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New look leaders or a new look at leadership?

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to take up the challenge of complex social, political and cultural influences, uncertain economic conditions, ever advancing technologies and increasingly diverse student populations. The challenge for educational leadership scholars and practitioners is to figure out what their work as leaders should be in new times. The paper aims to discuss the issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing loosely on the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu, and a continued research agenda, this paper outlines a framework for educational leadership that can be measured, but is not prescriptive.

Findings – The central argument of this paper is that viewing leadership as a complex social activity that is not directly observable has the prospect of moving scholarship and understanding beyond the superficial measurement of what is directly observed to a thick description of educational leadership.

Originality/value – The framework presented privileges the philosophical and scholarly elements of being an educational leader over the administrative and managerial. It is argued that this is what is needed in the leadership of educational institutions for the future and a framework for preparing the next generation of leaders.

Keywords Education, Leadership, Leadership development, Management philosophy

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

As we approach the conclusion of the first decade of the new millennium educational leadership, at all levels, is arguably at its most critical junction. The movement toward a standards based agenda which attempts to define, breakdown and measure leadership as though it is something out there that can be captured, combined with the performative measures of education pose a significant threat to the leadership of educational institutions. The pioneers and field leading scholars of educational leadership have been deliberately polemic in their attempts to push knowledge claims about leadership, management and administration in educational institutions. They have sought to establish new directions and into collisions with other kinds of knowledge, theory and practice. The current task is to continue this work and take up the challenge of complex social, political and cultural influences, uncertain economic conditions, ever advancing technologies and increasing diverse student populations. In short, our challenge as educational leadership scholars and practitioners is to figure out what our work as leaders should be in new times.

While the literature on educational leadership is far too extensive to review here, for the purpose of re-conceptualising school leadership for the twenty-first century, it is



important to understand the current state of play is a result of historical struggles between social, cultural and political groups. As such, any proposal for a “future” perspective needs to engage with and critically reflect on the historical events that have shaped our understanding, yet simultaneously seek to shape the future with innovative alternatives. This enables the conception of educational leadership as something more than the traditional administration of curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices devised elsewhere to a form of school leadership that is based on educational rather than administrative principles (Bates, 2006a).

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As a field of inquiry educational leadership has a reputation for being deeply conservative, but conservatism is not the path to more sophisticated knowledge. Gunter (2009) suggests that current fads in educational leadership are so intellectually and professionally impoverished that she concludes that no, or at least minimal, real scholarship exists in the field. We need to ask serious questions about the nature of work in the field. English (2006) argues that advancing the field requires deep criticism of it, philosophically, logically and empirically. He suggests that we do not search for pillars or core values but the contested grounds on which educational leadership is defined moment to moment. This is not about creating foundational knowledge for the field but “a dynamic, fluid, and connected ground of practice” (English, 2006, p. 468).

Many believe the key mission of professional schools is to develop knowledge that can be translated into skills that advance the practice of professionals. This professionalisation of knowledge, highly evident in the literature of the field, has been a barrier to the effective linking of knowledge claims and action. In an attempt to address the theory-practice nexus, many researchers have sought to produce work which will help educational leaders in their daily activities. The preoccupation with the “real” work of educational leaders, demonstrating ties to functionalism, positions scholarship on leadership in education as a problem solving tool for managers in educational institutions. In doing so, it does not emphasise the many subtle ways in which cultural, social, historical and political forces, both individual and organisational influence practice.

Rather than derive a sophisticated conceptualisation of practice from social theorists such as Bourdieu (1977) or Foucault (1977), the research agenda of educational leadership has utilised a narrow and under-theorised view of practice. It has limited itself to “what leaders do”, restricted to the bodily movements of actors and the functional implications of such actions. This fascination with the micro-level practices of educational leaders as they go about leading schools goes part of the way to explaining why there exist so many different models which basically are arguing for the same linear-rational decision making process, inspired by modernistic enlightenment based progress. This sociologically naïve and under-developed conceptualisation of leadership practice fails to engage with the discursive nature of social interactions.

