Theorising Context in Educational Leadership from a Relational Critical Realist Perspective

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Abstract	Article Info
Educational leadership scholars are unanimous in their appreciation of the importance of context. As a concept, however, context is not unproblematic and, while being scarcely theorised, the recent growing interest around the topic has shown fundamental differences in the way that it is approached with repercussions on how the field progresses. The analysis of published literature on context undertaken in this article, therefore, attempts to look beyond current framing of context as antecedent and moderator, in order to propose a relational critical realist perspective to framing context and, hopefully, shape as well as decolonise future policy, practice and theorising in educational leadership.	

Introduction

In its most unspecialised understanding, context can be defined as 'the circumstances that form the setting of an event…' (Oxford dictionary). To illustrate this more clearly, the circumstances of an isolated police brutality incident towards a black person, for example, can form the setting for a 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM) event/ protest.

'The physical environment in which practice [an event] takes place' (McCormark et al., 2002, p. 96) may become pervasive, in that events, such as BLM protests, can, for different reasons, spread across settings. While the expanding collective moral imperative of the BLM movement might strike a chord with many, expanding an educational practice or policy that seems to have worked in one setting across all settings is a bone of contention. The pervasiveness and dominance of events across settings triggered by certain circumstances, or the tendency to replicate 'what works here' in different contexts, is a poignant reminder for the need to frame the *in situ* of each setting and discern its contrasting and/ or shared positional space, time, actors, motives and other factors that characterise the here-and-now, as opposed or related to the there-now and at other times (*ex situ*) and vice versa. Understanding these dynamics of context is crucial since 'there is no leadership without context' (Rumsey, 2013, p. 3), as recognised by contributors to this special issue. And although the framing of the *in situ* of context is gaining momentum, this article aims to review the thinking thus far and propose a relational critical realist way forward when thinking about context. It also serves as a viable theorised justification for various degrees of hybridisation and comparative approaches that articles in this special issue grapple with, as they respectively put forward a comparative research concept and framework (Elonga Mboyo), Multilateral model (Loomis & Akkari), TURNS model (Msila) and Post-colonial framework (Morrosi), as possible ways of decolonising educational leadership in Africa. The article begins by recasting context as a cross-field of various interacting factors and acknowledges its contested nature before problematising how it has been understood as an antecedent and as a moderator. It goes on to reframe how context should be theorised as a relation from

a critical realist perspective before making some recommendations as part of its concluding remarks.

Threat to Context and the Role of Educational Leadership

The focus on the singularity and importance of 'context' is not new (Flikschuh, 2018) but the trend to override the *in situ* of educational settings is arguably a real threat that appears to have peaked and prompted calls for pause. One such call was made by Harris and Jones (2017), who decry the practices that essentially consist of copying leadership practices in order to remain competitive in national and international league tables and, as a result, fail to take into account the *in situ* of context without which enduring and embedded success is unattainable. O'Donoghue and Clarke (2010) have noted how such an approach has failed, particularly when implementing curriculum change. Although normative educational leadership approaches are said to be in response to the 'centrality of context', in order to help practitioners to solve specific problems in schools using certain types of leadership behaviours (Bush, 2011, p. 27), it can be argued that normative educational leadership, in the case of formal models of leadership for example, has, to some extent, served the sociological order set by the standardised top-down policies that also affect educational leadership practice.

It is important to remember that Harris and Jones (2017) do not explicitly advocate for contextual insularity that makes standardised external dictates evaporate into thin air without corroding the *in situ* of context. Therefore, the moment of pause away from standardised approaches is, arguably, a moment of immersion into local contextual racialised, gendered, cultural… epistemologies that are not necessarily impervious to external realities and wider perspective. It is this overlapping yet unique nature of context as an intersection, a 'cross-

field' (Zulfakar, 2020, p. 101) and 'glocal' point, where 'local and global forces interact to shape context' (Brooks & Normore, 2010, p. 54) that, I argue, educators and school leaders are confronted with and that needs to be theorised in a relational critical realist perspective, in order to catalyse real change when leading schools and theorising educational leadership in Africa, as is the case in this special issue.

