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School leadership and the cult of the guru: the neo-Taylorism of Hattie

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ABSTRACT
As one of the central institutions of society, schooling is subject to significant public interest and scrutiny. Fads and fashion successfully developed elsewhere are often rebranded and relaunched in education for the purpose of improvement. Such interventions are often quickly identified as intruders and frequently fade into obscurity, but what of internal interventions, the education research that becomes widely accepted and promoted? In this paper I argue that contemporary thought and analysis in Australian school leadership has submitted to the cult of the guru. Specifically, I contend that dialogue (much less debate) has settled on the work of John Hattie’s meta-meta-analysis giving rise to the Cult of Hattie. This paper is not an attack on Hattie as a person, or even his work, rather an argument about the conditions which have facilitated the rise of a guru. I argue that the uncritical acceptance and proliferation of this cult is a tragedy for Australian school leadership.

What is needed is a concerted commitment to political and programmatic struggle at a time when there appears to be a lessening of courage exhibited by some of the people who call themselves leaders and by some of us who oversee the landscapes of leadership training. (Rapp 2002, 184)

Callahan’s (1962) classic Education and the Cult of Efficiency illuminates how business practices, namely those inspired by the work of Taylor (1911), infiltrated American public education during the first half of the twentieth century. Central to Callahan’s thesis was that questions of education and educating had been replaced by business imperatives and in particular the pursuit of efficiency. Temporality is important here, as it was around this time that departments of educational administration (as they were known then) became established in US universities (Bates 2010) and the separation of educational and administrative goals was legitimised (Murphy et al. 2015). In many ways this trajectory has continued with the literatures of educational leadership (as it is now commonly...
known), sociology of education, policy studies, among others, filled with well-rehearsed arguments stressing the ills of managerialism (in all its forms).

While it is frequently easy to spot ideas and methods that cross-over from outside educational leadership (Peck and Reitzug 2012), it is far more difficult to spot those that emerge from within the educational leadership or broader education research community. The point at which a programme/project moves from an innovation to a disruption in production and then a (social) movement is rarely easy to demarcate. The ontological complicity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), or embedded and embodied nature of our relations with the world around us (Eacott 2015), makes it difficult to break with the status quo. In a challenge for management researchers, Weber argues that academics should ‘study fads and fashions, not chase them’ (Birkinshaw et al. 2014, 51). In this paper, I argue that educational leadership in Australia has submitted to a particular form of fad or fashion – the guru. To think with Callahan, Australia has entered the ‘Cult of the Guru’.

To make my argument I contend that the work of John Hattie, principally beginning with Visible Learning (Hattie 2009), has become not only the latest fad or fashion, almost to the point of saturation, but reached a level where it can now be labelled the ‘Cult of Hattie’. Irrespective of the well-rehearsed arguments in educational leadership that context (e.g. out-of-school factors) matters (which Hattie explicitly states he does not take in account in his analysis, see Hattie 2009, x–ix), methodological critique and the limitations of meta-meta-analyses for guiding policy and practice (e.g. Snook et al. 2009; Snook et al. 2010; Higgins and Simpson 2011; Terhart 2011; Gorard, See, and Siddiqui 2014), and the denial of a one-size-fits-all approach to school reform, Hattie’s work has become the dominant feature in contemporary educational leadership rhetoric in Australia – especially by the largest professional association, the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL). To be clear, this paper is not a critique of Hattie personally or the quality of his analysis, although to say I am neutral would be mistaken. Rather, I argue that the message of brand Hattie has been uncritically adopted by the masses and spread across Australian education systems in a previously unmatched scope and scale. While this paper may be empirically grounded in Australia the argument is beyond geographic boundaries. What I highlight are the conditions which make the rise of a guru possible. It is attention to the specific temporal conditions and the relations of the social world that make this theoretical argument distinctive from just another socially critical account of managerialism.

