

A new public educative leadership?

Helen M Gunter 

University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Steven J Courtney 

University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Management in Education
2021, Vol. 35(4) 194–198
© 2020 British Educational Leadership,
Management & Administration Society
(BELMAS)



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0892020620942506

journals.sagepub.com/home/mie



Introduction

Educative leaders, leading and leadership are not officially recognised or enabled for or within public educational services in England. The modernisation of education may add ‘educational’ to ‘leadership’ in spoken and written texts, but the change imperative is usually premised on ‘school’, ‘distributed’, ‘instructional’ and ‘transformational’ leaders, leading and leadership as organisational and performance technologies. Thinking and doing otherwise tends to be officially ignored or condemned as rebellious, with those involved being denounced as ‘the enemies of promise’ (Gove, 2013). While recognising these dangers, our commentary sets out to reveal the importance and authenticity of *educative* leaders, leading and leadership as a relational and activist pedagogy, in which we present a standpoint that is rooted in Economic and Social Research Council-funded primary research and is informed by social science theorising (Courtney, 2017; Gunter, 2012, 2018).

An in-common educative leadership?

Our research-informed standpoint is underpinned by a commitment to educational services that are owned, funded and accessed in common as a public good. What and who we might label as leaders, leading and leadership are a resource available for all, and this ‘all’ includes children, parents, communities, professionals, researchers, business owners, taxpayers and local and national policymakers who are located within and committed to in-common teaching and learning. We present important intellectual resources to support our standpoint:

- **In-common educability of all children:** all children can be educated to reach their potential in a common school. There is no independent peer-reviewed evidence for the current segregation of children either through home-schooling or for eugenics-informed access to school places based on biology, faith, class, race or intelligence (e.g. Chitty, 2007).
- **In-common access to public educational services:** there is independent peer-reviewed evidential justification for the local common educational service from nursery through to the completion of compulsory schooling and for access to a curriculum and

pedagogy that are respectful of but not determined by parental beliefs and resources (e.g. Fielding and Moss, 2011).

- **In-common access to power:** there are explicit value systems and independent peer-reviewed evidential justification for the reality and conceptualisation of a leader, doing leading and exercising power as leadership that is disconnected from hierarchical structures and is educative as a mutual resource (e.g. Smyth, 1989).

Therefore, educational leadership is educative when it is ‘communal and shared’ and so:

The issue is that *leaders* are embodied individuals, while *leadership* is a shared and communal concept. This means that while leaders occur in a certain time-space context, it is neither necessary nor sufficient that leadership be identified for all of time and space with these individuals. One of the generative aspects of leadership is that leaders exist only because of the relationship attained with followers, and that this relationship allows followers to assume leadership and leaders, in turn, to become followers. Leaders, in short, create other leaders, and it is in this fashion that leadership becomes a shared and communal process” (Foster, 1989: 57, original emphasis).

The dynamics of co-production through reciprocal access to power enables relationality to be a teaching and learning process in itself. The curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are therefore sites where not only can all participants be involved but which can also raise questions about the context in which deliberations and decisions are taking place. The inclusive exercise of power can expose, name and make contributions to resolving social injustices within educational services and the wider context in which teaching and learning are happening.

Foster (1989) identifies two aspects to thinking and doing ‘educative’ leadership: first, the importance of *analysis*, or how organisational systems and structures are examined in order ‘to reveal the “taken-for-granted”

Corresponding author:

Helen M Gunter, The Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, Oxford Rd, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.

E-mail: helen.gunter@manchester.ac.uk

features of institutional life, and to allow for commentary on the ways and means that the institution either restrains or promotes human agency' (p. 54); and second, the use of narratives to promote a *vision* or idea about possibilities, 'to show new social arrangements, while still demonstrating continuity with the past; to show how new social structures continue, in a sense, the basic mission, goals and objectives of traditional human intercourse, while still maintaining a vision of the future and what it offers' (p. 54). Such an approach is educative because it enables problem posing about why something is the way that it is and seeks to address those problems productively: 'the educative aspect, in other words, attempts to raise followers' consciousness about their own social conditions, and in so doing to allow them, as well as the "leader", to consider the possibility of other ways of ordering their social history' (p. 54). This is a different approach to what currently dominates as 'transformational leadership' in educational services: in Bourdieuan (2000) terms, a fixation on numbers generates misrecognition of the context in which those numbers are created and legitimised; and visioning by seduction legitimises the symbolic violence of subjugation to a narrative disconnected from the realities of those required to comply.

