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To cite this article: Scott Eacott (2015) The principalship, autonomy, and after, Journal of Educational Administration and History, 47:4, 414-431, DOI: [10.1080/00220620.2015.996866](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2015.996866)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2015.996866>



Published online: 11 Mar 2015.



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The principalship, autonomy, and after

Scott Eacott*

Faculty of Education and Arts, Australian Catholic University, North Sydney, NSW, Australia

Contemporary discourses in educational administration have exponentially grown the number of adjectival leaderships, challenged traditional organisational structures, and offered autonomy as a solution to performance issues. In this theoretical paper, I ask *what does the principalship look like after autonomy?* Despite the range of objections that could be raised in relation to thinking with and through an organisational role, it is the contention of this paper that it is in the principalship that we find important resources for theorising educational administration, even if, at first sight, these resources appear to bear little connection to, or resonance with, contemporary discourses of ‘leadership’ in education. Working within a relational approach to educational administration that I am advancing, my argument is built around three key markers: the centrality of temporality, the (im)possibility of the local, and the imposition of ‘quality’.

Keywords: principal; social theory; temporality; autonomy; relational

Introduction

On an international scale, irrespective of systemic variance, the office of the principal – the principalship – is a key component in our conceptions of the social order of schooling. Large-scale projects such as the *International Successful School Principalship Project* reinforce the centrality of the principalship. My claim here is not that the principalship is a universal and stable role, rather that the idea of an administrative position such as the principalship – or headteacher to use the UK vernacular – is shared across many, at least English-speaking, western nations. Somewhat ironically, contemporary policy moves around school governance have raised the profile of the principalship despite the demonising of bureaucracy and the rhetoric of flatter organisations, networks, distributed leadership, and participatory decision-making within decentralised or devolved systems. Reinforced through our own lived experience of schooling and an ontological complicity with seeing organisations – if not the

*Email: scott.eacott@acu.edu.au

entire social world – through hierarchical structures, the theoretical and empirical schemata through which we come to know, do and be labour in education hold the principalship as the key administrative role (although it is now more common practice to go by ‘leadership’ or even ‘management’) in an educational institution. Ongoing policy interventions in school governance have however sought to re-organise administrative labour in education. This recasting of administrative labour places the somewhat timeless image of the principalship under revision.

Since at least the 1960s almost all education systems in western democratic societies have implemented some degree of reform concerned with devolution, decentralisation, and/or autonomy. Specific examples include free schools in England and Sweden, charter schools in the USA, not to mention the growth of for-profit providers running schools in India, Africa, and New Zealand. This is part of what Lingard (2010) describes, with origins found in comparative education, as ‘policy borrowing’ within a context of global education governance (Sellar and Lingard 2013). The global spread of school-based management or its various facsimiles, and its manifestation as principal autonomy (as is the current policy agenda in Australia), is consistent with what Grek (2009) labels the ‘comparative turn’ in education policy. This is where a proposed reform (e.g. principal autonomy) is a feature of a ‘successful’ education system elsewhere, yet absent in the country in question and its introduction is thought of – or argued for – as a means to bring about improved performance. For some, this is evidence of the global spread of the contemporary managerialist project (see Klikauer 2013) and the adoption of a theory of the firm, including the pursuit of competitive advantage. Australia, my geographic location, has been one of the leading embracers of the managerialist – although frequently coming under the broader brushstroke of ‘neoliberalism’ – agenda. The adoption of practices from private enterprise into the public services, and in particular education, and the social Darwinism of the market have become key policy levers in the recasting of educational administrative labour.

