

Leadership or Management in  
Schools?

A Critical Review of the Literature

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### Introduction

Reflecting upon, or perhaps resisting, the heroic leadership styles popularly espoused by the likes of *TED Talk* star Simon Sinek, Mertkan (2014) refers to the canonisation of leadership: a universal discourse celebrating inspiration and vision in place of hierarchy and bureaucracy. Within this leadership discourse, leadership is foregrounded while management is marginalised, evident in Colin Powell's remark that, "Leadership is the art of accomplishing more than the science of management says is possible" (Tobin, 2014: 1). Such a view appears to permeate the discussion of educational leadership, with a focus on styles such as instructional leadership, distributed leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership (Duignan, 2015; Kruger & Scheerens, 2005). To differing extents, these approaches implicitly marginalise, or take for granted, the technical and systematic concerns of management, an approach Glatter (2006) criticises as focusing too much on the actors and too little on the stage.

However, the extent to which school leaders can develop their own vision, transform their schools, or act in accordance with personal morals and ethics contrasts with the contemporary educational context in which governments prescribe curriculum aims and content (Bush, 2008). Also, accountability mechanisms such as high-stakes testing allow the state to use performance data as a catalyst for prescribed educational change (Lingard & Sellar, 2013).

This paper will analyse the polarised perspectives on school leadership and management, and explore their relevance within the current accountability-driven educational context. The disconnect between leadership theory and practice will also be explored, suggesting the need for school leadership to be reorientated to reflect an increasingly centralised education system.

### Defining Leadership and Management

When seeking to define leadership and management, much of the literature constructs a binary opposition in which leadership is regarded as superior to management. Leadership and management are essentially defined by being contrasted with one another, with many writers on the topic constructing a simple polarity between the two. For example, *The Wall Street Journal* (2009) suggests that while a manager's job is to plan and coordinate, a leader's job is to inspire and motivate. Further they suggest that while managers administer, leaders innovate, and where a manager is a copy, a leader is an original. Such simple binaries are also reinforced by Kotter (2013) who claims that while management is the fulfilment of tasks such as planning and budgeting, leadership refers to a future vision. While Kotter (2001) does seek to argue that both management and leadership are equally important, he regards management as focusing on control, while leadership focuses on motivation and inspiration. The prosaic manner in which management is regarded reflects a consistent foregrounding of the apparent enigmatic nature of leadership in contrast to the utilitarianism of management.

This contrast is also reflected by Hallinger and Snidvongs (2005) who regard management about organisation and control, while leadership reflects the capacity to forge a new direction and motivate stakeholders. Glatter (2006) suggests that while management is associated with a narrow, technicist, hierarchical approach, leadership is seen to contain a moral, democratic dimension. Kotter (2001: 93) also draws upon this moral line of thought, claiming that, "Motivation and inspiration energise people...by satisfying basic human needs for achievement, a sense of belonging, recognition, self-esteem, a feeling of control over one's life, and the ability to live up to one's ideals."

Such an oppositional approach to defining leadership and management is contested by Bush and Middlewood (2005). They suggest that effective management is just as important as visionary leadership for success, arguing that, "The polarisation of leadership and management should be replaced by an

androgynous approach, synthesising these two dimensions.” (Bush & Middlewood, 2005: 1) It is also argued that for schools to achieve their objectives, “leadership and management need to be given equal prominence.” (Bush & Middlewood, 2005: 1) However, Bush and Middlewood (2005), revealing a more nuanced approach than the previous definitions, do draw a distinction between management, which still requires purpose, and managerialism that focuses purely on, mainly financial, efficiency.

