

## Exploring Leadership as a Phenomenon in an Educational Leadership Paper: An Innovative Pedagogical Approach Opens the Unexpected

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Neoliberal ideologies influence both the content and pedagogical approach of educational leadership programmes. This article proposes an alternate pedagogy, one which privileges the experiential nature of the leadership and challenges students to critique prevailing ideologies within education. The authors describe the reshaping of a compulsory, foundational academic paper within a Masters of educational leadership programme to focus on the phenomenon of leadership more explicitly. They illustrate the use of student stories and hermeneutic interpretation to deepen the appreciation of the contextual nature of educational leadership practice. The authors suggest that the influence of this pedagogical approach resides in the sincerity of the pedagogical comportment of the teaching faculty and the elusiveness of the taken-for-granted nature of leadership. They conclude that pedagogical processes that maintain a centrality of concern for the humanity of leadership experiences are a matter of urgency in our present educational context.

In this article we advocate for an alternative pedagogy in educational leadership programmes and papers. Initially, we consider mainstream pedagogical practices in educational leadership programmes and note, in particular, the invasive influence of the predominant neoliberal ideology on education. After locating ourselves and establishing the context for this article, we outline an alternative way of thinking about educational leadership and an alternative pedagogical approach that focuses on students' personal recollections and associated hermeneutic interpretations of these leadership experiences. The facilitation of this hermeneutic process is illustrated by students' stories and excerpts from their interpretive writing. This article identifies a range of implications that call for a critical response from educators teaching in leadership programmes. Our position is that being a leader is more than the knowledge of, and the skills for, leadership. As such, alternative pedagogical approaches that call for holistic responses humanise the task and project of leadership in practice.

### **Current Approaches in Educational Leadership Programmes**

Current approaches to educational leadership programmes appear to be structured in a way that reflects the prevailing and predominant ideology (Bourdieu, 1973). Presently, the predominant discourse is located in an ideological backdrop known as economic rationalism, or the New Right (Codd, 1996, 1999, 2004, 2005; Grace, 1991; Lauder, 1987; Snook et al., 1999). Positioning education as a private good, this ideological discourse favours individualistic approaches to education, reduces curriculum to measurable and rational outcomes, and casts educational leaders as managers of small businesses. This invasive neoliberal ideology can be found systemically and is expressed in

current educational practice as managerialism, performativity, market theory, and choice theory (Alphonse, 1999; Codd, 1996; Pollitt, 1990; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003). In this Darwinian environment, schools are perceived as individual entities and forced to compete for scarce educational resources. Concern for social justice and the holistic emancipation of students, schools, and communities is of little concern.

Under this ideological influence, priority in educational leadership programmes is given to academic traditionalist objectives involving increased knowledge and understandings in the first instance and the development of particular skills deemed pertinent to the topic in the second. As such, strategic planning, capacity-building, leadership development and other leadership responsibilities are objectified towards linear, albeit conceptual, understandings devoid of the problematic, contextual, and experiential nature of leadership (Begley, 2001; Brundrett, 2001; Bush, 1999; Cardno, 2003; Codd, 2005; Creissen & Ellison, 1998; Johnson, 1994; Millken, 2002).

Concern for matters of character, disposition, attitude and the like are problematic to this ideological paradigm (Begley, 2001, 2003, 2006; Bhindi & Duignan, 1997; Luckock, 2007; Starratt, 2007; Stevenson, 2007; Walker & Shuangye, 2007). The relationship between the teacher (lecturer) and the tertiary student (emergent leader) is utilitarian in nature; that is, technicist approaches to learning remain fixated on the efficiency of the delivery of content more so than the personal and professional formation of these emergent leaders (Alphonse, 1999; Carr & Harnett, 1996). Ironically, some current programmes and papers purport to critique current educational leadership practices and its ideological backdrop, advocating for greater contextual awareness and wisdom, while doing so in a transactional, technicist mode of delivery. These programmes and papers appear to privilege

theory over practice as well as theory over the experiential nature of educational leadership.

The implication of the ideological underpinnings in educational leadership programmes and papers is the privileging of rationalist argument, understanding, and skill development at the expense of other contemplative and deliberative approaches to learning (Johnson, 1994; Restine, 1997; Shor, 1992; Southworth, 1995). As such, the predominant ideological discourse continues to be legitimated and systemically sustained (Barnett, 2003; Giles, 2005; Giroux, 1981; Meighan & Siraj-Blatchford, 2003). The learning process, as a consequence, tends towards a replication of the teacher's (expert) understandings as opposed to the possibility of transformative personal and professional outcomes of an experiential kind (Carr & Harnett, 1996; Hare, 2005).

