

PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Public intellectualism and educational leadership

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The Australian education context is arguably experiencing its most critical junction since the adoption of mass schooling. We have seen the implementation of a national testing regime, a forthcoming national curriculum, the MySchool website, and the professional standards movement, just to name a few. In addition, we have the fundamentally flawed initiatives of rewards for great teachers and rewards for school improvement, both having some common sense appeal for those beyond education, but built on an apolitical argument that ignores long standing social inequities. Furthermore, there is Julia Gillard's commitment to rolling out school autonomy by 2018 – another initiative with common sense appeal but again apolitical. All of these initiatives have a significant influence on the day-to-day work of school leaders. For this piece, I am going to pick up on some issues I have raised elsewhere to argue for what I see as the core role of the educational leader, public intellectualism.

For me, and arguably many others, educational leadership is about having a vision for quality education and then pursuing that vision. While in an aspirational country such as Australia the traction of working hard and getting ahead remains dominant, in wider society, the leaders who garner the most attention and admiration are arguably those who not only rise to the top but also significantly alter our way of thinking. This represents a disruptive moment, but it is the kind of disruption that is most important here. I am suggesting one in which existing ways of thinking are put aside and novel alternatives not only put forth but taken up – a social movement of sorts. This is not about playing the game better (e.g. being more effective/successful), but rather playing a completely new game. In this sense, leadership is about doing something different, disrupting the status quo. Specifically, I see this disruption as the practice of freedom. Following Foucault, I contend that this 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. Such a debate requires public intellectualism. Tough questions need to be asked, even if individuals, groups or even systems feel uncomfortable engaging with the topic. It is in this space where I am constantly drawn back to the following quote from Gunter and Fitzgerald (2008):

If we are serious about developing democracy in England then an educated public is essential. Field members, in their totality, but specifically in universities, need to see themselves as doing intellectual work and being public intellectuals (p. 262).

While this quote is directly speaking to the English context, I feel it is equally true for Australia. As education is a public space that is increasingly being influenced – if not directed – by those beyond it (e.g. politicians as part of the productivity agenda), there is now more than ever a need for those who can and will speak up and back to policy, practice and public opinion. I am however deeply mindful that this argument may be quickly dismissed as yet another self-righteous critical account, therefore, I am going to outline two interventions from which this public intellectualism can, and arguably should, come from: leadership preparation and development programs; and universities.

Much of the school leadership preparation and development industry – the choice of industry is deliberate here – is focused on the technical skills of running a school (an equally problematic alternate, frequently used as conference keynotes, is the aspirational tone of the charismatic speaker selling their latest book revealing once and for all the way to improve schooling). Let's not be mistaken here, I am not suggesting that the technician skills of educational management are not important, in fact there is a substantial literature arguing that school leaders who do not get the administrative side of things right frequently lose their jobs. Instead, what I am arguing is that these technical skills need to be decentred in the preparation and development of school leaders (see Eacott, 2011; Lumby & English, 2009). I argue that if school leaders are to be anymore than deliverers of a state agenda (see Gunter & Forrester, 2010), then public intellectualism is not a choice, but imperative. By public intellectualism I mean the capability to critically engage with current policy and practice for the purpose of contributing to debate and professional critique of existing ways of being.

For example, as a result of a series of recent seminars with practising educators, both aspiring and current leaders, I have become acutely aware of how very few educators are aware of the policy structure of Australian federalism. The difference between national, federal and state level policy is lost on many educators. Even an awareness of the Melbourne Declaration is limited. This type of knowledge is pivotal to being able to engage with policy debate.

Additionally, the capacity of school leaders to locate and critically engage with research is of great concern. I mean this not in the sense of merely criticising research, rather critically reading research and being able to identify its core assumptions and what they mean in relation to findings. As a case in point, the work by Robinson and colleagues, reported in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, at an ACEL Conference, and later published as an ACEL monograph. The work is well done, and I am not critiquing its rigour or the research team, but let's engage with the findings. They found that leadership that focused on teaching and learning (instructional leadership) had a greater effect on student outcomes than leadership focused on change (transformational leadership). This should not be surprising. The bigger questions that this raises are concerned with the proliferation of 'adjectival' leadership and the pursuit of 'what works' in research.

As part of my everyday work I frequently come across school-based staff who claim that research lacks relevance to practice. But arguably this is one of the roles of research, to critically engage with matters of practice and propose alternates to 'current' practice. It may not be explicitly relevant because it is asking you to think of the world in a completely different way. As Bourdieu argues, you cannot change the world without changing how one thinks about it. However, I am not blinded to the fact that much of the research in educational administration does not do this. And this goes to my second intervention, where can such public intellectualism come from.

I am encouraged by a recent blog on the UCEA website (www.ucea.org) by Catherine Lugg entitled *Speaking up and speaking out*. Her argument is aimed at academics, and based on the role of public intellectualism – although she does not label it that – in academic work. This is a significant topic with substantial relevance to what is happening in Australian education at this very time. Many of us have stories of colleagues committing career “suicide” by speaking up about issues, and this is a cold hard reality for those working in education systems or with school boards. However, if our school leaders cannot engage intellectually with matters of policy and practice (and I would argue that systems are set up to reduce, if not remove, such a possibility) where can it come from?

Herein lies the strength in the academy. Following Bourdieu, I argue that those who have the good fortune to be able to devote their lives to the study of the social world cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of that world is at stake. What we have arguably been missing in the Australian educational leadership context is a strong alternate voice (I do of course acknowledge the pioneering work of Richard Bates, John Smyth, Jill Blackmore, and more recent voices such as Jane Wilkinson, Richard Niesche), a collective of minds who challenge that which is self evident (e.g. schools selecting their own staff have better staff; or localised control – with market forces – will improve quality). Such a voice operates at many levels, including critiquing the status quo of research. Therefore, if the logic of the academy, that of argument and refutation was to be expanded into the public space, rather than the current political game of denouncing or discrediting an adversary, I believe education would be in a stronger place than it is. Of course, one major caveat exists; that is, one should only make their voice heard in a space in which they are competent.

I see two major stepping stones to facilitating this form of public intellectualism: first, the reciprocal engagement between the academy and schools; and secondly, the opening up of space for such intellectualism in preparation and development programs. In the former, greater dialogue between the two sectors is required. A dialogue where neither 'serves' the other, but rather the two come together as a collective. Despite all of the work on distributed, shared, participatory leadership, very little work has been conducted in educational administration on the power of the collective. In the latter, and a considerable risk in the contemporary market ideology of higher education, students need to embrace the fuzziness that is social life and accept that programs will not give them the seven steps to reforming education.

In this paper I have sought to embody that which I am espousing. I have asked questions, how challenging they are is up to the reader. Given the minimal debate that occurs in educational leadership journals and at conference, I encourage those who agree, but more importantly, those who disagree, to respond to this paper – whether that is personally through email, or via the pages of *Perspectives* or other ACEL publications. If but one person responds, then this paper has at the very least inspired another to engage in public intellectualism.

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Perspectives on Educational Leadership

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