree. And then they say, so we're having teacher well being week. So what we're doing is we're adding a breakfast. So all the teachers have got to come in at 7 30 on Tuesday for the well being week. And tomorrow we expect them at 8 o'clock for Pilates. Because we really care. Now that's a kind of jovial answer, but I see it turn up all around the world.

Yeah. We care about a problem. What do we do about the problem? We've got to, we've got to do something. We've got to add something. So it's this tendency towards additive thinking. And what happens over time, you get these sedimentary layers building up and building up and building up. And what's really strange is people somehow fall into the trap of this next little thing.

This next thing is all that was missing to move across. So, you know, you'll [00:27:00] see this in policy where people say, Oh, what we're going to do is we're going to provide, um, uh, one day a week instructional coach for every school in mathematics. Oh, great. Love this. Okay. So all of our Scottish teachers, for example, are already teaching mathematics.

We all agree on that. Yeah, we've already got these resources. We've got this assessment and this is all happening every week. And they're talking about it around the data and their PLCs, all their teams. And then what make you think that the one day a week person coming inside who doesn't necessarily have a coffee cup in that comment, like Tell me the theory about why that's the final thing that's going to take us into the next level of impact.

And I'm, I'm not saying at all that instructional coaching, in addition of that, wouldn't be an evidence informed approach, but this idea of we'll just add that, and then we'll just add that, and then we'll just add that, and no one starts to say, well, what about all the things we're already doing? Why aren't we already achieving what we hope through that?

And what would make us think like this? So we get into this additive trap at all different levels. And I've been trying to work out what do we do about it? [00:28:00] Because... COVID gave us a pause, but no one did any pruning. So, what happened is what we're now experiencing is everything that we used to have to do back, plus a whole bunch of other things due to some of the growing complexity of the challenges we face in this kind of post crisis, I won't say post crisis, it's still very much with us, but in this post crisis period, and then people are saying, we really, really care, we've got to close the gap, we've got, the gap's got, you know, larger, so we need to do more and more.

So I've been trying to think about what do we do and so number one, I just want to say that, um, we can't carry on at this rate and that we're going to end up like a computer that has too many apps on it, too many tabs open, but we can't risk turning it off because we're not really, you know, we don't really trust that the shutdown is going to result in everything else reloading again.

And I talked to school leaders about this and they would say, yeah, yeah, my computer's like that. I'm just hoping I can't afford to turn it [00:29:00] off yet. And I feel like that's how our schools and our and our regions are at the moment. So I've been trying to work out what is a really positive frame, a conceptual frame and a set of tools we could use, Sarah, that could help us engage in the work of pairing back.

And. We all know that we want less like we all know that we want a state of calm, but we don't actually often have processes that we can do collectively to get us to that state of less or calm. And so, for me, the notion of pruning has emerged as a really Helpful frame because pruning is a natural process that we engage in within living organisms and ecosystems, I should say, and we do it in this artful kind of combination of subtraction and preservation.

We don't do it because, oh, this just, just totally failed. We don't do it because we've run out of funding. No, we prune because we need to [00:30:00] redirect limited resources and energy to the most profitable goods. We often prune things that are themselves going well, and this is important. Yeah. You need to prune things that are going well to re stimulate growth and rejuvenation.

And sometimes you just need to prune to kind of fit out, open up a bit more airflow and get greater coherence. And so, Sarah, I found this a concept that's just resonated really, really quickly in all the networks and the partners that we have as a team. Because people are saying, you know what, this is a term we enjoy using.

Hey, we need to engage in prune. So we talk about we need pruning season before planting season. Every school improvement plan should start with a box of the things that we're going to stop doing or cut back or refine, and that some of the strategies in your school improvements should be subtractive strategies.

Why do we always think the school improvement plan should only have additional strategies? It's also something that we can [00:31:00] do collectively, uh, where we're trying to bring things back under capacity. And we do this, um, sometimes because subtraction is a good answer in and of itself. So we might say, if we were to improve attendance, or improve mathematics, or improve behavior, how could we do that only through subtractive answers?

Sometimes teams just don't tell you, and then they wait, and they start to generate. Well, we could do this, we could do this, and that would reduce the pressure on this, that could be interesting. Or we say the new order of order of operations in school improvement is subtraction before addition. And that idea of anytime you say, we've just got to do this.

Okay, where are we going to find that margin? Where are we going to find that bandwidth? We must be willing to cut back. I love that idea of embedding it in the improvement planning process or your improvement plan document even so that, as you say, it becomes a way of doing and a way of being, [00:32:00] um, because it is really easy to just keep adding in.

That's what the improvement plans usually are. So to have that clearly stated, I guess it builds, as you say, that kind of rhythm and process. building the processes that enable you to, to do that as part of your, as part of your work. Yeah, that's well said. And I'd say, well, why don't we prune? Part of it is we just haven't had a language that really resonates.