Although at first sight this argument may appear similar to that of ‘academic celebrity’ (e.g. Lamont 1987; Clegg 1992; Bartmanski 2012) the distinction I claim is with the unit of analysis. A focus on academic celebrity could be undertaken on a number of big names who are popular on the international speaking circuit, such as Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, Alma Harris, and Yong Zhou, among others. But in doing so, one is forced to construct the individual celebrity as
an entity, a ‘social fact’ to think with Durkheim (1982). I am less concerned with the rise of Hattie per se (although there is an argument to be made there too), and more interested in the conditions in which it was possible for Hattie’s work to achieve widespread appeal within the Australian school leadership community. This subtle shift is significant. It moves the analytical frame from a substantialist (or entity) approach to a relational one. In building and defending my claims I make three distinctive, yet inter-related moves: first, I establish the specific temporal conditions that enabled the rise of Hattie’s work across the nation; second, I demonstrate how unlike past attempts at pedagogical reform, Hattie’s work has provided school leaders with data that appeal to their administrative pursuits; and third, is an articulation of the new image of school leadership. In doing so, and taking inspiration from Callahan, I contend that what we have currently is a tragedy in Australian school leadership.

**Reform conscious Australian education**

Australian school education systems have pursued large-scale reforms for some time, although frequently state- or territory-based due to the unique constitutional configuration of the nation’s governance (Keating and Klatt 2013). Some examples include the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS) (Lingard et al. 2001), New Basics (Luke et al. 2000), Quality Teaching (Ladwig 2005) and its recent iteration as Quality Teaching Rounds (Gore and Bowe 2015) – which has some parallels with instructional rounds. Current national priorities include: teacher quality; school autonomy; engaging parents in education; and strengthening the curriculum (see https://www.studentsfirst.gov.au). As with many nations, there is an appetite for interventions in the name of improving the performance of schools – usually limited to student outcomes, and this focus is particularly important.

On the basis of sustained arguments stressing the declining performance of Australian school students (Masters 2016), managerial rhetoric has coalesced around rationality. The desired path to improvement is based on a systematic, logical and sequentially planned intervention focused on ‘what works’. Had the performance of the economy, or education system, experienced rapid decline (e.g. Global Financial Crisis, recession), managerial rhetoric would have shifted to a more normative/aspirational tone (Abrahamson 1997; Hartley 2010; Eacott and Norris 2014). This is designed to engage emotionally with employees/stakeholders and provide hope. The normative rhetoric facilitates the rise of the instrumental guru, one who outlines how things could (should) be and provides aspirational descriptions of a utopian future if we just do the work or take the risks, frequently without specific details of how exactly to bring them into being (this is the role played by many keynote speakers at educational leadership conferences) or naively overlooking the underlying political complexity of the status quo. The rational/control approach is concerned with
avoiding bottoming out and providing the necessary structure for ensuring success. Increased political attention to perceived declines in benchmarking data from national testing programmes (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy: NAPLAN) and larger international programmes (e.g. Program for International Student Achievement: PISA; and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study: TIMSS) provides the necessary stimulus for a rational/control rhetoric. To prevent further decline, there is a need to know ‘what works’, and even more so, ‘what works best’. Traces of Taylorism remain in such an approach, namely the pursuit of ‘one right method’ and the underlying generative principle of perpetual improvement.

Therefore, despite the aspirational tone of national policy documents such as the *Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA 2008), there is an absence of finer details for school leaders to bring those goals into a reality. The information required to identify the essential elements of practice and provide evidence of their impact on desirable outcomes remains a much sought after target. Whereas Taylor achieved this through his time-motion studies on the factory floor and close supervision, this is not directly translatable into schooling. Or is it? The QSRLS, New Basics, and Quality Teaching reforms all for the most part focused on the three key message systems of schooling (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment). As has been consistently demonstrated, despite considerable attention to the need for a re-injection of education (or specifically instructional oversight) into school leadership, the actual percentage of instructional work undertaken by school leaders is minimal (Murphy et al. 2015). If instruction was to become a central focus of school leaders then it requires evidence that spoke to the administrative pursuits of school leadership.

