Bourdieu's strategies and the challenge for educational leadership

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Published online: 05 Nov 2010.

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The quality of scholarship in educational leadership has frequently been questioned both within and beyond the field. Much of the work in the field is limited to the analysis of either individual or structural influences on practice. The resulting lists of traits, behaviours and organizational structures provide little in furthering our understanding of leadership. Theoretically informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and building on a previous special issue edited by Lingard and Christie, in this paper I contend that insufficient attention has been devoted to the temporal features of leadership actions. Analogies provided by practising principals are used to highlight the directly unobservable features of school leadership. The central argument of this paper is that heightened attention to temporal elements of leadership as a social action has the prospect of elucidating that which is not directly observable and consequently move scholarship beyond the superficial measurement of what is directly observable to a thick description of educational leadership.

Introduction

As a field of study, educational leadership has a relatively weak quality profile within the already weak quality profile of educational research (Griffiths 1959, 1965, 1985, Immegart 1975, Gorard 2005). While the topics of educational leadership have generated a great deal of scholarly interest internationally over the years, reviewers have generally suggested that it has not been an area given to rigorous empirical investigation and knowledge accumulation (Erickson 1967, Bridges 1982). It is dominated by a pragmatic empirical approach (Scheerens 1997) and the cognitive development of the field is still at the 'discovery orientation' (Eacott 2008b), dominated by loosely coupled studies with little systematic testing and further development of theoretical propositions. Gorard (2005) suggests that the difference between educational leadership research and other educational research is the uniformity of methods used, mainly small-scale qualitative work with little transparency and no comparison groups, although this in itself represents an implicit preference for hypothetico-deductive structures. He further adds that the lack of inclusion in the Social Sciences Citation Index of the

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majority of educational leadership and management journals is perhaps itself an indicator of the non-impact of research in the field, although the applicability of this system is highly problematic and contested within the discipline of education. Within the Australian context,[1] work by both Mulford (2007) and Bates and Eacott (2008) suggest that Australian scholars fail to acknowledge the contributions of each other, both past and present, to the field.

A significant portion of early inquiry into educational leadership lacked effective theoretical development and, subsequently, appropriate empirical tests, although the results of these studies remain valuable for the construction of knowledge. In fact, consistent with the growth of sophisticated research methods in other disciplines, 'the results from primarily case-oriented, anecdotal, and topic-driven work reflect interest in examining a particular phenomenon' (Ireland *et al.* 2005: 114). Many of the early investigations provided the foundations from which further activities could have occurred. The problem, however, is not the use of, or foundations provided, but rather the failure of much of the field to move beyond these elementary studies. Lets not be mistaken here, my intention is not to disregard all that has gone, but rather to challenge those who work in the field to move beyond what is known and produce a deeper understanding of leadership within the educational context. In his introduction to the first issue of *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, Waite (1998: 92) wrote:

> Like it or not, the area of educational leadership (a.k.a. educational administration) has a reputation for being deeply conservative. But conservatism is not the path to renewal. New and different voices are required to offer us alternative ways of being in the world.

The use of conservative methods in the field leading to lists of traits and/ or behaviours exhibited by 'effective' leaders, deeply rooted in the principles of scientific management and the inertia of the Theory Movement has reigned for too long. In 1969, W. Taylor noted:

> Millions of words are to be found on the role of the school superintendent, the role of the principal, the role of the school board member; on supervision, evaluation, delegation, communication, professionalisation, certification and a dozen other processes. There are paradigms and models, theoretical constructs and conceptual taxonomies, analytical schema, dichotomous, bi-polar, ideal typical continuums and factorially structured four celled frameworks. The effort required to read even a representative selection of the books and articles available is considerable, and apt to seem not particularly rewarding. (p. 97)