Um, secondly, we don't have rhythms and seasons for it. Yeah. So if I say to people, when's planning season? They'll be like, oh yeah, so when's school review season? Oh, it happens only every three years. And it happens around, oh, okay. When is pruning? Oh, what? So they don't have a concept? That resonates that they can use with each other.

Secondly, they don't have a seasonal rhythm about when we do it. Thirdly, they don't have a set of tools. So, when we go about pruning, how do we do that? How do we examine, look at [00:33:00] a tree, look at the orchard and say, where are things at? What's creating impact? What isn't? Then how do we prioritize? And then how do we actually make the cut?

And then how do we, um, unify the bits that are left and then step away and nurture? What often happens after pruning is people just fill the space straight away. No, no, no, you prune now, let it, let it come back, nurture what's there, uh, and allow it to, to, to grow in a more natural way. So I'm exploring with this idea and it's definitely resonating.

I do think there should be pruning at least a month out from planning, uh, or it should be the first phase of planning. I think there needs to be a box at the front end about things that will be paused, taken away, um, in order to create space to do the new work. I think some strategies themselves should just be subtractive strategies.

Uh, we think we can make this outcome better by taking away this. And then, um, bit by bit normalize it so we don't have to do a one [00:34:00] off big prune that's kind of heartbreaking and we want to play, you know, some sad music in the background. It's like, oh, no, this is just something we're always doing every couple of terms printing back.

And this is part of our work as leaders in organic ecosystems. Yeah. And I think there's, I'm hearing sort of two elements, there's the subtraction and also the pruning as well. And I guess sometimes what happens is we fall into the language of what do we need to stop doing? But actually just stopping something is too, it's too hard, it's too big, it's too much.

Whereas perhaps this idea of pruning allows us to... Either do that gradually over time or to shape it in different ways. And maybe it doesn't need to be stopped altogether, but actually we can, yeah, prune in order to allow it to grow in a slightly different way and I, you know, I've been an advocate of sort of Jim Collins is what's yours.

Stop doing list. And I definitely [00:35:00] think at the individual pruning level, that can be useful. You look at your own. We do this and we look at our own, you know, workflow calendars over the last two months. And we think about lower impact and lower leverage work and what we might need to prune. But again, even telling people what meetings can we get rid of is hard.

But if I say, could we prune meetings by 25 percent in length? Most people go, Ooh, am I allowed to? Yeah. So let's take all the one hour meetings. Okay. Let's make them 45 minutes. And then everyone's got 15 minute processing time. But think, Oh, okay. So that's a much easier yes to people. Or if we sort of said, look, do we need to dump this whole professional learning approach?

No, but could we print it back? Like we really getting three hours of benefit that what would it look like if we did it in a one hour? What would it look like if we took the six questions and made them four questions? What would it look like if, and we're just exploring and exploring and thinking. And I do think as you're saying, it's a matter of degree.

Of the extent to which you prune, whether, you know, are the language and, you know, there's been a lot of [00:36:00] language brought across in implementation science about de implementation and, um, you know, I myself have steeped in that literature and, and, and are really interested. What I find, though, it's a process, it's a little colder, a little bit more sterile, and it's normally deployed on things that really need to go, you know, this, we need to, this reporting process just isn't working or, you know, this approach to early use literacy is not based on the evidence, and it needs to go, and we need to systematically do that, but it's not something you sort of One, two, um, speak to the group of teachers.

Hey, what are we going to do this? What are we going to? And I found the language of pruning. And because human teachers are so, uh, connected to organic metaphors. Yeah. Um, they really love the notion and they're more than happy. And sometimes I want to take out the chainsaw. Sure. And they want to cut off the dead, the damage and the problematic.

Other times they take out the loppers and they want to take off a few branches and sometimes they've just got the sick of tears and they're just making some adjustments and it's an empowerment around, [00:37:00] okay, let's just pull it back. Let's just pull it back. Know that growth will keep happening. Uh, and I think it's a process that can happen at all levels.

Hmm. Do you notice anything around? areas in which we're more willing to prune and less willing to prune. So I'm thinking that maybe, um, if it's something we've come up with, or we feel we have a sense of ownership of, we might feel more reluctant to prune than if we feel it's imposed by others. That's like the first thing, top of the list, we could subtract that easy enough, but I'll just take a tiny bit off here.

Cause I like that thing. Do you get any sense of that coming through? Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think everyone listening can sort of play that human logic out. Um, I think early on, it's always easier to prune closer to you in the sense of I would normally say. Um, prune originally in your own tasks and responsibilities in your own calendar, uh, in your own meetings.