**An opportunity presents itself**

As noted earlier, an enduring critique in educational leadership literatures has been the separation of educational and administrative pursuits. The Tayloristic principles taught by the likes of George Strayer (*Teachers College Columbia*), Edward Elliot (*Wisconsin*), Franklin Bobbit (*Chicago*) and Ellwood Cubberly (*Stanford*) in early educational administration programmes legitimised the separation (Tynack and Hansot 1982). This generation of professors, and arguably of greater importance those that studied with them and after them, reproduced this separation which for the most part remains until today. That said, since at least the 1970s with the establishment of the School Effectiveness and School Improvement movement (Chapman et al. 2016), and particularly during the past decade, there has been a renewed focus on instructional leadership (Murphy et al. 2015) as a means of overcoming this separation and putting the education back into educational leadership.

A germinal piece of research in this re-emergence, at least in Australia, was Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe’s (2008) William J. Davis Award winning paper in
Educational Administration Quarterly (EAQ) – The Impact of Leadership on Student Outcomes: An analysis of the Differential Effects of Leadership Types. This work came out of the Best Evidence Synthesis project commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd 2009). Robinson also delivered the William Walker Oration (named after the pioneering Australian educational administration scholar, Bill Walker) at the annual conference of the ACEL, which was later published in the association’s monograph series (2007). This work did two very specific things that have shaped dialogue and debate in the following decade. First, it broke the dominance of transformational leadership, both its original form (Burns 1978) and its educational appropriation (Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach 1999; Leithwood and Jantzi 2005), in the literatures of educational leadership by demonstrating that instructional leadership had a greater effect on student achievement. Hallinger (2005) contends that the enduring attention on instructional leadership is a lasting legacy of the School Effectiveness and School Improvement movement. A re-orientation to instructional leadership can be conceived as a win for school effectiveness and school improvement literatures over their critics (e.g. Thrupp and Willmott 2003) and evidence of a centring of what was once a more peripheral sub-field of, or parallel field to, educational administration. Second, but related to the first, Robinson and colleagues introduced the educational leadership community at large to effect sizes. They identified, on the basis of a meta-analysis of 27 studies, five leadership dimensions with greatest effect/impact on student achievement: establishing goals and expectations (ES = 0.42; SE = 0.07); strategic resourcing (ES = 0.31; SE = 0.10); planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (ES = 0.42; SE = 0.06); promoting and participating in teacher learning and development (ES = 0.84; SE = 0.14); and establishing and orderly and supportive environment (ES = 0.27; SE = 0.09).

Instructional leadership, or facsimiles such as pedagogical leadership or leading learning, began to re-emerge as the adjectival leadership of choice. Overlooking for the moment the issue of adjectival leadership, or the fact that what Robinson and colleagues are really making a somewhat common-sense argument that leadership focused on instruction (e.g. teaching and learning) is better at increasing student achievement than leadership focused on change (transformational), the highest impact leadership dimension in Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) (promoting and participating in teacher learning and development) explicitly returns the educational focus to school leadership. To follow this line of inquiry would return educational administration to its roots in education.

What was needed however was a set of practices, a ‘what works’, for school leaders to promote and participate in teacher learning and development. Despite a rich intellectual history of scholarship articulating desirable models of pedagogy, notably the US work on authentic pedagogy work by Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran (1996), and Australian developments such as productive
pedagogies (Mills et al. 2009) and Quality Teaching (Ladwig 2005), there was a
desire for something new. Both the productive pedagogies and Quality Teaching
reforms were now over a decade old and as is often the case, there is a desire for
currency and something new. Significantly, there was a need for research that
spoke to school leaders and their administrative pursuits.

Concurrently, the education research community was under-going reform for
the purpose of increasing the rigour and robustness of scholarship. As Donmoyer
and Galloway (2010) note in relation to the US, led through the Institute of Edu-
cation Sciences (IES), randomised control trials (where participants are assigned
to control and experimental groups by chance) became the ‘gold standard’ for
educational inquiry and funded research proposals exhibited a preference for
large-scale ‘what works’ projects (e.g. Allensworth and Sebastian 2012;
Grissom, Goldring, and Knapp 2015). Leading organisations such as the American
Educational Research Association explicitly articulated their standards for the
publication of empirical social science (2006) and humanities-orientated
studies (2009). Shifts in the US academy have significant effects worldwide as
the US higher education system is the benchmark for performance (as judged
in international ranking systems) and in many cases, American is often synon-
ymous with ‘world standard’ (Tadajewski 2016).

