

The Leaderisation of schools: How did schooling come to be about leadership?

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The Leaderisation of schools: How did schooling come to be about leadership?

A problem of leadership

What do pandemics, equity, AI, wellbeing, and ecology all have in common?

If today's school researchers are to be believed, these are all problems of 'leadership.' At least, this is the impression given by recent research on crisis leadership, inclusive leadership, digital leadership, resilient leadership, and environmental leadership in education.

In the early 21st century, school researchers in the English-speaking world have come to a consensus that these and other issues are best approached through the lens of educational leadership. Here, leadership means to exercise influence over staff perceptions and attitudes, in order to build commitment towards a mission or vision of change. It lends itself to the language of purpose, inspiration, empowerment, motivation, and commitment.

The choice to frame schooling in this language is not an obvious one. It is not immediately apparent why small-group leader-follower relationships should be the entry point for understanding organisational improvement in mid-sized schools and colleges. This uneasy match becomes more pronounced in the concept of 'system leadership,' where a group psychological concept is applied to the public administration of education at a state or federal level. Even still, educational leadership has ascended (Bush, 2004), and inquiries into organisational learning or educational administration have been sidelined. There has been a 'leaderisation' of

schooling.²

The leaderisation of schooling has effectively reorganised schools around leadership theory. This does not just mean that researchers offer leadership as a solution to a range of problems in schools. It goes further. Leaderisation has changed what is perceived to be a problem, and what kind of problem it is perceived to be. Under leaderisation, ‘school’ problems become reframed as ‘school leadership’ problems. In discursive and professional practice, leadership theory is not just one answer among many. Instead, leaderisation has changed what practitioners take for a valid answer. This can be seen in the ‘leader-centrism’ of school discourse (Grice et al., 2023; Gronn, 2002), and ‘leaderism’ in school conduct (Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Evans, 2022; Riveros et al., 2016; Simkins, 2012). These two developments have arisen from a chain of historical events.

How schooling came to be about leadership

I contend that the leaderisation of schooling was not a straightforward case of the ‘best’ theory inevitably winning, or simply due to political and economic pressures (as critiques of neoliberal policy have already indicated). I propose that leadership theory’s ascendancy was due, in no small part, to an unlikely source: survey research designs. The combination of leadership theory and survey questionnaires promised productive and consistent evidence for evidence-based practice. However, this promise came at the expense of concerns about the validity of relying on such research.

My investigation into Leadership Theory in Schooling suggests that leaderisation occurred in four phases: emergence, adoption, diffusion, and reproduction. Firstly, leadership theory as we know it emerged in workplace research

² I use this term to refer to the reorganising of schooling around leadership theory (as opposed to administrative theory, for example). The term has also been used to discuss the reframing of party politics, or educational policy, around individual leaders (Mancini, 2011; Gunter, 2016).

in the 1970s. It switched the target of workplace research to focus on interpersonal influence over staff. This was because survey designs were better suited to produce reports of staff perceptions and ratings of staff attitudes, and less suited to measuring supervisor behaviour and performance outcomes. This pivot was needed to leverage the benefits of questionnaires, which included their affordability, feasibility, scalability, machine-readability, and amenability to statistical analysis. These benefits were already apparent from survey studies at Ohio State and Michigan universities, as well as contingency research, which attracted significant US government funding.

Second, leadership theory was adopted into schooling in the 1980s because of its promise to address the problem of purpose and values, which had been neglected by administrative theory. Leadership theory was driven by the school effectiveness movement which brought attention to educational mission, and by critical perspectives scholars concerned with visions of transforming society. These two traditions were both capitalised upon by transformational school leadership, which repurposed leadership theory to build commitment to school restructuring and systemic reforms. Both school effectiveness and transformational leadership research were able to produce consistent research using structured, fixed-response survey instruments (the PIMRS and NSL, respectively).

Thirdly, leadership theory diffused throughout education in the 1990s and 2000s, because it promised to consolidate a range of research gaps into a single, leadership-sized gap. Leadership theory, once concerned with interpersonal leader-follower dynamics, was expanded to take in policy implementation (in the form of Self-Managing Schools), pupils (through Organisational Conditions and School Leadership research), international projects (such as the ISSPP), and participatory governance (with the model of Distributed Leadership).

Finally, leadership theory could be reproduced due to two developments in the 2000s and 2010s. These consolidated research approaches and shored up research findings in meta-reviews. By the early 2000s, work was underway to integrate

instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and teacher/shared leadership. The resultant 'leadership for learning' framework consolidated the various research approaches that had flourished with the collapse of administrative theory. Effective schools research became 'successful school leadership,' cognitive research became 'distributed leadership,' interpretivist and humanist inquiry became 'ethical leadership,' social theory became 'social justice leadership,' cultural theory became 'culturally responsive/relevant leadership,' and critical theory and feminism became 'transformative leadership' and 'advocacy leadership.'

