

Preface

This book is a follow-up to *Educational leadership relationally* (2015, Sense) where I sought to articulate and defend a relational approach to scholarship in educational leadership, management and administration. Why the need for a follow-up book? This is a fair question. To respond, I want to take this as an opportunity to discuss the nature of academic/scholarly work and the need to engage with others for the purpose of advancing a distinctive brand of scholarship. That is, to move beyond the parallel monologues that dominate the field (where alternate approaches are rarely acknowledged, infrequently engaged with, and more often ignored or dismissed outright).

While reading for my doctorate three things particularly caught my attention in the educational administration, and broader education, literature. First was the dialogue and debate between Peter Gronn, Ross Thomas, and Don Willower over the (theoretical and methodological) worth of observational studies, primarily taking place in the pages of *Educational Administration Quarterly* (but also including the *Australian Journal of Education*). While the content of the exchanges was interesting it was the back and forth of ideas and the means of critique and justification that sparked my interest. Second, Colin Evers and Gabriele Lakomski's *Knowing educational administration* and the subsequent book in the trilogy, *Exploring educational administration*. In explicitly outlining what they saw as the flaws in the positions of others while articulating their own perspective, Evers and Lakomski then directly engaged with those they critiqued, essentially providing the right of reply, and then refining/advancing their work further. Third was the regular responses and rejoinders in the pages of the American Educational Research Association's *Educational Researcher*. Again, it was the exchanging, challenging, and justification of ideas, rather than the ideas themselves that caught my attention. What struck me as significant in these three examples was a commitment to the logic of academic work—argument and refutation—and how that transpires through scholars articulating a position and justifying that position in the face of critique. Note the specific choice of “justify” rather than “defend.” For me, this distinction matters. Justifying is more concerned with the ontological and epistemological preliminaries of scholarship and the strength of knowledge claims.

Defense, at least for me, is more concerned with unwavering belief in one's position. This defense rarely goes beyond othering alternatives and sustaining differences through denial or ignorance of other positions. Therefore, defense does not necessarily overcome the parallel monologues of orthodox educational administration and leadership literature.

Consistent with the above favoring of a social epistemology, based on the engagement with my work in a 2016 Special Issue of *Journal of Educational Administration and Foundations* (Vol. 25 Iss. 2) and the collation of this book (particularly Part III), I have strengthened my *relational* position. Those under-developed or flawed matters, quite rightly identified by contributions, I have dropped, or at best refined, others I have held on to in the face of critique, but tightened my argument to make my justification stronger. In short, those that I can continue to justify in the face of critique, I have kept, and those I cannot, I have discarded.

At risk of being too normative, the need for rigorous and robust scholarship in educational administration and leadership (I reluctantly use this latter label, for reasons that will become clear as you progress through the book) has never been greater. The last generation of scholars seriously trained as multi-disciplinary educational administration researchers who have been retiring and replaced by a group of technicians or at best instrumental functionalists. I am aware this is a broad sweeping statement but I cannot stress the point enough. The rich history of epistemological and ontological dialogue and debate in educational administration and leadership literature is being lost in the contemporary push for ahistorical translation of research on “best practice” and “impact.” The notion of theory has become watered down and/or othered as something exotic and self-indulgent undertaken by out-of-touch academics working in ivory towers. Rather than simply resign to this reality or critique it, I subscribe to the belief that the only way to change the world is to generate new ways of seeing, being and doing it.

To that end, my aims for this book are dual. First, I seek to articulate and justify a serious piece of scholarly insight into educational administration. The primary aim of the book and my central focus both here and elsewhere, is the advancement of a theoretical and methodological (seeing theory as method) position for coming to understand the organizing of educational institutions relationally. The second and equally important even if more peripheral aim is to demonstrate an approach to scholarship that I feel has been lost in the field. The logic of academic work—argument and refutation—has been sidelined in contemporary dialogue and debate courtesy of the well-rehearsed neglect educational administration researchers show those with whom we disagree. If, however we seek to advance understanding, then engaging with one another—not necessarily agreeing—is required. Our ideas can only be understood in relation to those of others. They have a history, a trajectory or story so far, their novelty or originality comes in the distinctions from others. In short, to advance one's position requires seriously engaging with those of differing positions.

An interesting by-product of advancing a position that is beyond the orthodox literature of educational administration has been an opening of scholarly networks.