In undertaking a meta-analysis, a method common in the medical sciences,
Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008, 2009) brought a degree of perceived rigour
and robustness to the educational administration literature. This was an impor-
tant move given the enduring critique of the quality of educational adminis-
tration and leadership research (e.g. Griffiths 1959, 1965, 1979, 1985; Immegart
1975; Gorard 2005). They provided evidence of the leadership dimensions
with greatest effect on student achievement. What was missing was an articula-
tion of where exactly to harness those leadership dimensions. Hattie’s work filled
this void. Going further than a meta-analysis, he provided a meta-meta-analysis,
or mega-analysis (Terhart 2011). The scope of the work is impressive. More than
800 meta-analyses, integrating more than 52,637 individual studies, were ana-
lysed and resulted in 138 factors listed under 6 thematic groups and by effect
size. All of a sudden, despite years of school effectiveness and school improve-
ment literature and calls for instructional leadership (including supporting
empirical research), there was finally research that spoke to administrator rheto-
ic. Rather than models of pedagogy, even those that came with instruments to
measure the quality of practice (e.g. Ladwig 2005), Hattie provided school admin-
istrators with evidence on which they could base decisions – evidence informed
decisions. The mega-analysis brought a degree of scientific rigour and robust-
ness to claims of ‘what works best’ and the presence of effect sizes meant
that administrators could make decisions with an eye to return on investment.
Explicitly articulating 0.40 as equivalent to a single school year meant the calcu-
lations on where to invest, and arguably where not to, become core to school
administration. The pursuit of effectiveness and efficiency that which was
central to Taylorism was once again popular. Hattie has provided the means through which scientific management can be achieved in educational leadership.

The popularity, or at least proliferation, of Hattie is witnessed in his frequent role as a keynote at the ACEL annual conference since 2009, his partnership with Corwin (publishing) to develop professional publications and learning workshops – including partnering with ACEL. Major school systems from all sectors (e.g. public and Catholic) have called upon Hattie’s work for preparation and development programmes, including some schools now identifying as ‘Hattie schools’. Visible learning, as a label is now used in a variety of areas (e.g. the Making Literacy Visible work of Douglas Fisher and Visible Wellbeing work by Lea Waters) further building the brand and evidence of the brand of Hattie exploiting an opportunity for maximum advantage. Courtesy of sheer presence, Hattie has become canonised in initial teacher education, graduate programmes, and professional dialogue and debate. His work is now ubiquitous with education in Australia.

Talking administrator’s language

During the 1950s and 1960s educational administration sought to develop a science of educational administration in what has come to be known as the Theory Movement (Culbertson 1981). Built heavily on Simon’s (1945) Administrative Behavior and the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle, the underlying generative principles of the Theory Movement were thought to provide the path to law-like generalisations in educational administration and a definitive ‘what works’ agenda. The goals of the Theory Movement were never achieved. Murphy et al. (2015) claim that the closest education researchers have come to anything law-like is that the teacher is the single most important school-based factor for the improvement of student outcomes.

Hattie’s mega-analysis builds on, or at least supports, the claim that the teacher is the single most important school-based factor. Whether it is significant when out-of-school factors are considered remains to be resolved, but that is another argument, one that social theorists such as Bourdieu and Passeron ([1970] 1977) and many others would contend needs addressing. Importantly, for the rise of Hattie, he has developed a scientific account of teaching. Although the work has been critiqued for combining intervention and correlational (or experimental and ex post facto) research as though they are the same; publication bias in selection; and common language effects (Higgins and Simpson 2011), Hattie has sought to make learning, as the causal outcome of teaching, visible. In doing so, learning is open to sensory experience rather than hidden in the minds of learners. As with the Theory Movement earlier, Hattie demonstrates a preference for classic empiricism, the privileging of data through the senses, and distance from the observer.
School leadership is arguably experiencing an era of data. The constant generation of data has become central to the daily work of administrators and teachers alike. Data are used to evaluate national education systems, individual schools, teachers, and students. The atomising of evaluation, and the potential elevation of achievers, is not too removed from the ‘great man’ approaches that have residualised in educational administration. Despite trends towards post-Fordist models of management, educational administration literatures still exhibit considerable bias towards individualised narratives of great individuals who turnaround school performance. The generation of data concerning the impact of teaching, or more specifically teachers on student learning reflects an expansion of administration through data. The identification of practices with greatest effect on student learning and the measurement, judgement, and manipulation made possible by Hattie’s work speaks directly to the core business of educational administration – the improvement of organisational (student) outcomes. Built on a trajectory of pragmatic empiricism, Hattie’s work has provided school administrators with the holy-grail – what works. This information can be used in decision-making as to where to strategically invest, even if just in time, on the practices that will give the institution the greatest return on investment. It enables administrators to go beyond anecdotes and use evidence in their decision-making.