In this paper, I ask *what does the principalship look like after autonomy?* Despite the range of objections that could be raised in relation to thinking of contemporary educational administration¹ with and through the principalship, it is the contention of this paper that it is in the recasting of administrative labour that we find important resources for the task of theorising educational administration, even if, at first sight, these resources appear to bear little connection to, or resonance with, contemporary discourses of ‘leadership’ in education. The usefulness and relevance of these resources may only be made explicit if we understand recent policy moves as concerning a recasting of administrative labour, an understanding that positions bureaucratic roles within institutions not only in regard to contemporary events, but also in regard to questions of the futures of schooling. This is more than an intellectual puzzlement. It is a serious question for educational administration as a field of

both knowledge production and practice. Contemporary discourses have exponentially grown the number of adjectival leaderships, challenged traditional/classic organisational structures, and then offered autonomy as the solution. In contemporary Australia, this autonomy is not constructed and argued for as ‘school’ autonomy, as is often the case with school-based management rhetoric; rather, the current Tony Abbott-led Federal Liberal-National Party government is arguing for ‘principal’ autonomy.² As a result, I argue that the current autonomy agenda is a significant point for the office of the principalship both theoretically and empirically.

It is important to explicitly state what this paper is, and equally, what it is not. There is a substantive, and enduring, body of literature on the various forms of school autonomy ranging from the instrumental provision of strategies (Caldwell and Spinks 1988, 1992, 1998) through to the socially critical perspective (Smyth 1993). Although matters of power, injustice, and governing remain of interest to readers of *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, in the broader discourses of educational administration such matters are frequently, and often rapidly, dismissed as ideological or too removed from practice. For example, in Caldwell’s (2012) ‘Review of related literature for the evaluation of empowering local schools’ for the Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations, he reduces the critical literatures (of which there are many) on school-based management and its many facsimiles to a single citation – Smyth (1993) – and a very short single sentence tacked on to the end of a paragraph, ‘[r]obust criticisms were mounted’ (p. 8). My goal is to provide an alternate approach to theorising the principalship under conditions of shifting autonomy. What I offer is a, not the, way to think through the issues, but one which I believe offers potential to move beyond some of the tensions across the different ways research traditions of educational administration engage with the principalship and autonomy.

Theoretical resources

This paper mobilises a *relational* approach to the study of educational administration that I am advancing both here and elsewhere (Eacott 2015, Eacott and Hodges 2014, Eacott and Norris 2014). The intellectual heritage of this *relational* approach is eclectic, drawing heavily on French social theory such as the work of sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, management scholars such as Peter Dachler, Dian Marie Hoskings, and Mary Uhl-Bien, also critical management studies, political science, organisational studies, and given my own disciplinary location, recognised educational leadership, management, and administration thinkers such as Richard Bates, Colin Evers and Gabriele Lakomski, Thomas Greenfield, and contemporaries such as Helen Gunter, Pat Thomson, John Smyth, and Fenwick English. Significantly, in bringing critical pluralism to scholarship I engage with what I see as the key

theoretical problem of the legitimation of the social world and its empirical manifestation in the organisation of education. Through this theoretical and empirical focus, a *relational* approach investigates how the production of knowledge of the legitimacy, effectiveness, efficiency, and morality of administration connects with the practices of administration. In doing so, questions are raised regarding the extent to which existing ways of thinking are generative or limiting of alternate ways of being. A *relational* focus enables scholarship to move beyond internal tensions and external pressures by opening up institutions and engaging with the dynamic relations that they hold with other social institutions, those which constantly redefine their very existence. As a means of bringing this *relational* approach into conversation with the contemporary principalship, and in particular autonomy, the key features of the *relational* approach are:

- The centrality of ‘administration’ in the social world creates an ontological complicity in researchers (and others) that makes it difficult to epistemologically break from ordinary language;
- Rigorous ‘scientific’ inquiry calls for questioning the very foundations on which the office of the principalship is legitimised;
- The contemporary capitalist condition is constantly shaping, and shaped by, the image of administrative labour;
- Foregrounding social relations enables the overcoming of the contemporary, and arguably enduring, administrative tensions of individualism vs. collectivism, and structure vs. agency; and
- In doing so, there is a productive – rather than merely critical – space to theorise educational administration.

