Beyond instrumentalist leadership in schools: Educative leadership and anarcho-syndicates

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Abstract

Taking our cue from Gunter and Courtney's critique of dominant discourses in the field of educational leadership, and their engagement with the concept of educative leadership as inclusive and activist, in this article we aim to deepen and expand the discussion of educative leadership. Our interest in educative leadership begins with the assumption that schools are complex spaces of human interactivity in which contestation over beliefs, values, and morals is inevitable. In drawing on insights first developed in the 1980s as part of the Educative Leadership Project in Australia, we attempt to articulate a concept and set of practices that could function as an alternative to the largely performative and managerial nature of contemporary school leadership. We seek to supplement Gunter and Courtney, drawing on theories pertaining to the structure of anarcho-syndicates in an attempt to make the argument that inclusive and non-hierarchical leadership is not the same as structureless organisation. Finally, in arguing for the centrality of education to the work of schools, we advocate for further engagement with the concept of educative leadership within the field of school leadership and management.

Keywords

educative leadership, anarcho-syndicates, school leadership, leadership structure, managerialism, instrumentalism, educational leadership

Introduction: school leadership for human complexity

As demonstrated by the social and political upheavals being experienced across the world in recent times, living and working together involves the negotiation of competing desires, ideas, and practices. Human social life is increasingly complicated and subject to conflict and tensions. While there may be a role for managerial, technicist, and data-informed forms of leadership, they are not nearly enough to address matters that involve individual and shared values, beliefs, morals, and politics. We question these types of leadership within school contexts and see them as contributing to the prevailing 'what works' (Biesta, 2020) logic in education, which is characterised by an increased focus on data, metrics, and accountability, from leadership down to classroom level. Even seemingly more democratic models, such as distributed leadership, are oriented to achieve measurement-driven outcomes. However, despite the dominance of this 'what works' discourse, and subsequent approach to educational leadership, schools inevitably remain places in which a vast array of human interactivity takes place. Not only is managerialism insufficient for deeply human spaces, but our argument also emerges from the more positively inflected position that approaches to leadership in schools should, by definition, prioritise education. Schools are complex ecosystems and, viewed as mini-versions of society at large (Dewey, 2011), are places in which all members of the community are part of a negotiation of life together.

These concerns form the background to this conceptual paper, which is also written as an appreciative response to, and extension of, Gunter and Courtney's (2021) article in this journal: *A new public educative leadership?* Rather than a critique of Gunter and Courtney, our article should be read as a conversation partner that wishes to extend an important discussion. Whereas they focus on revealing 'the importance and authenticity of *educative leaders*, leading and leadership as a relational and activist pedagogy' within the context of 'public educational services in

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England' (p. 194), our aim is to expand the understanding of educative leadership conceptually. We focus on how organisational structures in schools can help facilitate educative leadership. Foregrounding the importance of human inter-activity, we thus attempt to present an alternative way of thinking about, and practising leadership in schools. To do this, we first begin by drawing on different literature to that of Gunter and Courtney in order to supplement the notion of educative leadership as described in their article. Next, we further develop the way in which self-governance and anarchy are presented by Gunter and Courtney. We offer an elaborated account of how we might approach organisational structures in schools that support educative leadership by looking at the role anarcho-syndicates can play. In doing so, this paper seeks to interrupt the domin-ance of neoliberal, individualised, conceptualisations of leadership – such as 'transformational leadership' – within the research field of educational leadership and man-agement (Gunter, 2016). Importantly, the ensuing discus-sion also aims to think about education leadership philosophically in resistance to the field's orthodoxy of pur-portedly (but impossibly) neutral evidence-based proposi-tions. While the language of anarcho-syndicates may not appeal to many researchers and practitioners of educational leadership, to the extent that its ethos can be found in the philosophical bases and practices of the more palatable notion of educative leadership, we argue that anarchist approaches to organisational structures are able to help edu-cation leadership to recover its educational purposes, its potential for enacting democratic practice, and its need to negotiate the complexity of its human, social context.

