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The new leadership in education

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Current concerns over educational leadership are of quite recent vintage. The contemporary preoccupation with educational leadership was preceded by concerns during the latter part of the last century with the management of education; before that, the emphasis was on educational administration. These shifts are indicated by name changes—the British Educational Administration Society in the nineteen seventies to the British Educational Management and Administration Society in the nineteen eighties and to the British Educational Management, Administration and Leadership Society more recently (Bates, 2010a).

Moreover, while these transitions were taking place, the dominance of the field by business administration, management and leadership theories (especially in the United States) was supplemented, if not replaced, by a new emphasis on leading for learning: that is, an educational emphasis replaced the earlier separation of administrative and educational concerns that so bedevilled the field (Bates, 1983; Lingard et al., 2003).

Again, the (largely American) quest for a science of educational administration that strongly characterised the field in the middle of the last century has been replaced by the recognition that leadership is a social construction, dependent on context and culture for its various forms and effectiveness (Bates, 2006a & b; 2010b).

This relatively new view contrasts markedly with previous ideas of educational administration as an apolitical science of implementation, through bureaucracy, of ideals and procedures determined elsewhere. What seems to be happening, however, is that these new ideas lie alongside continued attempts to ‘manage’ education through definitions of educational leadership that are confined and shaped by policies articulated by politicians committed to control through ‘deliverology’ (Barber, Moffit & Kihl, 2010).
It also seems to be the case that the fragmentation and privatisation of education systems have been matched by attempts to increase central control over curriculum, assessment and teacher education through new definitions of leadership (Ball, 2007; Ellis, 2010).

Part of this new managerialism redefines educational leadership through concerns over school effectiveness and improvement interpreted as an increase in pupil outcomes (Townsend, 2007). Measures of such outcomes are frequently set within assessments of performance against both national and international comparisons and result in increasingly competitive behaviour between schools but apparently without the increase in performance that such competition is supposed to stimulate (Waslander, Pater & van der Weide, 2010).

Much of the official literature (or what Bernstein (2000) calls the context of official discourse) is directed towards greater efficiency in the application of educational resources to the 'problem' of pupil performance. However, as Bernstein notes, the official discourse is always recontextualised by the pedagogical discourse of the school. Several difficulties arise here as schools are caught between the demands of policy and the needs of pupils and their communities, or, as Ball (1997) argues, between the pursuit of efficiency and the pursuit of social justice. Indeed, concerns over issues of social justice have become increasingly important in the literature over the past decade as determined attempts to overcome educational inequality have come to the fore (Bates, 2006b; Normore, 2008; Theoharis, 2007; Wrigley, 2003).

Such moves towards putting social justice at the heart of educational endeavour have a long history in education—especially in the tradition—stretching through Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori, Hume, Mill, Smith, Arnold, Marx and Dewey—that emphasises the role of education in fostering autonomy and emancipation (see Bates, 2010c).

Supporting such a perspective is a renewed interest in the ethical foundations of educational administration. Here, the emerging literature serves to recontextualise the idea of ethical behaviour, drawing attention away from a concentration on interpersonal behaviour towards a broader understanding of ethical behaviour as a social and organisational issue (Sansier, 2003; Starratt, 2004). Moreover, emphasis on social justice and ethical concerns leads to a wider concern with social issues outside the school, at both community (Starratt, 2003) and global (Bottery, 2004) levels.
Such concerns are not, however, disconnected from the central issues of schooling: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Bernstein, 1975). Bottery (2004) for instance, places concerns over productivity, democracy, welfare, social relations, social values, epistemology, personal development and environmental concerns at the heart of his theory of educational leadership and at the heart of the school curriculum. Starratt (2004) puts the cultivation of meaning, community and responsibility at the heart of his. Lingard and associates (2003) argue, in their advocacy of the role of principals as those who are ‘leading learning’, that leadership should be seen as pedagogy. Starratt (2004) argues that human development is at the centre of the school’s responsibility and that, indeed, the work of schools can be seen as primarily that of fostering human development through learning.

Moreover, as curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are everyone’s business, leadership within schools is increasingly seen as a shared responsibility, with the development of teacher leaders being a primary responsibility of principals (Crowther, Ferguson & Hann, 2009).

Currently, therefore, we have two contrasting views of leadership vying for acceptance. The first, ‘official’, view is that leaders’ primary responsibility is to ensure that official policy directives are faithfully implemented in their schools. In pursuit of this objective, ‘standards’ for school leadership are developed and training programs for prospective leaders established that direct behaviour in particular ways, resulting in what Gronn argues is a new ‘method of producing leaders to design specifications’ (2003: 7). Part of the design of such leadership behaviours is to enhance the ability of trainees to ensure compliance with official policies on the part of teachers according to new systems of performance and accountability through ‘distributed practice’ (Gronn, 2003: 27). The result is what Gronn, following Coser (1974) calls increasingly ‘greedy’ work where leaders are totally consumed by the demands of the job, succumbing to the demands to be ‘totally reliable servants of power’ (Gronn, 2003: 147). The ‘disciplining’ of principals through such demands is argued to be characteristic of the new forms of control exercised over principals (Niesche, 2011).

