



# “Leadership” and the social: time, space and the epistemic

“Leadership” and the social

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – “Leadership” is arguably the central concept of interest in contemporary scholarship on educational administration. Within this scholarly discourse, there is an explicit assumption that leadership is a “real” phenomenon that is not only important, but also necessary for educational institutions. However, few scholars engage with issues surrounding the confusion of a socially constructed label with an assumed empirical reality. The aim of this paper is to mobilise critical social theory and to discuss the concept of leadership in educational administration.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To engage with this matter, the author mobilises critical social theory, specifically that of Pierre Bourdieu, to discuss the concept of leadership in educational administration.

**Findings** – In doing so, the author argues that: “leadership” is a label taken from common language into scholarly discourse for the purpose of solving a perceived problem in the empirical world, and that this is made possible through a particular constitution of the social space.

**Research limitations/implications** – The central argument of this paper challenges the hegemonic position of educational leadership scholarship, particularly its mobilisation of context, both time and space.

**Originality/value** – Unlike scholarship focused on developing an explanation of what constitutes leadership, this paper engages with the abstraction of “leadership” as an educational administration concept.

**Keywords** Leadership, Bourdieu, Educational administration, Epistemic, Temporality, Education

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

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## Introduction

Leadership is arguably the most commonly used concept or label in contemporary research in, and the practice of, educational administration. However, in the broader organisational research discourse, while central, the scholarly value of leadership as a concept remains contested (O’Reilly *et al.*, 2010), with Podolny *et al.* (2005) citing that leadership is actually marginalised by dominant organisational paradigms and perspectives. There remains ambiguity surrounding the very definition of leadership (see Bedeian and Hunt, 2006), and advocates of leadership and its effect on organisational performance frequently, if not always, constitute leadership through titles/roles in organisational hierarchy. Notably, over the past 50 years there has been a shift from leadership as meaning making to the significance of leadership for economic performance. This shift results in “leadership” becoming an attribute of organisations demonstrating a “high level” of performance. Embodying generative functionalist assumptions, such accounts are often limited to detailing personal/group traits, behaviours or actions correlated with higher levels of performance. In doing so, as with



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Barnard (1968), there is a privileging of communication acts, with other activities being given the lesser label of “management”, part of what Gronn (2003) labels the canonising of leadership and demonising of management. Additionally, and most significant for education, and specifically educational administration, those who view organisations as heavily constrained, especially from external influences such as large educational bureaucracies, claim that leadership is largely irrelevant and, at best, a social construction (Hannan and Freeman, 1989; Meindl, 1990). This brings Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) to assert that while most people seem to have little doubt that leadership is a “real” phenomenon – not only important but necessary for organisations – few acknowledge problems with confusing a socially constructed label with an assumed empirical reality. It is in this space that this paper makes its contribution to the body of knowledge. That is, this paper engages in a theoretical argument around the mobilisation of the label “leadership” in educational administration discourse. It does not draw upon a specific case study, but given my location I use data drops from the Australian context – this is consistent with the argument of the paper that context matters. The lack of a case study is not to say that there are not implications, for both researchers and practitioners, as a result of the argument. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Challenging the label of “leadership” requires both scholars and practitioners alike to justify their own stance on the topic in the face of criticism. It is arguably the constant critique and justification of ideas, concepts, practices and so on, that reflects a healthy intellectual community.

In this paper I argue that leadership in the context of education is a label of the managerialist project of the state and a historical analysis of the rise of managerialism in public administration and the emergence of leadership as the label of choice (as opposed to the previous labels of administration and management) supports such a claim. As it is, in the educational administration discourse there is a proliferation of types of leadership through an assortment of adjectives, yet minimal critique or problematising of the label of “leadership” itself[1]. It is here where I am drawn to Bourdieu’s (1988/1984) distinction between “real” or empirical objects and those that become known through social analysis, the epistemic. In particular, I explore the relationship that educational administration discourse has with the social space. In doing so, I put forth a critique of “leadership” as an educational administration concept to argue that leadership is an epistemic label applied post-event through the a priori assumption of its very existence. Most significant, however, is that the hegemony of the discourse fails to recognise the epistemic labelling.