Anecdotal observations from our previous teaching experiences suggest that the present ideological regime constrains intellectual inquiry through pedagogical practices that seek to provide answers, sanitise contextual concerns towards linear and causal relationships, apply theory to practice as if this is our normal experience of leadership, and avoid the problematic nature of human and relational contexts.

#### **Locating Ourselves as University Lecturers in an Educational Leadership Programme**

Critical, postmodernist and feminist traditions in education call for those that speak to locate themselves (Freire, 2003; hooks, 2000, 2003). This article represents our particular 'voice' on the nature and possibilities inherent in educational leadership programmes. As co-authors of this article, we identify a number of pertinent personal and professional experiences that 'locate' us as educators. We readily acknowledge that our pre-assumptions influence how we see the 'essence' of leadership and the nature of programmes that might equip emergent educational leaders.

As university lecturers, we currently teach in the same university and co-teach a compulsory foundational educational leadership paper, the subject of this article. We bring to this role extensive teaching careers, having variously been involved in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of education. We have held a wide range of educational leadership roles, including Head of Department, Deputy Principal, and Dean of Education.

We hold the position that the 'experience' of being an educational leader is as critical as our understanding of the nature of such leadership. Indeed, we readily express our commitment to relational, contextual, and ecological approaches to leadership in education. As such, our concern for educational leadership starts with

an affirmation of the relational nature of our humanity and the fundamental respect afforded to every person, regardless of role. Such a position focuses on the relational nature of leadership more so than a preoccupation with the power relations inherent in leadership. Our commitment and priorities on a daily basis also show the critical importance we give to the development of innovative understandings that might open the essence of leadership towards greater expression and embodiment.

#### **An Alternative Way of Thinking About Educational Leadership**

Traditionally, it would appear that the pedagogy within educational leadership programmes has been largely transactional, didactic and generic, with the academic content being determined and delivered by faculty perceived to be theoretical experts. Our starting point for thinking and teaching educational leadership papers is that leadership is a phenomenon. Leadership is not firstly a concept, role, position or power, but a phenomenon. While students might expect tidy concepts, constructs, and understanding, we propose that, as a phenomenon, there is an essence to leadership that is not definitive (Lawler, 2005). Such an essence exists but is difficult to define. While we 'experience' leadership and feel as if we 'know' about leadership, all the while the essence of leadership escapes us in relational experiences occurring between people in an educational context.

A further consequence of seeing leadership in this way is the 'uncertain' nature of this phenomenon. Indeed, some would suggest that the experience of leadership is atypical, contextual, situational, and always/already in flux relationally. Importantly, we notice the increasing body of literature that affirms the 'authority' of a participant's experience of education (Dinkelman, 2003; Hamilton, 1998; Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003; Munby & Russell, 1994; Sandretto, Lang, Schon, & Whyte, 2003; Schuck & Segal, 2002). With leadership as a problematic and experientially messy phenomenon, the educational process must now value the dialogue which opens such a phenomenon for new thinking (Bohm, 1995, 1996; Bokeno & Bokeno, 1998; Heifetz, 1994; Lambert, 1998).

We aspire to facilitate and engender academic dialogue and inquiry that calls for thinking and deepening considerations of the essence of leadership (Cam, 1995; Diekelmann, 2003; Heidegger, 1992; Ironside, 2003; Lefstein, 2005; Lipman, 2003; Smythe, 2004; Smythe & Norton, 2007; Zeichner, 1994). Students (emergent leaders) need to be provoked towards a comfort in 'apparent ambiguity,' confident in not having to have 'right' answers prior to their

impending experience of leadership, and sensitive to the embedded layering of leadership praxis. We hope that such an educational experience will influence the student's way-of-being as a leader. It is our intention that examining the essence of leadership in dialogue with students provokes a greater humaneness in the role and practice of leadership, both in this course and in the participant's future leadership endeavours (Giles, 2007).

### **An Alternative Pedagogical Approach Within an Educational Leadership Paper**

In re-shaping this compulsory foundational paper, we introduced changes to the teaching approach and curriculum that intentionally sought to explore leadership as a phenomenon, alongside other conceptual and rational notions of leadership. Hermeneutic activities were constructed that required interpretive and deliberative reflective writing (Birmingham, 2004; Diekelmann & Magnussen Ironside, 1998; Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; van Manen, 1984, 2006). The intention was to explore the notion of leadership and call for higher order thinking responses about the essence of such a phenomenon. Problematising leadership as a phenomenon for inquiry appeared to draw out the nature and legitimacy of the students' experiences.