Intellectual resources for in-common educative leadership

Another narrative is possible. The field has the resources to rethink professional identity and practices as a form of in-common educative leadership:

Teaching and learning: children's contribution to pedagogy, the curriculum and assessment design (e.g. Lingard et al., 2003);

Professional networks: pedagogic partnerships between professionals (e.g. Wrigley et al., 2012);

Organisational arrangements: restructuring that enables active participation in decision-making (e.g. Apple and Beane, 1999);

Cultural values: the ways of thinking that recognise and work for social justice opportunities (e.g. Anderson, 2009); and

Biographical narratives: accounts by activist professionals that locates a school within a wider community (e.g. Winkley, 2002).

Such resources are presented as illustrative of a range of ideas and evidence in a plural field (Gunter, 2016), which we exemplify by considering the relationship between in-common educative leadership and notions of distribution. Mapping the range of resources regarding 'distributed leadership' has been undertaken (see Gunter et al., 2013), and here we take up the challenge of rethinking educative forms of 'distribution' by using two resources: first, self-governance and anarchy and second, politics and micro-politics:

Self-governance and anarchy: the idea that a human being as singular and plural can govern the self and

selves without the formality of organisational mandates. While there are different versions of what this means and how to achieve it, it is the case that 'what links them all is the rejection of external authority, whether that of the state, the employer, or the hierarchies of administration and of established institutions like the school and the church' (Ward, 2012: 3). When this idea appears in the field it tends to be equated with disorder (e.g. Hargreaves and Fink, 2006), but the potential for thinking differently has been recognised by Western (2008) who argues that anarchism is a productive outcome of exchange relationships through 'spontaneous . . . leaderless action' (p. 46). He goes on to present research evidence and claims that instead of thinking hierarchically regarding the organisation as 'leaderless' we need to consider relational action as 'leaderful' (p. 47). This speaks to Gronn's (2000) work on the realities and regularities, habits and instinctive practices of distributed leadership, where not everything that goes on in a school is causally linked to a head teacher, and with the potential to link to the activism recognised by Hatcher (2005) in regard to doing things differently in educational services.

Politics and micro-politics: the idea that exchange relationships within organisations is not only formal through line-management accountability but is also informal through how people both come to terms with external policy demands and relate to each other with shared histories, intimacies and animosities. This is what Hoyle (1999) identifies as 'policy micropolitics' and 'management micropolitics' and requires recognition of 'the dark side of organisational life' (p. 43) where there can be disruption and potentially unethical conduct. It seems that effective and efficient models of school leadership (as transformational, instructional, functionally distributed) may be glossed over with entrepreneurial dynamics that actually require compliance. However, as Blase and Anderson (1995) argue, such approaches constitute a 'fool's errand' because organisations are replete with struggles over position and recognition, but there is more than this to take into account. If we shine a light on the 'dark side' we may see the energy, ideas and potential that are in effect necessary for the type of productive leaderful action that Western (2008) alerts us to. Following Fielding (1996), there is a need to appreciate how empowerment has been reworked as a process that renders the teacher enthusiastically compliant with the market, and how we may need a new language if we are to give recognition to relational exchanges. Freedom is not a possession through power capture, but is, in Arendtian (2005) terms, based on plurality and 'exists only in the unique intermediary space of politics' (p. 95). This speaks to debates taking place using a range of conceptual tools to think

about the educative potential of exchange relationships through focusing on ‘productive leadership’ for learning (Lingard et al., 2003) and on the interplay of power with the relational turn in the field (Blase and Anderson, 1995)

What these resources illustrate is a serious intellectual problem. Leadership in all of the educative potentiality outlined here are automatically considered to be dangerous and so tend to be handled through non-educational thinking and doing. An agenda for educational practices needs developing.

What is to be done?