Educative leadership: an elaboration

The notion of educative leadership is not well established in the literature on school leadership, and almost non-existent in contemporary discourses. Gunter and Courtney (2021), in a recently published piece in this journal, have made ref-erence to the term, and clearly see it as a worthwhile way of thinking about leadership in and for education. They are concerned with 'educational services that are owned, funded and accessed in common as a public good' and, therefore, with leaders and leadership as a 'resource avail-able to all' (p. 194). They contend that 'educational leader-ship is educative when it is "communal and shared" and that this is achieved when leaders work to create other leaders' (p. 194). Drawing on Foster (1989), Gunter and Courtney note that educative leadership involves analysis of organisa-tions in order to reveal that which is 'taken-for-granted' within the life of an institution, as well as 'the use of narra-tives to promote a *vision* or idea about possibilities' for how things could be otherwise (pp. 194–195). The concept of educative leadership presented by Foster (and, in the same collection, Smyth, 1989) has its origins in the work of social philosopher Brian Fay (1975, 1977).

Fay develops his notion of the educative model of social theory in contrast to that of the instrumentalist approach to theory and practice, which, he writes, 'is clearly a manipu-lative conception because it is rooted in the conviction that

there are certain sets of naturally recurring general regular-ities which can be used to achieve one's purposes by alter-ing one set of conditions to affect another' (p. 203). Such a view allows for social theory to be in service to social engineering – that is, control of the people. The educative model, on the other hand, 'is predicated on the notion that changing people's basic understanding of themselves and their world is the first step in their radically altering self-destructive patterns of interaction that characterize their social relationships' (p. 204). Following Foster, Gunter and Courtney advocate for leadership as educative because of its potential for helping both 'followers' and 'leaders' to become conscious of their social conditions and to then consider other possible ways of ordering social life (p. 195).

Our argument in this article shares this basic commit-ment to working for alternative social arrangements as a matter of justice, and we acknowledge the important foun-dational work of Fay's model of educative leadership in providing alternatives to instrumentalist approaches within both social theory and, subsequently, educational leader-ship. However, we also contend that Fay's model, on which Gunter and Courtney base their own articulation of educative leadership, is deeply rationalistic and thus places too much emphasis on individuals' rational faculties as the driver of social change. By engaging with a different set of literature, we wish to offer an alternative perspective on the concept of educative leadership. This perspective embraces Fay's attempt to provide a non-instrumentalist approach to social theory, but emerges from a pragmatic theory of ethics and a politics of democratic practice. This approach to educative leadership is, we argue, better-equipped for negotiating contested and complex matters in education.

Educative leadership in complex and contested spaces: negotiating values, beliefs, and morals

This alternative concept of educative leadership was devel-oped through the Educative Leadership Project (ELP) that was commissioned in 1986 by the governments of Victoria, New South Wales, and the Australian Capital Territory (Duignan & Macpherson, 1992, p. 1). Educational leadership, for Duignan and Macpherson, should be educative in intent and outcome (1992, p. 1). Beginning with this assumption, the ELP then sought to understand and theorise such an approach to educational leadership by drawing on the views and practices of school administrators, as well as the analysis of educational scholars. Thus, whereas Fay's work was focussed on devel-oping a model of social theory, the ELP aimed at theorising a concept and a practice of leadership in schools. Duignan and Macpherson (1993) suggest that school leadership is often 'driven by noneducational criteria, such as those manifest in bureaucratic rationality, in political expediency, and in calls for economic restraint' and that 'there is a need to explore ways and means of promoting a greater concern

for educational values in the management of education' (p. 8). Taking a different approach, the ELP 'was to provide a means by which a "practical" theory of educative leadership might be developed' (Duignan and Macpherson, 1992, p. 3).