A Contested Terrain

Despite its centrality, educational leadership literature has tended to portray the *in situ* of context as not the 'be all and end all'. To cast the view further afield to the wider context, school leaders have been urged not to be confined by (the *in situ* of) context (Day, 2005) and attempt to abstract what successful leaders do across all contexts (Day et al., 2011). On their face value, these assertions appear to contest Harris and Jones' (2017) insistence on the uniqueness of context and suggest that a 'less contextually dependent' (Eacott, 2019a, p. 67) approach to school leadership is what is needed.

While recognising the influence of 'socio, political, economic, and professional contexts', Day (2005, p. 575) also argues that 'successful heads were driven primarily by individual value systems'. Although individual value systems and what one does with, or as a result of, them might impact on context, it can be deduced from the above authors that those value systems arguably exist outside the realm of context. The choice between the primacy of something other than context, on the one hand, or the need to bracket everything else deemed external, in order to examine an exclusively internal entity called 'context', on the other, can be viewed as an obsolete dichotomy, particularly when engaged in comparative educational leadership research, theory and practice that require recognising the particularities of the *in situ* of context while moving beyond it (Sackey

& Mitchel, 2002, p. 909). This flight beyond a singular (aspect of) context, in order to develop epistemologies that cut across contexts is, arguably, firmly rooted on the specificity of context. In other words, developing a sophisticated analysis of context for educational leaders cannot be achieved if one is exclusively focused on immediate bearings of a given location, while ignoring the overall cross-contextual map and vice versa. By suggesting that school leaders be less confined by context, Day (2005) and Day et al. (2011) arguably seek to recognise the 'glocal' contextual dynamism therein, in order to develop core leadership practices upon which most successful school leaders draw to embed themselves into unique contextual situations and devise appropriate responses in order to achieve specific educational goals.

It is, nevertheless, these not only pertinent but also contentious, considerations about context and how leadership behaviours should be in respect of them that make 'a theory of context' (Eacott, 2019a, p. 67) necessary and this article aims to do just that, while reframing previous attempts in an effort to advance an arguably viable understanding of and impactful (decolonising) approach to theorising context when leading schools and researching and theorising educational leadership, particularly in Africa. When recognising the intricacy of the *in situ* and *ex situ* of context in the exercise of leadership on which the success of schools depends, Day et al. (2011) use previous research in educational leadership to theorise context as either an '*antecedent*' or a '*moderator*'. A further concept that this article seeks to add frames context as a '*relation*' that is argued here from a critical realist perspective.

Theorising Context as an Antecedent

Shaping the notion of context as an antecedent is the perception that a setting is not an empty vacuum; that context can be framed from

pre-existing conditions that need to be identified and matched with appropriate leadership actions. The most fitting current analysis of context that integrates studies by Clark and O'Donoghue (2017) comes from Hallinger (2018). Hallinger's theorising of six contexts through institutional, community, national cultural, economic, political and school improvement lenses can be framed as contextual variables structuring a given setting that school leaders must seek to analyse, understand and respond to with an appropriate 'repertoire of practices' (Day et al., 2011, p. 7). The impact of these antecedent conceptualisations of context on school leadership practice is real, as Gurr et al. (2018, p. 40) noted that 'behaviours and intentions on the part of principals and other school leaders could be linked to each of the [six] contexts'. If African national cultural context, for example, finds its corresponding educational leadership approach, it could be argued that context as antecedent has the potential to decolonise educational leadership in Africa. However, while these bounded normative, as well as critical, mechanisms for framing context are useful in understanding key contextual factors, they structure school leadership actions from an essentialist understanding of context. This essentialist reading of context sidesteps various levels of complexity and hybridity in which school leadership practice in Africa is enacted. It also ignores the fact that (leadership) actions are not only add-ons to a pre-existing context but constitutive of it.