We know that there are serious barriers to be overcome, some are visible, others are not. There are barrier-defending strategies that are pertinent to denouncing educative positions:

1. Public investment into in-common education has been too successful but is being dismantled because of what Chitty (2007) identifies as the fear and ‘threat of mass education’. Ranson (1984) reports a civil servant saying that the government feared unrest and so ‘there has to be selection because we are beginning to create aspirations which increasingly society cannot match’ and so ‘people must be educated once more to know their place’ (p. 241).
2. The supply of school places in England is privatised with between 70 and 90 different types of schools (Courtney, 2015), and the demand for such places is framed around social mobility and economic productivity that is underpinned by eugenics ideology that enables segregation to be legitimised (Gunter, 2018).
3. Educational professionalism is being redesigned as functional delivery at a time of brutal employment conditions (see Courtney and Gunter, 2015). A globalised consultancy industry is shifting the location and methodologies of knowledge production, and the legitimacy of who the authoritative experts are (Gunter and Mills, 2017).

Such complex obstacles have been exposed as integral to reform hoaxes (Ravitch, 2014) and we have to confront them because as Apple (2006) argues, those who promote them speak and act in ways that make sense and are acceptable to the public. For example, parents have been told repeatedly that they would be failing in their duties if they did not strive to secure a ‘good school place’ for ‘their’ child, and yet a public education system requires parents to care and take action about and for all children and their access to ‘all school places as good’.

In addressing this situation, we can in Bourdieuan (2003) terms ‘fire back’:

1. Investment in the in-common school has worked in England (see Benn and Chitty, 1997), and elsewhere (see Lubienski and Lubienski, 2014; Sahlberg, 2015).
2. Teachers, head teachers, parents and children are speaking up and taking action about the damage being done to un-common schools (Gunter, 2018).
3. The claims about anarchic impracticality have been challenged by shifting the focus away from the normality of a hierarchical division of labour towards asking: ‘what sort of leadership’ do we require, and how do we ‘create and support leadership that is not oppressive’ (Western, 2008: 48).

Such thinking generates potential contributions to the idea and reality of the provision of school places where there are a range of approaches internationally, and here we note the differences between the privatised system in Chile compared with Finland (see Seppänen et al., 2015). In England, there are debates about how to secure more coherence in a privatising system with proposals for a National Education Service (e.g. Benn, 2018; West and Wolfe, 2018). Such policy proposals create additional questions about how researchers who focus on educative leaders, leading and leadership might make a contribution. Current resources that could be used to support thinking are (a) ‘system leadership’ (Hopkins, 2007) and (b) ‘self-improving school-led system’ (Greany and Higham, 2018). Both have traction in current policy discourses regarding bottom-up partnerships and solution provision, but both do not examine the implications of segregated school places. Much of what is labelled as educational leaders, leading and leadership is designed to do non-educational work, not least by categorising and calculating in order to discount and dispose of children and families. The forms of leadership required to exclude children because they do not fit the school brand, to close down a school because of how the market is working, or to *academise* (see Rayner et al., 2018) are not educational leadership that is actually educative. We have noted elsewhere (Courtney and Gunter, 2019) the corporatised fabrications or *lies* that are told to and by school ‘leaders’ to maintain the illusion that it is. Field intellectual resources are available – it is time to take Smyth (1989) off the shelves to read and think differently. Field resources are plural – it is time to undertake novel conceptual and empirical projects that are *relational* through including all, *activist* by working for social justice, and *educational* because we all learn from each other through our practice.


Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Helen M Gunter  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6486-5033>

Steven J Courtney  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2379-7035>