In this context, there exists a need for scholarship to move beyond modernistic thinking and embrace the complexity of ever shifting cultural, social, historical and political relationships. That is, the obsession with rationality and the appealing to common sense needs to be robustly challenged through serious and concerted study, something that is all too infrequent in the field currently. Appropriating Smyth’s (1998) use of an earlier notion of “enuncative space” in the specific domain of educational leadership, the framework described later in this paper provides an alternative. It

creates an opportunity to articulate what it means to be a school leader; to tangle with the social issues beyond the technicalities of managing an institution; and having some agency within which to question and challenge the wider structures surrounding educational leadership.

Our place in time

Educational leadership has, uncontested I might add, become part of the “managerialist” project of public administration, relinquishing its commitment to liberal social democratic principles in order to get aboard the newly marketised, competitive bandwagon of the self-managing school. What is most troubling about this is that educational leaders have been largely complicit in this demise and foregoing their role as public intellectuals (Gunter and Fitzgerald, 2008). The explicit linking of education to economic sustainability and quality of life makes educational leadership knowledge not only about the work of academics but about the socio-cultural norms of progress and change that are part of the political nature of contemporary life. Such power struggles are evident in government policy initiatives and emerging/established social movements. Many of the issues of the field are problematic, although they are infrequently discussed in such manner. Education is however, a political activity. Educational leaders, at all levels and sectors, need to perceive themselves as political players in a large ideological struggle for power and domination within the larger social order (English, 2006). Substantial struggles exist on matters such as the purpose of schooling (Callahan, 1962; Molnar, 2006), competitive advantage and market ideology in education (Ball, 1993; Bell, 2002), the uncritical adoption of business rhetoric (Kelly, 2005), the participation of stakeholders (Anderson, 1998), evidence based practice (English, 2003; Kowalski, 2009), the recruitment and preparation of future leaders (Gronn, 2003), the teaching of educational administration in universities (Bates and Eacott, 2008), and arguably most significantly, school effectiveness and school improvement (Mulford *et al.*, 2007). The underlying assumption of this body of work is the desire to improve school performance, usually measured by student outcomes. However, Bourdieu (1988) argues that documents which begin with official statistics are objectified products which represent little more than fabrications of institutional performance. A narrow focus on such products and performance measures fails to engage with the underlying power struggles that shape and define such documents and the performance that they describe.

Educational leadership is a field maintained by stories which legitimise existing policies/practice and conceals the dominance of particular groups, such as the state (Lumby and English, 2009). Scholarship provides a sense of certainty in uncertain contexts through the simplification of complex social activity to enable a more limited range of choices so that the reality leadership is not overwhelming. The role of educational leader, officially determined by role statements and legislation, is far greater defined by role expectations. A crucial fact is that the office of an educational leader is situated in the social space of education that owes a number of its most distinctive properties to the set of relationships it holds with other institutional based personnel, other institutions and society at large. This is why Bates (2006b) strongly argues for the consideration of the educational leader/society relationship in the scholarship of the field. That is, it is impossible to extract the role of leader from this

social space. Consequently, the modernistic research program of educational administration, most strongly linked to the Theory Movement, but still evident in the scientific stream of research in the field, is fundamentally flawed. Any attempt to objectify and/or de-contextualise leadership practice destroys that which it attempts to explain.

Leadership welcomes complexity and ambiguity and cannot be represented in a neat framework. This is a central underlying assumption in Samier and Bates' (2006) critic of authors who claim to have the "seven simple steps reforming education" or use snappy acronyms or mnemonic devices to sell their latest fads or "adjectival" leadership. In addition, the vast majority of leadership preparation programmes continue to advocate for a rationalisation of leadership practice (Samier, 2002). However, even when practices appear as rational to an observer who may possess all of the necessary information to reconstruct them as such, rational choice is not its principle (Bourdieu, 1988). The required conditions for rational calculations are almost never obtained in practice where time is scarce, information is limited, alternatives are ill-defined, and practical matters pressing. The educational leader, or "educational strategist" (Eacott, 2010) demonstrates a practical sense or "feel for the game" by understanding that the context of their practice is constructed rather than fixed. Therefore, to understand the context in which they work, leaders must have an understanding of the collective unconscious assumptions of their work, and the value placed on their work by a diverse range of societal forces and power relations. This involves leaders using and interpreting multiple sources of information, evaluating alternative points of view, and developing a reasoned and defensible argument for practice. This requires a critical reflexivity to distinguish the persuasive educational assumptions which inform educational leadership.