Theorising Context as a Moderator

While leaders approaching context as an antecedent seek to impact on it, the moderating nature of context is conversely measured on how contextual factors can 'dampen or magnify the impact on organisational outcomes of the same set of leadership practices' (Day et al., 2011, p. 7). This is particularly the case where leaders who are less successful in one setting may thrive in another. What you get in

this conceptualisation is not only an ever-expanding list of leadership behaviours/ styles in response to varying moderating factors but also a re-examination of those in order to identify leadership models and leaders' traits that are more successful than others (Day et al., 2011). In reality, context as a moderator does not provide an elaborate breakdown of a theory of context. Hence, the extent to which context as a moderator impacts on organisational outcomes, arguably only goes to validate embodied leadership competencies that need the right moderated context to unleash potential.

Most educational leadership literatures are caught up in this two-way traffic that either views context as an antecedent or a moderator with educational theories that are shaped around those notions of context. Although the styles, models of leadership, high impact and 'what most successful leaders do in most contexts' repertoires are not developed outside context, their normative positioning with regard to context as an antecedent or a moderator have portrayed both context and leadership approaches from essentialist and normative perspectives. Educational leadership has arguably been built around establishing normative inventories of (antecedent and/ or moderator) contextual factors or variables that, as noted by Thorpe (2020), have tended to lead to refashioned school leadership behaviours as tools for (new) liberal managerialism as a dominant contextual factor. Here, context analysis can become a mechanical inventory exercise of normative factors that either impacts on leaders or on which school leaders exert actions. When the merit for success for these leadership actions are determined by policy makers in an increasingly neoliberal world, one dominant understanding of context can easily prevail at the expense of others and structure leadership behaviours that have prompted calls for pause, such as the one by Harris and Jones (2017). As the objectification of context (as

antecedent and moderator…) is foregrounded, the role of relations that would have given rise to these normative strands of context in the first place often goes unnoticed. In this partially flawed understanding of context, school leaders in various parts of the world, can be compared to subjectively unengaged scientists, who attempt to objectively dissect reified and compartmentalised components of context without contamination of school leaders' organising activity and other external factors. The subjective relational involvement in what is effectively an interplay of contextual factors within a cross-field is hardly articulated as context. There is, therefore, the need to look through and beyond the normative theorising of context in order to relationally frame both the *ex-situ* and *in-situ* of context and enrich educational leadership theorising and practice.

Theorising Context as a Relation

This conceptualisation is primarily built around the need to look beyond normative framing of context, in order to view it as an on-going process and outcomes of agents' (dis)enabled relations. It recognises that context is not only an antecedent and/ or moderating 'state' but also an 'act' or, as framed here, a combination/ hybridisation of both where, for instance, acting on contextual (antecedent and moderators) states gives rise to new comparative, postcolonial, TURNS-framed contextual relations to educational leadership, as discussed through different contributions in this special issue. It is worth noting that some theorists favour the bracketing (Eacott, 2019b), flattening (Deleuze & Guittari, 1987) and stratifying (Baskhar, 1989) of normative realities, or (states of) contexts in this case. This concluding rejoinder, however, seeks to advance a relational critical realist (stratified) reading of context to further cement a viable new departure in decolonising educational leadership research, theorising and practice in Africa and beyond.