However, the androgynous approach espoused above is unique, with leadership framed within the intangible parameters of purpose and values, while management is seen as being limited by bureaucracy and rationality (Bush, 2008). Such an esoteric view of leadership is typified by Duignan’s (2015) reflections on the development of authentic leadership, which essentially focuses on leading according to one’s values, ethics and morals. Duignan (2015: 16) argues that, “...educational leaders...need to continually respond to... [the] challenge of transforming students each day into something special and something that enables their human spirit to soar.” In response to such lofty visions of leadership, Hallinger and Snidvongs (2005: 13) refer to organisational theorist James March’s metaphor for educational leadership as, “...creating bus schedules with footnotes from Kierkegaard.” The suggestion is that most of a school leader’s job focuses on making bureaucracy work through effectively dealing with trivial day-to-day matters. This reference to March by Hallinger and Snidvongs (2005) draws attention to the propensity to focus on the honourable elements of leadership, typified by Duignan (2015), creating a gap between leadership theory and the reality of managing a school.

### Contemporary Leadership Context

It should be noted that Duignan (2015) does draw attention to the world in which authentic leaders are required to operate: a world of standards, assessment and accountability. However, other commentators place greater emphasis on the contextual limitations placed upon those running schools in a neo-liberal policy climate. This emphasis is typified by Glatter (2006: 71), who

argues that in education there is a rhetorical emphasis on transformational leadership, while accountability regimes inhibit leadership, an arrangement between schools and government concisely described as “any vision you like so long as it fits with ours.” Bush and Middlewood (2005: 8) agree that the increasing centralisation of education has reduced the possibility of realising transformational leadership, arguing that the contemporary policy climate “raises questions...about the possibility of developing a vision specific to the needs and aspirations of the school community.” Mulford (2008) further supports this observation, suggesting that curriculum centralisation and accountability mean that discretionary decision making for school leaders is limited.

A key driver of this centralised decision-making has been the introduction of test-based accountability, which Rutledge (2010) suggests has reshaped the work of school leaders to focus on improving results in high-stakes tests. Rutledge (2010) and Bottery (2007) agree that the increase in achievement testing has resulted in a more directed profession and a more centralised education system. Lingard and Sellar (2013: 5) refer to this effect as a regulatory state that uses accountability to steer at a distance, where “accountability mechanisms in education [are used] as technologies of governance...” It is argued that the hegemonic logic of policy as numbers has led to, “...an intensification of audit and accountability within the system with perverse flow-on effects such as goal-displacement, teaching to the test and naturalisation of data as the most sensible medium for thinking about teaching and learning.” (Lingard & Sellar, 2013: 19) Clearly this contemporary context has a profound impact on the ways in which school leaders carry out their roles.

### Impact of Contemporary Context on Leadership

Far removed from the visions of leadership espoused by, among others, Kotter (2001, 2013), Glatter (2006) and Duignan (2015), Bottery (2007) regards contemporary school leadership as the implementation of policy hegemonically decided by government. In a study exploring how Headteachers in English were

responding to increased centralisation, Bottery (2007: 91) found that school leaders felt, “forced to concentrate on working out ways of fairly uncritically implementing policy, rather than of engaging in personal and communal critique and implementation.” Within the Australian context the impact of accountability on educational leadership has been similar, with “...a particular form of contemporary school leadership” legitimised by accountability (Eacott and Norris, 2014: 171). Eacott and Norris (2014) suggest that Australia has been an enthusiastic employer of data-driven centralisation, where the effectiveness of leadership is coupled with testing regimes in place of what Duignan (2015) would regard as the authentic pursuit of fairness, equity and accessibility.

Moore, George and Halpin (2002), Watson (2009) and Bush (2008) are all highly critical of the disconnect between the leadership discourse and the reality of running schools in an era of increasing accountability. Moore et al. (2002: 177) ask: “How far are headteachers able to sustain their personal educational visions and values...within a competitive market culture and a mandated national curriculum?” In responding, they argue there has been a conceptual shift from authentic leadership to contrived leadership, “...as a way of disguising or sweetening an actual lack of genuine leadership possibilities inherent in the extent of central government control” (Moore et al., 2002: 179). It is suggested that headmasters are operating increasingly as a managing director, where their control over the budget is offset by their lack of control over the curriculum. Within Australia, Watson (2009) also found a tension between the autonomy espoused in contemporary leadership theories and the reality of accountability practices. It is argued that, “The nature of the school principal’s role in Australia remains focused on management at the expense of leadership in teaching and learning” (Watson, 2009: 11).