This is however very difficult to extract. Bourdieu (1977) discusses this in relation to the role of and expectations of researchers that require informants to bring to the state of explicitness, for the purpose of transmission, the unconscious schemes of his practice. What frequently occurs is a tendency to draw attention to the most remarkable moves, rather than to the principles from which these moves were enacted. Similarly, Smyth (1998) discusses the major methodological struggles that emerge when we (researchers) seek interpretations of lived experience from informants and the practical and ethical levels involved in making sense of what is told to us, including what gets included, excluded, silenced or marginalised. Simplistic and naïve research questions fail to adequately engage with the complexity of the socio-political context of educational leadership. Theoretically placing our work in this space however, enables us to advance our (I use this in the collective sense of the field) work by constructing a persuasive discourse of grassroots educational leadership that contests the hegemonic bureaucratic managerialism of the discourse.

Any leadership practice must be recognised as a given moment representing a point in time, the product of historical and contemporary struggles and developments. An action represents a decision integrating both the conscious and unconscious, based on timing. Bourdieu (1977) suggests that failing to acknowledge the timing of actions is to abolish strategies itself. He adds that many mistakes would be avoided if every agent were to bear in mind that the social structures he or she engages with at any given time are the products of historical development and historical struggles that must be

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analysed if one is to avoid naturalising these structures (Bourdieu, 1988). This requires an interpretation of the “state of play”, working at the meso- (greater society), macro- (systemic, organisational), and micro-level (interpersonal). This engagement with historical developments enables a future orientation.

Yesterday, today and tomorrow

The very notion of “future leadership” is somewhat problematic. The idea of future leadership, by definition, implies that the leadership of tomorrow is different from the leadership of today. If we extend this, then even if we are to define the leadership of tomorrow, it will again become redundant the following day. While this may appear somewhat simplistic, the temporal issues are significant. Many have discussed the ahistorical approach of discourse on educational leadership. Yet few, if any, challenge the notion of future leadership. In fact, many make their keep selling the latest fad of future (or “futures” implying more than one) focus.

There is a subtle difference to be considered in relation to a future focus. First, there is the practical aiming of a future-to-be inscribed in the present. This perspective is primarily concerned with improvements in efficiency and doing the day-to-day operations of the organisation better. The second is positioning the future as such, as something that can or cannot happen. This perspective focuses on challenging incumbent practices and promoting innovation by rethinking the purposes and processes of practices in the aim of being a field leading institution. Failing to understand this distinction is a critical error in understanding the timing of strategies and therefore leadership. While the former gives attention to playing the game better, the latter is about changing the game. It serves as the key distinction between trying to do the current better and rethinking the entire operation.

Basically, any attempt to define the essentials of educational leadership in the mastery of ever changing repertoire of skills under conditions of risk, uncertainty and competition is highly problematic (Bates, 2006a). The distinction provided by Lakatos (1999) between regressive and progressive research programs is useful here. A regressive program is one where the methods and content of the field of inquiry is always at least one step behind the practice. This is common in leadership and management research as the very nature of leadership is to be at the cutting edge of knowledge and practice. On the other hand, a progressive program is one where methods of knowing are ahead of practice. Educational leadership has been committed to a regressive research program and this is a significant issue in the preparation of school leaders. If we acknowledge that the contemporary contexts and practices of school leaders are the result of ongoing ideological struggles for power and dominance, then educational leadership preparation becomes about being involved as a critically reflexive practitioner, not just a passenger or drone.