References

- Anderson G (2009) *Advocacy Leadership*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Apple MW (2006) Interrupting the right: on doing critical educational work in conservative times. In: Ladson-Billings G and Tate WF (eds) *Education Research in the Public Interest*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. pp. 27–45.
- Apple MW and Beane JA (1999) *Democratic Schools*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Arendt H (2005) *The Promise of Politics*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Benn C and Chitty C (1997) *Thirty Years On*. London: Penguin Books.
- Benn M (2018) *Life Lessons*, London: Verso.
- Blase J and Anderson G (1995) *The Micropolitics of Educational Leadership*. London: Cassell.
- Bourdieu P (2000) *Pascalian Meditations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu P (2003) *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2*. London: Verso.
- Chitty C (2007) *Eugenics, Race and Intelligence in Education*. London: Continuum.
- Courtney SJ (2015) Mapping school types in England. *Oxford Review of Education* 41(6): 799–818.
- Courtney SJ (2017) Corporatising school leadership through hysteresis. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38(7): 1054–1067.
- Courtney SJ and Gunter HM (2015) ‘Get off my bus!’ School leaders, vision work and the elimination of teachers. *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 18(4): 395–417.
- Courtney SJ and Gunter HM (2019) Corporatised fabrications: the methodological challenges of professional biographies at a time of neoliberalisation. In: Lynch J, Rowlands J, Gale T and Parker S (eds) (2019). *Practice Methodologies in Education Research*. London: Routledge.
- Fielding M (1996) Empowerment: emancipation or enervation? *Journal of Education Policy* 11 (3): 399–417.
- Fielding M and Moss P (2011) *Radical Education and the Common School*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Foster W (1989) Towards a critical practice of leadership. In: Smyth J (ed.) *Critical Perspectives on Educational Leadership*. London: The Falmer Press, pp. 39–62.
- Gove M (2013) I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools: Education Secretary berates ‘the new enemies of promise’ for opposing his plans. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html>. (accessed 4 March 2019).
- Greany T and Higham R (2018) *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.
- Gronn P (2000) Distributed properties: a new architecture for leadership. *Educational Management and Administration* 28(3): 319–338.
- Gunter HM (2012) *Leadership and Education Reform*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Gunter HM (2016) *An Intellectual History of School Leadership Practice and Research*. London: Bloomsbury Press.
- Gunter HM (2018) *The Politics of Public Education: Reform Ideas and Issues*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Gunter HM and Mills C (2017) *Consultants and Consultancy: The Case of Education*. Cham: Springer.
- Gunter HM, Hall D and Bragg J (2013) Distributed leadership: a study in knowledge production. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 41(5): 556–581.
- Hargreaves A and Fink D (2006) *Sustainable Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hatcher R (2005) The distribution of leadership and power in schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 26(2): 253–267.
- Hopkins D (2007) *Every School a Great School*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Hoyle E (1999) The two faces of micropolitics. *School Leadership and Management* 19(2): 213–222.
- Lingard B, Hayes D, Mills M, et al. (2003) *Leading Learning*. Maidenhead: OUP.
- Lubienski CA and Lubienski ST (2014) *The Public School Advantage. Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ranson S (1984) Towards a tertiary tripartism: new codes of social control and the 17 plus. In: Broadfoot P (ed.) *Selection, Certification, and Control: Social Issues in Educational Assessment*. Lewes: Falmer Press, pp. 221–244.
- Ravitch D (2014) Hoaxes in educational policy. *The Teacher Educator* 49(3): 153–165.
- Rayner SM, Courtney SJ and Gunter HM (2018) Theorising systemic change: learning from the academisation project in England. *Journal of Education Policy* 33(1): 143–162.
- Sahlberg P (2015) *Finish Lessons 2.0*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Seppänen P, Carrasco A, Kalalahti M, et al.(eds) (2015) *Contrasting Dynamics in Education Politics of Extremes*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Smyth J (ed.) (1989) *Critical Perspectives on Educational Leadership*. London: Falmer Press.
- Ward SC (2012) *Neoliberalism and the Global Restructuring of Knowledge in Education*. New York: Routledge.
- West A and Wolfe D (2018) *Academies, the School System in England and a Vision for the Future*. Clare Market Papers No. 23. London: LSE and Matrix Chambers.
- Western S (2008) *Leadership: A Critical Text*. London: Sage.
- Winkley D (2002) *Handsworth Revolution*. London: Giles de la Mare Publishers Ltd.
- Wrigley T, Thomson P and Lingard B (eds) (2012) *Changing Schools, Alternative Ways to Make a World of Difference*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Author biographies

Helen M Gunter is Professor of Educational Policy in The Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, UK. She is a Fellow of the Academy of Social

Sciences and recipient of the BELMAS Distinguished Service Award 2016. Her work focuses on the politics of education policy and knowledge production in the field of school leadership. Her most recent books are *An Intellectual History of School Leadership Practice and Research* in 2016 by Bloomsbury Press; *Consultants and Consultancy: the Case of Education*, coauthored with Colin Mills, 2017 by Springer; and *The Politics of Public Education* by Policy Press, 2018.



Steven J Courtney is a Senior Lecturer at the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, UK. His research focuses on educational leadership and policy, where he uses critical sociology approaches to explore the identities and practices of those professionals constructed as 'educational leaders'. He is co-convenor (with Helen Gunter and Ruth McGinity) of the BELMAS research interest group Critical Education Policy and Leadership.

