

Thinking Relationally about the *School Leader*

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Abstract

This paper engages with the program outlined by Scott Eacott (2015) in *Educational Leadership Relationally*. I aim to mobilize some of the themes explored in the book in order to analyse a contemporary phenomenon in the administration of education, namely, the enactment of standards for leadership practice. I situate my analysis in the Canadian context, in particular, the province of Ontario. This analytical engagement has two purposes: first, to investigate the possibilities that a relational approach has to offer to the study of the enactment of leadership standards in education; and second, to interrogate some of the assumptions and implications of the relational project for the study of educational administration. I conclude with critical comments, recommendations, and suggestions for further exploration and scholarship.

Keywords: education reform, leadership standards, leadership reform, relationality, identity

Introduction

As neoliberal discourses in education promote the commodification and instrumentalization of knowledge, theoretical inquiry becomes a rare occurrence. Theoretical work in educational administration and leadership is no exception to this trend. Jill Blackmore (2013) noted that, “as a concept that has significant normative and political capacities as well as consequences, leadership is discursively overworked and theoretically underdone in policy and in much of the literature” (p. 140). Of course, this does not mean that the study of educational administration is devoid of theorization. The history of this field of inquiry offers notable examples of theoretical engagements, principled debates, and conceptual interrogation, such as Thomas Greenfield’s (1991) challenges to the theory movement or Colin Evers and Gabriele Lakomski’s (1991, 1996, 2000) naturalistic coherentism pro-

gram. As Helen Gunter (2005) noted in her typology of research orientations in the field, knowledge claims in educational administration and leadership are necessarily situated within intellectual traditions and discontinuities that engender debate and contestation. Robert Donmoyer (2001) noted, however, that the different orientations treat each other with benign neglect, without engaging in critical conversation about their object(s) of study.

Eacott’s proposal to adopt a relational perspective in the study of educational administration and leadership comes at a time where performativity has consolidated its place as the logic of education reform. In Stephen Ball’s (2003) words, “the novelty of this epidemic of reform is that it does not simply change what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are” (p. 215). Evidently, under these historical circumstances, social actors involved in the administration of education, including researchers and practitio-

ners, have the opportunity to interrogate the discourses and forces that shape the contemporary social condition through administration in a globalizing world. These forces are evident in the current obsession of most of the literature aiming to link student achievement and the actions of the principal.

As much of the research engages in the search for the mechanism of perpetual school improvement, little has been done to interrogate the very constructs that drive the research in this field. Eacott's proposal, offers a way to investigate the social and historical construction of the object of inquiry, as well as the implications of this construction for practice and research.

The Relational Approach

In a relational ontology, relations are ontologically more fundamental than entities. That is, entities are constituted through relations and not vice versa. The interactions, connections, disconnections, and differences between beings determine their identity. In contrast, an entities-based ontology assumes that identity is an intrinsic property of beings. The relations between beings do not affect their identity in any substantial way. For instance, a relational ontology would characterize a teacher's identity as a product of multiple relations between policies, material spaces, discourses and practices. What makes someone a *teacher* (or a *principal* or a *parent* for that matter) is the multiplicity of intersections between education policies, social practices, practices, gender roles and other markers and positions that engender this identity. There is nothing intrinsic to an individual that makes her a teacher or a principal, her identity is constituted by the position that she occupies in the educational system, the policies that enforce that system, and all the other social-historical arrangements that facilitate the emergence of such identities. A relational ontology portrays its objects as emergent, as products of the intersections between discourses, practices, social forces, other identities, and other social and material realities.