The type of analysis made possible by this *relational* approach offers a means of crafting theoretically charged narratives illuminating the situated nature of administration. Struggles for legitimacy are at the very core of institutions (Barley 2008). Social institutions, particularly modern institutions such as education, are the configuration of individual actors in a particular socio-geographic space. As such, groups are an epistemic construction as much as, if not more so than, an empirical reality. While individual actors exist in the empirical, it is the epistemic classification of groups on the basis of a particular attribute (which could include physical locality but more often location in a social hierarchy) that gives rise to institutions. In addition, administrative analysis is frequently based on an underlying generative assumption that this collection of individuals operate as a coherent whole. However, I, as with many others, argue that such configurations of individuals in a particular time and space are dynamic contested terrains. The binding attributes of institutions, as social groupings, are performative in the sense that they only exist in practice and cannot be solely reduced to particular structural arrangements of the empirical. The binds that hold a group of individual actors together in the form of a social institution are therefore problematic, active, and by virtue of these qualities, fragile.

The work of institutional actors is the ongoing construction of the social world through the embedding and embodying of it with meaning centred on what is legitimate. Therefore, change in institutions – including the constitution of roles – can only take place through shifts in the logics whereby legitimacy is assessed, or, in other words, shifts in the standards whereby alternatives are deemed to be appropriate. For the purpose of this paper – arguing that the office of the principalship is under revision – a *relational* approach provides an analytical lens for interrogating the moment-to-moment social relations that define the work of administration. Specifically, this *relational* approach opens up analysis that brings to the level of discourse the underlying generative features of the principalship. In doing so, this approach provides a means of constructing an alternate narrative or logic whereby the legitimacy of what it means to hold the office of the principalship is defined.

Recasting administrative labour

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005[1999]) argue that since the mid-1970s, capitalism abandoned hierarchical Fordist work structures primarily on the basis of the attack on the alienation of everyday life by bureaucracy. Temporally, this aligns with the proliferation of the ‘leadership’ industry in broader management and administrative discourses. As Kellerman (2013) argues, initially spawned and sustained in the USA in the 1970s, when corporate America was, for the first time since the Second World War, fearful of competition from abroad, notably Japan, ‘leadership’ became the dominant rhetoric in the pursuit of improved organisational performance. However, there are significant limitations in constructing an understanding of administration in a linear or chronological manner (see English 2002). History plays a small role in the Anglophone educational administration discourses (Samier 2006). With philosophy, sociology, and the humanities, it has been forced out of preparation and development programmes during the standards era (English 2006), and as with public administration, there is a general ahistorical approach to scholarship (Adams 1992). A considerable limitation in our conceptualisation of administration, and administrative labour, is the constructed point of origin within the modern bureaucracy – that articulated by Weber (1978[1922]) – rather than recognising a lineage dating back to at least ancient times. As Samier (2006) argues:

Many administrative phenomena are really historical topics rather than strictly managerial problems. First, those involving forces external to organisations that influence decisions and actions, which are regarded simplistically as ‘environmental factors’ in systems theory, would be more fruitfully pursued as the study of administration under different historical conditions, such as colonisation and decolonisation, social unrest, revolt, revolution and the introduction of new political and social values like equality and equity, all of which have had a significant influence on educational systems. (pp. 131–132)

Although for some, the administration of education is changing to reflect corporate ideals, or a model of the firm, there is a long history of broader managerial discourses in educational administration. It is significant to remember that the establishment of departments of educational administration in US universities aligns with the publication of Taylor's (1911) *The principles of scientific management*. Furthermore, it is well documented that many of the early high-profile professors of educational administration, such as Ellwood Cubberly at Stanford, did not have strong scholarly backgrounds in education (Tynack and Hansot 1982, Bates 2010). More so, Callahan's (1962) classic *Education and the cult of efficiency* explicitly outlines how managerial approaches were a generative feature of education policy and reforms during the first half of the twentieth century in the USA. This remains important because as Kanigel (1997) argues, Taylorism is so embedded in our understanding of organisations and their management that we frequently fail to recognise it.

This is not to suggest that there is not an intensification of managerialism in contemporary times, rather it is to make the point that this is not a 'new' phenomenon. To ignore history is to de-contextualise – in both time and space – the argument. In other words, conventional ways of thinking make it unlikely, if not impossible, to conceive of educational administration in any other way than the existing orthodoxy. This is not necessarily the radical paradigm shifts articulated by Kuhn (1962), or even the epistemological break argued for by Bachelard (1984[1934]) – later used by Althusser (1969[1965]) and Bourdieu with Chamboredon and Passeron (1991[1968]) – rather, I am building an argument for a form of scholarship that pays attention to locating the scholarly narrative in time and space.