To make this argument I focus on academic discourse, or specifically, scholarship on educational leadership, management and administration. As a social scientist, and by virtue, as part of the social scientific community, this paper is intended to be disruptive, an act of political intervention into the hegemonic position held by mainstream educational administration scholarship and a challenge to the seemingly unlimited elasticity of “leadership” as a label. Specifically, this paper contains two key interventions: the first is the claim that leadership is an epistemic, not empirical, concept; and the second related claim is that leadership in education is constituted through a particular relationship with the social space. To lay out these two interventions it is necessary that I first turn to the issue of scholarly education discourse and in particular discourse in educational administration.

### The problematic

In the performative regime that constitutes the enterprise university, education research is arguably at its most critical junction since the establishment of university departments, faculties and/or schools of education. For example, during the recent first iteration of the Excellence for Research in Australia exercise, the Australian equivalent of the Research Assessment Exercise/Research Excellence Framework in the UK, education featured as one of the weakest areas accounting for 5 per cent of the national research productivity and only receiving 1 per cent of nationally competitive research income. Of course, the weak quality profile of education in the academy is nothing new, and is experienced by education scholars on a daily basis through numerous apparatus including research funding regimes, journal rankings, promotion systems, research fellowships, post-docs and so on. Herein lies a significant challenge for education researchers. On a global scale, policy makers have embraced the idea of experimental/interventional research design (e.g. randomised control trials) as the “gold-standard” for educational inquiry (Donmoyer and Galloway, 2010). The preference for large-scale experimental studies designed to reveal, once and for all, “what works” in education is firmly embedded in assessment criteria for national competitive funding regimes. For those working in education, and the broader humanities and social sciences, this shift negates forms of research which are not easily recognisable in the logical-empiricism paradigm. That being said, for those working in educational administration, the privileging of logical empiricism is consistent with the “theory movement” of the mid-1900s and continues in the scientific stream of research.

What remains particularly challenging for educational administration scholarship is its relationship to theory, especially in the context of the desire to maintain a closeness, or relevance, to practice. As Gunter (2010) argues, theory only seems to matter if it can be directly translated into decisions to be made at 9:00 a.m. on Monday morning. The apparent relevance of social theorist/philosophers such as Bourdieu, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Weber, among others, is seen as minimal at best, and in most cases, unnecessary. However, it is theory that stops us from forgetting that the world is not laid out in plain view and thinking that things speak for themselves – “the data”, “practice”, the pure voice of the previously marginalised (MacLure, 2010). This type of engagement, or lack thereof, with theory allows for the dominance of description over explanation, a matter which I shall return to later. But for now, enough to say that, the explanatory power of the theoretically infused narrative of educational administration is far less seductive than the everyday language employed in descriptions of “what works”. It is in the pursuit of, and engagement with, the “what works” of education that we have the constitution of leadership through the identification of high-performing schools/institutions and then the attribution of what individuals playing key roles, frequently limited to titles and official positions rather than social positions, did to bring about that performance (there is, however, a general omission of lesser performing schools/institutions in such research, and therefore the explanatory power of the work to articulate what it is that differentiates between higher and lesser performing schools/institutions is significantly reduced – not to mention the apolitical view of “high performing”). Here we have a major theoretical issue, that is, a posteriori labelling of “leadership” while a simultaneous a priori assumption that leadership exists. This establishes, and sustains, a particular relationship between the concept of “leadership” and the empirical space in which practice takes place, one where the location of practice in both time and space is

acknowledged, yet under-theorised. With the expansion of what Gunter (1997) originally labelled the “educational management industry”, which could now be more appropriately categorised as the educational leadership industry, and the proliferation of school leadership preparation and development programmes outside of the academy (see Eacott, 2011), there is now, more than ever, a need to engage with the knowledge claims of “leadership” in the educational administration discourse.