The result of these demands is disengagement (Gronn, 2003; Samier & Lumby, 2010) where the demands of the job exceed the willingness of potential leaders to submit to such greedy work. Disengagement is to be seen in the increasing difficulty of recruiting teachers into leadership positions—especially the principalship (Thomson & Blackmore, 2006).
Such a direct program of principal training in ‘what works’ is inevitably a partial and incomplete preparation for educational leaders for it inevitably sets up and privileges a particular paradigm of leadership, management and administration. Here the definition of leadership is restricted to one that serves the particular interests of whatever group is currently in control of the governance of education. As Gunter (2001: 8) suggests, ‘leadership in educational studies can be seen as the process and product by which powerful groups are able to control and sustain their interests’. However, rather than see the field of educational leadership simply as such a uni-dimensional assertion of particular interests through the exercise of power, Gunter goes on to argue, following Bourdieu, that leadership is more complex than this. In reality, educational leadership is a field of discourse and practice, ‘a competitive arena in which struggles are not just about material gain but also about symbolic capital, or authority, prestige and celebrity status’ (Gunter, 2001: 13).

In opposition to the official view of leadership is one that sees the educational role of leaders as one of sustaining community through responding to the needs of students through relevant learning (Starratt, 2004). This view takes the position that little learning is likely to occur if schools teach subjects whose content and ‘delivery’ are disconnected from the lives that students lead in particular communities. As Alain Touraine (2000) suggests, schools teach subjects while their students want to make sense of their lives. As many of their lives, particularly in marginalised or disadvantaged or migrant communities, are disorganised (by transitions, discrimination, linguistic and cultural difference, lack of access to resources, work and services) the school’s presentation of subjects and society as organised systems may be discontinuous with their pupils’ experience (Touraine, 2000).1

The alternative leadership response to such situations is to take a cultural approach to learning—one that sees the culture of the school as central to the facilitation of learning. Moreover, the view of culture here is that of Willard Waller (1932) who saw the school as the nexus of intersecting cultures where the multiplicity of possible relationships shapes a school culture that is achieved through negotiation rather than imposition (Bates, 2006b, 2010e; Waller, 1932). The result is what Wrigley (2003) calls ‘Schools of Hope’ driven by constructivist views of curriculum and pedagogy, ideas of schools as communities of learning and a commitment to citizenship and social justice. Beckett in his interviews with successful school heads shows what effects result from this rejection of official discourse and its recontextualisation
within the idea of schools as learning communities driven by emotional as well as functional intelligence (Beckett, 2010).

The Importance of Context

Clearly the preceding discussion gives some idea of the conflicts that characterise the field of educational leadership. The complexity of these conflicts produces struggles at all levels of educational leadership: struggles that take particular forms in specific contexts. But this is the point: learning is always a situated activity. Context makes all the difference.

But schools face pressures from a variety of contexts. On the one hand, as noted, there is the official context of specifications, requirements, performance appraisal, rewards and punishments: the formal system of curriculum and its accompanying discipline system—assessment. There is the community context with its needs for relevance, citizenship and belonging: the informal system of adaptation and negotiation and its associated variety in curriculum, pedagogy and its intrinsic forms of evaluation. The demands of each of these contexts (and other religious, ethnic, class and gendered contexts and demands) lay claim to particular views of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. They invariably conflict as they rub up against each other and make the need for cultural negotiation a central concern for successful leaders.

This makes the micropolitics of schools a major issue for school leaders. Schools are typically ‘complex organisations where struggles are the norm for scarce resources, control and power’ (Caffyn, 2011). While much of this struggle is over access—to physical, financial and staff resources; to the power to influence, access or deny—it is also frequently a struggle over ideas. These ideas will cluster around the three message systems of the school: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Bernstein, 1975). Passionate commitment to the ‘official’ versions of these message systems is pitted against attempts to adapt or subvert the official discourse in order to meet the needs of various communities in the school and its contexts. Such commitments lead to clashes over ideas of what and whom education is for as well as how it should be constructed. This clash of ideas is central to the work of teachers and leaders and involves considerable emotional labour (Caffyn, 2011; Samier, 2009).

Such emotional labour may well be situated within commitments to tradition (maintaining the cultural traditions of particular communities, religious or ethnic groups) on the one hand and modernisation and transition
(new technologies, civil rights, personal identities) on the other. Such disagreements are often to the fore where dispersed populations attempt to adapt to their new context while maintaining intellectual, emotional and cultural allegiances to their families and their homelands (Saunders, 2010). Some of the complexities faced by members of such diasporas are evident in the backward longing for communities that no longer exist in the remembered form and for the high tech means of communication that now allow such diasporas to establish and maintain themselves on a global scale (Dufoix, 2008).