Given the context in which contemporary school leaders operate, there does appear to be a disconnect between the vision of school leadership and the reality of running a school within an accountability framework. Returning to the previous definitions of management and leadership, it would appear that within a centralised education system in which the leadership roles of establishing

values and vision are imposed upon schools, the reality of a principal's role is the managerial function of implementing the established vision.

### From Leadership to Management

In response to the contemporary leadership context, Bush (2008: 278) proposes that, "Leaders are free to pursue their own values only if they are consistent with those of the central government". Similarly, the possibility of developing a unique educational vision is curtailed by government prescriptions about curriculum aims and content (Bush, 2008). This leads Bush (2008) to propose that the shift from school management to school leadership, typified by Duignan (2015), is merely a semantic shift as opposed to a reconceptualization of the role of principals. This perspective is supported by a study of West Australian principals by Cunningham (2014) who found that despite the focus on inclusivity and collaboration in Australian school leadership literature, the reality was that most schools reviewed in the study were run in an autocratic manner.

Given the semantic nature of school leadership, Spillane (2009: 70) suggests that school leadership should be reframed: "By fixating on leadership, we pay inadequate attention to the importance of management." Mertkan (2014) also argues that the contemporary focus on leadership has been to the detriment of management. Mertkan (2014) is critical of leadership literature's focus on inspiration, vision, collegiality and non-hierarchical relationships that ignore the managerial dysfunctions of many schools and education systems. It is suggested that, "...the declining interest in school management, coupled with the decontextualized and universalistic discourse of leadership, can be a serious barrier to educational effectiveness and educational reform..." (Mertkan, 2014: 238). Mertkan (2014) concludes that, while leadership has been canonised, the role of management has been downplayed and management issues ignored to the detriment of head teachers' capacity to manage schools. Glatter (2006), in exploring the need for a reorientation from leadership to management, suggests that the overselling of the power of leadership has led to too much focus on the

actors and too little on the stage. This metaphor is most apt in reflecting upon the thrust of contemporary leadership theories.

### Conclusion

This paper began by exploring the polarised nature in which leadership and management are defined, with leadership regarded as possessing vision, inspiration and motivation (Kotter, 2013), while management is regarded as technical, hierarchical and utilitarian (Glatter, 2006). Bush and Middlewood (2005) explicitly challenge this polarisation, instead proposing a synthesised, androgynous approach that recognises the importance of both effective management and visionary leadership. This perspective is somewhat unique in the literature, with commentators such as Kotter (2001) and Glatter (2006) foregrounding leadership's moral and ethical emphasis. The technical aspects of management are implicitly taken for granted.

Within the education sector it appears this focus on visionary leadership is disconnected with the actual work conducted by the majority of principals, leading to what Moore et al (2002) label contrived leadership. Kruger and Scheerens (2012: 4) refer to research that shows "principals spend their time mainly on keeping the organization running." The disconnect between the reality of running schools and the lofty visions of leadership espoused in contemporary literature is most clearly articulated in the quotation referred to earlier in which educational leadership is criticised as merely being the creation of bus timetables with philosophical footnotes (Hallinger & Snidvongs, 2005). This disconnect has been increasingly amplified in Australia with further standardisation and centralisation limiting authentic leadership opportunities as the vision of schools is determined by education departments (Lingard & Sellar, 2013). Contrasting the views of leadership and management advocated in the reviewed literature suggest that a reorientation, reflective of centralised, standardised contemporary education systems is required to reflect the limitations and expectations faced by current principals.

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