### **The realness of “leadership”**

In the broader academy, there is a level of scepticism as to the realness or robustness of leadership as a concept. The underlying question, and one of significant importance for educational administration, is whether one is seeking to either reveal or construct leadership through scholarship. To reveal implies that through scholarship, one can accurately portray an object of analysis as it exists in the empirical world. On the other hand, to construct centres on scholarship that through the methods of analysis brings an object into being. Pivotal to both positions is of course the use of language, or more specifically labels, for objects. For Bourdieu (1988/1984), an empirical object is the “real”, that which is inexhaustible, and located in the complexity and messiness that is the social world. In contrast, the epistemic object, that which comes into being through analysis, contains nothing that evades conceptualisation. The mobilising of Bourdieu in this space may seem odd, if not problematic. For some, it will be read as the binary that is realism and relativism, far less sophisticated than the musing of Weber or Deleuze on the use of concepts in the social sciences (see Gane, 2009), or the Foucauldian notion of discourse. However, Bourdieu’s distinction is significant in the context of the educational administrative discourse, especially given its failure to recognise “leadership” as an epistemic. As it is, the very establishment of educational administration as a domain of inquiry was built upon the distinction of administration from education, and therefore to challenge the very labels that constitute the domain (educational administration, management and leadership) is to destabilise the domain itself. There are two issues which I am going to explore here: first, the cross-over of “leadership” from everyday language into scholarly discourse; and second, the somewhat unique constitution of leadership through the post-event attribution yet simultaneous a priori assumption of its existence. It is through this combination that I argue educational administration discourse, for the most part, is unable to recognise its epistemic creation.

Calder (1977) argues, that “leadership” is a term that originated in everyday discourse, and its common-sense meaning has been appropriated into scholarly discourse. However, in everyday language, the label leadership merely identifies, giving little information about the object of which it speaks. As a label, it is capable of being arbitrarily applied to almost any object, saying that this object is different without specifying in what way/s it differs. In doing so, the label serves as an instrument of recognition, and not of cognition (Bourdieu, 1988/1984). When mobilised as an act of recognition, the label “leadership” singles out an individual, a team of people or an institution, generally thought of as acting as a coherent whole, to say that they are different without saying in what ways they are different. The apparent comfort with assigning the label of “leadership” in everyday language, that which provides little in relation to distinctions, leaves the concept, much like that of “change”, open to the critique of being vacuous, if not meaningless. In contrast, the constructed “leadership”, an act of cognition, defines leadership by a finite set of criteria or properties which seek to create a distinction between those who possess the properties

and those who do not. In short, leadership is mobilised as a label of exclusion, not inclusion. The notion of leadership as exclusive is problematic for those promoting the latest “adjectival” leadership (e.g. teacher, student, shared, distributed and so on), where leadership is apparently something that everyone possesses – effectively reducing leadership to a meaningless label that offers nothing in relation to social distinctions – raising major questions of its scholarly value. A significant move here, however, is that the explicit criteria employed in the construction of leadership constitute a specific form of leadership that exists in a social space given life through the very criteria that produce it. That is, leadership is present in a context in which it was already decided that leadership existed – a rather tautological situation.