Overly technicist and managerial approaches, Duignan and Macpherson (1992) argue, fail to acknowledge that schools should be seen as cultures which manifest from 'the concerted imaginations of organised people who share assumptions, values, interpretations of their situation and meanings that they give to their actions' (p. 3). Responding to the cultural context requires more than 'a set of social or management techniques' (p. 4), such as an educative form of leadership that is understood as a 'group phenomenon whereby a shared reality of meaning and of what is right is regularly renegotiated and reaffirmed' (p. 4). As such, Duignan and Macpherson argue, educative leadership is 'concerned about right and wrong, justice and injustice, truth, aesthetics and the negotiation of practical ideals in education' and that this 'implies a responsible involvement in the politics of an organisation' (p. 4). We would argue that to think of schools and the task of school leadership in this way gives greater prominence to the ethical and political components of school leaders' work. This perspective acknowledges that matters of right and wrong, justice and injustice, and negotiating shared values require genuine intellectual, emotional, and practical engagement at all levels in a school.

Evers (1992) makes the claim that an educative leader 'should prefer and promote approaches to learning that are based on dialogue, on conjecture and on refutation' (p. 40). Educative leaders help to create conditions in which all matters of knowledge, especially including those that have clear political and moral implications, are subject to critical reflection. Such conditions require that all voices are valued. When it comes to emotive and personally confronting issues, this can be difficult. Hearing the experiences of people who have been, and continue to be hurt is an important part of the educative process, and greater wisdom is needed for a leader to carefully negotiate spaces in which emotional trauma exists.

To approach leadership on matters such as racism, for example, by making statements of affirmation or non-affirmation, or formulating policies and regulations connected to sanctions, fails in its task of being educative. If the educative approach involves deliberation, growth in knowledge, and processes of problem-solving, the alternative to this, Evers (1992) argues, is 'short cuts and quick fixes'. While such short cuts and quick fixes may maximise 'short-term happiness', Evers continues, they 'do not make for sound long-term progress' (p. 41) as there is an absence of negotiation and sustained dialogue. Conversely, educative leadership 'should contribute understanding of and respect for genuine differences in needs, problems and opinions' (Walker, 1992, p. 47).

An important point to make about understanding educative leadership in this way is that the focus is on that which exists in the present. Any future change emerges from a negotiation of beliefs and practices that are present in the 'here and now'. It is not an idealist, principle-based approach to ethics, but a pragmatic one in which educative practices themselves help to form the basis of life within the professional community. In other words, ethical judgement takes place in response to the differing perspectives and the particularities of context rather than in response to a predetermined set of fixed principles. However, while diversity of views is not only recognised but embraced, there remains the need to judge views according to their merits. The educative approach thus requires the hard work of unpacking often hidden assumptions, weighing evidence, while keeping the focus on education as the intent and outcome of such processes. This also means that, following Walker (1992), 'educative leaders have a role to play in combating crude and prejudiced representations of competing views' (p. 71).

Educative leadership, in the way in which we have described it here, relies on a particular mode of organisation and structure that supports educative practices. It functions according to the assumption that all claims to power are worthy of being questioned in the name of justice, and all claims to truth ought to be questioned in the name of truth. Following this, one might conclude that the concept of educative leadership is opposed to structure and authority. Indeed, quoting Ward (2012), Gunter and Courtney contend, various versions of the idea of self-governance and anarchism are linked by 'the rejection of external authority, whether that of the state, the employer, or the hierarchies of administration and of established institutions like the school and the church' (p. 195). While we agree that it is important to focus on 'leaderful' (Western, 2008) relational action within an organisation, in contrast to hierarchical ways of thinking about leadership, in the next section, we provide a critical engagement with Gunter and Courtney on the matter of anarchism as it relates to school leadership. In doing so, we explore how the anarcho-syndicate can be a constructive organisational approach for educative leaders.