Everyone's happy to prune meetings, by the way, Sarah, they're always, they love that idea. [00:38:00] Yeah, and then as you move to other bits, I think you, you put it inside here. So when we're talking about projects, they're often willing to, aren't wary of pruning something they've put a lot of effort in and here's where they fall for what we all do assume is the sunk cost fallacy.

Which is this idea? Well, I've already spent this much time and this much public money. And this, you know, this professional time on this work, it's not really working. I actually, you know, I really think it needs to be cut back or it needs to be removed. But look, I've already put this much time into it. So I should just put a little bit more in.

So we've got to be aware of some of those cognitive heuristics. So I definitely think. That, um, that sunk cost fallacy where we feel a bit guilty or a bit bad for using, you know, budget and time and energy. And we feel like, well, I've already put this much of my own time into it. I'll just keep going. We have to be aware of that.

And I can say, no, no, you spent that money and that time to learn that this isn't a good fit for your school or your role. So, um, thank you so much for doing what you were saying before that experiment, that [00:39:00] learning, uh, now look at the evidence and make an adjustment and your job is to follow the evidence and to adjust, uh, not to blindly just keep going.

So sometimes it's about that. Uh, sometimes it's, we're not very good at looking for evidence and we fall for confirmation bias where we look for evidence that confirms what we really wish to be true, or we fall for an anecdotal. Fallacy where people tell a story about how good it is in the year seven classroom and this teacher's amazing and somehow try to generalize from that one case towards, um, some sort of justification of the whole school wide program.

And so there are cognitive errors that we make for ourselves. I think at other times we're wary in long term teams to suggest pruning someone else's work. You know, if you were working with me, Sarah, you might think, well, that's Simon's baby, that thing, and he's put a lot of effort in. And so this is why I think we need to depersonalize it somewhat by having regular rhythms.

Clear tools, ways of gathering [00:40:00] evidence and thinking about it, and then having broad and open, transparent conversations about it. And of course, you don't start off when you're learning how to prune. Going after, I think that person should start this. Start with self, move to team. Move to reflection on self leaders reflecting on some of the truth, the trimming and pruning they're doing

in their own work and then trying to model that and then create the safety that as Vivian would say, you mentioned, she talks about perseverance in hard work, but it's perseverance around the goal, not.

Sticking to the strategy. And so one of the reason we prune is that we've got this real sense of the perseverance around the goal, but we're not wedded to the original strategy. And so we're not necessarily pruning because we're giving up on the goal for young people. We're just suggesting either this strategy is ineffective and it's going to go or it's being quite effective, but it's sort of getting a bit wooded.

Understand that's not, you know, we've been doing PLCs this way for quite a while. When we're getting less yield. And so we actually need to cut it back because it's going well. So it keeps going [00:41:00] well. That's another really lovely thing about pruning that it doesn't fit other sort of de implementation framing.

I think pruning just gives a sense that we wouldn't de implement something going well, but you would definitely have to prune something that's bearing fruit. Yes. And that gives a broader set of categories that we prune good things to ensure that we sustain the yield, the quality of the fruit or the flowers or however you want to play out the metaphor.

And that's a nice thing as well, I think Sarah, to actually get people to practice pruning on things that are going well to stimulate more growth. And then over time, bring them across to things that are dead, damaged, diseased or problematic. Yeah, I get a real sense in the difference between that language around the research of de implementation and what you're describing of pruning.

The thing that feels different to me is that it comes with it, it brings energy with it. That's the sense that I get, that pruning is a real energizer. And it's creating energy within the system or within the individual as well, which may be the language of de implementation doesn't convey in the same way.[00:42:00]

Yeah, and please, you know, I'm grateful to colleagues who have brought that across from the implementation science literature. I hear it a lot now in the work that we do on pruning, where people are saying, Oh, this is like the implementation. We do a bit of that. We like that work. And I think that's been a really important piece.

I suppose, um, I'm, I'm always, uh, you were kind before, but I'm always looking for simple things that cut through with the majority that people use back and that they can understand in 5 minutes and start using next week. Yeah. And I found that people's initial response to concepts that I've taught around de implementation were like, oh, that's, that's provocative.

Yeah, we need to de something. But then it also often tended towards things of admitting that something really didn't work and it's got to go. And so, or we've got to de implement because we're kind of out of resources or funding. But pruning isn't about touching the underlying resources. We're not talking [00:43:00] about removing water or nutrients in the soil or sunlight.

We're saying, as you say, like, if we want to redirect that energy around the most fruitful thing, if we want to keep re stimulating and re growing, then we're going to be long term organizations that we must constantly prune. Not as a sake of failure necessarily, not as a sake of like admitting we got something wrong, but in the pursuit of long term structural integrity, in the pursuit of long term vitality, we have to do this artful, um, dance between preservation and subtraction.