The new ‘scientific’ school leadership

Just as Tayloristic principles sought to bring a scientific approach to school administration in the first half of the twentieth century Hattie’s work is doing the same to school leaders in the twenty-first century. While Taylor developed his time-motion studies to identify the most efficient means of production, Visible Learning (Hattie 2009) has provided an effect measure for teaching practices enabling decisions to be made on the most efficient strategies to improve outcomes. What Hattie has done is brought science (although a very particular version) to the educational administration conversation.

Over fifty years ago the pioneering Australian educational administration scholar Walker (1964) argued against those who believed that personal experience, or to think with Taylor ‘rule-of-thumb methods’, were sufficient preparation and training for school leadership. Specifically, Walker advocated for formal study in educational administration. In a different time and space, Taylor argued for the development of a science for each element of an individual’s work. Hattie’s work has provided school administrators with a science of teaching. The teaching and learning process is no longer hidden in the minds of learners, but made visible. This sensory experience can be used as the data for the generation of data – therefore making it measurable – and evidence informed decisions on what to do. The data is an extension of educational administration, in the era of data, if there is no evidence of learning then it did not happen.
Furthermore, if there is no evidence of learning, then teaching did not happen and this is a performance issue to be managed by administrators.

In developing a science of teaching, it becomes possible to scientifically select and train potential teachers. In the US examples of this include attempts to oversee applicants entering into teacher education programmes (Henry, Bastian, and Smith 2012), assessment for tenure (Loeb, Miller, and Wyckoff 2015), and ongoing measures of teacher effectiveness (Goldhaber 2015; Goldring et al. 2015; Harris and Herrington 2015). In Australia, the University of Melbourne (where Hattie is currently employed) has developed TeacherSelector (Bowles et al. 2014; https://teacherselector.com.au) to assess potential applicants for its programmes. The scientific knowledge of teaching is useful for school administrators. Moving beyond the micro-politics of schooling, administrators can now claim to have data to inform their decisions and present a version of objective and transparent decisions in the interests of advancing student outcomes.

This comes at a time where through a series of education reform, Australia is rolling out a national curriculum and professional standards for teachers and principals through the Australian Institute for School Leadership and Teaching (AITSL, which incidentally Hattie is currently the Chair). The significant shift here is that while forms of evaluation are external to the teacher the current trends have shifted the burden of proof – for performance – onto the teacher. That is, teachers must be able to demonstrate their impact on student learning. Scaling that up, school leaders need to be able to show evidence that the actions they take, including the structures they put into place, have a demonstrable effect on student learning. Annual performance reviews, as a formalised accountability structure, require staff to demonstrate their effect through data and identify areas for improvement (current deficits). Similarly, ongoing accreditation requirements against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and then eventually the Australian Professional Standards for Principals shifts the focus of improvement to the individual teacher and their supervisor – as measured by an external check.

Worth noting however is that the language of Hattie’s work is less about ‘effectiveness’ and ‘less or non-effective’ and more concerned with ‘greater effect’. This is a relational construct as the concepts are not absolutes. It is about decisions between which actions to pursue and which to ignore. As noted earlier, it is about ‘not only knowing what works, but what works best’.