Structurally, education is one of the greatest achievements of administration. Systematic, comprehensive education offered to a nation's citizens – and in particular, youth – is at a scale that very few national, and international, reforms can claim. What is at stake in the current drive for autonomy is the underlying generative principle of education – universality. Autonomy discourses, those which are about creating localised distinctions, are part of a broader reform of public administration. Post-bureaucratic models of educational administration, particularly of public education, shift the principalship from the local face of a state agenda to a role under revision. This 'revised' principalship is not the same unit of analysis that is the focus of critical literatures. Rather, it is a construction which enables the dismissal of critical analysis through the appearance of emancipatory potential and the prospect of moving beyond the structural constraints of the bureaucracy. This is an important move of the managerialist project, one that has the potential to shut down the alternative. But this alternative is one constructed within existing ways of thinking.

In response to critiques of school performance and constraints on innovation, contemporary discourses in educational administration have sought to

break down bureaucratic structures to argue that ‘relief from stultifying mediocrity lies in deregulation and local control of schools’ (Timar and Kirp 1988, p. 75). Long-time advocates of self-managing schools, Caldwell and Spinks (1988, 1992, 1998, 2013) argue that self-management provides the basis for a new professionalism and new forms of innovation that will provide a quality future-focused education for all. However, this stream of work is heavily criticised for over-playing the impact of reforms (Wolf 2002), overlooking many of the structural inequities of society that come to the fore through schooling (Thrupp 2003) and are exponentially grown through school choice and self-managing schools (Smyth 1993, 2008, 2011). The fundamental flaw in these conceptualisations of administrative labour is the distance created with the day-to-day work of education. On the StudentsFirst website, the Australian Federal government articulates its position, stating:

Both internationally and in Australia, evidence emphasises the advantages of school autonomy as part of a comprehensive strategy for school improvement.

In Australia, schools in all states and territories have been moving towards more autonomous and independent models to improve education outcomes.

The Australian Government also recognises that giving schools and school leaders greater autonomy can help improve student results.

Great schools have leaders and teachers who have the independence to make decisions and develop the courses that best meet the needs of their students.

The recasting of administrative labour is very much a socio-historical event, one that requires substantive grounding in a particular time and space. In the example above, the notion of autonomy is given a history – and a scale – through reference to ‘evidence’ both from Australia and internationally. Autonomy is also linked to improving schools. There is also the commodification of autonomy as governments are ‘giving’ schools and school leaders greater autonomy. The commodification is consistent with critiques of autonomy discourses (Eacott 2011). In mainstream discourses, autonomy is constructed as the administrative key to unleashing the potential of the principalship to achieve the highest levels of school outcomes. However, I argue that the pursuit of autonomy is a fallacy. As Bourdieu (2005[2000]) notes, in heavily administered societies, much like a gravitational field, even the person perceived to have absolute power – or decision-making authority – is him/herself held within the constraints of administration. That is, nobody knows anymore who is the subject of the final decision, and the place of the decision is both everywhere and nowhere. This is counter to the illusion of *the* decision-maker and the notion of absolute autonomy.

Common-sense usage of ‘autonomy’ would suggest a separation, even severance, of the principalship from a system or institutional context. The

tension inherent in autonomy arguments is the embedding of an explicit tie to the local. I argue that the principalship can only be understood through its relations with other actors and institutions, going as far as to say that the principalship owes as much of its constitution to these relations as it does to anything else. These relations are only brought into existence in a particular time and space. This means that social activity is not viewed or mapped using measurable units of the clock but rather as actions taking place in relation to other actions. These relations are reflective of the various dynamics underway in the social space.