Notwithstanding the questionable attempt to bracket normativity as the focus shift to relations (Elonga Mboyo, 2019a), Eacott's (2019c) pioneering framing of context as 'constitutive of and emergent from activity' (p. 69) breaks away from the normative understandings of context as an antecedent and places agents/ auctors' organising activity at the centre of the emergence of context. However, Eacott's focus on context as organising activity of relations only wishes away the bracketed normative entities, of contexts as antecedents and moderators in this case, without necessarily demonstrating how agents (auctors) ward off, engage with and/ or transform normative international political dictates of what works, for example, that Harris and Jones (2017) noted can be used to override the *in-situ* of local context. If the setting of a school is an open system where (the in-situ and ex-situ of) mechanisms interact, Eacott's bracketing of normative (antecedent and moderator) contextual factors portrays auctors' organising activity as emerging *ex nihilo*. In this normativity bracketed, yet filled with relations, setting, Eacott's (2019a) empirical study further recommends three criteria, such as clarity, coherence and narrative for high-impact leaders in context. In a nutshell, these defining features of context portray high-impact school leaders as needing to establish 'the purpose/s for which a school is working and demonstrating coherence (or at least naming the criteria by which one wishes to be judged), [and] the generation of a narrative' (Eacott, 2019a, p. 72). The reality, however, is that school leaders do not always have the latitude to bracket normative antecedents of contexts or the authority to set the criteria by which they are judged, as they are compelled to implement top-down directives from (inter)national and even local institutions with abusive and destructive consequences (Courtney & Gunter, 2015; Harris & Jones, 2018; Krasikova, 2013). The dominance of certain normative notions of context, whether they are

ex-situ (such as universal education policies) or *in-situ* (in the way of local tyrannies) can be overcome by reframing context relationally and, hopefully, within the thrust of this special issue, decolonise educational leadership in Africa.

To understand context as *a relation* from a critical realist perspective then, involves first recognising that normative antecedents and moderating factors of context are a real and stratified ontology (Baskhar, 1989) of, in this case, context that is the bedrock of educational leadership. Whether imposed or wilfully activated, the generative presence or absence of these contextual mechanisms can either perpetuate dominant mono-dimensional perceptions of contexts or give voice to marginalised elements or forces of context. As part of critical theories (of context) then, critical realism helps 'to transcend appearances and reveal enduring social structures that ratify special interests and the status quo in society' (Egbo, 2005, p. 268) and brings out marginalised gendered, cultural, post-colonial voices, as raw materials of context. For the most part, educational leadership theorising reflects western normative approaches that have been copied across contexts and effectively have perpetuated the colonial narrative, not only in educational leadership but also the context upon which the theorising should be rooted. In response, some critical gender, cultural and postcolonial approaches to context can, arguably, be said to overcompensate for their systemic exclusion in the ongoing policy, practice, and research arenas. In so doing, they provide uniquely exclusive perspectives based on an arguably legitimate although insular reading of context that is not cognisant of the cross-field and relational nature of context. When these critical voices are, in turn, abstracted as bounded essentialist entities, they, I argue, only echo a one-sided normative narrative of educational leadership in context. The projected understanding of 'context' emerging from

critical approaches to educational leadership is still built on siloed conceptualisations of context as 'antecedent', with arguably the only difference being the foregrounding of previously marginalised antecedent factors of context.

While standing 'within the stable of critical theories' as indicated above, critical realism still 'stands apart' (Thorpe, 2020, p. 39). It arguably 'stands apart', in that, it allows for the inclusion and examination/ analysis of 'a multiplicity of factors, *of context in this case* – [my italics], which interact to produce a specific outcome' (Stylianou, 2017, p. 977). When this is applied to theorising about 'context', in this case and school leadership thereof, it arguably implies perceiving context as an emergent reality resulting from agents' organising activity of all the stratified contextual realities.