The analytic of relationality has an illustrious history in philosophy and sociology. Nota-

bly in the works of Martin Heidegger (1962), Michel Foucault (1971) and Gilles Deleuze (1993), who challenged, each one in their own way, the individualistic/atomistic assumptions of modern thought. Eacott draws his relational proposal inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who famously argued for a relational understanding of the constitution of social reality. For instance, in his discussion of social space, Bourdieu (1998) argued that:

The notion of space contains in itself, the principle of a relational understanding of the social world. It affirms that every reality it designates resides on the mutual exteriority of its composite elements. Apparent, directly, visible beings, whether individuals or groups, exist and subsist in and through difference; that is, they occupy relative positions in a space of relations which, although invisible and always difficult to show empirically, is the most real reality (the *ens realissimum* as the scholasticism would say). (p. 31)

Difference is a relational property, one that could only be understood in terms of the distinction between entities in a social space. Consequently, the identity of an individual, a practice or a process is an effect of the configuration of the relations in which that individual, practice or process participates. Eacott adopts this analytic in his discussion of the construct of *leadership* and the recasting of *administrative labor*.

One clear advantage of adopting a relational approach is that it immediately highlights the situatedness of the object under examination. In the case of leadership, Eacott investigates the social and historical conditions under which the label of leadership has been created and appropriated. He argues that the label of leadership has become part of the "managerialist project of the state", a label of choice that legitimizes the adoption of performative regimes in education (Eacott, 2015, p. 35). Eacott's claim echoes a growing dissatisfaction in the academic literature towards the uncritical embracing of this label in academic, professional and policy circles. For instance, according to Alvesson and Sveningson (2003):

that there is a strong discourse emphasizing leadership and that this is repeated by mass media, the public, people in organizations, and leadership researchers is no proof of anything—except, perhaps, about the popularity of this discourse. That there is considerable leadership research studying and claiming the existence of leadership does not prove anything either. Much of this research takes for granted leadership and is stuck in this assumption. The research assumes what it perhaps should study in a much more open and questioning way. (p. 377)

The interrogation of the idea of leadership has compelled researchers to call for a reorientation of the field towards a broader understanding of educational organizations (Glatter, 2006) and the practices within them (Lakowski, 2005). O'Reilly and Reed (2010) expressed similar concerns mobilizing the notion of *leaderism*, which refers to the introduction of the narrative of leadership in policy discourses, representing “an evolution of entrepreneurial and cultural management ideology and practices which are focused on ‘re-imagining’ the public service user as a consumer (or ‘co-producer’) rather than as a citizen or client” (p. 960). Relatedly, Hall (2013) argued that the “discourse of leadership and the communication of the leadership imaginary to schools in England ... have enabled the adaptation of the teaching profession to the radical changes associated with NPM [New Public Management]” (p. 267).

Eacott's proposal contributes theoretical resources to researchers interested in exploring the constitution and emergence of leadership as a social construct. His analysis reveals that researchers have taken the existence and meaning of this construct for granted, engaging in an ontological complicity that assumes the causal influence of leadership in shaping organizational realities. In Eacott's view, by uncritically accepting the existence of leadership and its causal influence, researchers and practitioners have been complicit in the re-creation of a school that perpetuates the belief in the necessity of leadership as an explanatory mechanism for educational outcomes. One consequence of this reification of leadership is the preservation of traditional positivist di-

chotomies, such as subject/object or agency/structure. Indeed, by portraying leadership as a causal mechanism that influences the operation of the school, most of the research assumes that the school is a well-defined entity that could be intervened and reformed through the action of the leader(s). Leadership, in this image, is a resource, a powerful mechanism that could be appropriated to organize and mobilize social actors towards the achievement of predetermined goals.

The relational perspective advocated by Eacott purports to map out the interactions that contribute to the construction of these objects. It would allow us to interrogate the conditions for the existence of these entities and would allow us to question the legitimacy of the mechanisms used to intervene and reform the school. In my own work, I have studied one of these mechanisms of reform: The creation and adoption of standards for leadership practice. In particular, I am interested in the enactment of the standards in order to understand how they reconfigure practices and identities. In what follows, I aim to explore how a relational lens could be mobilized to study the enactment of leadership standards, offering, at the same time, a critical examination of Eacott's proposal.