In the Australian education policy context, whether it be national, federal or state/territory, there is a clear message being presented: there is a desire to improve student outcomes in schooling – in fact it is possible to argue that literacy and numeracy outcomes, those reported in national (e.g. National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) and international (e.g. Programme for International Student Assessment; Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) testing regimes, have become a proxy for schooling; teacher quality is a central focus on the basis of school effectiveness and school improvement literature citing the teacher as the most influential role in student outcomes; and school leadership (frequently defined as “the principal”, although the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, a national policy, makes mention of “principals and other school leaders”) is seen as a key driver of this desired perpetual improvement. In a letter to Tony Mackay, the incoming chair of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (to some extent, potentially the Australian equivalent of the National College), then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Julia Gillard notes: improving teacher quality requires strong leadership from principals and that excellent school leadership is a key to improving outcomes for students (see [www.aitsl.edu.au](http://www.aitsl.edu.au)). Likewise, as part of the Gillard government’s education reform agenda, she explicitly argues “if each of those [Australia’s 9529 schools] schools is to be a truly great school, it needs great leadership” (see [www.alp.org.au/agenda/school-reform/](http://www.alp.org.au/agenda/school-reform/))[2]. There is a clear assumption at play in this policy context, leadership matters, and significantly, great schools – those with higher than average student outcomes, and especially those achieving higher than average value-added (growth) data – have great leaders. Here we have the construction of a primary criterion, high student outcomes, a point of cognition, to which there is an assumed causal relationship. That is, an a priori assumption that by virtue of the institutional, or actually student, performance, leadership must have been enacted in that location. In doing so, researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike have constructed the epistemic label “leadership” without acknowledging the post-event identification of the construction. Through the application of this a priori assumption of the existence, or “realness” of leadership, and the a posteriori, or post-event identification of where leadership has happened, scholarship pays far more attention to the description of who leaders are, and what they do, than developing the kinds of explanation which can inform theoretical criteria from which its very existence can be engaged with. This leads to a neo-trait or neo-behaviour abstraction of leadership, one where the context, in both space and time, remains on the periphery. Key aspects of the cognitive process, that which conceals the abstraction of the empirical, are the relations with both time and space, primarily through temporality. To engage with these matters I turn to Bourdieu’s discussion of time, including that mobilised and advanced by Adkins.

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**“Leadership” and its relation to time and space**

What we have come to know as the school and the administration of schooling is constituted through the operationalisation and privileging of clock time. The temporal rules of schooling construct the school day, terms, semesters, the school year, class schedules and the notion of progression based on time. Just like the temporal rules of the economic field, the hegemonic position on time is its measurement in terms of an abstraction, separate to events and reversible through units of the clock (see Adkins, 2009, 2011). As Bourdieu (2000/1997) argues, reinforced through ordinary language, time is constituted as a thing, something that an individual or institution has, gains or wastes. It is in this space that the administration of schooling, frequently reduced to the leadership and management of change and enacted through the process of planning for the future and embodying the principles of perpetual improvement, comes to the fore. Significantly, activities such as strategic planning and reporting/funding cycles become not only synchronised with the game of schooling, but become the game of school administration. In this game, and I am referring to Bourdieu’s notion of “the game” as opposed to that of game theory or elsewhere, leadership, particularly that which is “successful” or “effective”, is constituted through measures of student achievement, those reported through the operationalisation of time. Take for example the reporting of student outcomes in Australia, primarily through the MySchool web site (see [www.myschool.edu.au](http://www.myschool.edu.au)), but also available through the production of Annual School Reports – a rather corporate notion – produced for the system, distributed to all parents (e.g. shareholders), and publicly available via school web sites (as a means of marketing/transparency). What we see here is the reporting of annual standardised testing (taking place for students in grades three, five, seven and nine), essentially the schools bottom-line, and the value-added data, read “growth” or “profit”, for those cohorts in-between tests. The centrality of this (economic) data for the policy, and arguably wider societal, constitution of what is school leadership and the value judgement of “success” or “effectiveness” is significant, especially where we have a federal policy agenda that has replaced a \$550 million over five years initiative to support and improve school leadership and teacher quality (consistent with the Melbourne Declaration) with two programmes, rewards for great teachers (\$425 million) and rewards for school improvement (\$248 million) for the next four years (see McMorro, 2011). Ignoring for the moment the well-rehearsed argument regarding the apolitical and ahistorical nature of education policy moves, it seems important to focus on the version of time employed in such accounts, especially given the centrality of temporality to narratives of leadership.

