




Other forms of leadership in education

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ABSTRACT

I observe a split in the field of education today between two academic sub-tribes: those who champion ‘practice’ and are suspicious of ‘theories’ on the one hand, and those who insist on ‘theory and philosophy’ on the other. But philosophical commitments are implicit in our use of language and all our ways of being and acting in the world. This recognition points towards other concepts and forms of educational leadership. Below, I explore if and how philosophy and writing lead to another kind of educational leadership.

KEYWORDS

Editorial education;
educational leadership;
neoliberal education policy;
philosophy of education;
writing as a method of
inquiry; writing for
publication

Any word that is overused tends to lose its meaning, or parts of its meaning, sometimes becoming reduced to a mere shadow of its former, richer self. The ways of working of complex contemporary systems of educational policy and national schooling make such overuse of key words likely, sometimes with unremarked but significant consequences. One such key idea is ‘leadership’—a word I think has fallen victim to its own discursive success, its meaning in education becoming thinned and hollowed out by overuse and being commodified. I want to explore other possible meanings and forms of leadership in education; what ‘leadership’ in education might look like from, say, a philosophical perspective. This commentary presents a thought experiment, considering the proposition that ‘leadership’ has become a victim of overuse in education, and looking at alternative concepts of educational leadership. This re-thinking process highlights the possible danger of domesticating discourses of leadership. Such effects have particular relevance for social justice and the interests of already marginalised groups in education, including Māori and Pacific families.

Educational leadership is a strong sub-discipline in the contemporary academic landscape of education scholarship and policy in Aotearoa New Zealand. The word ‘leadership’ is being used in relation to the practice of leaders in schools, centres, and other education organisations. This specialism is very popular with postgraduate students, mostly full-time teachers, for whom a qualification in educational leadership may be a career escalator to a principal position. Leadership as a specialism in education emerged following the onset of neoliberal reforms in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1980s, and takes on particular meanings relating to school management. I observe a split in the field between two sub-tribes of education academics: those who champion ‘practice’ and

are suspicious of ‘theories’ on one hand, and those who insist on ‘theory and philosophy’ on the other. Binary disagreements are typical between the two positions. Proponents of practice call out the philosophy sub-tribe for wanting to stay in the ‘ivory tower’ and ignore ‘how things work’ in the ‘real world’—while philosophers counsel that no practice can begin, continue or proceed without an underlying philosophy, whether we are cognisant of it, or not. Philosophy is implicit in our use of language and all our ways of being and acting in the world. This recognition points towards other concepts and forms of educational leadership, which are easily overshadowed in the current emphasis on school leaders.

Educational Leadership through Writing

What are the implications for leadership and social justice in education of committing to the life of an academic writer? From a philosophical perspective it makes sense to say that writing and scholarship is equally as important as other more ‘traditional’ forms of educational leadership, since philosophy is, primarily, a scholarly pursuit engaged through words in discussion, reading and writing. Philosophy, it can be argued, is the most practical of all subjects to study, because its lessons apply in every practical situation we could ever meet. Besides, the act of writing about practice is always a kind of theorisation. This reasoning collapses the binary and the typical arguments raised against philosophy in education. When philosophy and ethics go unacknowledged and unexamined in educational practice, dominant mainstream universalist frameworks inevitably exert implicit influence. Philosophy of education can be ignored, but it cannot be avoided.

To succeed as an academic in the contemporary university it is important to write well (Stewart et al., 2021). Typically, soon after finishing writing their doctoral thesis, the early career academic begins to write journal articles. Soon, they start to receive requests from journals to review submitted manuscripts (Stewart, 2016). They may be invited to edit or co-edit a Special Issue, to serve on a journal Editorial Board, or as an Associate Editor. Eventually they may take up a role as Editor-in-Chief of a journal, either for a set term or indefinitely (Burbules, 2014; Peters, 2009). Each of these steps and stages within the knowledge ecosystem of journal publishing is an achievement for the individual academic; the size and significance of the achievement depends on the quality and reputation of the journals and scholars with whom one works. Employer universities value such achievements for reputation and research metrics, but the translation into hours on the academic workload is seldom made (Peters, 2015).

In the first decade of my post-doctoral academic career, I achieved the above and more due to being part of particular academic networks where many such opportunities were being made available over a number of years, in strategic efforts to grow editorial expertise in educational theory and philosophy. A focus on editorial ethics and education emerged, with an initial project of coordinating collective online journal article reviews, and later co-guest editing a Special Issue of six interviews with editors of leading educational philosophy journals (Jackson & Stewart, 2017). As well as supporting my own students and colleagues to get published, I developed a programme of experimental collective writing projects with small groups of Māori and Indigenous co-authors. These projects lead to different formats in the written research output: one format presents a series of personal/cultural statements on a topic; in another I write the article supported by co-author discussions and feedback (Stewart et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2021). While the journal article is still the gold standard research output, academic writers today also embrace editorials, blogs and online columns, not only for driving traffic to one’s more formal research outputs, but also as part of a writerly practice, beneficial for crafting and re-crafting one’s ideas and experiences.

Today’s post-digital world of academic publishing is complex and fast-changing (Jandrić & Hayes, 2019). Most working academics know something about journal metrics, but few as yet have more than a rudimentary understanding—though this measure, too, will move quickly (Benade, 2021). Academic websites where material can be openly disseminated can effectively support an

academic's 'traditional' research output. Collective writing and editorial networks are strategies whereby academics can resist the rule of metrics and exert some agency against faceless university systems of control. In the last six years I have participated in 15+ collective writing experiments leading to published research outputs (Jandrić et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2016). Indigenous, feminist and other non-elite academic tribes stand to gain even more than white male academics by taking control in such ways, pushing back and gaming the system, attempting to even up the playing field.

All such activities are part of an academic writer's life, and add up to a form of educational leadership through academic writing and publishing. Leadership and philosophy go hand in hand in education. Leadership in education is about supporting groups of human beings to grow and develop to become their best selves. A concept and practice of educational leadership that is not philosophical cannot be considered educational and must be considered domesticated. The phrases used against philosophy in education—the notion of ivory tower academics ignoring 'how things really work'—reveal the economic basis of their concerns, as was central to the neoliberal reforms from the start (Devine & Irwin, 2005). Economics is always part of educational planning, but to allow economics priority over philosophy of education is both wrong and impractical, as shown by the failed neoliberal reform of state schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand (Thrupp & Irwin, 2010).

The conclusion of my thought experiment is that, in reality, any schism in the field between educational leadership and philosophy of education would be detrimental to the interests of the students and communities our schools educate. Inattention to philosophy enables dominant ideas to continue to influence practice, so such a schism is particularly deleterious to the interests of already marginalised groups in education, including Māori and Pacific families in Aotearoa New Zealand. Education benefits when philosophy and leadership work together in practice, for the betterment of the future interests of our societies and humanity as a whole.

Notes on contributor

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