

PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Challenging the Orthodoxy of School Leadership

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I became an assistant principal at the age of 26. I cite this not to boast, although my parents and wife were so amazingly proud at the time, but rather to highlight how quick we come to accept orthodoxy, even if it is inconsistent with our ideals.

Before I engaged with my first school executive (note the infiltration of corporate language into our educational vernacular) meeting I had already been seduced by the managerialist project of education. I was reading and talking of evidence-based practice, value-added data, quality improvement of student outcomes, strategic planning, and arguably one of educators' eternal quests – best practice. What I do in this paper is problematise some of the ideas that fill so many of the pages of school leadership journals and conference presentations.

As this paper is a short think piece, my approach is more intensive than extensive. I seek not to tell others what they have to do, rather through the issues raised and the questioning of what is thought of as self-evident, I aim to disrupt the reader's mindset, the way you do and think of things. My sole intention is to engage the reader in an intellectual moment. I apologise to those who expect a more formal style of writing from these pieces, but I am un-ashamedly making a passionate plea to my fellow educational leaders to embrace what is educative about our work and to fight back against those who seek to narrow our role.

Bourdieu (1989) warns researchers to beware of words. He argues that common language is the repository of common sense. A historical accumulation of orthodox meaning that obscures our understanding of social practice. Due to the brevity of this piece I am going to focus on a few concepts/practices that I see as highly problematic: strategic planning, shared vision, and participation.

Strategic Planning

It seems funny to be criticising the literature and practice of strategic leadership and planning given that I have contributed to this in the past. It was actually sitting in a school planning day that sparked my academic career. Having

been off class all day as an executive team to get the planning done (note the explicit notion of participation), at about three o'clock I noted that we could have taught our class and then done this after school as we were yet to have achieved anything other than a long conversation and a nice Chinese lunch. While I note the importance of conversation, this was not an overtly purposeful one and my current research in schools indicates that my experience is not a lone story. In response to my comment the principal turned to me and said 'Welcome to school planning, son'.

If we move past the patronising nature of the latter part of the comment, it was this acceptance of this is how it is and the lack of seeing any possible chance of an alternative that feed what Duncan Waite would refer to as my 'intellectual puzzlement'.

'Re-presenting' a School

What I have come to realise is that strategic planning actually allows one to re-present their school. Note the very specific word choice. Not 'represent' but 're-present'. School strategic plans and annual school reports as documents are little more than a proxy of organisational reality. As they become increasingly public documents they arguably serve more of a marketing tool than an educational one. The various domains of plans are frequently little more than the localised version of a political agenda.

Timelines and funding regimes reflect the will of those beyond education. In fact, school based planning, sold to educators as part of a decentralising or even devolving agenda, is a Trojan Horse of the state. The cost of the autonomy to plan at the local level is adherence to an agenda set afar. Coming with that is increased accountability and implicitly, if not ultimately, the sole judgement of school leadership on the achievement of key performance indicators such as student test results, budgets, timelines and my favourite, deliverables.

The thought of funding programs that are based on addressing issues of educational disadvantage having the caveat that if you do not achieve the targets set in year one you don't get the money in year two is highly problematic.

The reason the school has been identified is because it does not reach the targets. The very thought that throwing money at schools and then expecting them to change years of marginalisation is flawed. To borrow a popular adage,

it is like using a band aid for cancer. This leads me to my second point, a 'shared vision'.

Shared Vision

In my early meetings as an assistant principal I sought to establish a shared vision for my team. The choice of words is deliberate. Yes, a 'shared vision' for 'my team'. Think of the way schools are structured, the compartmentalisation of faculties/stages and the appointment of executives to lead/manage departments. The same then goes for education systems, just on a larger scale. Much of the educational leadership and change literature centres on having a shared vision. This shared vision is seen as imperative in bringing people together to work for the collective good. But what does it really mean to have a shared vision. Although it is naive to assume it is a dichotomy, I am going to use it to make my point. On one hand, a shared vision serves as a strategy of convenience, seeking to reproduce existing practices and most importantly socialise new members into such practices while marginalising those who do not conform. On the other hand, a shared vision can be one of contestation, where ideas, policies and practices are open to be challenged, extended, but most importantly, engaged with.

As educational leaders we are key definers of the culture of society. That is why governments are so quick to intervene in education and seek to influence our practice. However as Helen Gunter challenges us, in this era of post global financial crisis, the managerialist project of education should be ripe for the crushing. If we seek to use our position in society to advocate for those who have been marginalised, whether through social, political or economic means, contesting and engaging as a public intellectual is imperative. We are more than conduits for a state agenda. As educators we do important work. And any time you or a colleague forget that, I encourage you to listen to (or read) Taylor Mali's poem 'What teachers make'. We do important work!

Participation

An integral part of this important work is speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. The challenge surrounding the push for empowerment is that any system that encourages participation favours the privileged over the marginalised. Think of the parents who come to parents and friends meetings, school council meetings. Do they represent the diversity of your school community? Gary Anderson has written about this in the US and numerous critics of school-based management have raised similar concerns. Critical social theory has shown that those in dominant positions in society rarely do anything that challenges their location in the social space. Through raw numbers alone, the dominant group and orthodoxy of the status quo, far outnumber the marginalised.

Therefore participation, despite its intent, often further marginalises the very voices of groups that need it the most. As educational leaders we are in a privileged position and as a colleague of mine once remarked, it is not how you get through the door that matters, rather it is what you do when you're in.

Conclusion

If there was anything that participants should have taken away from the 2010 CCEAM/ACEL Conference in Sydney, it is that the wonderfully uplifting performances of the school students that opened each day and entertained at the conference dinner are not the kind of school work that is represented on *MySchool* or other forms of standardised testing. But as parent, I cannot help but be moved by that. As a male colleague of mine once said, it is always during the performances of children that I tend to get a little dust in my eye. To cite but one example, the singing, dancing and musical accompaniment of Hallelujah on Monday morning was not only worthy of a Mark Holden 'touch-down' (my apologies for those not familiar with Australian Idol) but embodies what it means to go to school and be educated by caring and compassionate teachers who care about the individual hopes and dreams of our children. Remember what educators make, it is not the numbers that fill websites, reports and league tables, it is our future generations. We owe it to our children to do what is right by them, as decided in the pedagogical space between teacher and child, not the distant offices of bureaucrats.

The very last time I heard Hedley Beare speak, he did two things to me. One, he made me squirm in my seat. Not through being uncomfortable or bored, but through the intellectual challenge that he proposed in what he was saying. Basically he made me think and question the very core of why I was thinking the way I was.

Secondly, and closely related to the first, he made me want to respond, both to him personally and through my actions. While I am no Hedley Beare I hope that this piece has in some small way contributed to his legacy of making people think. Maybe even encourage others to squirm and even go so far as to respond, either to me personally or via the pages of ACEL publications.

Perspectives on Educational Leadership

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