

Neil C. Cranston and Lisa C. Ehrich (eds.): Australian educational leadership today

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In the contemporary academy there exists an ongoing tension between embracing borderless discourse and paying attention to the local. In their book *Australian educational leadership today*, Neil Cranston and Lisa Ehrich have brought together an extensive group of Australian academics to discuss school leadership within a distinctively Australian context. In doing so, they have created the first Australian survey text of this kind since Colin Evers and Judith Chapman's *Educational Administration: An Australian Perspective* (1995; Allen and Unwin). However, unlike Evers and Chapman, who devote the first half of their book at least to theoretical perspectives in the field (with contributions from Gabriele Lakomski and Colin Evers, Peter Gronn, Richard Bates, Lawrence Angus, Fazal Rizvi and Co.), Cranston and Ehrich's volume takes a far more mainstream, less theoretical approach. Arguably this reflects the direction that discourse in educational leadership, management and administration is taking, as much as anything else. The book itself is structured around four inter-related sections: (i) contexts and challenges facing educational leaders; (ii) leadership issues and approaches; (iii) professional learning and development for leaders; and (iv) leadership in and for successful schools. The editors point out in their preface that the volume should be of interest to undergraduate and postgraduate students, current teachers and leaders, system-level leaders and policy makers. Arguably, such a diverse audience leads to the favouring of a less theoretical discourse.

That being said, the book fills a void in the field of educational leadership nationally, as many scholars have raised concerns regarding the over-reliance on or uncritical adoption of work undertaken overseas, particularly in the US and UK. It is also timely, given recent policy moves at the federal and state/territory level bringing school leadership to the fore in education reform.

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Rather than providing a descriptive summary of each section, I am going to devote what limited space I have to two particularly interesting chapters, before returning to this question of the atheoretical nature of the volume. Karen Starr's opening chapter on confronting leadership challenges is insightful, although the argument is not a new one. What Starr opens up, although this is somewhat underdeveloped, is a fruitful potential discussion around what I would identify as 'public intellectualism' among educational leaders. The loss of voice of Australian school leaders in education policy debates has been picked up on in recent times by a number of authors, nationally, and is of great relevance on an international scale. The means through which this voice has been censored, or even silenced, has utility with many other fields of education research and is, I argue, something that is both timely and needs to be further engaged with. On a closely related topic, Pam Matters' chapter on the formation of leaders provides a novel approach to the currently topical discussion on school leadership preparation and development, especially given the professional standards movement. Whereas mainstream work on the topic is frequently limited to the description of a specific program—or at worst, is an infomercial for a particular program headed up or taught into by the author—such attention to how policy and practice shape the formation of the education profession is infrequently given (although, it is possible to argue, becoming more common) in the educational leadership space. What does stand out though, and this goes to my next point, is that despite focusing on professional formation and the role of policy and practice, there is no mention of social theorists usually associated with such matters, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, or even Stephen Ball. It is this lack of engagement with social theory, despite the argument that leadership is a social, and context-specific practice that limits the scholarly—although not necessarily the pedagogical—impact of the volume.

The under-theorised, or even atheoretical nature of the text arguably says more about educational leadership as an intellectual domain than it does specifically about the editors and contributors. There is a diverse range of perspectives across the 19 chapters but the book is clearly structured around content rather than paradigmatic perspectives. Possibly this says something about the complexity of researching, teaching and publishing in what would most frequently be labelled an 'applied' field.

In this regard, one of the strengths of the volume is that it is written in an accessible style. This opens the audience to school leaders, systemic personnel and undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students. While this enables a broad readership it comes with a drawback. That is, how can it serve those colleagues already working in the academy, or higher degree researchers looking to work at the boundaries of contemporary thought and analysis in the area? However, as highlighted so eloquently in the conclusion, Australian educational leadership scholars traditionally have not engaged too much with one another's work. Much of the Australian research in, and writing on, educational leadership continues in parallel rather than with any sense of engagement—whether in extending, refuting, or taking the discussion into new directions. Therefore, the extensive collection of contributors to the volume and the non-alignment with any one particular theoretical framework serves an implicit, or perhaps explicit, purpose. That is, to bring

Australian educational leadership scholars into conversation with one another. This in itself makes the efforts of the editors worthy of our applause.

In summary, this book makes a significant contribution to the field of educational leadership in Australia. It provides a comprehensive and detailed discussion of school leadership in the Australian context at a particular point in time, and draws on an impressive collection of Australian-based scholars. Additionally, as previously highlighted, this collection is a point of convergence for scholarship in educational leadership in Australia, a foundation on which greater engagement with one another can be built. Over the course of time I envisage that the work will require revised editions to maintain currency. In doing so, I believe that future editions will become a 'must contribute to' for Australian-based scholars, and a 'must read' for those with an interest in educational leadership at any level.

Author Biography

Scott Eacott is currently Senior Lecturer, Convenor of educational leadership programs, and Leader of the Educational Leadership, Management and Administration (ELMA) Research Group at the University of Newcastle, Australia. His research interests and contributions fall into three areas: theorising leadership practice, leadership preparation and development, and re-conceptualising strategy in the educational leadership context. His most recent book, *School Leadership and Strategy in Managerialist Times* is published by Sense Publishers.