The centrality of temporality

Fahy, Easterby-Smith and Lervik (2014) argue that the spatial and temporal dynamics of organisational life are much neglected. This is a key observation in the ongoing recasting of administrative labour. Schooling, as a canonical modern institution, has an underlying generative temporality. As I have argued elsewhere:

What we have come to know as the school and the administration of schooling is constituted through the operationalization 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. (Eacott 2013a, p. 96)

The hegemonic position on time and temporality in modern institutions is its measurement in terms of an abstraction, separate from events and reversible through units of the clock. As Bourdieu (2000[1997]) notes, reinforced through ordinary language, time is constituted as a thing, something that an individual or institution has, gains or wastes. This relationship keeps temporality and practice separate where either one can be overlaid upon the other to measure or construct a narrative. There is however somewhat of a temporal turn in the contemporary social sciences, witnessed in sociology (Adkins 2009, 2011), human services (Colley *et al.* 2012), education (Duncheon and Tierney 2013), and educational administration (Eacott 2013a). Mobilising temporality, as opposed to just time, historicises action without a need to prescribe a past–present–future model of reality. This challenges mainstream developmental thinking by breaking down the underlying generative linear progress that explicitly links practice with time. Importantly, as Adkins (2011) argues, in breaking with a view that sees time as an object that operates externally to agents, it is possible to consider temporal points of view from the acting agents. This mobilisation of temporality enables an alternate construction of the principalship – one that addresses, or at least engages with, the concern with comparison based on proxies for institutional and leadership performance (e.g. student test results).

Contemporary orthodoxy in educational administration discourses is built around central concepts of 'leadership' and 'change'. Caldwell (2007) considers these to be almost one and the same, or at least co-dependent, and elsewhere (Eacott 2013a) I have argued that what we have come to know as 'leadership' is defined by our understanding of change and its measurement over time. This is however only one way to conceptualise temporality, and although consistent with managerialist accounts of institutions and performance it has arguably reached its limits. A conceptualisation of time that exists separate to action is an organising framework arguably built for comparison. Clock time was central to Taylor's (1911) shop floor primarily through his time and motion studies. He was particularly interested in measuring performance and comparing against both past performance and the performance of others. This mobilisation of time is central to international, and national, comparative testing regimes. That is, time, and points of time, are an organising structure for educational labour, be that teaching, learning, and/or administration.

The alternate, and one that I argue autonomy discourses call for, sees the principalship play out in time rather than separate to it. As the contemporary capitalist condition shifts educational administration from an industrial to post-Fordist models of management, the boundaries between time and performance are increasingly blurred. That is, the autonomous principalship is temporalised, or temporalising. The autonomy agenda does not eliminate an external narrative of temporality, but casts radical doubt on it as the sole – or even most appropriate – means of understanding practice. This is however a major challenge for educational administration discourses which for the most part focus on a manipulation, which is not necessarily a negative use of the word, of people, structures, and symbols for the purpose of a desired future state. Contemporary 'leadership' discourses are heavily committed to this goal. However, a temporalising principalship is not about building an alternate (better?) future, rather it is about building an alternate in the here and now. The conceptual category of the 'future' is somewhat redundant, or to think with Nowotny (1994[1987]), at least loses some of its attractiveness with the emergence of an 'extended present' (p. 11).

If the future is present in the here and now, this casts into radical doubt the distance between the present and future. More so, it casts doubt over the credibility of comparison between schools and school systems. What becomes most important in this conceptualisation of temporality is trajectory – a historicising of action and locating that history within a narrative of performance. This trajectory is not isolated as it cannot be removed from the social space in which it takes place. However, I argue that a greater level of understanding can be derived from a rigorous and robust description of this temporal trajectory than can be from a broader brush stroke of sites using an external (and arguably normative) criterion. This is not to say that scholarship in educational administration ought to progress through a series of small-scale case studies as such parallel monologues do little to add to the body of knowledge. The over-reliance on

small-scale case studies is an enduring critique of educational administration discourses. My concern is less with case studies per se, and more with the failure to locate these case studies within the social space and temporality.