The students were asked to share personal experiences of being-in-leadership along with stories of experiences of others in leadership. What was important here was that the students described these experiences as fully as possible, given that this descriptive writing was the basis of the interpretive and reflective writing that resulted. The following excerpt is from a student's story:

I attended an all boys' school in another country that was run by a strict fundamentalist organisation. The school had a card system to monitor and enforce the discipline amongst the boys. Pink cards were for minor offences and grey cards for major ones. If you had three grey cards, exclusion from school was the dreaded rule for all of us. I was on two grey cards by the time I came to my final year of study. There was a major incident that happened at school and I was blamed for it. I didn't do it, honestly, I didn't do it. I was called to the Principal's office to explain what had happened and why I did it. I tried my best to explain to the Principal and Deputy Principal that I wasn't involved but to no avail. I swore on my grandmother's grave but no one was buying my story. I was asked to wait outside the Principal's office while they debated my future at the school. It was clear from the voices inside the principal's

office that the Deputy Principal wanted me out of the school. The Principal explained that if I was kicked out of school, no other school would take me in and that I would be on the streets with a bleak future. The principal (God bless him) decided that I would remain at school and complete the year. I thanked the Principal for his decision.

This student's experience was discussed in relation to the student's anxiety over the leaders' decision. It was also considered in relation to the lasting impact of a leader's practice. Vividly etched in his memory was the thought that sometimes "a strict application of the rules is not always the most humane decision."

The interpretive writing required the students to hermeneutically consider the meaning of leadership, being-in-leadership, and the nature of leadership. During this activity, students were unaware of our intention that they notice the essence of leadership that was beginning to emerge across their stories and reflective writing. To more specifically focus on the essence of leadership, the students were asked to review their stories and interpretations alongside the other students' contributions and respond in writing to the question, "What is the nature of the relationship between educational leadership and the human context surrounding this leadership?" One student encapsulated her thoughts stating, "effective leadership is when we combine vision with wise action cradled within a sense of humanity." Another wrote:

I am really intrigued with the idea of redundant leadership and believe it is in fact commonplace. Likewise, distributed leadership happens all the time but we don't acknowledge it. As they say, the rhetoric is way behind the reality. It just doesn't have the glamour of 'superman' and 'the caped crusader', but stereotypical heroes are more of a popular fantasy than reality.

Students began to appreciate that the phenomenon of leadership eludes simplistic and prescriptive language. One commented:

I think it is easy to find quotations about educational leadership and try to unpack what it means to be a great leader in an academic way, but I don't believe that outstanding educational leadership can be summed up in a quote or an academic sound-byte. Seeing and experiencing excellent leadership is all the more important.

The writing expectations moved from descriptive accounts to interpretive writing that was firstly specific to their own particular stories and then extended to a consideration of others' stories. In this way, the

interpretive writing was grounded from actual experiences.

As the students responded to the nature of the educational leadership and the human context, we used the students' responses to 'tease' out essential aspects of leadership as a phenomenon. One student, for example, wrote of the essence of leadership using phrases such as "leadership is circumstantial, situational, contextual, always changing. It occurs in a moment ... for an instant."

Students understood that their writing was always public to the other members of the class. The students' writing was captured in a discussion forum within an on-line learning platform. In a dialogue with another student, one person pondered the tension between visionary leadership and daily managerial imperatives:

I do so strongly believe that in many cases the "vision" - especially if it is heartfelt and all encompassing - is hard to balance with the necessary and sometimes mundane aspects of running a class or school. At some stage if the vision is bigger than the development of the one school perhaps it is time to either leave the running of the day to day aspects of the school to a second person or time to move on altogether. I often wonder if schools should have two principals. One for effective and visionary admin[istration] and one for effective and visionary professional practice.

At the end of each week, we posted an interpretive summary that sought to capture students' essential thinking about leadership from the week's posting for a particular activity. The students' stories were re-read alongside their interpretive writing, with a view to describing emergent themes that appeared to have phenomenological power (Giles, 2008; van Manen, 2006). On one occasion, this summary focused on the contextual nature of leadership with particular concern for human and relational contexts. On another occasion, the summary focused on the uncertain and dynamic backdrop to educational leadership, as this drew attention to the *techné*, *epistémé*, and *phronésis* within leadership experiences. This summary served the purpose of summarising the students' ideas and contributions while also modelling a hermeneutic and interpretive writing style.