Anarcho-educative leadership in schools

It is not uncommon for people to equate anarchism with the 'rejection of external authority' (Gunter and Courtney, 2021, p. 195). There is good reason for this. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, anarchy originally meant 'without archon' ('without leader') and was used in the 16th century as a synonym for 'absence of government'. In contemporary and more popular usage, the idea of anarchy has morphed further to mean chaos, lack of rules, and disorder. This shift indicates that, in the popular imagination, there exists an assumption that the absence of government leads to chaos and that the presence of a top-down governmental structure is a necessary condition to govern ourselves. This need not be the case. The original interpretation creates possibilities to conceive of anarchism as a general political philosophy resulting in an alternative form of organisation that is centred around relationality, interconnectedness, and solidarity. This is a point also made by Gunter and Courtney (2021) who suggest that, rather than thinking of an organisation in hierarchical

terms as leaderless, we can see relational action as leaderful (p. 195).

Anarchist thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin, Rudolph Rocker, and Colin Ward shared a commitment to bottom-up social transformation, underpinned by principles of self-governance, mutual aid, and participatory democracy (Suissa, 2006). As Suissa (2006) describes, they see in 'the very act of restructuring human relationships within [such] institutions (the school, the workplace), a creative act of engaging with the restructuring of society as a whole' (p. 139). There is an obvious emphasis on human relationships and a commitment to be actively involved in the shaping of a better society. However, what this means for how we understand the nature of leadership and authority remains in question. While it may appear easy to move from the idea of relational action and self-governance to a denial of authority and structure, such an assumption is problematic. 'Structurelessness', as Jo Freeman (1970) stated in her famous essay *The Tyranny of Structurelessness,* 'is organizationally impossible. We cannot decide whether to have a structured or structureless group, only whether or not to have a formally structured one' (p. n.p.). She goes on to say that 'there is nothing inherently bad about structure itself – only its excess use' (Freeman, 1970, p. n.p.).

Similarly, in drawing on the principles of anarcho-syndicates, we are not arguing for complete rejection of structure and authority. For educative leadership practices to thrive, an alternative kind of structure is necessary, one that is inclusive, non-coercive, and participatory. Here, we share Gunter and Courtney's commitment to a structure that caters for leaderful instead of leaderless actions (Western, 2008). To return to Fay (1977) once more, he contends that the kind of social change envisioned by the educative model is likely to occur within the kinds of institutional settings that are:

> relatively small, relatively egalitarian (in the sense that no member has command over another without the other's approval), relatively free of recrimination between members, relatively committed to rationally discussing its members' situations and experiences, and relatively insistent that its members take responsibility for whatever claims, decisions, or actions they undertake to make. (p. 230)

This quote contains an implicit critique of individualist and hierarchical models of leadership, yet Fay is not writing against organisational leadership and structure. Indeed, in using the language of 'relatively' egalitarian, free of recrimination, etc., he does not appear to be advocating a completely flat model of organisational structure or leadership. It is our contention that one possible structure compatible with Fay's model is the anarcho-syndicate – an organisational approach borrowed from the anarchist school of thought that emerged from the labour movement in the early 1900s (Chomsky, 1976). We mainly draw on the work of German anarchist and activist Rudolph Rocker (1873–1958) in developing our understanding of how anarcho-syndicates can function in an educative school context.

Anarcho-syndicates for educative leadership

Anarcho-syndicates are based on principles of solidarity and participation and have two distinct features: (1) small by intention and (2) self-governance. These features are opposed to the structure and purpose of large and often hierarchical bureaucracies, because 'organisation is, after all, only a means to an end. When it becomes an end in itself, it kills the spirit and the vital initiative of its members and sets up that domination by mediocrity' (Rocker, 1938, p. 93).

The first feature of the anarcho-syndicate, small by intention, is based on the idea that change is more likely to happen in smaller structures. Anarcho-syndicalists are concerned with solidarity amongst all community members, establishing common interest and thereby ensuring that 'mutual agreement is possible and serviceable to all parties' (Rocker, 1938, p. 113). Within a school context, different anarcho-syndicates can emerge for different purposes. It may be that an anarcho-syndicate emerges in relation to matters of policy affecting a particular school, or approaches to pedagogy in the classroom. They can grow organically and allow school community members to take up leadership roles and to engage in actions that 'deepen their understanding, and broaden their intellectual outlook' (Rocker, 1938, p. 117). What this suggests is that neither the idea of leadership generally, nor the idea of the leader more specifically, is rejected by the anarcho-syndicate.

