



*Critical Studies in Educational Leadership, Management
and Administration*

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND ADMINISTRATION THROUGH ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

Paolo Landri



Educational Leadership, Management, and Administration through Actor-Network Theory

Educational Leadership, Management, and Administration through Actor-Network Theory presents how actor-network theory (ANT) and the related vocabularies have much to offer to a critical re-imagination of the dynamics of management in education and educational leadership. It extends the growing contemporary perspective of ANT into the study of educational administration and management.

This book draws on case studies focusing on new configurations of educational management and leadership. It presents new developments of ANT (“After ANT” and “Near ANT”) and clarifies how these “sensibilities” can contribute to thinking critically and intervening in the current dynamics of education. The book proposes that ANT can offer an ecological understanding of educational leadership which is helpful in abandoning the narrow humanistic world of managerialism, considering a post-anthropocentric scenario where it is necessary to compose together new “liveable” assemblages of humans and non-humans.

This book will be of great interest to academics, scholars and post-graduate students in the fields of educational management, leadership and administration, as well as education policy. It will also be highly relevant to policy-makers and experts of education policy at the national, European and international levels.

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Jill Blackmore and Amanda Heffernan

This series draws on social and political theories from selected key thinkers and activists to develop critical thinking leadership tools. Each text uses the work of a particular theorist or theoretical approach, explains the theory, suggests what it might bring to the ELMA field, and then offers analysis and case studies to show how the tools might be used. Every book also offers a set of questions that might be used by individual leaders in their own practices, and in areas of further research by ELMA scholars.

In elaborating the particular approaches, each of the books also suggests a professional and political agenda which addresses aspects of the tensions and problems created by neoliberal and neoconservative policy agendas, and the on-going need for educational systems to do better for many more of their students than they do at present.

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Educational Leadership, Management, and Administration through Actor-Network Theory

Paolo Landri

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To Nora, Emanuele and Gabriele



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Series editor introduction

Imagine yourself walking into the foyer of the Department of Education, Victoria, Australia. In front of you is a wall on which a series of names are displayed ceiling to floor. You glance quickly and note the following: Edward de Bono, Richard Elmore, Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, Maria Montessori, Linda Darling-Hammond, Daniel Goleman, Kenneth Leithwood. Now imagine yourself in England. You decide to go to the website of the state-owned leadership research and training National College, and you find a section called “Key Thinkers.” When the screen changes, you find yourself looking at a list which contains many of the same names.

Today, both of these things have disappeared. The names on the wall in the Victoria have been removed, and the National College website has been revamped. But both were in place for some years. Seeing them made us wonder what was going on that the very same people were being lauded on both sides of the world. We noted that both lists were dominated by North American men. In the Australian case, no Australians were listed, and in the case of England, the English names were in a minority. Would this happen if we were exploring a leadership space or place in Los Angeles? In Edinburgh? In Cape Town? In Beijing? In Buenos Aires? In Toronto? It is interesting to think about where and where not we might see similar listings.

We are sure that we would not have found this thirty years ago. While there was an international circulation of educational ideas and texts, the development of a celebrity leadership culture promoted by international gurus with modernising know-how is a new phenomenon. It is worth considering why this might be the case. We think immediately of four possible reasons.

- 1 Leadership now encompasses all aspects of “continuous educational improvement.” All professionals (and increasingly children and young people as well) are identified as leaders, doing leading and exercising leadership. Headteachers, or principals, are deemed repositories of leadership that they do or do not “distribute” to others to enable “delivery” to be “maximised.” All educational professionals are spoken to or about as school leaders, often without reference to role titles, and so just about everyone is potentially included as a consumer of leadership ideas and models.

- 2 There is now a much greater focus on leadership development. Education policymakers from the right and left suggest that if policies are to be implemented, then they need leaders at the local level to make it happen. Many have also decided that they only need to provide directions for change and frameworks for what is to be done and then devolve the means to secure resources necessary to the local leader.
- 3 Systems now assume that they need to be seen to be using “world’s best practice.” National governments are highly conscious of their place in international league tables, and their national credibility rests on being able to show some kind of “continued improvement.” They are extremely vulnerable to media portrayals of “failing” schools and/or systems. They believe that there are international “solutions” to local problems which may appear not dissimilar to problems in other jurisdictions.
- 4 There now seems to be a leadership industry made up of knowledge producers and popularisers located in private companies, universities and schools. This leadership industry has made significant interventions in all spheres of activity, including in education and in educational leadership. What is on offer from a select range of academics and consultants, the traveling leadership entrepreneurs, is a set of tailor-made as well as off-the-peg “solutions” to individuals, organisations and governments. These solutions are sold as transnational, evidence-based and transferable.

The readiness of the leadership industry to provide policy and professional solutions creates a situation in which it seems, if one examines the kinds of training on offer to potential school leaders, that there is a one-best way to do leading and leadership and to be a leader. The promotion of policy anxiety, leadership and entrepreneurial activity is not necessarily, we suggest, a virtuous circle. We call this conjunction the transnational leadership package (TLP).