Previously I have sought to explore the strategies of administrators and the methodological challenges that engaging which such poses for educational administration scholars (Eacott, 2010). In doing so, and following Bourdieu (1977/1972), I argue that the limited engagement, or worst still, failure to acknowledge, the temporality of practice is to abolish the notion of strategy/ies. Despite making this criticism, I am mindful that educational administration does engage, even if implicitly, with notions of temporality. It is the mobilisation of a particular type of temporality that is of interest. The construction – or more accurately, abstraction – of points of clock time used to delineate the temporal dimensions of leadership, or specific phases or stages, those in which the description or causal relationship of practice put forth has but to align itself with, is central to mainstream leadership research. The underlying assumption is that leadership is a means through which to bring about a better future, achieved through the manipulation, read control,

of the forthcoming. Such a proposition is consistent with those who argue that educational administration is a technology of control (see Bates, 1980), and in this particular case, the desire to control the future. Therefore, educational administration, and specifically leadership, is about “influence” (I am aware of the rapidity to read “power” as a negative term in the educational administration discourse) over the game and how practice plays out in time.

Samier (2006) argues that educational administration exhibits the same “persistent atemporality” (Adams, 1992) of its parent discipline, public administration, where attention is paid to the history of administrative theory rather than the actual history of administration. While she goes on to argue for greater mobilisation of history in scholarship, particularly in relation to point-in-time discussion of leadership (the recognition of the here and now on a temporal continuum), my attention here is on the very notion of a delineation of past, present and future. Much of the work in educational administration is about the future, and the need to be future focused. As such, the future is conceived as at some distance from the present (e.g. the three-year plan for the school), and that our desired future can be achieved through prudent action in the here and now. Embedded within this thesis are the rationalisation of practice, with direct cause and effect, and the dislocation of practice from time. In contrast, for Bourdieu, the future is not a distant horizon separated from the present, rather, it is already present in the immediate present, a future that is already here. As Adkins (2009, 2011) argues, the present is already present because players are ordinarily immersed in the forthcoming, or more precisely, players practically and pre-reflexively anticipate the forthcoming as a routine part of action. As an example of this thinking, Bourdieu (see Lamaison and Bourdieu, 1986) evokes the image of the good football player, stating:

Nothing is simultaneously freer and more constrained than the action of the good player. He quite naturally materializes at just the place the ball is about to fall, as if the ball were in command of him – but by that very fact, he is in command of the ball (p. 113).

What we have here, following Bourdieu, is practice that is not in time, but rather makes time. Significantly, as Adkins (2009) notes, time does not operate externally to events, but unfolds with events. This conceptualisation of time explicitly challenges the delineation of past/present/future, and the commodification of time. While sociologically the absence, or at least periphery, of such matters is limiting, the why is significant. I argue, and building from an extensive body of work, that the leadership literature engages in a professionalisation of knowledge focusing on being a problem-solving toolkit for practitioners as opposed to theory infused accounts of leadership practice in schools. Therefore, the operationalisation of temporality is consistent with the constitution of schooling – clock time, an external commodity that one has, or has not, in the pursuit of the purpose of schooling (usually limited to improvements in student outcomes). The literature, for the most part, conforms to what Bourdieu (2005/2000) calls “native theories” of strategic action (in this case, leadership), expressly produced to assist administrators in their decisions, and explicitly taught in preparation and development programmes[3]. In doing so, the gap between the native and research representations is less marked. For many, this addresses the problem of the insurmountable theory-practice binary, however, there is an inbuilt, although frequently unrecognised, tension regarding a professional group who make consistent claims to the uniqueness of each and every school, yet seek refuge in scholarship that abstracts both time and space – removing context.