The (im)possibility of ‘the local’

As social institutions, schools are both embedded and embody the unique spatial–temporal conditions in which they exist. The contemporary capitalist condition is one that has given rise to what Pellizzoni (2011) labels ‘consumer sovereignty’. This is not surprising given the ubiquitous commercial settings that surround us daily, encouraging consumption – resulting from choice – as a primary source of well-being. Furthermore, the contemporary capitalist condition is one of constant revision, instant change, and dynamic institutional identities, or as Bauman (2000, 2005) calls it, a ‘liquid society’. Such conditions explicitly challenge conservative conceptualisations of schooling based on notions of state provision, strong community ties, and stability. The solidity and continuity that is a trademark of modern identities has been replaced with the floating and drifting selves of contemporary societies. Unlike its hierarchal past with the state adopting a ‘panoptic surveillance’ (see Foucault 1977[1975]), the contemporary capitalist condition has the individual school, and arguably the individual educator vying for attention in the fluidity and diversity of the marketplace. In doing so, the ‘school community’ – the mythical entity that combines both geographical affiliation, but also an emotional attachment to ‘the local’ – becomes little more than a nostalgic imagery of a bygone era where schools, particularly the local public school, were a central feature of communal identity.

This poses a significant issue for mainstream western discourses of the principalship and the autonomy agenda. Common-sense arguments for autonomy are built upon the assumption that schools will better serve students if they are autonomous, especially if held to account publicly – even if only through market forces. The central thrust of this assumption is that those closest to schools, including parents and teachers, know how to serve students best. Who exactly are these people is contested. In the case of parents, is it the parents of the students currently at the school, or, is it the parents of yet-to-come students (and does it matter how soon that yet-to-come is)? If the latter, how does one even begin to identify this group? Similarly, the same questions could be raised about teachers and those ‘stakeholders’ in the immediate geographic space. The assumption of physical proximity to the school as constituting those with the most knowledge about ‘the local’ is arguably cast into radical doubt when considered within the discourses of consumer choice, and the globalising nature of education policy.

Despite attention to the need for autonomy as a means of sustaining (or establishing) an attachment to ‘the local’, corresponding school choice discourses encourage consumerism in education and selection based on perceived

fit rather than geographic attachment.³ This fit may be about ideology (e.g. faith-based), aspiration (e.g. social mobility through a ‘high-achieving’ school), or many other orientations, but rarely is the choice agenda ever about a sense of loyalty to ‘the local’. Even market-based discussions that focus on niche providers are often dismissed on the basis that the niche approach is only enacted by those who cannot compete with comprehensive institutions on a larger scale. Autonomy discourses are therefore embedded within a broader set of discourses that place ‘the local’, that central feature of autonomy, under revision. Many of the assumptions regarding autonomy and ‘the local’ are counter to more sociological accounts of educational administration which argue for the impossibility of separating ‘the local’ from the global – even if they do not use that language (see Blackmore 2004, Bates 2006, 2008). Most striking about autonomy discourses is the perceived separation from a (nation-)state anchor while at the same time the facilitation of connections on a global scale, all to be achieved through localisation.

However, rather than assuming where the boundaries of the local, global, and anything in between are, or should be, these accounts of autonomy and the principalship alert us to how the boundaries and experiences of them are socially constructed. Normative assumptions – those which dominate much of the mainstream discourses of educational administration – assume static, in both time and space, boundaries. In addition, as Bourdieu warns, the artificial partitioning of the social world into such spaces serves the classifiers’ purposes more so than reflecting an empirical reality (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992[1992]). I am not suggesting that there is not a local or any form of affiliation to material and/or symbolic objects in the geographic space, rather arguing that establishing boundaries around what is, and more importantly, what is not, ‘the local’ is problematic. Therefore, autonomy discourses which raise the degree of importance of ‘the local’ are engaging in a complex and contested space. The notion of a static, in both time and space, local is counter to understandings of the social world that recognise fluidity and dynamic social relations. For the principalship, discourses of ‘the local’ both narrow – through the provision of some sense of geographic marker – and create a new scale – through the complexity of defining boundaries. Further complicating the matter is the nature of judgement on the principalship and its focal point, not necessarily its genesis.