Considering the rapid expansion of scholarly interest in educational leadership in the decades since W. Taylor's comments, we can only imagine what his thoughts would be today. The major arguments of W. Taylor's somewhat negative thesis were the enormous amount of repetition and the prevailing tone of prescription and inspirational writing. The repetition of claims, or at its most despicable, the re-naming of previous frameworks and ideas, is a substantial issue within the field of education. Cynical school-based staff are quick to dismiss the latest fad or gimmick under the guise that it came and went in a bygone era under a different name. The attempt to bring something 'new', or at least renamed, to the development of educators is what has led to the overload of change initiatives and the reluctance of many educators to participate or engage with ideas (Eacott 2007). Additionally, the high level

of prescriptive writing in the field (Eacott 2008a) has done little more than offer a large number of different models and framework which all seem to make the same or at least very similar claims. The constant expansion of the field's literature with adjectival leadership offers little to the practitioner other than provide them with the latest buzzword to help in the quest for promotion. Contemporary books such as *Leading Australian Schools*[2] (Duignan and Gurr 2007) is but another example of the rhetoric of the field surrounding the distribution of roles and delegation, yet celebrating the individual leaders and their skills in turning around schools (see also Gronn [2003] for a discussion on 'exceptionality'). In such work, and for that matter, much of the work in the field, the focus has long remained on what can be directly measured, usually through questionnaire or interviews. A major challenge in the field is how to gain access to that which is directly inaccessible. That is, knowledge leaders and those who work in schools might not be able to express in words. In essence, if leadership is more than a series of rational choices leading to a pre-determined goal (or means-end rationality as articulated by Weber (1978), yet rarely referenced in the field), arguably the commonly held belief in the field, how can we access this leadership sense?

Bourdieu's *strategies* as the theoretical tool

The work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is very useful for theorizing educational leadership (Lingard and Christie 2003) and was the focus of a 2003 special issue of *International Journal of Leadership in Education* **6**(4) edited by Lingard and Christie. In the broader discipline of education, others have used Bourdieu in the analysis of policy (e.g. see *Journal of Education Policy* **20**(6) for a special issue on this topic) or to examine the boundaries of the field of educational policy (Ladwig 1994). However, much of the utilization of his work in education has been on how schools contribute to social reproduction and the production of inequality (Lareau 1987, Teese 2000, Lingard *et al.* 2003). A small emerging literature has, however, used Bourdieu in relation to educational leadership (Fritz 1999, Gunter 1999, 2000, 2001b, Thomson 2001a, 2001b, 2002, Lingard *et al.* 2003). Lingard and Christie (2003) highlight that the minimal use of Bourdieu in the field of educational leadership is surprising given that his theoretical approach was primarily concerned with the nature of the relationship between individual agency and structural determinism. However, much of the educational leadership literature continues to focus on either the individual, or individuals, as the field continues down the path of distributed models of leadership or the structural constraints of action such as bureaucracy, accountability and efficiency. Gronn (2003) has consistently argued for the need to explicitly bring the individual and the structural into the same debate, yet the current popular adjectival perspectives (transformational, authentic, moral, servant and so on) and the most frequently utilized research methods (questionnaire, interviews, document analysis) fail to adequately address this concern by focusing on what is easily measurable, or at least operationalized in an easily measured way.

For those who have utilized Bourdieu in the field of educational leadership, his concepts[3] of *capital* (cultural, social, intellectual and symbolic), *habitus*, *fields* and *strategies*, have provided a lens through which to investigate the individual possibilities and contextual constraints within the work of educational leaders (Lingard and Christie 2003). However, this work has not been picked up much within the field. Bourdieu encouraged researchers to work *with* his concepts, suggesting that his theory provided a 'set of thinking tools' which are continually shaped and reshaped by empirical work (Wacquant 1989: 50). In this paper I focus primarily on the concept of *strategies* as a lens to investigate the scholarship of educational leadership and propose that it is the neglect of research designs to adequately address this concept that reduces much of the reporting of leadership to a hyper-rationalist perspective (where everything is seen as malleable through a series of logical incremental steps, for example a school development plan), often closely aligned to Romantic ideals (the pillars of the school-based management movement, where the 'relief from stultifying mediocrity lies in deregulation and local control of schools' [Timar and Kirp 1988: 75]) and, consequently, limits the value of work to influence practice and further knowledge creation. The particular argument of this paper works with Lingard and Christie (2003) and Lingard *et al.* (2003) by seeking to de-romanticize educational leadership and explicitly link leadership actions to the social space in which they occur. The unique contribution of this work is the heightened attention to Bourdieu's conceptualization of *strategies* as the 'leadership *habitus*' (Lingard *et al.* 2003) enacted.

For Bourdieu, strategy is not conscious, individual rational choice, rather appropriate actions taken without conscious reflection. Perhaps his most articulate description of the concept of strategy is in an interview 'From Rules to Strategies' published in *Cultural Anthropology* (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986), in which he discusses the notion of 'feel for the game'. Strategy or the feel for the game entails moves in the game that are based on mastery of its logic, acquired through experience, part of *habitus*.