And if you think Scottish schools are still going to be Scottish schools in 2030 2050, then clearly pruning is something that's going to be crucial to their ongoing longevity. And their ongoing structural integrity. Like if you let things overgrow and grow in problematic ways, they will collapse under their own weight.

And I think that's a danger for some Scottish schools. Yeah, it's very official as well. When you talk about it, we can all imagine [00:44:00] the idea of seasons because we're very used to those in Scotland. We get all four in one day quite often. So we understand seasons in that sense. So I think, yes, it gives us something very tangible to, to kind of, um, play around with and connect with.

And look, great thinking. I'm not the first person to think about the need to renew. My small contribution here is say, but how do we make it something that. That we look forward to that, that you say that brings energy that focuses on the things we want more in the future, rather than the things that we have to sadly take away.

And I think if you get that language, right, and the energy, right. And then you can imagine Sarah, you know, a head teacher says, Hey, you know, we're coming up to the. The post Christmas season, New Year pruning, and this is a

very light prune this time of year, but we're just tuning in with each other four or five months in, and this week only subtracted answers.

We're doing a pruning jam, we've got a pruning [00:45:00] wall. I would say be careful if you're a new strong minded principal, head teacher coming into a place, they might put you on the wall, so be careful how democratic you make this too early on. Um, but that idea of, hey, it's pruning season, it's pruning week, you know, the week, uh, no additional answers, please, that are not subtractive.

People love that. Oh, it's pruning week. Only subtractive answers. Cool. And then maybe as you head off into April or May, there's a really deep prune where you say, As we prepare for thinking about our next school improvement planning process end of May, early June, as we're thinking about that, and then we'll break for the summer and come back, we really want to do a much deeper prune, a real analysis of the data, and we do that pruning before we do our planning.

And people, people I think will really love that seasonality or subtractive time. Um, can you imagine if right at the heart of, you know, Scottish education or RICs or, um, uh, local authorities, [00:46:00] everyone saying, Hey, just so you know, everyone, we're in pruning week. Uh, we're really open to feedback and thoughts here.

Uh, remember our priority goals of these, and we're going to, in Vivian's language, we're going to persevere with. With personal courage here in the pursuit of those, but in the pursuit of those goals, we're open to some pruning of some of our strategies. So, um, let's talk and it's just, you know, it's an empowerment.

Yeah. Oh, that's another word you always talk about. Hey, you know, it is another word. Pruning would be very empowering, um, particularly if it's not pruning of the aspiration or the dropping of any goals for our young people and system. It's, it's, it's much more being willing to prune in the strategic area, the strategies, the layers, the residual, the kind of, um, layer upon layer of sometimes redundancy you have in Scottish education of great people doing similar things and bumping into each other, making it more confusing for schools to know what the priority is, there would be opportunities to prune and align.[00:47:00]

Yeah, yeah. Simon, thank you once again for an energizing and stimulating conversation. Great to be able to dig into some of your reflections and

experiences of being in Scotland and what you learned while you were, you were here. But also to explore that idea of pruning principle and how I think that can interact with the idea of sustainability.

So, as ever, hugely grateful to you, um, for your time. One last question. Do you have a question or something you would encourage listeners to go away and really think about?

Well, given our conversation in the back half here, Sarah, I would say the question I would ask anything you're grappling with. What if The answer is less.

Brilliant question. Less. Just sit with that. What if the answer is less? You just work it [00:48:00] through, whatever. You're like, it can't be. No, no, I really can't. What if the answer is less? And you start to work it through your own workload and burnout challenges. You work it through in, um, Um, Uh, the dynamics you're having with your team, work it through with the overload in your school improvement.

You work it through with how many times people in the RIC are getting together and you're getting lower attendance rates. I don't know, whatever it is, just, what if the answer is less? And wouldn't it be worth trying that for a couple of months and to see what happens? Yeah. Simon, thank you. We hugely value your time and the ability to have these conversations with you.

So thank you once again. It's my pleasure. Thanks for the friendship, uh, across, uh, long distances. And I must say, uh, I am but a visitor, uh, sometimes digitally and, uh, for a little while for a try of Haggis and visited a couple of schools and conversations with, with, with leaders. But I [00:49:00] really only sampled a very small part of Scottish education and sampled and had conversations with brilliant people from across the country.

But again, just a sample. And so I always say, you know, when I visit, I probably get a whole range of things wrong. But sometimes hearing an outsider, whether they put their finger on something that only an outsider would Probably be allowed to say, um, or whether they say something that really doesn't resonate and you know why it's wrong.

Um, hopefully sometimes the outside visitor helps you see a new, uh, your own system. And, uh, if some of my reflections have done that today, uh, I'll, I'll be, um, happy about that. Uh, but I also acknowledge, uh, I probably got all sorts of things wrong and, uh, be happy to be told so, and come for another visit and learn more.