

## Book Review

***The art of educational leadership: Balancing performance and accountability.*** F.W. English. (2008). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 233 pp. ISBN 978-0-7619-5741-0

Contemporary educational contexts feature increasing diversity and complexity. It is from this premise that Fenwick English presents his treatise on the nature of educational leadership. His book places a theory of educational leadership against a backdrop of standardization of the educational leadership knowledge base, corporatization of public education, and social justice. As an introductory text to the field of study, this book appropriately engages in “foundational” discussions of what constitutes educational leadership as a field of study, what is leadership, and where the theory/practice nexus is located. English concludes that leadership is an art, and such an art exists in “the doing” of leadership and exists “because it involves a purposive construction of self” (p. 5). His basic premise, in that “leadership as an art,” necessitates an engagement with worldviews and theories of knowledge more at home in the humanities disciplines than in the social sciences.

The beginning of this book explores some questions fundamental to the study of educational leadership. The question of the management/leadership dichotomy is treated with considerable tact, yet English includes the science/art dichotomy in the discussion, and, as a consequence, assigns epistemological orientations to both leadership and management. Much of the remainder of the opening sections of the book explore the nature of leadership from some traditional leadership theory perspectives; however, English’s approach to making connections about leadership is to use examples primarily from American social history. The result is an exploration of leadership that is accessible to new students of educational leadership and is situated in fresh contexts outside of the corporate world (see for example, Bolman & Deal (2008), whose primary sources for illustrating leadership contexts is drawn from the boardrooms of GM and IBM). In keeping with this approach, an interesting feature of this book is the use of film to illustrate and deepen connections to material presented in the book. English suggests several popular films (e.g. Gandhi, Inherit the Wind, Patton, etc.) at the end of the chapter that can be viewed by readers to extend learning from the text.

In Chapter three, English begins a discussion of the epistemology of educational leadership by exploring theories of truth. English has no reservations in asserting the practicality of placing epistemology within the practice of educational leadership. This chapter places a useful discussion concerning the history of educational leadership as a field of study within an epistemological “genealogy”. English traces trends in the field in the context of his prior discussion of theories of truth. He concludes this chapter by arguing for a “counter ontology” of educational leadership. “Such a deliberately crafted view of reality would reject objectivism and any concept of truth as finality. To criticize studies in educational leadership without creating a different ontology will be futile” (p. 82). English foreshadows his argument, found later in the book, with respect to an ontology of educational leadership as defined by a standardized knowledge base. He

rejects an ontology of educational leadership implied by the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards for administrator practice and preparation.

In Chapter six, English explores the historical development of a conceptual work that has influenced educational leadership. He argues that the history of educational leadership has been shaped by organizational studies and he divides the work in this area into “epochs”. These epochs include the proto-scientific, pseudo-scientific, behaviourism, structuralism, feminist/critical theory, critical race, queer theory, and postmodernism. English argues that the field of educational leadership is heavily dominated by structuralist and behaviourist schools of thought and that much of the contemporary literature used in the study of educational leadership relies on these perspectives. He identifies such contemporary luminaries as Senge, Bolman and Deal, Covey, and Collins, as inheritors of these management traditions. Fascinatingly, in this chapter, English applies a term first proffered by Eugenie Samier in a refreshingly provocative way. Samier’s notion of “kitsch” is applied to a number of texts in the popular management and leadership literature. English lists 40 popular management books which are commonly referred to in educational leadership texts. He argues that “these texts oversimplify reality and promise a rationality that does not exist in the real world.... Students of educational leadership will not find the kind of understanding that has the potential of working in a contested environment” (p. 164). An example of his critique of these ubiquitous texts is the following statement about the work of Jim Collins, author of the best selling book *Good to Great*. “Collins’s (2005) approach is a kind of managerial social Darwinism packaged into bumper sticker homilies” (p. 165). English’s writing is frank and is a much needed critique for those involved in educational leadership and leadership preparation.

In Chapter seven, English presents an alternative mode of inquiry for educational leadership, that of life writing. English argues that literary approaches to inquiry borrowed from the humanities may provide more appropriate and insightful knowledge about educational leadership. His argument here is compelling, yet I wonder about the fit of this chapter in a text that appears to address students new to educational leadership. This chapter appears to be written for a researcher audience and, while engaging, is a bit of an incongruity in the larger work. This chapter does, however, emphasize the human side of leadership and his discussion of life writing concludes with a brief summary of Greenleaf’s *Servant Leadership* as a potential model that enables “people to become powerful, finding the leaders in themselves” (p. 188).

The last section of the book includes a critique of administrator standards, particularly the ISLLC standards in the United States. English clearly objects to such approaches to standardizing leadership knowledge and, consequently, leadership practice. He argues that such standards for leadership practice and leadership preparation “embrace[s] the doctrine of efficiency... [and have] been cleansed of variance” (p. 192). He suggests that standardized practice of educational leadership is extremely problematic and undesirable. “The knowledge base is actually ambiguous, multidimensional, highly subjective, nonempirical, and filled with huge epistemological holes” (p. 194). As with his discussion of the kitsch management literature, English explicates the allure of such simplistic pronouncements of what constitutes knowledge. He states that the standards, like the kitsch management texts make the transfer of theory a relatively simple, if futile, affair.

I very much recommend this book to educational leaders and especially to those involved in educational leadership preparation. This book provides an insightful critique of the historical and contemporary conceptions of educational leadership and presents a much needed indictment of reductionist and simplistic approaches to the transfer of “theory” in leadership. It calls for a more thoughtful engagement with leadership theory and serves as an antidote to the multitude of recipes for efficient educational leadership.

### References

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