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Justice for leadership: (Re)versing the lyrics of 'leadership for' in education

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ABSTRACT
Leadership for justice, leadership for change, leadership for learning, leadership for institutions, and leadership for success. The leadership lyrics continue to resound, 'leadership for'. What if leadership lyrics were reversed and re-versed? The world amply rewards leadership, not just leaders, to the extent where leadership may not only need some ontological reorientation, but more importantly, and as the focus of this commentary, some repositioning down the popular policy, research and practice charts. Justice for leadership starts with what is leadership and whether leadership has been unjustly promoted beyond where it should be? For leadership to become more oriented to wider issues of social justice in education, the issue of leadership popularism has to be addressed first through a possible (re)versing of meaning and application.

Introduction

Leadership is everywhere so it seems. To bring some clarification to what is meant and intended through leadership usually means employing one or more of four approaches. The first is associating a purpose with leadership, for example, leadership for justice. A second, is to rely on adjectivalism, where the term preceding leadership carries the meaning we attribute to leadership, for example, transformational leadership, educational leadership, distributed leadership, social justice leadership and so on, accumulating to over 60 theoretical categories (Dinh et al., 2014). The third is to use leadership as a noun, where the leadership is equated to an individual or team, or a verb, where certain practices are labelled as leadership. Finally, the fourth and lesser used approach starts ontologically with, what is leadership? If we are not clear with the fourth approach, which actually should come first, then we run the risk of hoping a possible empty signifier (in this case leadership) can do something for justice, the focus of this special issue.

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Ontology, Leadership Studies and ELMA

In line with the fourth approach, I first present my own assumptions. This journal is associated with the education field of knowledge, so this special issue is partly situated within the field of Educational Leadership Management and Administration (ELMA). Because the nomenclature of leadership has been selected for this issue of ACCESS, there is also an association with the Leadership (Studies) field which is larger than ELMA and not bound to the education field. This special issue's call for papers brings together the terms, leadership, leaders, the led, the not-led, lead their followers, and leadership success. There is an alignment with an entitative ontology that informs most mainstream leadership theory with these terms, in other words, the triad of leader-follower-success, with the latter determining the effectiveness of whatever is deemed leadership. To embed leadership in notions of ethics, aesthetics, and social justice, we first need to (re)consider what leadership is and how it is susceptible to managerialist capture. It may be a (re)versing of what leadership is that may be part of addressing issues of social (in)justice. Afterall, most leadership studies, including those in education, do not subject the concept of leadership to much scrutiny (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Fitzgerald, 2021). Looking "beyond the mystical aura that comes with leadership discourse" (Spoelstra, 2013, p. 186) reveals the study of leadership is not a straightforward one.

The mainstream versing of leadership

Most mainstream leadership thinking assumes the entitative constructs of leader(s), followers and success through shared goals, are ontologically sufficient, an assumption that is challenged by Drath et al. (2008), Raelin (2016), By (2021) and Crevani (2018). Mainstream leadership thinking assumes leaders and followers are the starting place for answering the question, what is leadership? The leadership field has evolved from an initial sole focus on the heroic leader, their traits and behaviours, to include followers (or subordinates) and how leaders adapt to them (and vice versa), as well as organisational contexts, to also include post-heroic models. Post-heroic models, such as shared leadership, distributed leadership, collective leadership, and collaborative leadership, broaden the source of leadership beyond those in formal organisation leadership roles. However, these too can be prone to being embedded in entitative ontology, where leaders and followers become interchangeable (Youngs & Evans, 2021). Leadership is usually based in an entitative ontology, whether heroic, leader-centric or post-heroic, and can be popularised as the means of and for transformation. I am not bringing into question that certain practices may lead to transformation, rather, a more cautious approach is required before associating these practices as or with leadership. It is the (over)emphasis on leaders and leadership that is the issue.

     We can be prone to overstating the contribution of leaders and leadership. This in one way is associated with the romanticism of leadership and the attribution of leadership to certain individuals (Meindl et al. 1985; Pfeffer, 1977). In such cases, it may "lead to the hypothesis that the more the context actually effects organizational outcomes, the more efforts will be made to ensure attribution to *leadership*" (Pfeffer, 1977, p. 110) and leaders. The concerns raised in these 1970s and 1980s critiques of leader and leadership have not subsided. Wilson (2016), in her critical historical analysis of leadership studies, argues the dominant way of thinking about leadership gravitates to individuals who are visionary, transformational, charismatic, and authentic, despite studies showing individuals cannot live up to these expectations; leaders can "also cultivate stupidity" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016, p. 104). Studies also suggest any impact leaders have "is both more modest and context dependent than many portrayals of them imply" (Newark, 2018, p. 199). Vision is often touted as a necessary pre-requisite for transformation, yet according to Popper's (2012) examination of well-known leaders, associating vision with leaders is questionable. In addition, the influence of New Public Management (NPM) with the (over)emphasis on rational structures, efficiency, effectiveness,