> The real principle of *strategies*, that is, a practical sense of things, or, if one prefers, what athletes call a feel for the game (*le sens du jeu*). I refer here to practical mastery of the logic or immanent necessity of a game, which is gained through experience of the game, and which functions this side of consciousness and discourse (like the techniques of the body, for example). Notions such as habitus (or system of dispositions), practical sense, and strategy are tied to the effort to get away from objectivism without falling into subjectivisim. (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986: 111)

This conceptualization of *strategies* allows for actions to be 'guided by constraints, as well as for improvisation, different levels of skill, and different choices to be made in particular situations' (Lingard *et al.* 2003: 67). As such, it welcomes ambiguity, it cannot be directly represented in a neat framework, a normative list of behaviours or a one size fits all model of leadership, but most importantly, it rejects the isolation of individual actors from the context in which they are present. An application of Bourdieu's notion of strategy requires a macro-level perspective of educational leadership, while simultaneously paying attention to the micro-level moves of players. Conventional methods of inquiry which focus on identifying and measuring the frequency of specific behaviours without recognizing the social space in

which those actions take place can never provide us with the answer to what it is that educational leaders do. They may provide countless lists of the bodily movements of leaders, but they will never get to a level of conceptual understanding that can potentially shape future practice and inquiry in the field. In essence, the failure to investigate leadership *strategies* limits much of the work of the field to 'thin' description, whereas we should be aiming for a 'thick' description (Geertz 1973) of leadership actions.

The limitations of conventional modes of inquiry

In recognition that the 'feel for the game' of educational leaders is not directly accessible, within a larger study (Eacott 2008c), principals ($N = 36$) as part of a semi-structured interview were asked to identify an analogy which best summarized what their current experience of the role was like.[4] The two most common analogies involved sailing and a sporting team. A representative sample of these included:

> I see it [leadership] as Captain Cook leading his ship to try and find a new land, Australia. You have the goal in mind, at the end there it is, we are going to discover this great unknown southern continent, but along the way, the ocean really deals lots of blows and the people that you have working with you come from all different strata, whether it is the cabin boy down stairs or the one who is going to feed you slop or whatever. You are also dealing with all kinds of clientele, and trying to keep them happy and safe, also making sure that you keep your vision, because it is a long journey. Sometimes you need to readjust the path, but the destination remains the same. (Principal 5)

> I come from a sporting background, rugby. I see educational leadership just like a game of rugby. We get on the field and bust our butts together, but when we walk off the field, we either won or lost as a team. It does not matter that I dropped the ball over the line and they scored, we play as a team and we win or lose as a team. (Principal 8)

These analogies give narrative access to knowledge that the principals might not be able to express in terms of the conventional language of the field. That being said, these analogies align with two different, yet closely aligned streams of work on the leadership and management of educational institutions. The sailing reference, which frequently included control over where the boat was going and the numerous crew working on it, reflects the busyness of the educational environment while also reinforcing the concept of control or management by the principal, centre director or vice chancellor.

The sporting team analogy is consistent with contemporary educational leadership discourse on participative models of leadership. A notable and arguably deliberate omission from the sporting team analogies was the term 'captain' or its equivalent. In each case, the respondent spoke of the 'win/lose as a team' approach to sport. Even if one person made a catastrophic mistake that led to the loss, the game was played as a team and therefore lost as a team. The notion of 'control' or 'responsibility' is in direct contrast in the two analogies discussed so far. In the first, the principal, under the guise of ship's captain, is controlling the actions of crew and the direction of the ship, essentially the responsibility for reaching the desired destination falls

with the principal, even though it is the actions of many that make it happen. This is consistent with the current legislative environment in many countries. In comparison, in the team analogy the success or failure in the game does not fall on just one person. This has organizational (or team) culture and climate implications for practice. It requires an environment where all staff take responsibility for aligning their actions with the espoused goals of the team. It makes the assumption that all staff are on board with institution-wide initiatives and that they will act professionally in fulfilling their roles.