It was not long before meta-syntheses, meta-analyses, systematic reviews and science mapping were leveraged to settle any reservations about the promise of school leadership theory. These meta-reviews have become the most cited papers in the field, and their production continues to be popular. With these, a new de facto epistemology was established, which set new standards for what is deemed as acceptable research on schooling. Today, school researchers are free to pose research questions as they wish, but their research risks irrelevance if not couched in the language of leadership. Likewise, scholars have licence to deploy a range of methods, including qualitative and mixed-methods designs, but they are expected to build on the accepted 'knowledge base' of school leadership research. This knowledge base is now grounded in meta-reviews that favour instructional and transformational leadership surveys, because they produce large datasets of pre-coded quantitative data amenable to aggregation. A knowledge base premised on meta-reviews recycles the headlines, the broad generalisations, the bold claims. The details – discussions of context, research design limitations, and the tentativeness of the findings – are relegated to the footnotes.

Towards better leadership theory, or something better than leadership?

Leaderisation has played a historical role in stabilising school discourse. From the

1970s to the 1990s, educational administration discourse was gripped with anxiety about the incompatibility of its diverse research traditions and methodologies (Griffiths, 1979; Greenfield, 1993). This no longer presents a problem: with 'leadership for learning,' once irreconcilable approaches are now viewed as different perspectives on the same agreed-upon object.

However, this stability has come at the cost of over-concentration, and schooling now risks being captured by a narrow conceptualisation of leadership. In the interests of diversifying the portfolio of school research, I identify four lines of inquiry forged by Australian and international scholars:

1. *Clearer delineation of what leadership is (and what it is not).* My commentary on leaderisation should not be read as a simple opposition to leadership theory. Leadership theory has its place, and its uses. The challenge is to identify precisely where that place is, and what those uses are. When conducting inquiry, school researchers cannot assume from the outset that all problems will inevitably point to some form of leadership influence, and can be addressed by articulating a vision or mission of change. Moreover, 'leadership' requires greater conceptual clarification, building on work that has decoupled leadership identity from the position of the 'principalship' (Blackmore 1999; Lingard et al. 2003; Niesche 2011).
2. *Greater competition between research designs.* School leadership research has traditionally relied upon 'influence' (impacts on morale), because that is what surveys and interviews are designed to reveal. This has resulted in repurposing cross-sectional designs to describe the impact of leadership over time, and the use of terms like 'effect size' to refer to correlations when no cause-effect relationships were tested for. By contrast, Australian 'Leadership for Organisational Learning and Student Outcomes' (LOLSO) research stands as an example of longitudinal research that trialled principal interventions (Silins, et al. 1999).

3. *Greater competition between theories.* Leadership theory enjoys its current prominence because of what it promises to explain. However, leadership theory is only as viable as the alternatives it is tested against. One alternative is naturalistic organisational theory, which shifts the unit of analysis from 'influence' to 'cognition,' in order to better cohere with the methods and findings of natural science (Lakomski, 2005). Another candidate is sociological organisational theory, which replaces 'influence' with a 'relational' approach that investigates how interactions dynamically reorganise the experience of space and time in schools (Eacott, 2018).
4. *Competing virtues for judging theories.* Leadership theory has spread due to two promises. In epistemological language, leadership's first promise has been 'explanatory unity' and 'comprehensiveness:' that is, to provide a single framework for investigating all manner of problems in schooling. Its second promise has been internal consistency: to reliably produce data. However, Evers and Lakomski (1991) argue that these epistemic virtues are not complete unto themselves, and ought to be counterbalanced with other criteria, such as external consistency, conservativeness, parsimony, and fecundity. On these counts, current leadership theory fares less well, because it is committed to a view of atomistic individuals who are at once detached from their environment, but who also change that environment. More pressingly, under leaderisation, leadership theory is not especially fecund, because it functions to answer all questions in advance. No matter what issue arises, some tried-and-true blend of shared-transformational-instructional leadership will inevitably be the solution.

Leadership theory ascended out of discontent with theories of educational administration, and has its merits. However, such comparative advantages will remain invisible unless leadership inquiry is permitted to compete with alternative research designs and theories, and subjected to competing criteria for judging theories. Greater

theory competition is needed if schools are to move toward better leadership theory, or something better than leadership theory.

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