As a consequence, the terrain on which such divergent views compete is no longer local nor even national, but becomes global in its scope. Competing ideologies operate on this terrain. Much official discourse in most nation states focuses upon ‘world class’ standards and the drive towards ‘maintaining global competitiveness’ so as to ensure economic success. Such a position demands that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices model themselves on ‘international best practice’ that is always directed towards the functional ‘needs’ of the economy. On the other hand, as communities globalise and organise through new communications media, issues of universal concern become articulated around such matters as social justice, civil rights, environmental change, the redress of poverty and access to education. Some of these are expressed through official non-economic international organisations and are exemplified by the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2006).

So at a global level there is debate about whether the message systems of schools should be centred upon competitive economic development or more general social, cultural and environmental issues.

This debate is seen by theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and Alain Touraine as a conflict between interests (economic, political, financial, industrial) and values (community, social, cultural). Here, they say, we are sandwiched between markets and organisations (which articulate interests through system development) and communities and cultures (which express themselves in interactions within the ‘life-world’ of everyday communication and activity). The medium of markets is money, of organisations is power, of communities is belonging and of cultures is belief (Bates, 2010d).

The school is, therefore, at the nexus of competing claims over economic benefit (markets/money), organisational interests (bureaucracy/power), traditions (communities/belonging) and cultures (values/beliefs). Moreover, these competing claims can be articulated at various levels (personal, local,
regional, state, global) at which differing compromises may be reached. Schools are pressed by top-down and bottom-up demands and how these are articulated within particular contexts is a major determinant of what is possible or desirable for school leaders. ‘Think global; act local’ is an increasingly pressing issue for those who lead schools. Moreover, schools differ crucially in their location within contexts that are oriented towards one or more of these particular pressures. For instance, well established elite communities may well demand of their (largely private) schools that their children are equipped with both skills and attitudes that fit them to become part of what Lesley Sklair (2001) calls the ‘transnational, corporate elite’. Emerging cadres of middle-class parents in developing countries may well demand access to functional/creative ‘Western’ education for their children while attempting at the same time to maintain traditional patriarchal, authoritarian cultural and religious practices (Theresa, 2008). Schools in transitional areas where significant migrant communities are situated may well be required to equip pupils with linguistic, economic and cultural skills that allow them to become effective members of the host nations (Touraine, 2000). Schools in rust-belt areas where the economic base has collapsed may well be required to provide therapeutic support for communities that have become disorganised and disoriented (Thomson, 2002).

Leadership and negotiation

As contexts change, so too do the demands on the school and on school leaders. This being so, leadership can no longer be thought of as simply the implementation of directives received from elsewhere. Rather, it must necessarily be involved in the negotiation of appropriate constructions of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices that meet the needs of particular situations.

This does not mean that educational leaders should meekly submit to the particular demands of officials or communities in their articulation of the mission of the school and its development of the school’s message systems, for if the school is to serve the needs of its pupils it must defend some degree of autonomy from the various demands. Touraine (2000) points out that it may well be as dysfunctional for schools to submit to the demands of specific communities as it is for them to become simply an administrative device. This is because one of the functions of the school is to develop in its students the strength and autonomy to make their own choices and determine their own futures, navigating their way between the demands of markets and
organisations, communities and cultures in ways that allow them to choose the selves they wish to become. This may mean relinquishing values, beliefs and memberships of communities of their past as well as resisting or choosing between the demands made by markets and organisations. It may also mean, as Armatya Sen has pointed out, that the individual may—quite probably will—accumulate multiple identities as a result of experience and education. In his own case (Sen, 2006: 19):

I can be, at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author in Sanskrit, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a strong defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a non-religious lifestyle, from a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a non-believer in an afterlife (and also, in case the question is asked, a non-believer in a 'before life' as well).

The role of the school leader in the contemporary world is to help devise curriculum, pedagogy and assessment systems within the school that facilitate the development of autonomy, based upon a recognition that the role of the school is not simply to teach subjects, but to help students make sense of their lives, to provide them with sources of the self (Taylor, 1989) from which they can fashion the selves they wish to become and to do so with confidence and hope.

Notes

1 [Although Bates writes with a different context in mind, namely that of such communities in countries like Australia, reflection will quickly indicate that these comments are applicable also in the Pacific Islands region, where urbanisation and temporary and permanent migration are prominent contemporary features. The educational dimensions of this population mobility have been all too little explored. Ed.]

2 [Again, readers are encouraged to contextualise these comments, in terms of pacific mobility, not only with respect to schooling but also to a regional institution such as the University of the South Pacific. Ed.]

3 [While the concept of 'rust-belt areas' is perhaps not context-specific to this region, the idea of depopulated and marginalised rural areas is certainly not alien in many parts of it. Ed.]
References