What does seem to be deeply problematic for the anarcho-syndicalist, however, is the kind of bureaucratic, managerial, and instrumentalist outcome-driven structure and approach to leadership so common in contemporary schools. In contrast, as Ward (1996) writes:

> an important component of the anarchist approach to organisation is…the theory that, given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, *evolve order* out of the situation – *this order being more durable and more closely related to their needs than any kind of externally imposed authority could provide.* (emphasis ours, p. 31)

And it is for this reason that there is great potential for Duignan and Mcpherson's (1992) approach to educative leadership as a 'group phenomenon whereby a shared reality of meaning and of what is right is regularly renegotiated and reaffirmed' (p. 4). This can be constructively put into practice through an engagement with the organisational principles of anarcho-syndicates.

While notions of distributed leadership within the literature on educational leadership seek to provide an alternative to top-heavy models of leadership, they rarely question the assumptions and structures that perpetuate the growth logic of schools. In other words, discussion of distributed leadership in schools rarely if ever has any connection to the idea of 'small by intention'. Rather, one could argue that distributed leadership is connected to the logic of efficiency (Göksoy, 2015; Hartley, 2010) rather than the critique of asymmetrical power structures within schools (Woods,

2016). While Woods and Gronn (2009) suggest that distributed leadership 'is not generally thought of as a normative concept' (p. 441) but, rather, describes how leadership actually functions in schools (p. 440), educative leadership is, indeed, discussed through the ELP in normative terms. And while the theory of educative leadership does not come with a stated commitment to 'small by intention', one may argue that, understood as involving the regular renegotiation and reaffirmation of 'what is right', it will function best in the context of a structure that is small enough to allow for genuine dialogue.

The second feature of the anarcho-syndicate is its self-governance and refusal to be disproportionately governed by an external bureaucracy. Structures that are small by intention provide better opportunities for self-governance and practices that supersede elements of the external bureaucratic, dominating forces which otherwise might go unquestioned. We return once more to Jo Freeman (1970) to emphasise that structure is a necessary condition for solidarity and inclusion: 'a "laissez faire" group is about as realistic as a "laissez faire" society; the idea becomes a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others' (p. n.p.). Therefore, far from creating a lawless environment, the school community is required to assume an authentic responsibility for vision and values, an explicit spelling out of its own principles, purposes, duties, and responsibilities as distinct from an 'imported' programme. Rocker (1938) emphasises the importance for the members of an anarcho-syndicate to exert 'vital solidarity with their fellows-in-destiny and moral responsibility for their own actions' (p. 90).

This element of self-governance which refuses the disproportionate government by external bureaucracy and also embraces the call of the anarcho-syndicate to moral responsibility, may function to work against the situation Gunter and Courtney (2021) describe in which 'the teacher [is] enthusiastically compliant with the market' (p. 195). To the extent that the market can here be understood as the interests being represented by school systems and owners – and including well-meaning school leaders who have nevertheless become subject to the demands of a culture marked by competition and performativity – the self-governing anarcho-syndicate provides an alternative approach to accountability. The anarcho-syndicate is not oblivious to external agendas, but its starting point is that of being accountable to each other. As such, the anarcho-syndicate takes an educative approach by questioning assumptions, beliefs, and values and negotiating what it is that is to be considered of value and just

While one may offer the critique that any range of small groups in schools – such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) – may engage in critical and formational processes, the anarcho-syndicate is different in that the very idea of a large organisation governing from the top has been rejected for a different kind of structure. Thus, while models of distributed leadership in schools may champion the leaderful activity of those who are not in senior positions of leadership, the reality is that most school-based initiatives emerging from 'below' require the approval of senior leadership. The educative model of leadership takes a different approach through its commitment to deriving value and implementing initiatives as a result of a deliberative process. Distributed leadership, on the other hand, takes external ideas and authority and distributes this through the school via a range of actors outside of formal leadership positions. The structure of distributed leadership, therefore, functions to further embed the status quo rather than question it. Within a system that understands 'good education' as whatever 'the evidence' and 'the data' apparently tell us, distributed leadership works well as it is used to instrumentally bring about outcomes that have been unquestionably accepted by the majority. However, it fails to provide a structure capable of working through the complexity and contestation.