Michael Oakeshott (1967, p. 159) suggested that the fundamental issue of education was to “join the conversation of mankind”. Bates (2006a) appropriates this to argue that “to become educated is to join the conversation of the world . . . for it is only within such conversation that curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation – those three fundamental message systems of schools – can be properly understood” (Bates, 2006a, p. 283). If this is what we aspire to for educational leadership, then there is a strong rationale for English’s push for a “knowledge dynamic” as opposed to a “knowledge base”. The preparation of aspiring leaders and the professional

development of current leaders in such case is an initiation into identity construction and not the acquisition of managerial and technical knowledge and skills or a generic set of values (Lumby and English, 2009).

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A framework for educational leadership

While it is too early to present empirical data from the project from which this paper is based, it is possible to outline the framework for educational leadership that informs the work. This framework is built on the assumptions expressed previously and is designed to allow for the investigation of leadership practice without the need to prescribe any one way to go about the role. The framework, which cannot be represented in a simplistic two-dimensional figure, is supplemented with a description of each dimension within a Leadership Practice Coding Manual.

Within this framework, educational leadership involves leaders demonstrating an understanding that the context of their practice is constructed rather than fixed. Therefore, to understand the context in which they work, leaders must have an understanding of the collective unconscious (or cultural/educational) assumptions of their work, and the value placed on their work by a diverse range of societal forces (e.g. social) and power relations (e.g. political).

In education, this involves leaders using and interpreting multiple sources of information, evaluating alternative points of view, and developing a reasoned and defensive argument for practice. A high level of understanding this space involves the leader acknowledging the many social forces which act on practice. It requires critical reflection to distinguish the persuasive educational assumptions which inform educational leadership, an understanding of the value placed on educational institutions and the educative process through social exchanges with a diverse range of people, and an explicit awareness of the power relations between different social groups both within and beyond the organisation.

Additionally, leadership recognises that any given moment represents a point in time, the product of historical and contemporary struggles and developments. Any action represents a decision integrating both the conscious and the unconscious, based on timing. This requires an interpretation of the “state of play”, working at the meso-(greater society), macro- (systemic, organisational), and micro-level (interpersonal). Leadership must critically engage with the historical developments of any initiative and focus on doing the right things at the right time. It is also equally important to know when to abandon a course of action.

While educational institutions often operate within large bureaucratic structures and rigid regulatory frameworks, leaders are able to move beyond the blind conformity to rules and enact leadership strategies which actively promote and support innovation. This involves moving debates from the day-to-day operations of the school towards a desired future state. As such, it requires leadership to focus on the future of the organisation through challenging incumbent practices and promoting innovation in the aim of being a field leading institution. In this case, the leader is focused on fundamentally changing the nature of the game.

In the context of leadership preparation, this framework poses some fundamental questions. It makes it difficult to hang a program on a single coherent idea. In fact, the quest for coherence in a program goes against what the framework argues for. A leadership preparation program based on this framework would be characterised by

internal contradictions, antinomies, circularities and contested intersections. The program would reflect the dynamic and contested terrain of the field in which it is embedded.

How might we prepare for it?

Many education systems have implemented leadership preparation programs such as the National Professional Qualification for head teachers in the England, professional standards and/or higher degree requirements in the USA. However, these programs are often more about systemic socialisation and normalising the work of leaders than engaging with broader socio-cultural and political matters. While other countries may not yet have such programs in place the scholarship and practice of educational leadership is arguably at its most critical juncture if as a field we are to remain about more than just “operational and technical matters” (Thomson, 2001).

Gronn (2008) stresses that the contemporary market ideology of higher education reduces program offerings to the lowest common denominator, in this case, the vacuous concept of educational “change”. Past criticism by Gunter (1997) laments the “management by ring binders” approach of leadership preparation and development. Smyth (2008) draws attention to the loss of scholars from educational leadership (to more interesting and intellectually rewarding areas) and the bias towards academics focused on getting things done, particularly things handed from above. Bates (2006a) describes this phenomenon as the abandonment of studying schools as social organisms and the further expansion of what Callahan (1962) labelled “the cult of efficiency”. Bates believes that there is always an educational leadership – society relationship which partly defines what it means to be an educational leader.