Applying the Relational Approach to the Study of the Enactment of Standards for Leadership Practice

One obvious implication of relationality is its necessary grounding in contexts. If the real is relational and reality is contextual then a relational analysis would be an analysis of the context. Eacott warns us that the *context matters* narrative has done little to define what context is. Clearly, context is not synonym with *local*. In research, we use context as a heuristic, as a category that helps us situate the object of inquiry. While most of the research in educational administration has adopted the context matters dictum, the definition of the context usually corresponds to pre-established categories, such as the school, the district, or the nation. Without a critical examination of the discourses that frame their definition of the context, researchers are destined to reproduce these taken-for-granted categories

through their research. In contrast, a relational understanding of context is interdisciplinary; it portrays the local and the global in a dialectic relation, recognizing that context is always an emergent reality, produced through the intersections between practices, identities, and discourses.

In line with this understanding of context, the notion of *policy enactment* (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) offers a situated understanding of policy processes:

Policy is complexly encoded in sets of texts and various documents and it is also decoded in complex ways. Policy enactment involves creative processes of interpretation and translation, that is, the recontextualisation through reading, writing and talking of the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices. (Braun, Ball, Maguire & Hoskins, 2011, p. 587)

This situated characterization of policy contradicts the traditional notion of *policy implementation* in which policy is seen as a linear, top-down process with school actors having limited involvement. In contrast, policy enactment is a situated, dynamic, iterative process, framed by particular social and historical circumstances. Ball et al. (2012) argued that the study of policy includes the practices of the actors and their creative efforts to interpret and contextualize the policy messages into their specific circumstances. In their view, the analysis of enactments includes: the historical and locational aspects where the policy is put in practice; the professional cultures; the material circumstances; and the wider social and political forces that interact with the practices of social actors. Policy frameworks, discourses and initiatives represent some of these forces.

Ball et al. (2012) argued that conventional accounts of policy implementation tend to dematerialize the school context, assuming the “‘best possible’ environments for ‘implementation’: ideal buildings, students, teachers and even resources” (p. 41). This idea resonates with Eacott’s examination of some studies that assume the existence of leadership as an empirical reality that exist with independence of social and historical contexts. This decontextualized characterization of leadership is

evidenced in much of the policy geared towards leadership reform. Newton and Riveros (2015) argued that contemporary discourses on school reform position leadership as a key mechanism in education reform. As neoliberal discourses in education reform introduce new forms of managerialism in the administration of schools, the *leader* is construed as the key agent in charge of mobilizing the organization towards the goal of reform. In these discourses, *student achievement* has been defined as the ultimate purpose of education and leadership has been positioned as the mechanism that would produce this desired outcome.

This *leadership turn* in education reform (Riveros, Newton & Burgess, 2017) adopts the construct of leadership to position the school leader as the agent in charge of reform. This is evident in the obsession over the principal as the focus of the inquiry in most of the literature in educational administration. In two recent reviews of the literature, Ingvarson, Anderson, Gronn, and Jackson (2006), and the OECD (CEPPE & OECD, 2013) noted the growing popularity of policies on leadership standards around the world. The leadership standards movement started in 1996 in the US with the publication of the Interstate School Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (NPBEA, 2015). After numerous boards adopted the ISLLC standards in the US, other jurisdictions followed suit creating their own standards, notably, the UK (DfES, 2004, 2015), Australia (Education Services Australia, 2011, 2015), Alberta (Alberta Education, 2009), British Columbia (BCPVA, 2007, 2013), and Ontario (Institute for Education Leadership, 2007, 2013), among many others.

Despite the controversies around defining and studying leadership (Gunter, 2005; Heck & Hallinger, 2005; Oplatka, 2009, 2010; Newton, & Riveros, 2015), there are significant similarities between the formulations of the standards. The CEPPE-OECD (2013) study noted that most leadership standards include five key domains: i) to establish a guiding mission; ii) to generate organizational conditions; iii) to create harmony within the school; iv) to develop the self and others, and v) to do pedagogical management. The overlap between the different formulations of the standards suggests the existence of global policy

transfer mechanisms that are materialized in the emergence of leadership policies in different jurisdictions across the globe (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011).