Through adherence to the underlying assumptions of these two analogies and arguably to the historical roots of the field in logic empiricism, researchers adopt a Neo-Tayloristic (Gronn 1982) perspective. Neo-Taylorism is research embedded in a crude form of Tayloristic thinking—based on the question of 'What do principals do?', which is usually only ever answered in an over-simplified or unduly mechanistic sense of practice. While some claim that Taylorism or scientific management is dead in educational administration (Leithwood and Duke 1999), Kanigel (1997) warns that Taylor's thinking is so embedded in contemporary life that we no longer realize it is there. In addition to the Taylorism, both of these analogies align with means-end rationality (Weber 1978). The ship has to get to the destination and the game eventually ends with the purpose of winning. The measures of both are simply linked to efficiency. The captain who gets the boat to the destination the quickest? The team who wins the game? The performance of the leader is reduced or even lost in the performance of the unit (the ship or the team). However, the role they played becomes objectified. The most successful units become the focus of study. What did the leaders of those units do? Tasks are broken down, and the inter-relationships between leader, follower and the environment are objectified or worst still, ignored. The individual breakdown of tasks or division of labour, explicitly evident in the ship analogy, yet somewhat invisible in the sporting analogy, seeks to institutionalize the need for each individual actor, whether they be teachers, crew on a ship or players in a sporting team to perform their individual tasks. This reductionist perspective, evidence of a rationalist logic, is at the heart of the 'best practice' or 'what works' movement that dominates much of the field's literature. The very concept of 'best practice', the equivalent of Taylor's 'one best way', is derived from empirical work of the match between methods and means and is determined not by the actors but by researchers or the so-called experts (Kanigel 1997). The move towards professional standards is evidence of a desire for 'what works' and 'best practice' scholarship. However, scholarship of this nature, a professionalization or service orientation, has proved to be a significant barrier to knowledge accumulation in education (Lagemann 1997). After all, research has consistently shown that there is no one size fits all model of leadership. The simplistic link between a set of standards, behaviours or traits and student achievement (however, that is defined) is empirically flawed as it ignores the moderating factors between school leaders and student action.

The Neo-Taylorism undercurrents have significant methodological implications for the scholarship of educational leadership. This was highlighted in a debate between Gronn and Thomas during the 1980s (Gronn 1982, 1984, 1987, Thomas 1986), primarily through the pages of

Educational Administration Quarterly. Noting that Mintzberg's (1973) *The Nature of Managerial Work* had re-awakened interest in the use of observational studies on organizational executives, and following the examination of O'Dempsey's (1976) pioneering thesis, Thomas (editor of the *Journal of Educational Administration*) became a leading advocate for the use of observational methods in the study of educational leadership. In 1981 Thomas *et al.* contended that observational studies would provide scholars with a better means of understanding principals 'in action'. However, drawing on an analysis of observational studies at the time, Gronn (1982) argued that the use of such methods represented little more than Neo-Taylorism. He suggested that these accounts:

> seriously misconstrue the phenomenon they purport to explain: they fail to explicate what it means to 'do' something. As a result, questions having to do with action, such as when an action can be deemed to have taken place or the meaning of actions, are totally glossed over. (Gronn 1982: 18)

Gronn goes on to cite the work of Ryle (1971) and, particularly, the notion of 'doing something'. He discusses Ryle's example of two boys winking and that any given wink may be a voluntary contraction, an involuntary twitch, a wink, a parody of a wink, (possibly) a rehearsal of a parody of a wink and so on. Gronn goes on to link this discussion with the concept of 'thick' description, most frequently linked to the work of Geertz (1973). However, it is at this point that Gronn makes what I see as an error in his important argument. Rather than continuing with the Ryle's and Geertz' argument, he proceeds to outline the ethnographic method of Boswelling (borne out of Boswell's [1953] biography, *the Life of Samuel Jackson*). Thomas (1986) responded with a scathing attack on Boswelling and, in a somewhat uninformed manner, referred to the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' description as mere semantic acrobatics. The most disappointing feature of this turn for the reader was that a deep methodological discussion, that is, how do we come to understand what a principal is doing, got side tracked by labels, and the core question of how best can we understand the principalship was lost.

