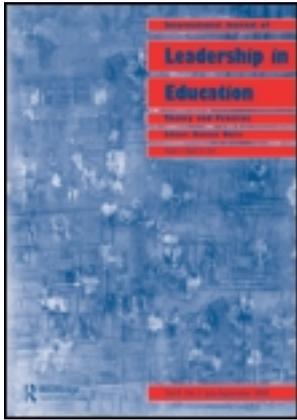


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## INTRODUCTION

# These disruptive times: rethinking critical educational leadership

JANE WILKINSON and SCOTT EACOTT

This special issue is framed against a backdrop of rapid transformation in politics, business and education, the global financial crisis, global warming and major shifts in government in the USA, England, Australia and the Middle East. Its focus is on critical educational leadership as a tool for scholarship and practice at a time of rapid social, political and economic change.

This special issue poses the question: at a time of major transformations to the political, social, economic and educational landscapes, what are the implications for rethinking critical educational leadership as a tool for (disruptive) scholarship and practice? It takes as its theme, ‘these disruptive times’, in order to capture the possibilities that may flow when previously taken-for-granted ideologies embedded in ‘common sense’ assumptions (such as the neoliberal framing of policies, practices and discourses characteristic of many anglophone government and economic institutions over the past two decades) are exposed to debate, scrutiny and contention.

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The articles in the special issue draw on a variety of critical and post-critical methodological and theoretical approaches located in contemporary social theory to interrogate and trouble the current logic of practice which holds sway in educational leadership. To achieve this end, we have placed a particular emphasis in the special issue on the imbrication of scholarship and practice, as a means of opening up productive and fruitful lines of enquiry for researchers and practitioners. Each contributor explicitly addresses aspects of leadership practice utilizing a practice-informed theory approach. The aim has not been to engage in tired and ultimately futile debates around an assumed practice/theory divide. Instead, we argue that critical (and post-critical) scholarship provides salient tools which develop and extend critical approaches to educational leadership in practice, theory and policy, and suggest a range of much needed strategic interventions within the field.

Our purpose in this issue is not merely to critique existing work and, thus, create a modernistic binary between the approaches explored here and those of others in the field. Rather, our intention is to open up alternative lines of enquiry into practice, through foregrounding other vantage points, which 'transcend the boundaries' imposed by hegemonic discourses of educational leadership and make 'transparent and open to question', their underlying assumptions (Carr, 2007, p. 278). This is not disruption of the status quo for its own sake. Instead, we seek to highlight the benefits of embracing the complexity, ambiguity and moment-by-moment contestation that defines the social practice that is educational leadership. In doing so, we argue that these lenses help provide an active intervention in the field, with consequences for theory, policy and practice.

In assembling the contributors to this special issue, we have deliberately selected a diverse range of critical and post-critical contributors, representing differing stages of academic careers. As a result, this collection of articles ranges from early/mid-career researchers to well-established scholars, demonstrating the breadth and rigour of critical and post-critical studies in educational leadership. The genesis of this issue was a symposium we convened at the 2010 Australian Association for Educational Research Conference in Melbourne, Australia. Working from the papers presented there, and mindful of our goal, we invited a diverse group of critical/post-critical scholars from across the globe to contribute both empirical and conceptual (dare we say 'theoretical') pieces. In casting our net far and wide, we have brought together pieces from the USA, the UK, Australia and the United Arab Emirates. Although primarily anglo-phone, this collection covers a diverse territory, both geographically and intellectually. Moreover, the coherence of the special issue lies not in its adherence to a single master narrative, but rather the intellectual pursuit of the critical and post-critical project. Thus, we bring critical feminist, post-modern, and critical sociological lenses to our existing Bourdieusian and Nancy Fraser-inspired papers. In the final piece, Eugenie Samier, who speaks both to the critical/post-critical traditions and engages with ideas presented across the papers, plays the role of discussant, through both her original intellectual contribution, as well as providing a synthesis

of the ideas within the collection. This move enables the special issue to cover an intellectual terrain beyond the physical locales of the authors, and importantly, one that arguably goes against the hegemonic position of educational leadership as a domain of inquiry in the represented nations. For example, despite Australia's rich history of producing critical (and more recently post-critical) scholarship (see Tinning & Sirna, 2011 on the Deakin School), it would be a brave person to claim that en masse Australian work in the area is 'critical' or 'post-critical'. Likewise, similar claims have been made about the UK (see Gunter, 2010) and the USA. This intellectual periphery is important. It serves as both the innovative/significant aspect of the special issue—but also its underlying generative principle—a theoretical intervention, or disruption, to the status quo. In brief, it embodies the message that it espouses.

With an ever-increasing volume of the literature, particularly given educational leadership's fascination with (frequently imported) fads, it remains both possible, and plausible, that alternate stances will remain on the periphery while the core changes very little. Such a situation is not new, especially given the long history of critical interventions such as Callahan's (1962) classic *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, the Greenfield inspired humanist movement (see Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993) and the critical theorists of educational administration (see Bates, 1980; Foster, 1986; Smyth, 1993). Their presence, however, as history has shown us, is not enough to suggest a changing of the guard, or to refute the empirical claim of stability and centrality in a domain of inquiry.

We have little doubt that educational leadership, management and administration research and practice have been tremendously enhanced by the work of mainstream, critical and post-critical debates to date. However, as Thrupp and Willmott's book, *Educational Management in Managerialist Times* (2003) reveals, there is very little dialogue between traditions. If anything, the agenda and arguments here serve as an invitation to like-minded scholars to more directly confront mainstream educational leadership, and education in general. For those coming from alternative traditions, this collection provides insights and a means of engaging with—as opposed to simply rejecting on epistemological grounds—critical and post-critical perspectives. This invitation to dialogue is posed both as a theoretical intervention in the field, and simultaneously as arming educational leaders and scholars with alternative sets of thinking tools with which to intervene as public intellectuals in increasingly moribund, reductionist and sterile debates about what constitutes 'successful schooling'. To make such interventions is to reclaim, as each of our contributions powerfully reveals, educational leadership as a 'historically constituted ... ethically informed, social' and political practice (Carr, 2007, p. 277), that is, a *practice-changing* practice (Kemmis et al., in preparation). It is this power to set the terms and conditions in which debates about education as a field are shaped in socially just, transformative ways that suggests the genuinely disruptive potential of educational leadership practice and the critical and post-critical scholarship that can inform it. It is in this spirit that we commend the issue.

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