In a study conducted in the province of Ontario, Riveros, Verret and Wei (2016) investigated the enactment of the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013) aiming to understand how school actors in urban schools in Ontario translate these standards into practices. Briefly, the OLF aims to provide “leaders with a clear picture of what effective leadership looks like at both the level of the individual leader and the organization. It describes what an effective leader does and what an effective organization does” (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013, p. 6). The OLF includes five domains where leadership is demonstrated: i) setting directions; ii) building relationships and developing people; iii) developing the organization to support desired practices; iv) improving the instructional program, and v) securing accountability.

Through a case study approach that included semistructured interviews with principals and vice-principals and document analysis, Riveros et al. (2016) identified key analytical themes that offered insights into the enactment of the standards. One key finding relates to the constitution of the school leader as an emergent identity.

The School Leader as an Emergent Identity: A Relational Story

A relational perspective avoids essentialist accounts of identity. As indicated above, the subject is constituted in the interconnections between other identities, discourses, practices and other social and material circumstances. Our initial analysis of the OLF suggested an essentialist or *entity* ontology in which the leader is the school actor who reflects the domains listed above. Leadership is conceived as a real property that could be easily transferred between contexts and adopted by different actors. In his analysis of the leadership standards in the US, Fenwick English (2012) argued that these frameworks constitute instruments of rational control over the actions and practices

of school actors. They become instruments of subjectification, namely, tools that configure subjectivities through diverse articulations of power (Foucault, 1982).

Evidently, we did not begin the analysis with a preconstructed notion of leader or leadership, instead, we allowed our participants to articulate through examples situations in which they consider they are responding to the demands of the OLF. Our initial analysis revealed that the OLF was largely used in processes of recruitment, evaluation and promotion. The OLF provided a fixed list of criteria used to contrast their practice against an abstraction of what leadership looks like in the best-case scenario. While the OLF play an important role in defining who enters, stays and moves up in the ranks of school districts in Ontario, its relevance as a guide for the daily practice of school administrators is less clear. Here we see that the role of the school leader is construed in ambivalent ways: the portfolios for promotion, the annual evaluations and the reports to the school board portray a school leader that fits neatly defined categories. This identity appears *ex post facto*, in reflection, when the OLF is used as a template to evaluate performance. However, it is important to note that the mechanisms created to enforce compliance with OLF have an effect on the practices of the administrators.

While it is tempting to say that school administrators display two sets of practices: one set to comply with the OLF and another to deal with their daily work, the deployment of the surveillance mechanisms mentioned above compels administrators to act in ways that ultimately reflect the domains in the OLF. In this process of enacting the policy, namely, in the process of recontextualizing the OLF through situated practices, the school leader emerges as an identity. In Ontario, the school leader is a term that has become intimately associated with the OLF. One salient example of this association could be seen in the principal preparation courses offered to those wishing to join the administrative ranks in their districts. Our review of these programs revealed that all of them have used the OLF to structure their curricula. This is an instance of the ontological complicity that Eacott (2015) mentioned in his analysis. The emergence of the school leader as

an identity has been made possible by a number of social and political factors that include i) the global circulation of policy discourses on leadership and school reform, ii) the unproblematic acceptance of these discourses at the local level, and iii) the materialization of these discourses in practices and mechanisms of surveillance and control. The tacit complicity of policy makers, researchers, academics and practitioners towards defining the school leader has made the emergence of this identity possible.

This school leader is a systems leader whose role is to mobilize the school towards student achievement. This leader does not act nor reflect on issues of oppression, marginalization or emancipation. More problematically, no space is there to include key markers of personal identity, such as gender, race, ability or sexual identity. By portraying the school leader as a homogenous identity, the OLF does little to open spaces for diversity in the administration of schools. This decontextualized treatment of leaders and leadership fails to acknowledge the realities of women, racialized minorities, LGBTQ people, and people who live with disabilities, as they consider joining the path of school administration. By portraying the school leader as a homogenous identity, the OLF reinforces the social privilege of the white middle class in the administration of education. This lack of diversity in the administration of schools is problematic, especially in a province that has an increasingly diverse population, particularly in its urban centers.