This brings us back to work of Bourdieu, who encouraged others to reject all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanistic reaction. Despite trends towards interpretive aims, educational leadership scholarship remains strongly influenced by positivism (English 2001, 2002, Biesta and Miron 2002). However, to understand leadership, we must accept complexity and realize that it goes against all logic to seek to break leadership up and study its parts (Goeppinger 2002). The normative tendency in theorizing leadership has resulted in a proliferation of adjectival leadership theories each prescribing their own specific ideal model for effective leadership. Spillane *et al.* (2004) criticize this normative approach for offering simplistic prescriptions of practice and suggest that:

> Theory is not so much a guide or template for the moves leaders should make, but rather a tool for helping leaders to think about and reflect on their practice. (p. 5)

As noted earlier, Bourdieu encouraged others to work *with* his theory as a set of thinking tools. This reflexive approach sets the tone for professional

practice. That is, professionals, whether they are academics, teachers or school leaders, engaging with the theoretical developments within their fields, combined with their own lived experience to shape future actions through critical reflection. Lists of leadership behaviours may serve this purpose in the short term, but the highly technicist-rational nature of much writing in the field has many principals doing most of the listed behaviours. It is possible that it is not the behaviours listed that are the difference between perceived effective and less effective leaders but rather the timing and implicit factors of those behaviours that differentiate. When and why particular actions are and are not enacted are more important questions to ask in our quest to better understand the phenomenon of educational leadership. It is an imperative of the field that academics and practitioners alike strive for this better theoretical understanding of educational leadership and utilize that theory as a point of reflection.

Seeking out the directly inaccessible

Two analogies provided by participants exposed the indirectly accessible features of the principalship. Rather than portraying the role in a manner consistent with the literature of the field, these analogies begin to explore the relational and interconnected elements of the role. The two examples below bring to the fore the leader as an active participant in a social interaction. There is a reciprocal relationship between leader and follower, and performance is not static. Rather, educational leadership experiences ebbs and flows, and success requires an understanding of the logic of game:

> Leadership is like a theatrical performance. A good theatrical performance will have impeccable timing, whether it's comedic or dramatic. It's about when you can hear the pin drop because you've got the audience engaged. You can say all these fancy things about managing and having timetables and organizing and communicating, but at the end of the day its really whatever it is that makes up a good theatrical performance. Theatrical performances can be a whole variety of things, comedy, solos, Shakespearian, musical, it could be any number of things and that's the versatility. At the end of the performance you may not remember the specifics [exact words] but it is the essence of what you experienced that matters. (Principal 19)

> It [educational leadership] is probably like a very good sexual relationship long term, because it is long term and its where people are equal and its not always easy and its not always what you want and what you feel like, but its something that can be really exciting, you want to work on it, but if you're not involved in it, you're not going to enjoy it. But it can't be something where someone else can do all the hard work for and you and you go hey yeah, this is great, because that doesn't work, it's that team work and that people are engaged together and being a part of something. It can be sort of full on and other times have nice sort of gentle lulls that you enjoy. (Principal 36)

In contrast to the previously discussed analogies, these two examples represent a different perspective on educational leadership. The theatrical performance alludes to constant improvisation that is necessary for the leader to adapt to situations that are infinitely varied. The normative nature of the field's literature provides many lists of leadership behaviours and traits. These lists and neat frameworks seek to provide a form of codified rules or explicit norms for practice. However, in reality, things are much

more complicated and the infinite possibilities of actions cannot be captured in tables, models, diagrams or neatly packaged explanations of adjectival leadership. The good principal, just as the good player or actor, has a natural sense of the game. Bourdieu (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986) notes the good player is continually doing what needs to be done, what the game demands and requires.

The theatrical analogy acknowledges the pluralism of leadership by outlining the different genres and implying that there is no one size fits all leadership. In addition, it explicitly raises the notion of followership through the reference to engage the audience and the need for big picture leadership, that is focusing on what is important and on core business. Pivotal to the theatrical performance is timing. Bourdieu (1977) suggests that failing to acknowledge the timing of actions is to abolish strategy. The impact of actions and words is heightened when delivered at the right time. An action or phrase delivered late in the performance is arguably set up throughout the performance. If delivered too early or too late, the value, whether that is comedic or dramatic among others, is stifled or lost, but delivered at the right time, leaves a lasting impact on the audience.

The sexual relationship analogy presents a more personal perspective on the role, but addresses similar aspects. The explicit reference to the power relations (where people are equal, although not reduced to the simplistic zero sum equation) moves beyond the conventional dominated and dominator mode of writing on the topic in the field. As with the theatrical analogy, the sexual relationship requires active participation by all parties. It is not possible to remove the actions of one individual from the larger relationship. Timing is again vitally important. Without becoming too crude, actions or words used at one time maybe highly appropriate and heighten or extend the excitement or intensity of the act; yet if the timing is wrong, such actions or words could quickly end any interaction.

