

CEPaLS Paper 03:

Smyth's edited collection: Critical Perspectives on Educational Leadership

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I would go so far as to say that Smyth's 1989 edited collection [*Critical Perspectives on Educational Leadership*](#) is the most important book to be published for the field. I can say that with confidence because the contents and approach have stood the test of time, and while a reader might add in references from the 1990s onwards, it is the case that this enhances rather than outdates the text.

The book is in the *Deakin Studies in Education Series*, and as such it represents research from a Deakin team that was a powerhouse of thinking and practice regarding the reform agenda, and the implications for children, families, schools and communities. At a time when public education services were being transformed into businesses through site-based management, marketing, and consumer choice, this book presents the intellectual resources for leaders, leading and leadership that are educational and educative. Much of what was being published from the 1980s onwards was a form of [*Jurassic Management*](#), where schools were being turned into business-experience theme parks, and the focus was (and is) on functional efficiency and behavioural compliance to vision and mission. Instead, Smyth and his co-authors present schools as sites of education, and in ways that focus on student and staff realities of power and social injustice.

It may seem odd to have to say this, as the phrase 'educational leadership' is used a lot, but what Smyth and his co-authors do is to show that much of what is claimed to be about education is actually about the maintaining of organisational (and wider elite) interests through the efficiency and effectiveness of *organisational* leadership. Here is what Smyth in his opening Preface says:

"The writers in this book challenge in a very direct manner the dominant behaviourist and functionalist views that have come to entrap those who live, work and conduct research on the area of educational leadership. By drawing in various ways upon the tenets of critical social theory, the various chapters on the largely ignored political, cultural and social context of schools as the starting point from which to unravel the forms of knowledge, power relationships and social control that *must* be central to any discussion of leadership in schools. The linking argument is that if schools are to be the critical and inquiring communities necessary for a democratic way of life, then the leadership within them will have to be more educative and pedagogical in various ways, rather than bureaucratic and authoritarian. By shifting the focus away from sterile discussions about traits, personalities and styles of educational leadership,

and focusing instead on the structures and processes within schools as organizations that frustrate, distort and ultimately stifle educative relationships the writers provide a much needed way of reconceptualizing both thought and action in so-called acts of educational leadership. Construed in this way, the agenda becomes one of empowering school participants by helping *them* to unmask the unquestioned and managerialist modes that have come to constrain them” (pp4-5, original emphasis).

The shift that was happening in the 1980s was away from educational services that had to be managed towards managerialism with managerialistic technologies. What I mean here is that the power structures in regard to educational professionals shifted from networks and communities with traditional hierarchies towards corporate/business performance and line management hierarchies. The division of labour shifted from professional organisational concerns to functional and behaviourist delivery monitoring and evaluation.

This approach was not only dominant in the 1980s but has remained so, and has been subjected to product modernisation through branded leadership and the acceptance of organisational and entrepreneurial leadership as vital for the delivery of privatised educational services. Smyth and his colleagues challenged this approach in 1989 and their work continues to support our challenges. Reading the book again gives recognition not only to the fact that organisational and entrepreneurial leadership does not work as intended, but also that it generates injustice and challenges democratic legitimacy. Hence the chapters consider the origins of and consequences of performance leadership (Watkins), business management (Angus), patriarchal power structures (Blackmore), and examine alternative communal leadership (Foster), the need for values (Bates) and for justice, freedom and respect for persons (Codd). Importantly the thread running through the chapters is one of educative leadership, where power is not the property of an elite role but is shared, and focused on learning, not only by children but by all within the school as a community (Smyth). This enables the purposes of education to be at the forefront, whereby the relationship of a school to democracy is developed (Rizvi).

In sum, Smyth and his colleagues are asking what schools are supposed to be for, and hence what that means for organisational arrangements. Critical approaches to educational leadership see schools as places where adults and children learn together, and where adults take on the responsibility not only to teach knowledge and understanding and skills, but also what it means to be a citizen. It does not make sense to have managerialist power structures if children are to be equal as voters and democratic

debaters/decision-makers. Hence if Smyth's book has been marginalised it is because it speaks the heresy of democratic development and renewal because the reforms taking place during and from the 1980s were not about citizenship democracy but about creating the conditions in which democratic participation could be harnessed to secure a corporate take-over of civil society.

Final point. As Snyder shows in [On Tyranny](#) Lesson 5. In order to challenge tyranny there is a need to "remember professional ethics" or "when political leaders set a negative example, professional commitments to just practice become more important. It is hard to subvert a rule-of-law state without lawyers, or to hold show trials without judges. Authoritarians need obedient civil servants, and concentration camp directors seek businessmen interested in cheap labor" (p38). Consequently, educational professionals need to have a professional code of ethics that is educational and educative, otherwise we are part of the decline into totalitarianism. Activism and not entrepreneurialism are integral to this code of professional ethics.

If you wish to reference CEPaLS 03, please do so as follows:

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