standardised systems and measurement across public sectors such as education, has given rise to what O'Reilly and Reed (2010) call leaderism. Leaderism, "construes leaders as change agents" (O'Reilly & Reid, 2010, p. 961) for public reforms, and "leadership as enabling and facilitating public service reforms" (p. 961), where leaders are "an essential ingredient of the new governance of public service organisations" (p. 961). All three aspects contribute to the popularisation of the leadership discourse. These points all gravitate the meaning of leadership back to what leaders are expected to do, what they actually do and have done. This does not help objectify leadership apart from reducing it to leaders, unless leadership is a social construction amongst those who use it to explain a phenomenon that is usually associated with transformation and some form of influence. Perhaps this is why adjectivalism is prevalent with leadership studies and across ELMA, where the adjective preceding leadership carries the meaning of the practice or expectation of the leader being described. Leadership for justice may be a hollow attempt to address social (in)justice issues unless we are clear with what we mean by leadership and know what leadership may look like. Social justice [……] does not need the [……] to be filled with leadership, unless we consider (re)versing leadership, and are prepared that some (re)versing could also be inadequate. We may be doing leadership an injustice by expecting too much of it or too much of leaders.

(Re)versing leadership towards (social) justice

If leadership is associated with social justice, then the focus is on disrupting "power and systemic inequities rooted in oppression, discrimination, and prejudice" (Castrellón, 2021, p. 1). However, if leadership is shown prejudice over other means to disrupt and overturn inequities, then we may end up discriminating against other means, because of the prevailing power leadership may hold as a discourse for transformation. I am not arguing against leadership for social justice, but rather let us be sure by what we mean by leadership and whether or not it is the most appropriate term to use. Instead of leadership, it may be social movements, critical interventions, pedagogies of tangible hope, critically reflective dialogue, stepping back to create space, and quietening down so other voices can be heard, that may provide a more nuanced and transforming approach to disrupting and overcoming inequalities. Can we rely on such examples without needing to use the term leadership? If so, then we need to ask what does leadership then add? Here, leadership is taken off the song sheet or at least taken down a notch or two in terms of linguistic profile.

Another approach is to shift leadership from an entitative ontology to an alternative and (re)verse the leadership lyrics. One way of doing this is to learn from within indigenous cultures so leadership is not based in Anglo-American-Euro constructions that may over promote individualism. For example, in Aotearoa (also known as New Zealand), the Māori term, *rangatiratanga*, is often equated with leaders(hip). However, "the word 'rangatira' is made up of *raranga*, meaning to weave, and *tira*, meaning a group. Rangatira therefore means to weave a group together, and the 'tanga' denotes this as an active term … [cultivating] the personal sovereignty of each person" (Spiller et al., 2015, p. 65). The active form used here points to ongoing movement and fluidity, as well as shifting focus from individual entities more to the ongoing weaving of people in relationship, in other words, *rangatiratanga.* If the ongoing weaving together includes those who are oppressed, then perhaps we start to get closer to what practices may help address issues of social (in)justice.

A second way of possibly shifting leadership away from an entitative ontology to an alternative song sheet, is to align it with process ontology. This is not to be confused with the study of (influence) processes between entities, usually leader(s) and followers. This approach is common in the leadership field and can be labelled as a process perspective (Crevani, 2018). Process ontology brings to focus whether and how leadership is an ongoing, fluid and temporal process, where one "path is to take the concept of 'producing direction' as one core aspect of leadership work and explore it processually" (Crevani, 2018, p. 85). This shifts the focus from leaders and using this noun to also mean leadership, to the ongoing forming of directions conducive to or barriers to practices connected to maintaining or overcoming social injustice. The terms 'leader', 'the led', and 'not led'

become, 'the temporal and enduring practices' and what momentary events over time merge into a coherent pattern of practices that maintain hegemonic barriers and/or liberate people to access the personal agency and collective responsibility they have a human right to. There may at times be leading and following in these practices, however the leader-centric entitative ontology of leader, the (and not) led does not need to be the dominant frame in which we understand what is occurring regarding practices that we may label as being some form of leadership.

Conclusion

I started this commentary surfacing my assumptions and conclude with another. My argument to shift away from solely relying on an entitative ontology of leadership is made accepting that the nomenclature of leader, follower (or non-follower) widely exists and is evident in our Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs). My main point here is in the term 'solely' in the sentence above and reflects the dialectic intent of this commentary. The field of leadership is fraught with its own contestability, as well as slipperiness when trying to experience and understand it as a practice in the present as it occurs. Therefore, some justice is needed for leadership, so it is not positioned as <u>the</u> means to address and overcome issues of injustice. Otherwise, leadership and leaders, may simplistically be positioned as reasons for social injustice, so we then turn to another form of leadership with another adjective as a way forward. And so, the cycle continues as leadership is once again over-reified and under-defined.

Notes on contributor

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