However, unlike what maybe perceived from the voluminous literature on 'how to be a leader' and 'how to become more effective', the sexual relationship analogy explicitly highlights that leadership, and arguably followership, is not easy. Understanding the logic and necessity of the game is difficult and cannot be achieved by merely following a list of rules for the game. Good leaders, just like good players in a game, 'know how to take liberty with the official rule and thereby save the essential part of what the rule was meant to guarantee' (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986: 113). But this feel for the game is not infallible or evenly distributed. Just as in a team or in society at large, it is sometimes in short supply. It is for this reason, and in the context of the large expected turnover of educational leaders within the next decade in many developed countries, that there exists an imperative to better understand the leadership of educational institutions now.

Before moving on, I would like to briefly discuss three additional elements: the homogeneity of principals, the predictability of context and the preparation of the next generation of school leaders/scholars. Whether we like to admit it or not, principals are a relatively homogenous group. They have graduated from initial teacher education, taught in schools and then moved through the ranks of teaching into a leadership or management position. This is in contrast to the corporate sector where leaders and managers

come from a diverse range of backgrounds within (e.g. marketing, accounts, information and communication) or beyond the firm. Even if from different faculties, the path is very similar.

While noting that every context and leader is different, this difference exists on a micro-level. A great many things about schooling and school leadership are highly predictable. It is the pattern of people (students, community members, external agencies and staff) going to school over and over again which makes up the school as a formal organization. For regularity to exist, it need not even be the same people who repeatedly interact (Fay 1994). Therefore, at a macro- (school) or meso-level (systemic), there exists a high level of predictability of school leadership. This makes it possible to create a conceptualization of leadership which seeks to bring to the fore, the indirectly observable features or the underlying currents of practice. Achievement of such is what makes the work of scholars, such as Foucault and Bourdieu, enduring and demanding of academic attention. Lesser work, which seeks to describe micro-level variance, a constant if we consider every leader and context to be unique, demands little scholarly attention and is prone to being swept aside when the next 'new' list comes along.

In Australia we do not have compulsory preparation before taking up a principal position, although I am aware that this is the case in many others countries, including the USA. The dominance of modernistic thinking and Neo-Taylorism in the field has significant implications in the preparation of the next generation of leaders and scholars. This dominance makes it more likely that the supervisor is embedded in the discourse and therefore transfers that preference to the student. This further embeds the dominant voice in the field. As the student moves back into practicing in the field, the diversification of the dominant discourse continues. If, however, that student returns to the higher education sector, they further spread the dominant discourse of the field through their students and scholarship. In short, leadership preparation is evidence of knowledge as a political tool. Requiring school leaders to have completed training (the very use of the word training has many other implications) forces aspirants into programmes which potentially serve the purpose of government departments seeking to control the way school are led and managed. As such, the preparation of school leaders warrants study using Foucault's techniques of power to expose the underlying mechanisms at play and not just the superficial lists of curriculum context or course delivery modes.

Implications

The proposition that performance is not static or that there is variance across groups is not controversial. However, it does raise a string of potentially provocative questions. For instance, very few people working in the field of educational leadership have ever pondered the question of whether anyone can be a leader; Gronn (2003) is an exception. In fact, I have attended many workshops and read many papers by both students and colleagues in the academy which positively cite, 'everyone is a leader'. I wonder how many of

us, I use the collective to suggest those who work in the field, have seriously asked ourselves that question.

Leaders are elite. They are the people within our society who have risen to the top. Does this mean that those at the top are all of the best? No. Does this mean that those at the top are always the best? No. The goal of inquiry into educational leadership should be to understand what it is that makes them elite, not to produce a list of behaviours or traits that are common among current leaders (after all, aren't current educational standards slipping, or at least at the same level that they have been for years, as the media and our politicians so frequently tell us) that aspirants can use to plan their development. A central fear that has emerged in this writing process is that within the field of educational leadership and, arguably the larger discipline of education, is that the jump from the descriptive to the normative is made too quickly without adequate analysis.[5] The quest for answers to the question 'What a leader does?' overcomes the desire for rigorous in-depth analysis. Thomas (1986) noted that in the world of academe, publishing is paramount and this is particularly true in the current context of university funding being based on research outputs such as in Australia, the UK and New Zealand. Arguably, inquiry which seeks to explore the *strategies* of educational leaders will be more time consuming than conventional methods (questionnaire, document analysis and interview) and consequently leads to less publications in the short term. Wolcott (1973) noted that the process of researching and writing his ethnographic study *The Man in the Principal Office* took some six years. Yet, innovative work which sheds light on under-explored elements of the principalship has a greater chance of surviving the test of time than the repetitious prescriptive and inspirational tone of much work in the field.