Missing from traditional leadership preparation programs is the critical engagement with social space in which educational leadership is embedded. The vast majority of programs are more about the “acquisition of sets of rational-technical skills required to manage schools and an acceptance of national aims and values as ritually presented” (Lumby and English, 2009, p. 108). Perhaps the most obvious change prompted by considering a multi-dimensional concept of individual and group identity is that leadership is less concerned with the acquisition of techniques to be applied in predictable and static organisational intersections and more concerned with understanding that it is a dynamic, dialectical connection between leaders and followers who may at times exchange roles. But where does this preparation take place? English (2006) argues that the first step must be to reconceptualise the notion of a singular, stable, standardised knowledge base and to replace it with a more accurate and dynamic perspective consistent with growing and vibrant fields of theories and practices.

Professional standards and leadership capability frameworks have opened the back door for leadership preparation to be removed from theoretically informed research. If we remove any privileging for advancing the field by research active academics, preparation sites can be created by anybody with a pulse. Significantly, leadership preparation is reduced to training. At this historically significant point in time, education is calling for a new type of leader, not one seeking to maintain the status quo, rather someone who challenges contemporary practices and asks the big questions of education. Until school leaders and educational leadership scholars return to the fore in the political game that is educational leadership, the defining and re-defining of the boundaries of the field will continue to be set by those beyond education.

Conclusion

The marginalisation of critical and/or theoretical rich scholarship in educational leadership remains a considerable issue. This paper follows Lumby and English (2009) by not arguing for the removal of managerial knowledge from leadership preparation but rather de-centring management and making it an adjunct to the more critical endeavours of leading education. The purpose of this paper is not to merely interpret the contemporary context of leadership preparation for the twenty-first century, but to change our collective thoughts on the matter. Change them in the first instance by influencing the ways in which both scholars and practitioners of school leadership think about preparation for the role. As it is only by changing the ways of world making, that change can occur (Bourdieu, 1989). So what are we to say about educational leadership for the future and the preparation of educational leaders?

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- (1) The scholarship of educational leadership, Grace (1995, p. 5) argues for an approach to scholarship intent to:

... place the study and analysis of school leadership in its socio-historical context and in the context of the moral and political economy of schooling. We need to have studies of school leadership that are historically located and which are brought into a relationship with the wider political, cultural, economic and ideological movements in society.

As noted by Smyth (2008), it is important that scholarship in the field is not reduced to how to get things done. As a field, it is imperative that we remain committed to a quality of intellectual work that does not marginalise alternatives, embraces diversity and contestation and rejects the naïve adjectival leadership sweeping the globe in the quest for deeper understanding of school leadership as a social practice.

- (2) The teaching of educational leadership must move beyond the “one right method” of leadership preparation and not fear the contestation of knowledge claims. A program based on contestation challenges the homogenising effects of market ideology and seeks not to conform but to lead, assuming that which it espouses. Leading involves risk taking and leadership by definition is about riding the crest of the wave, an innovative and dynamic program that forces students to critically debate and challenge the underlying assumptions of practice and policy will engage, assist in identity construction, and introduce participants to the conversation of the world.
- (3) The practice of educational leadership is not the conduit for governments to administer control over society. School leaders need to spend the majority of their time working on what is most important in their organisation. That is, the pedagogical, curricular and evaluation practices of the school. Practice needs to challenge assumptions and incumbent ways of doing and critically debate why and how things are done. School leaders need to ask the tough questions. Future generations of children will not remember the school leaders and teachers who got the greatest improvement in value added data, but they will recall those who inspired them to think and engage in the conversation of the world. This should be the legacy of a school leader, not the official data used to produce official reports or construct league tables.

Fundamentally, educational leadership for the future and the preparation of future leaders depends on connecting the conversation of school leadership with the conversation of the world, a conversation that simply cannot ignore the socio-political and historical struggle for power and ideological supremacy. Not to mention, the identity construction of the education, the educator, and school leader. Such an alternative approach avoids educational leaders becoming consumed by the latest vacuous, de-contextualised or under-problematized ideas such as “educational change”, “participative decision making”, or the latest “adjectival” leadership devoid of any sense of history or context and allow the development of a culturally sensitive and socially intelligent approach to school, student and community leadership.

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