Expanding the Relational Perspective

In the last section I argued that the social construction of leadership as an empirical object creates and re-creates identities in educational administration. I aimed to show how the analytic of relationality offers situated insights on the constitution and emergence of the school leader as the preeminent agent of school reform. In doing this, I aimed to engage my own scholarship in the exploration of what it means to adopt a relational perspective. Eacott (2015) pointed out that:

the relational research programme is a generative way of thinking about educational

administration. The interpretation of what it is, and what it is not, is an ongoing – and enduring – question. This is why I cannot prescribe a how to, only to stress that theory is methodology and not separate entities. (p. 134)

While the intention of the book is not to offer yet another recipe to “do leadership”, it provides interesting groundwork to reimagine the objects of inquiry in educational administration. In what follows I suggest a few venues where the relational program could be further developed.

Power and Identity

Analyses of power have been central to the development of social theory. There are however, different perspectives when it comes to define what power is and how it exists in society. Eacott suggested that the legitimation of the object of study depends on the way such object is constructed in relations. As we study relations, more attention could be paid to the ways power circulates and contributes to the enactment of social realities. Further, is power something held by groups or individuals, a property of relations, a condition of control and influence or an ubiquitous productive force? At times, the analysis seems to portray power as a symbolic and cultural instrument that creates the conditions for social difference. “Theoretically, this takes analysis beyond the reduction of relations to the enactment of power, as is often the case with Neo-Marxist accounts, and brings to the fore attention to temporality and sociopolitical space” (Eacott, 2015, p. 71). However, as we pay attention to time and sociopolitical space in the constitution of the object of inquiry, the role of power in the legitimation of these objects is less clear. In my exploration of a relational perspective above, I argued that the definition of the object of inquiry has material implications for the emergence of identities in educational administration. One way to expand this analysis could be to investigate whether time and space as categories are created as an effect of disciplinary powers or regimes of truth (Foucault, 1982).

The Dichotomy Critical/Productive

Eacott indicates that the relational approach aims to investigate the legitimation of the object of inquiry in educational administration, going beyond a mere “critical” perspective:

The relational approach is concerned with the legitimation of the social – the various ways in which the contemporary social conditions have come to be, and importantly, are sustained. This is not couched in a negative perspective, rather one seeking description for the purpose of understanding, not judgement. The critical seeks to emancipate from regimes of oppression. In contrast, the relational, built upon description, pays attention to the construction and ongoing maintenance of the contemporary condition. Rather than explicitly seeking emancipation, the relational offers the means for alternatives to be promoted through its focus on the genesis of the contemporary. The critical and the relational are not so much different, but the distinctions matter. (Eacott, 2015, p. 79)

This distinction is stressed throughout the book and seems to suggest a distinction between critical and *productive*. I have to confess I am puzzled by this distinction. Is not emancipation a productive goal of critical theory? Why is it important to make this distinction? Clearly, a critical theorist could endorse an entity ontology and still mobilize their critique to overcome institutional and social sources of oppression. Critical theory takes the political seriously and asks whether realities are constituted through political action. I believe a relational perspective is not incompatible with this claim. Perhaps the question that could be asked here is whether the political should be prioritized in the characterization of the real as relational.

Concluding Remarks

I believe the relational perspective proposed by Eacott is engaging and intriguing. It offers novel possibilities to investigate knowledge

and knowledge production in educational administration. As a proposal, it offers meaningful questions for researchers to consider as they embark in their studies. Perhaps one critical aspect that should be carefully considered by those interested in the study of relations is the interrogation of the nature of relations. What counts as a relation and what type of relations should be taken into account? If relations are ontologically primitive, the definition of what a relation is and what type of relations are constitutive of the object is of utmost importance.

In this brief paper I aimed to engage relational thinking in the analysis of an issue in educational administration: the enactment of standards for leadership practice. I paid particular attention to the constitution of the school leader as an emergent identity. Using the analytic of relationality, I interrogated the ontological assumptions and the implications of policy discourses that aim to characterize the school leader as the agent of school reform and noted that this identity is emergent, fluid and fragile. Finally I made a few suggestions for researchers interested in mobilizing a relational perspective in their own work.

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