Lingard *et al.*'s (2003) contribution of leadership *habitus* is substantial, yet it has not been taken up in the field. Recognizing that inquiry into the *habitus* of educational leaders is a difficult methodological avenue to pursue for researchers, this paper has proposed a greater focus and attention be given to leadership *strategies*. Not strategies as in the rational definition frequently applied to strategic management and strategic leadership within the field, but the enactment of leadership actions within a social space and particularly the timing of those actions.

I argue that which is directly inaccessible is what differentiates good leaders from others. Traditional conservative modes of inquiry cannot access leadership *strategies* as outlined in this paper because of the very questions and methods they utilize. Take, for example, an attempt to investigate what makes an effective leader. The researcher engages with leaders considered to be effective, whether that be defined as the high achievement of student outcomes within the school, a somewhat flawed assumption based on the ever-increasing evidence that leadership is but a secondary factor on such achievement, or peer nominated, which also has selection bias, among other methods. In the process of engaging with these 'effective' leaders, the researcher inquires and probes to which the leader must:

> bring to the state of explicitness, for the purpose of transmission, the unconscious schemes of his practice. Just as the teaching of tennis, the violin, chess, dancing, or boxing breaks down into individual positions, steps, or moves, practices which integrate artificially isolated elementary units of

> behaviour into the unity of an organized activity, so the informant's discourse, in which he strives
> to give himself the appearance of symbolic mastery of his practice, tends to draw attention to the
> most remarkable 'moves' … rather than to the principles from which these moves and all equally
> possible moves can be generated and which, belonging to the universe of the undisputed, most
> often remain in their implicit state. (Bourdieu 1977: 19)

A particular limiting factor in such inquiry is that the informant produces a discourse that is biased towards the most remarkable moves and also one of familiarity. Through the immersion of familiarity, the leader leaves unsaid all that he or she believes goes without saying. However, it is this junction where the conscious and unconscious overlap that the feel for the game exists. By omitting what are perceived to be the less remarkable moves, essentially where the decisions are made to pursue what are to become the remarkable moves, leaders, and implicitly researchers, are constraining what can be extracted about the phenomenon of leadership.

A similar process occurs when extracting information from literature in the formulation of questionnaire item banks. As much of the literature is limited to the remarkable moves of educational leaders, subsequent items again fail to elucidate the implicit and directly inaccessible elements of leadership. The models and frameworks constructed around the remarkable moves and then reported on in the literature of the field form the basis of much of the teachings in the academy. Bates and Eacott (2008) noted that leading change was the most common topic taught in educational administrative programmes in Australia, to which Gronn (2008) suggested, 'although much used, is devoid of any particular concrete referent or context and is simply something "out there"' (p. 182). The objectified and reductionist nature of much of the work in educational leadership fails to recognize that any particular move or action undertaken is the product of the previous *strategies* of all parties and is reflective of each actor's social position at the moment in question, within the overall power relations of the context.

To access such information requires a level of inquiry not frequently seen within the field. Theoretically, and the analogies discussed earlier suggest empirical verification of this, the focus of educational scholarship needs to change. Conventional studies have placed the principal at the apex of inquiry, and their actions, or lack thereof, are studied for their effect on school performance, staff or some other related unit of interest. Viewing the leadership *strategies* of the principal places them within a web of intertwined connections. It cannot be represented in a two-dimensional linear causal map. The under-current of leadership behaviour requires increased attention. The focus of inquiry shifts from directly observable behaviours (although they remain important) to the directly inaccessible macro-level behaviours which are enacted through micro-level social interactions. Leadership actions need to be placed in a social space; that is, there is a need to understand the context of the situation in relation to historical events that have taken place. Any action taken is the product of the actor's peculiar history, their *habitus*. Therefore, during interviews, it is important to seek to uncover aspects of the leader's history which have led them to the present, their experiences at school and university, even what games they liked to play as a child. Bourdieu suggested that the feel for the game

is acquired beginning in childhood through participation in social activities (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986). In addition, to acquire an understanding of the history of events also requires observations over an extended period. The single drop-in observation is not sufficient, although it is quite possible that the extended observations of Wolcott (1973) are more than needed.

