Chapter 15
Engaging with Educational Leadership Relationally

Megan Crawford

In any field, we can get stuck within the same parameters of thinking and doing. As we build up a research profile, it is sometimes easier to not engage with ideas and practices that are outside our own comfort zones. Writing this short chapter has allowed me to connect with many areas in the field of educational administration that I had either not considered or had looked at only briefly. Reading *Educational leadership relationally* (Eacott, 2015) has not only allowed me to consider Scott Eacott's recent work, but also begin to consider where the field is moving in the next decade, and the gap between theory and practice. Eacott (2015) argues that educational administration scholars should engage with leadership in particular. His work focuses on the idea that "leadership" is "not an external knowable entity, but the product of cognition—a social construction." He claims that mobilizing a relational approach means that scholars can unpick some of the normative assumptions, which many of us have regarding what "leadership," is, and its explanatory value for both research and practice. It could be, he argues, that we should recast our ways of thinking about organizing, in order to make the everyday experiences of organizational life strange. This chapter will ask whether the explanatory power or descriptive value of relations is a stimulus for new thinking or a return to older values and assumptions. After all, Eacott asks scholars to debate whether relational approaches are at the cutting edge of contemporary thought and analysis, and if they are, how can we theorize and understand relations in the organizing of education and educational labor?

The Arguments

Much of the argument can be seen to consist of how or if we can define "leadership" at all, given the difficulties that various scholars have had over the decades, both in industry and professional settings, as well as specifically in schools. The idea of a "leadership" worldview having its own expectations against which

"leaders" are judged has deep echoes of the current state of school "leadership" in England (Coldron, Crawford, Jones, & Simkins, 2014). His argument that our failure to focus our attention on the concept while blaming an individual or an organization, has led to flawed thinking about what is actually happening within an organization, is an intriguing one. Noting that "leadership" language is reflective of an ideological position on organizational life, helpfully allows the reader to also reflect that the same ideological positions in various policy contexts may also bring pressure to bear on the language that is used systemically by those in "leadership" positions. His work is also very clear on the epistemological implications of language use in the field of educational leadership and administration.

Eacott's argument comes into its own with his debate about the ontological position of educational leadership researchers. Qualitative researchers often clearly state that they have assumptions or unconscious bias that may creep into their work and may even argue this position as a positive. In educational leadership research, this unconscious orientation may indeed be more damaging if, as he suggests, "how the researcher believes organizations *ought* to behave is used as a lens to evaluate how they are currently acting." This is a particularly interesting point to reflect upon for commissioned research from governmental departments. Eacott argues, convincingly, that many of the distinctions in the literature about "leaders" and others or "leadership" and "non-leadership" "are the manifestation of the preexisting normative orientation of the researcher." Thus, we need to critically examine both the language we use, and the descriptions we undertake of situations.

Making his key argument the shifting of the research object and an intention to disrupt the dominant epistemologies and methodologies of educational administration, his overall argument seeks to set out a relational approach that "privileges the situated nature of actions" (Eacott, 2015, p. 8). What exactly does this mean? The argument seems to be that relationships constitute context. Drawing on Bourdieu, he argues for five *relational* extensions, which draw on shaping and reshaping relationally through the research process, while at the same time, the view of organizing is continually re-shaped. His proposition is that this allows for relational thinking that in turn generates new ways of theorizing more productively, even if it does not do away with some of the difficulties of the field that he articulates. Instead of developing a new vocabulary to describe similar situations, his hope is that thinking *relationally* will allow researchers to allow new ways of understanding to develop, by getting rid of normative assumptions in the field. The argument is that new ways of thinking and understanding will allow many different ways of looking at the field of educational administration. In particular, my reading suggests that he wishes to encourage a healthier debate around epistemological issues, having no patience with the way the field has failed to engage over a long period of time. Thinking relationally, he suggests, would give the field the intellectual means to think differently, and more deeply, about our areas of concern. This includes giving due attention to the "space between" (Buber, 1981[1923]), which, he argues we are in danger of reducing immeasurably in search of the quantifiable. At the heart of his discussions are what we as scholars mean by "leadership" and why and in what ways it matters, given that his argument suggests that both the

research object and the researcher are rooted in, and exemplify contemporary social conditions. Eacott suggests that scholars need to ask how we can explain these dilemmas further, but not necessarily by solving problems but by asking other questions. These may be based on developing descriptions of organizational happenings by researchers who are at all times aware of conceptual systems within the social space however defined, which do not necessarily use the concept of "leadership" as a key variable for the achieving of organizational goals.

I warmly welcome anything that allows scholars to question deeply the field as it has developed, particularly over the last twenty years; faced with agendas in many countries which promote school autonomy while at the same time leveraging into place strong accountability measures that make that autonomy a chimera for many, and a power base for some. Also, I am fully in agreement with his assertion that we need to go beyond what passes for a commonsense approach to everyday social life in schools. If a relational approach does give the field an approach it can build upon, allowing new knowledge claims to develop as well as the healthy debate concerning the status quo, then that can only be a good thing in my view. It is challenging in and of itself to suggest that a relational approach can at one and the same time promote a narrative of rigorous and robust scholarship in educational administration while remaining critical of any narrative promoting versions of rigor and robustness. However, surely that narrative should be a basic tenet of what scholarship is about? In throwing out the challenge to other researchers in the field, Eacott promotes critical views on the *relational* approach, because that is what the scholarly must be about if areas are to grow, thrive, and develop robustly in the future. Eacott opens his book quoting Fenwick English (2006) who argues, that the advancement of any discipline requires deep and sustained criticism of it, philosophically, logically, and empirically. For me, there are several challenges that the relational approach brings, that are both about the advancement of the discipline in the way English describes, but also about the power of the "leadership" narrative to twist and subsume scholarship to pragmatic needs, rather than using challenging scholarship to ask new questions about the intellectual and practical social spaces in which schools as organizations are engendered. The rest of this paper will suggest why this might be the case, and what version of critique and challenge will encourage a space for debate.