While this emergence (of *context* as a *relation*) can be understood from three viewpoints: unilateral dependence, taxonomic irreducibility and causal irreducibility (see: Stylianou, 2017), the unlabelled description of emergence in this article can be fully grasped by reconsidering every antecedent and moderating factor that constitutes context as formless capabilities which are non-neutral, intentional and competing forces or potencies that relationally interact through agents' organising activity. These (antecedent and moderating) formless capabilities are the raw materials or mechanisms of context in schools' open systems; and they are so, not because they are less important and less unique to their settings but rather because they are incomplete. Although actual, meaning, existing in their normative forms as antecedent or moderator, incomplete/ insufficient contextual raw materials are not fully formed (hence, formless) in as far as they need to be relationally acted upon to become complete and arguably result in the flourishing or bringing about of something new

in a given setting. The *in-situ* of context that is a 'cross-field' of various factors (Zulfakar, 2020) is, therefore, a zone of (in)completion (Elonga Mboyo, 2019b) whose (incomplete or complete) processes and outcomes, as we are being urged by Harris and Jones (2017) to pause and reflect upon, are inextricably linked to agents' organising activity. Turning a zone or setting from that of incompletion to completion is not an activity performed from without context but rather from within it. Organising activity of the stratified layers of context is therefore part and parcel of context as a zone of (in)completion.

Decolonising educational leadership in Africa through contextually responsive school leadership approaches (Reed & Swaminathan, 2015), is therefore an enterprise that should consist of relationally engaging with various raw materials of context in order to develop school leadership approaches that effectively transform the layered interacting raw elements of context from incompletion to completion. The need to advance eclectic leadership approaches that are consistent with and/ or based on the heterogeneity of context cannot therefore be left to chance on the basis, for example, that 'most successful leaders are likely to embody most or all [the leadership] approaches in their work' (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 565). It requires conscious framing beyond a uni-dimensional perspective of context and leadership. Articles in this special issue, therefore, set the tone for a narrative that recognises the nature of context as a cross-field zone of incompletion and call for or advance consistent models of hybridisation when seeking to decolonise school leadership in Africa. Relational critical realism therefore offers an additional valid conceptual toolkit to ground such a decolonising mindset in African contexts.

Conclusion

This article has sought to advance an understanding of context from a relational critical realist perspective. Context as a relation can therefore be defined as the cross-field zone of incompletion whose flourishing is constitutive of auctors' organising activity. This does not do away with previously theorised notions of context as antecedent and moderator. These rather structurally layered contextual entities (Donati, 2020) are instead recast as raw materials of context. Hence, this article, and indeed this special issue, do not call for an elimination or bracketing of these raw materials of context. The institutional, community, national cultural, economic, political and school improvement lenses (Hallinger, 2018) and many other siloed normative and critical framings of context and educational leadership are essential and it is not excluded that a call to pause and reconsider context (Harris & Jones, 2017) might, for some, mean the exclusive elevation of long-ignored cultural contexts, for example, and arguably offer a decolonising educational leadership in Africa. This logic of competition, in decolonising context and educational leadership, that arguably defined modernity (Donati, 2014) is flipped here in favour of relational logics that recognise networks of contextual relations that need to emerge through agents' organising activity.

I therefore want to end this section, article and, indeed, this special issue by addressing the *so what* question. This is done by way of offering some considerations for both researchers and practitioners, particularly when thinking about decolonising educational leadership in Africa from a critical realist relational understanding of context. This arguably requires a certain degree of (1) awareness of the heterogenous nature of context, (2) engagement in the authoring of that glocal

context and (3) framing of consistent decolonising leadership behaviours.

An awareness of the heterogeneity of schooling environments (Maringe Moletsane, 2015, p. 357) is necessary. It recognises context as a cross-field of various factors that need to be identified; and that those normative factors are incomplete raw materials of context that need engagement. Engaging with raw materials of context is far from mounting a counter-insurgency exercise seeking to occupy previously dominated spaces. Here, the biological logic of survival of the fittest (contextual factors) needs to be recast through relational logics (Donati, 2014) within the stratified factors/ realities of context; and that organising activity (otherwise referred to wrongly or not as leadership) is therefore central when seeking to develop the most productive hybridised relations that may lead, as argued in this special issue, to the application of a comparative framework (Elonga Mboyo), Multilateral model (Loomis and Akkari), TURNS model (Msila) and Post-colonial framework (Morrosi) when leading schools in Africa.

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