Educative leaders who are committed to fighting prejudice and injustice and to putting human relationships first, are served by the anarcho-syndicalist principles of self-governance and small by intention, as a way to let the school community not just speak for themselves, but question their own assumptions. The anarcho-syndicate engages with external demands without necessarily being governed by them. Important to our argument in this paper, rather than representing chaos and disorder, it provides a structure in which the educative approach to leadership is able to genuinely function.

Towards educative leadership for educational organisations

Making an argument for anarcho-syndicates as the governing structure for schools is likely to be seen as too radical. We have tried to show here that anarcho-syndicates are not predicated on structurelessness. However, the idea of disorder and chaos associated with anarchy is too powerful to easily overcome. Given this reality, the rarely discussed idea of educative leadership provides some promise as a way of seeking a change to the dominant discourses and modes of leadership in schools today. Building on Gunter and Courtney's recent and welcome foray into educative leadership, we have attempted to further elaborate the concept by drawing on the Educative Leadership Project directed by Duignan and Macpherson over 30 years ago. Our own interest in educative leadership has arisen from the concern we have with the instrumental and managerial logics governing education leadership today. And our interest has also arisen from the desire to look for an approach to leadership in schools that is better able to account for the diversity in the beliefs, assumptions, opinions, and values of the people who are engaged, together, in the task of schooling.

Given our view that dominant discourses on educational leadership – from those pertaining to 'heroic orthodoxy' (Woods and Gronn, 2009) such as transformational and even servant models of leadership, to those that are seemingly but 'thinly' more democratic, such as distributed models of leadership – all tend to perpetuate the status quo, we were interested to see Gunter and Courtney engage with the ideas of self-governance and anarchism within the context of educative leadership. We have sought to provide a brief elaboration on

the anarcho-syndicate to support the argument that, despite common misconceptions, anarchist organisational principles are able to provide a particular kind of structure that facilitates genuinely educative leadership. While it would be difficult to imagine the language of anarchism infiltrating school corridors, our view is that the relevance and importance of the concept of educative leadership in current times provides an opportunity for its further development as a practice that can function as a genuine alternative to prevailing orthodoxies.

Schools are places of education, with ideas and knowledge at their core. As Ward (1996) writes, with reference to anarchism and leadership in the creative industries, 'if ideas are your business, you cannot afford to condemn most of the people in the organisation to being merely machines programmed by someone else' (p. 44). It is our view that schools, as complex spaces of human interaction with education at their core, are organisations better suited to the organisational principles of anarcho-syndicates than bureaucratic businesses. Yet, as Gunter (2016) has shown, the dominant thinking around educational leadership over the past thirty years has served 'neoliberal and neoconservative economic and social requirements' (p. 99) rather than education itself. Our contention is that leaders and scholars in the field of school leadership who wish to respond to Gunter and Courtney's (2021) charge that, 'much of what is labelled as educational leaders, leading and leadership is designed to do non-educational work' (p. 196), would do well to engage with the philosophical underpinnings and practices of educative leadership.

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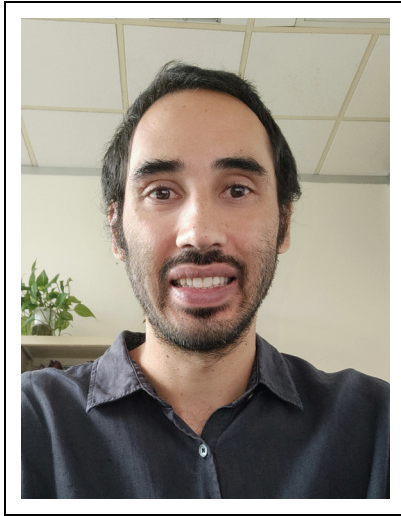
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