**A tragedy in Australian educational leadership**

Donmoyer and Galloway (2010) remind us, ‘no amount of research will be able to tell us, in any definitive way, “what works” in different (and always somewhat idiosyncratic) contexts’ (24). This is not to say that researchers should abandon the pursuit of what works, as such questions are both necessary and important (Slavin 2004), but the uncritical adoption of any one position is problematic.
Without being seduced by a naive form of relativism, there are times we need to accept the possibility that others are pursuing a different goal to ours. The work of educating is not singular. The relations that we share with education, and particularly schooling, are not singular. Why then do we persist in searching for a definitive theory of teaching, learning, administration? Unlike in the natural sciences, I am not convinced that in education (or the social sciences at large) the pursuit of a theory of everything is a particularly worthwhile endeavour.

The pressure on individual students, teachers, school leaders, systemic authorities, politicians to improve outcomes is unrelenting. Similarly, the need for evidence to support these improvements, or illuminate weaknesses, is ever increasing. Hattie has provided a means of making decisions, but it is ‘a’ not ‘the’. Just as relativism is problematic for allowing a thousand blossoms to bloom, a single overarching framework is equally problematic for the narrowing of dialogue and debate. This also relies on an acceptance of the sample of a mega-analysis being stable and of equal value – which methodological critique has highlighted may not be the case – and the possibility of a single version of education.

The argument of this paper has sought to challenge existing assumptions that Hattie is the latest innovation in educational leadership studies. Visible learning, and its ongoing expansion, is more like the evolution of an age old trajectory in educational administration research based on classic empiricism and the pursuit of what works for improving student outcomes. Educational administration has rarely engaged with the politics of the production of data. It was predictable that a programme of research would fill this void (a similar claim could be made against the work of Marzano and his high reliability schools). When transformational leadership – with its focus on change – failed to adequately address specific matters of instruction and instructional leadership struggled to break free from common-sense notions (e.g. that leadership focused on teaching and learning leads to better outcomes) there was a need to go for specifics. The partitioning of teaching into smallest measurable units, a piecemeal articulation of how to improve student learning, is not too removed from the work of Taylor over 100 years ago. Despite its voluminous and fast expanding literatures, educational administration remains rooted to the same problems of last century.

**Conclusion**

Hattie’s work is everywhere in contemporary Australian school leadership. This is not to say that educators have no opportunity for resistance, but the presence and influence of brand Hattie cannot be ignored. The multiple partnerships and roles held by Hattie the man and the uptake of his work by systems and professional associations have canonised the work in contemporary dialogue and debate to the extent that it is now put forth as the solution to many of the woes of education. What I have sought to do in this paper is to trouble the
idea that he is the saviour of Australian educational leadership. Yes he has produced work that is generating widespread appeal and influence. But this is just the latest in a line of works offering the elusive ‘what works’ in educational administration. What remains most important is due vigilance in assessing the worth of such approaches. There is value in the insights provided by Hattie’s mega-analysis and if these can stimulate dialogue and debate within and across schools and school systems this is a good thing. The uncritical acceptance of his work as the definitive word on what works in schooling, particularly by large professional associations such as ACEL, is highly problematic. Although there remains critique that schooling has remained relatively stable in the past century, there is an equal volume of literature arguing for the dynamic and fluid nature of contemporary society. If we accept the dynamism of society and the changing relations that schools have with students, communities (both near and far) then the pursuit of a single and forevermore account of what works needs to be accepted for what it is – a single piece of work (irrespective of its quality). To subjectify oneself to a single figure is to elevate that individual to guru status. What the Australian school leadership community arguably needs is more rigorous and robust work and more significantly, dialogue and debate (to which Hattie is a part) not the blind adherence to a single guru.

Notes

1. The William J. Davis Award was established in 1979 by the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) with contributors in honour of the late William J. Davis, former Associate Director of UCEA and Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It is given annually to the most outstanding paper published in EAQ as judged by a three-member panel chosen from the EAQ Editorial Board members who have not published in the volume being reviewed (see www.ucea.org/opportunities/william-j-davis-award/).
2. This is the US federal agency charged with funding educational research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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