The imposition of ‘quality’

An underlying tension in the autonomy debate is that of liberation. This liberating of individual schools, or units within a larger system, is proposed as a means of improving the quality of performance and/or product. The great difficulty or tension that exists is that this measure or criterion for quality of performance and/or product of schooling is already decided. In contemporary discourses,

especially those outside the academy, it is, for the most part, performance in standardised testing regimes. This means that the quality argument is more often than not backward mapped into policy and subsequent planning documents. In what is a Tayloristic turn, the imposition of quality markers of school, and by virtue principal, autonomy discourses is more likely to lead to the pursuit of efficiency – especially if funding is reduced, even if only in relative terms. As such, quality discourses are as much a constraint on autonomy as they are a facilitator. The presence of a priori criteria of success, those which align with a pre-existing normative orientation, does little to provide the conditions conducive to alternate ways of doing, being, and knowing. The backward mapping approach is consistent with the rational rhetoric of management (Abrahamson 1997) for bringing about ‘effective’ performance through a series of logical and sequential steps or modifications of practice. However, as Thomson (2010) points out, organisational actors become increasingly better at playing the game rather than challenging the rules of the game or its formula for success. These social conditions cannot be ignored. The managerial rhetoric around autonomy and freeing the principalship to innovate and localise education is negated if the markers of quality are set beyond ‘the local’.

An alternate way of thinking this through is Michel Foucault’s ‘practice of freedom’. Following Foucault (Fornet-Betancourt *et al.* 1987), I contend that freedom is not synonymous with liberation and/or autonomy. The problem is not ‘Let’s liberate our school leaders’ but rather engaging with the practice of freedom by which one could define what is education and educating, and the pedagogical relationship. Previously, I have argued that it is possible to think anew what it means to be a ‘quality’ school and in particular how one school, but notably the principal, rejected (although not completely) the use of external measures of quality as the sole criterion (Eacott 2013b). The key point that I am making here is that what is most limiting about orthodox ways of thinking is that they are based in the orthodoxy of their time and space.

The construction of absolute binaries such as autonomous and bureaucratic (although these two are not directly opposite) educational administration is not necessarily helpful, let alone empirically defensible. As argued earlier, it is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate an individual school. That is, the binary of individual or collective is not straightforward, as no school is completely constrained by social structures or entirely free to do as they wish. The social world is less clear. My argument is that policy, such as those around autonomy, is the product and producer of administration, and by virtue, the principalship. You cannot come to understand the principalship without attention to the contemporary policy conditions which in turn cannot be understood without attention to contemporary administrative practice. There is a reciprocal interplay as the principalship is shaped by, and shaping of, the contemporary conditions, in the time and space, in which it takes place.

Bourdieu (2004[2001]) stresses the need to not focus solely on the restraints on practice at the expense of the freedoms available to leaders. This is not to suggest that we should engage in some naive dialogue assuming absolute freedom to do what you want. Instead, the scholarly narrative needs to weave the two together. To privilege either one limits the scholarly narrative to replacing one master narrative with another. In de-centring both the constraints and freedoms, it is possible to engage with the relational nature of the principalship in the contexts of autonomy. Most importantly, this opens avenues for thinking anew the principalship.

Conclusion

Contemporary thought and analysis in the scholarly discourses of educational administration stress the importance of the principalship, autonomy, and ‘the local’, particularly in the pursuit of improving educational quality. This is not surprising given that in broader public discourses, leaders matter and market-based reforms are useful levers for producing effective institutions. However, these mainstream orientations towards autonomy have considered relationships from the standpoint of individual, independent, and discrete entities. This has enabled policy rhetoric and mainstream studies to establish constructs (e.g. principals, schools, stakeholders, and the state) as variables open to manipulation – the underlying generative principles of policy interventions.