### **Implications**

Considering leadership as a phenomenon, along with an expectation that students engage in activities that might be considered less academic, met with initial resistance from the students. These initial learning experiences were so different from the students' prior expectations that some students voiced their concern

about the meaning and validity of such activity. As such, some students initially struggled with the expectation to take the activities seriously. As other students posted their thinking online in response to the activities, and the level of creativity and insight was able to be seen, those resisting such an endeavour were progressively more willing to venture into their unknown learning. What the resistance did show was the students' expectation of the role of the teacher and the expectation that their participation would typically involve the taking down of the teacher's (expert) ideas.

There were numerous positive effects for the students, the teaching staff, the pedagogy of the paper, and the thinking that surrounded our inquiry. One noticeable effect of these changes to the paper was the affirmation given to the students' experiences of leadership, as these were made public to other class members. The connections between students' experiences became more obvious, and the generation of themes that might construct the essence of leadership affirmed the 'contextual' nature of leadership experiences. In this way, leadership experiences were always in context, a matter that at times appears to be ignored in the theorising of leadership.

Another recurring experience was students re-living their prior experiences and interpreting fresh meanings from these experiences. As such, the significance and the influence of 'being-a-leader' and experiencing leadership came to the fore. Heidegger (1996) suggests that our past is always in front of us. It could be said that for these students, their new interpretations of past experiences influenced the lens with which they now perceive educational leadership and their 'being-as-a-leader.'

We also found that these new activities appeared to engender a sense of life in the students' academic endeavours. Students were encountering the novel, which contrasted with their initial expectations. Indeed, their own creativity was opened to others for comment. Invariably, students' contributions opened a new strand of dialogue that was specific to their experience while remaining generic in terms of the essence of leadership.

The students' stories and interpretive writing opened possibilities for thinking together about educational leadership. We would describe the dialogue that resulted as rich, integrative, and full of possibility. In this way, the students' actual experiences and interpretive comments appeared to ground the dialogue surrounding the essence of leadership. This is not surprising given the nature of some of the stories. Some students chose to share stories that were very intense and emotional in nature. Immersed in her writing, one student said, "I'm aware that this story is too long. I should have chosen a less current and emotive story but I was three quarters of the way through it before I realised and then didn't want to start with another!"

This grounded dialogue served to anchor the student's educational experiences to our intention that students engage with the essence of leadership and leadership practice. The aforementioned student went on to say,

I am without doubt that this and all other dilemmas are resolvable ... tensions are felt like a thick blanket in the air to all who walk through the door. ... 'Being a leader' involves dispositions such as kindness and fairness.

As teaching faculty, we have found a greater courage to engage students in a pedagogically open manner (van Manen, 1990). Like the students, we were also influenced by the learning process and the experiences and writing that was shared. We intend to broaden the application of these activities within this particular paper and across the Masters of educational leadership programme.

We find ourselves pondering Gadamer's position that, as human beings, our way of being is to 'live questions' rather than answer them (Gadamer, 1994). In educational contexts where the practice of leadership is always found to be unique and relational, it seems to us that this paper provoked a consideration of the leader's need to remain attuned to what is essential in any moment and context. In this way, the essence of leadership involves a way of being towards others and the experiences we find ourselves in. Such comportment allows leaders to act while wondering, make decisions while holding the mystery of the experiences they find themselves in, and open spaces for meditative thinking that best serves others.

Where most academic programmes intentionally aspire towards intellectual and technicist outcomes (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004), we have noticed the priority the students have given to affirming the contribution and thinking of others in the class. The dialogue within and between students and teachers is critically important as the vehicle for thinking. What should not be forgotten are the many silences that occurred for staff and students as they pondered another person's contributions and experiences. It would seem that the pedagogical arrangement affords the space for a deepening human response to the dialogue that presents itself. In this way, the students' attunement towards educational leadership, we would argue, is in very good hands—their own.

### Conclusion

At a time when the ideological backdrop to education invades academia at all levels, students enrolled in educational leadership programmes need to be provoked to critique the current context of education as well as their own experiences of leadership.

Grounding a compulsory educational leadership paper within a Masters of educational leadership programme towards the essence of the phenomenon we call 'leadership' has resulted in refreshing and insightful educational outcomes for all the participants. Through sharing experiences, conceptions and interpretive writing, students in this course deepened their appreciation of the idiosyncratic and contextual nature of the practice of leadership in education.

The power of the educational process resides in the openness of the pedagogical stance of the teaching staff and the elusiveness of the taken-for-granted nature of leadership. It is our conviction that educative processes that call for students' experiences of leadership sustains the centrality of a concern for the humanity of leadership, a matter of urgency in our present circumstance.

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