Since the publication of *Educational leadership relationally* I have been able to establish links—some initiated by me, some by others—with multidisciplinary groups from near and far. Significantly, these have led to ties with groups built upon relational sociology based in Canada (the Canadian network of relational sociology convened by François Dépelteau) and continental Europe (convened by Pierpaolo Donati), most significantly, an invitation to contribute to the *Handbook of relational sociology* (Palgrave, edited by François Dépelteau). Within educational administration, broadening international networks was core to the establishment of the *Educational Leadership Theory* book series (Springer) that I co-edit with Richard Niesche. I firmly believe that these connections have been made possible by having a defined, and identifiable, research program. That is, while contemporary managerialist university administration might preference external research income and the latest metrics for outputs, the intellectual power of a rigorous and robust research program—even if emerging—remains central to building academic careers.

Many of the central features of the *relational* research program I advance in this book have been debated at conferences, in the literature, supervision meetings and graduate classes. This dialogue and debate have helped to shape my thinking ranging from encouraging greater clarity through to forcing substantial revision or extension of the work. The final two sections of this book are given over to critical responses to my previous book and my responses to them. The inclusion of these exchanges is significant. It speaks to my critique of parallel monologues in educational administration scholarship and also to the constant negotiation of research. That is, my goal is that this book models the form of scholarship that I believe the *relational* approach aspires to be: a generative and contested space that productively informs contemporary dialogue and debate.

The selection of commentators was not random, nor was it simply a case of reaching out to my academic friends or sympathetic readers. In reaching out to scholars from major centers of educational administration research—Canada, England, Israel and the USA—I satisfied the publisher's goal of international reach (and potential marketability) but my aim was to reach particular types of scholars. Helen Gunter (*Manchester*) and Izhar Oplatka (*Tel Aviv*) are arguably the leading figures in the field for mapping intellectual/epistemological traditions. It was, therefore, of considerable importance to secure their thoughts, insights, and reactions to *Educational leadership relationally*. Tony Bush (*Nottingham*) is the longtime editor of *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, one of the big three journals in the field (*Educational Administration Quarterly* and *Journal of Educational Administration* being the other two), and has written extensively on the state of the field (best captured in his textbooks for SAGE). He brings an authoritative position on the orthodoxy of the field. Fenwick English's (*North Carolina—Chapel Hill*) work sits outside the orthodoxy of the field and his commentaries draw on a breadth and depth of scholarship that is uncommon. Building on his lengthy career in the field and the intellectual diversity of his work, Fenwick's contribution was always going to push my thinking and where necessary take me to task. The most positive reception to *Educational leadership relationally*

(except for immediate family, although even that is debatable) arguably came from Canadian colleagues. To that end, it was important to reach out for responses. Through Paul Newton (*Saskatchewan*), who I met at a Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management conference in 2010, I engaged Augusto (Gus) Riveros (*Western University*), and Dawn Wallin (*Saskatchewan*). Gus had read my book over the summer, used it in his teaching (e.g., doctoral seminar), and was a sympathetic reader. However, as with the logic of academic work, his engagement while sympathetic was not without critique. Similarly, Dawn balanced a general alignment with a pressing concern for the silence of gender in the book. Both Gus and Dawn brought valued contributions for advancing the *relational* program. Megan Crawford (*Plymouth*) is a well-recognized figure from the UK, particularly through her work with the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS). Having a strong applied, or at least translation, focus meant that Megan would represent those in the field concerned with how research impacted on the daily work of educational leaders. There are arguably many more names that could have commented on the work but decisions have to be made. That said, the contributors to this book bring a breadth of intellectual resources and scholastic background to the task and offer robust critique of the *relational* program shared in a generative and productive manner.

Projects such as these are never solo endeavors, even if the bulk of the work is undertaken individually. To that end, I would like to acknowledge those who contributed to the book, namely Tony Bush, Megan Crawford, Fenwick English, Helen Gunter, Izhar Oplatka, Gus Riveros, and Dawn Wallin, whose close reading and careful critique of my position has helped me refine and justify what I believe to be a rigorous and robust approach to the study of organizing activity. To the many individuals who read earlier drafts of chapters, namely François Dépelteau, Fenwick English, Richard Niesche, Colin Evers, Gabriele Lakowski, James Ladwig, Eugenie Samier, but also including the students taking my Organizational Theory course and participants in Richard Niesche's Critical Perspectives in Educational Leadership course who engaged with my work during a guest seminar, your contributions to dialoguing and debating ideas is much appreciated. My doctoral and honors students, especially Gladys Asuga, Kimbalee Hodges, Scarlett Stemler, and Xi Luan, who mobilized the relational approach in their studies, and your contribution has not gone unnoticed. Finally, I need to acknowledge the love and support of my wife Amy and our two children Daniel and Madelyn. Despite my increasing stress and claims to never want to write another single authored book again, you continue to support my ambitions and crazy workloads.

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