The challenge of scholarship is to get beyond the naive understanding of the spontaneous sociologist and construct knowledge through rigorous and robust methodologies which facilitate new ways of knowing, being, and doing educational administration. The office of the principalship is an almost universally recognisable post. However, this is as much a weakness as it is a strength. It poses one of the greatest challenges of scholarship on the principalship. The spontaneous sociologist within us assumes the validity of labels and objects (entities) and works from there. My approach, and what I have argued in this paper, is that mainstream discourses of autonomy and the principalship actually fly in the face of contemporary thought and analysis in the field. Bringing together a diverse array of theoretical resources under the *relational* approach that I am advancing here and elsewhere, in this paper I have sought to construct an argument for a new image of the principalship, one that illuminates blind spots in contemporary scholarship and calls for theoretically and empirically moving beyond accepting at face value notions such as ‘the local’, ‘quality’, and ‘autonomy’.

The world of educational administration has experienced massive change over the past few decades; however, the theorisations that we mobilise to examine educational institutions have not, at scale, experienced the same degree of epistemological and ontological development – despite the proliferation of perspectives. That is, while educational administration as a disciplinary space has grown in size and significance over the past few decades, not to

mention the rapid expansion of leadership preparation and development programmes on a global scale, the discipline finds itself in an increasingly challenged position. Not since the establishment of departments of educational administration have the boundaries of the discipline become so blurred. The rise in policy studies and the breadth of the sociology of education, among others, have encroached on what was conservatively educational administration's territory. There is growing criticism of educational administration researchers in their failure to develop coherent and progressive approaches to knowledge production that can influence and shape policy and practice. This comes alongside critique for the lack of scholarly robustness in educational administration studies. If not practically useful and not rigorous and robust, then educational administration is in trouble.

Therefore, if educational administration is to flourish as a disciplinary space, then it needs means of providing unique voices on a diverse range of administrative problems. This is why I argue for the need to focus on the theoretical problem and its empirical manifestation. Attention to the theoretical problem enables the avoidance of theory fetishism, technical paranoia, or becoming too insulated and inward looking. As educational administration scholars, we are located in a wider system of knowledge production. Our theories are influenced by our many links. Therefore, while I strongly defend the need to embrace, protect, and teach our scholastic history, we must also expand our definition of foundational works if we are to capture the complexity of the contemporary conditions. As students of the social world, our target is constantly moving.

What I have provided is a (not *the*) way of breaking with existing paradigms in educational administration and recasting our understanding of educational administrative labour. Significantly, I have sought to shift from content-specific issues, as such content are not facts of an objective reality but epistemic constructs, to social practice; a move from an entity-based perspective to a *relational* one. This paper serves as an invitation. It is not final. To take seriously the matters I raise will require going beyond this paper. It requires attention to scholarship in its broadest sense: the role of the researcher; the construction and ongoing maintenance of the research object; and articulation of the ways of seeing, knowing, and doing. Therefore, while I offer a sound basis for mobilising an alternate conceptualisation of the principalship, I encourage the reader to think with, beyond, and where necessary, against what I argue in the spirit of the scholastic enterprise. The work of others may support, add to, or even discredit my claims, but this is part of the intellectual trajectory of generating alternate ideas for hegemonic discourses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. I am well aware that many, if not all, of my peers would prefer the contemporarily popular label of ‘educational leadership’ rather than a more historically located ‘educational administration’ – not to mention that ‘educational management’ fits between them chronologically, but I have opted for ‘educational administration’ as a means of foregrounding my attention to the recasting of administrative labour in education. The non-choice of ‘leadership’ will become more obvious as I build my argument. I did consider the inclusive ‘educational leadership, management and administration’ but considered that not to be in the interest of brevity and ease of reading.
2. See www.studentsfirst.gov.au/school-autonomy.
3. An enduring critique of the school choice agenda is that choice is not a universal and that only those families who were already advantaged could exercise the choice. In a number of US-based discourses of schooling, this is labelled the ghettoisation of schooling (see Anderson 2009).

Notes on contributor

Scott Eacott is currently associate professor of educational leadership at the Australian Catholic University (North Sydney). He has published widely, with research interests and contributions in three main areas: educational leadership theory and methodology; leadership preparation and development; and strategy in educational administration. His latest book *Educational leadership relationally* articulates and defends a relational approach to educational leadership, management and administration scholarship.

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