This is not, however, proposing that scholarship of educational leadership needs to align with any one particular mode of inquiry, for example quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. Such alignment would be to the detriment of knowledge creation and scholarship. Studies drawing from a diverse range of methods and designs are desirable, if not necessary. What is required is a shift in epistemological positioning. As an academy of scholars we need to be constantly asking ourselves, what knowledge is relevant to advancing both practice and scholarship? How do we decide/debate what is relevant knowledge? How do we debate the value of methods of inquiry? This paper has sought to challenge the traditional conservative approaches to the study of educational leadership and ask questions regarding whether current inquiry is looking at the right things.

Conclusion

The 'what works' (Gorard 2005) or 'instrumental' (Gunter 2001a) stream of research in the field arguably finds its roots in what many believe to be the key mission of professional schools, that is, to develop knowledge that can be translated into skills that advance the practice of the profession (Simon 1976, Kondrat 1992, van de Ven and Johnson 2006). As such, the central mindset of the field has been a quest for some essence of leadership, some distinctive set of characteristics possessed by leaders and not others (Evers and Lakomski 1996, 2000, 2001). In seeking to go beyond what is already known in the field, the ideas proposed in this paper are meant to stimulate debate and further inquiry. They are intended to provide a new platform for theory and methodological developments. The positioning of educational leadership within a wider social space poses key methodological questions for scholars and critical key points of reflection for practitioners. For scholars, it is no longer appropriate to study educational leadership at a distance, for example questionnaires and document analysis. It also requires approaches more commonly aligned with sociology and anthropology than has traditionally been the case. In doing so, it draws in closely aligned fields of education policy and sociology of education, reflecting the pluralistic and, to a lesser extent, inter-disciplinary nature of the educational leadership. The introduction of social relations, and not just bureaucratic authority or chains of command, requires a depth of investigation that goes beyond the mere literal meaning of words or a list of bodily movements to the much bigger question of 'What was the person engaged in it for?'

This proposition is clearly designed to be provocative, although it is also meant to be an optimistic perspective and not just a radical rejection of conventional scholarship. It challenges the uncritical acceptance of hierarchy and formal authority as the sole sources of power and influence in relationship within educational institutions, and in doing so, bypasses approaches to

educational leadership scholarship which populate most educational leadership journals and books. This approach may be unsettling for some in the field, but it is becoming hard to ignore such a stance. Although this should not be interpreted as a prescriptive call for how further inquiry should be undertaken as Foucault (1980: 265) wrote:

> The role of an intellectual is not to tell others what they have to … The work of an intellectual is not to shape others' political will; it is, through the analyses that he carries out in his field, to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions and on the basis of this reproblematization (in which he carries out this specific task as an intellectual) to participate in the formation of a political will (in which he has his role as citizen to play).

While this paper has suggested an alternate focus of inquiry for educational leadership, it remains for the reader to accept the challenge. Doing so will enable important new insights into and understanding of educational leaders and the actions they take and do not take. I am well aware that many of my educational leadership colleagues working in schools of education do not consider the issues raised in this paper to be legitimate. In fact, this is the argument of the paper. Building on from the work of Rapp (2002), we must commit to looking beyond the current perceived elites and loudest voices in the field that situate themselves and a somewhat narrow narrative of what is educational leadership. The educational context and requirement to 'teach' leadership to our students establishes a constant challenge to our capacity to put critically reflective theorization into practice (Sinclair 2004: 15). As noted by Rapp (2002: 184), I believe that 'the potential of educational leadership lies in our ability to overcome and be stronger than our present, inert condition'. It is my intention that this paper resists the objectified positivist tradition of the vast majority of work on leadership in education and reawakens a quest to understand what it is that an educational leader does.

Notes

1. As an Australian educational leadership scholar, I cannot help but be particularly interested in the field within my own national boundaries while at the same time focusing on it internationally.
2. This is a government-funded title which tells the story, through a biographical narrative, of 12 'effective' Australian principals and the contexts of their work.
3. A deliberate stylistic choice has been made to indicate Bourdieu's concepts of *capital*, *field*, *habitus* and *strategies* in italics to prevent confusion with other uses of the terms.
4. Checks for validity were undertaken by cross referencing responses with other questions relating to their role and how they enact that role.
5. I am grateful to Jenny Gore who so articulately made this point at a recent post-graduate conference at the School of Education, University of Newcastle.

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