Compliance and Conformity

In looking at the field in the UK particularly, there are strong social pressures, or norms, to conform in research in educational administration. Norms allow things to run smoothly, and we can follow from Eacott's arguments that the norms of the field have shied away from the intellectual debate, and moved towards trying forever to define "leadership." Social relations theory suggests that people conform or many and varied reasons, but any group has to be attractive to others for the conformity to apply; normative influence is where the pressure to comply comes

from others in the group. A strong feature of funded research in many countries is concerned with evaluating what may be influential policy strands, and where researchers have to maintain or conform within an established relationship with policy makers. Often, this might be categorized as public compliance where the individual researcher conforms but has not actually changed their private viewpoint as an "expert" in the field. The more appealing a group is to someone, the more likely they are to conform to the norms of that group. This could be one explanation for the lack of appetite in some international research communities to take up similar critiques of the field. That is, researchers want to belong to a community of researchers with influence in public policy spaces, for example, and although they may voice disquiet about managerialism and its effects on policies and the like, few are willing to step out and critique publically. In the English system, research in schools through teaching school alliances and similar is more likely to reinforce, rather than extend the boundaries of thinking, but it could be argued that such research is not conceptually driven, and therefore needs to be critiqued and judged differently. This would be an area to develop the discussion of relational aspects further in order to aid practitioners in schools with such a review.

As Eacott argues, there is widespread disquiet in some research communities about such issues as the advancing managerialist project (Hall, Gunter, & Bragg, 2011), and it would perhaps be a shame if the critique we are examining was focused in too restricted an area. As most writers in educational administration agree about the importance the role of context, this is a fertile area for deconstruction, discussion, and conceptual advancement. There are also, as Eacott delineates in his writing, central issues about individualism/collectivism and structure/agency, which are discussed and debated regularly, and often circuitously. If a relational approach is to be a key one for moving the field forward, Eacott's exhortation to be restless about the current state of thought and analysis becomes critical. My question would be to ask how near we are in the field to be dissatisfied with the status quo, where serves many well. Possibly much nearer to it then we were five years ago, but there are some difficult challenges to overcome. While many have to do with scholars themselves, others as I have suggested, may be rooted in vested personal and political interests. If a vigorous debate is wanted among scholars and the more pragmatic world of school leaders, arguments about the nature of research will need to be made clearly, concisely and in language that aids rather than hinders understanding. Eacott makes a clear argument to scholars, but I would argue there is also a piece of intellectual work to be done outside of our own community to facilitate discussion and give signposts that illuminate understanding. So, while I may appreciate Bourdieu, my work within schools suggests that this appreciation requires nurturing by those of us who work in such spaces, in order that the tools to aid debate are not lost at the first hurdle of understanding. Critics may say this is underappreciation of the intellectual resources of teachers in schools. I would argue that such resources need not only to be understood but to be internalized in a social arena where the time for reflection is always at a premium. Engaging with educational leadership relationally is a task that needs to be looked

at from both within and outside of the traditional research community with its particular writing voice, or it will consistently be marginalized.

Conclusion

If a state of disequilibrium and dissatisfaction with the status quo can help build a new norm for researchers in educational administration, then writers and thinkers need to actively consider how best, and where to, promote such a new norm. As I have noted above, and Eacott underlines in his writing, where authority lies is a crucial factor. Although it may be very difficult to determine where that authority lies in terms of research into the field, this does not mean that we should not try. Indeed, a step that might be taken next by those researchers and writers particularly interested in moving ideas forward is to engage in some writing, and/or workshops about where authority lies in certain areas. The policy would seem, initially to be an area of investigation where authority is clear-cut, because in many countries research is driven by policy imperatives. However, the nuances of this might be a useful discussion in terms of the debate on educational leadership from a relational perspective. I am heartened by the exhortation to shake off complacency, and even promote disequilibrium and dissatisfaction (in a positive way, of course).

Articulating the unseen in a way that stimulates debate in educational administration, and to do, it clearly and carefully is a challenge that I would be willing to accept. I do have reservations about the scale of the project if it is to truly challenge the existing structures of research and persuade researchers to be actively critical of the dominance of certain methodologies. This is because there are dangers of either tackling too great a task or even be afraid to start on the task for fear of returning to the old traps of "leadership." I would ask Eacott and other scholars to be explicit about how this task can be framed as the joint critical endeavors of a community of scholars. This piece, and others like it, may well be the start of this, but in order to build on these foundations, something inside my (perhaps managerialist) head, nudges me to thinking that joint critical endeavors require either extensive collaboration and debate with like-minded scholars or the setting up of a framework within which such debates can take place. Whichever way the discussion goes, I hope to be a part of it.

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