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In a study investigating university-based educational administration programmes in Australia, Bates and Eacott (2008) found the most common literature used for readings is that associated with “change”. Given the professionalisation of knowledge and the problem-solving focus of educational administration, this is not surprising. However, Gronn (2008) is most scathing of this trend, labelling “change” a vacuous concept devoid of any particular concrete referent or context and simply something “out there”. The major shift taking place here, or at least reflected in this space, is that the epistemic label of “leadership”, that which is constructed through policy, scholarship and practice has shaped the ontology of leadership, further embedding itself and obscuring the abstraction.

In this space, leadership is reduced to change[4]. Caldwell (2007) in his introduction to a special issue of the *Australian Journal of Education* explicitly states that leadership equals change and that no change implies that either leadership was not needed, or failed. Such a position is highly problematic, primarily on the basis that it overlooks the larger, and long term, inequities of society and the (re)productive forces in that power struggle, but also for how it legitimises a form of scholarship that can exclude context. For example, Dinham (2005), produces a composite set of principal leadership attributes and practices contributing to outstanding educational outcomes but warns that “there is a danger with such attributes or factors in that context is not sufficiently recognized” (p. 354). Likewise, Gurr and colleagues’ “Australian” model of successful school leadership[5] has the objectives of: describing, explaining and categorising various kinds of leadership intervention and outlining their relationship and impact on student outcomes; providing a conceptual map of the interventions used by the school’s leadership; and providing a framework for other practitioners to use as a guide to future action, including principal preparation (see Gurr *et al.*, 2010). However, the authors themselves note regarding the model that “[I]t does not explain why these interventions work in some circumstances and not in others” (Gurr *et al.*, 2010, p. 124). As such, leadership remains a vacuous concept connected to attributes, factors, behaviours, interventions, all of which lack a solid grounding in a specific context. It is, however, the context that gives behaviours or interventions meaning and significance. Similarly, the values, philosophies or other aspects of the individual articulated in neo-trait perspective lists only exist through practice – this is why Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* is both embodied and performative. They cannot be separated from the self. The lack of attention to the situatedness and specificity of contexts leads to a privileging of the directly observable features of practice rather than the underlying generative principles.

### Conclusion

A question, following Bourdieu (2004/2001), is how can “leadership” scholarship not help resolve a problem that it has itself brought into being? For the most part, since its very inception, educational administration has positioned itself as a solution for schooling. As the discourse has moved from educational administration to educational management and now the contemporarily popular educational leadership, few questions have been raised concerning the very criteria from which administration differs from management and then to leadership. This paper has sought to raise some questions regarding the very nature of “leadership”, particularly through its unique relationship with ontology and epistemology. In the contemporary world where matters such as information and communication technologies and globalisation are both reducing geographical boundaries yet also reinforcing ties to the local, the

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limitations of a discourse that is devoid of time and space has arguably reached “Leadership” and its limits. the social

## Notes

1. I am aware of the critical stream of research that engages, almost exclusively in such matters, but for the most part, this problematising is absence. This absence is also why at a certain point of the analysis we see the fusion of multiple “adjectival” labels (e.g. distributed, shared, participatory; or even leadership, management and administration) as though they are one.
2. Throughout this policy rhetoric there is frequent reference, at least implicit, to Jim Collins’ 2001 book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don’t*.
3. Bourdieu uses the example of “management theory”, a literature produced by business schools for business schools, and likened that to the writings of European jurists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who in the guise of describing the state, contributed to building it.
4. The problematic here is magnified. If we are to buy into the notion that change is everywhere and nothing is static, then “change” itself is a somewhat meaningless label. Therefore “leadership” is a label of questionable foundations defined by a label that is devoid of any concrete referent or context. This raises more questions regarding the constitution of leadership as a label.
5. An interesting tensions here is that despite only having case studies from two of the eight states/territories, the researchers still name the model “An Australian model of successful school leadership” – the representation of the entire nation is questionable and says something about the centrality, or lack thereof, of context.

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#### **About the author**

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