The emergence of the TLP

The TLP is not a homogenous body of work or people. It is derived from different national and cultural settings. It draws on a range of intellectual histories and practice traditions in different national contexts within the field of educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA). There are distinct, but interrelated, intellectual lineages within the field of ELMA which can be backtracked from contemporary concerns to particular historical contexts and theoretical origins. We call these lineages paradigms. ELMA paradigms cannot be easily disconnected from each other, either theoretically or chronologically, as different approaches were often developed differently in different places and at different times, in response to the failure, or lack of explanatory power, of earlier paradigms. The ELMA paradigms, each with their own internal logics, can be roughly depicted as follows:

- 1 the U.S. adoption of the Ford manufacturing Taylorist principles of **scientific management** (standardisation specialisation, synchronisation, concentration, maximisation and centralisation) as the “factory model” to emulate in schooling during the 1920s. Its later renditions are the school effectiveness and school improvement movements (SESI), and this is now interlocked with education policy through the imposition, across the entire public sector, of private sector market principles in the form of new public management (NPM). The core principles underpinning the resulting managerialisation and marketisation of schooling are competition and compliance, efficiency and effectiveness. Numbers as school rankings and comparisons are central to this push.
- 2 the post-war **human relations** movement, again largely U.S. driven. This movement recognised how supportive social relations and participative decision-making informed productivity. This human relations paradigm is re-emerging in the 21st century in the therapeutic turn where emotional intelligence, managing interpersonal relations and intercultural communication are now seen as core leadership skills rather than a display of weakness. This paradigm informs the move away from the provision of public services through institutions toward brokerage, contracts and partnerships. Notably it is visible in the contemporary organisational and pedagogic discourse about personalised provision.
- 3 the U.S. **theory movement** of the 1960s sought to establish ELMA as a value-free science. This paradigm has been ever present in ELMA but has gained new clout through the contemporary focus on large-scale quantitative studies, evidence-based/informed practice and data-driven decision-making. Prime examples of this contemporary trend are the involvement of TLP in the U.S. *No Child Left Behind* policy and *Every Child Matters* in England.
- 4 the **experiential or pragmatic perspective** of the U.K. tradition, which derived from a strong practitioner orientation and apprenticeship model of leadership. This has recently re-emerged in the “what works” discourse in England when leadership accreditation and training provisions were taken up by governments and as teacher education is pushed back into schools.
- 5 the **socially critical, neo-Marxist and feminist perspectives**, emerging predominantly from the geographical margins of Australia, New Zealand and Canada during the 1980s and 1990s. These are now being reinvigorated with the revival of social justice as a leadership issue in the 2010s, given the marked growth of educational inequality in both developed and developing nation-states. This book series is located within this tradition.

There is now a convergence of the ELMA paradigms. This has occurred at the same time as neoliberal policies have spread from the Anglophone nation-states to Asia, the Middle East, Mexico, South Africa and South America. Key aspects of the neoliberalist agenda are virtually enforced by international

bodies, such as the IMF, World Bank and OECD, and results of international standardised testing, such as PISA, are now a crucial reference point for policymakers in most countries in the world. This policy spread has been made possible in part through the advocacy work of knowledge and know-how entrepreneurs whose activity informs and is sometimes commissioned by these international agencies. The result is that there is now a coming together of the ELMA paradigms through preferred models, such as transformational leadership, which is simultaneously about delivery, an emotional commitment to the delivery and a predictive evidenced-based process to delivering the delivery! Tactical and pragmatic mediations may occur in some countries, such as England, but in the main, the ELMA paradigms inform and communicate vision and mission for localised implementation.

ELMA can now be understood as a transnational field of educational research, with a recognisable lexicon, key players and logics of practice. This is the case regardless of whether we are looking at the TLP, other ELMA scholars somewhat separate from it or socially critical scholars. Across ELMA, generally, there is a trend toward both standardisation and normalisation as to what constitutes good leadership through the development of leadership training programs and professional standards nationally—a shift away from post-occupancy professional development to leadership preparation, in some instances requiring certification. Scholars from the fifth paradigm are also positioned by these developments and engage in the kinds of critical, deconstructive and reconstructive work that is the purpose of this book series. Indeed, we have briefed our authors to engage in this process so that the problematisation of the field of ELMA and its relationship with the TLP are central to the engagement with theory and theorising.

The convergence of ELMA paradigms has also been actively produced by particular scholars and professionals through a process of selective eclecticism and appropriation of a set of concepts in response to the multiple and complex challenges of school leadership and to opportunities offered by anxious governments. This production and these products and producers are what we refer to as the TLP.

The TLP is not the same as ELMA. It brings together concepts and practices that were formerly confined to particular localities and institutions into a particular “saleable” form. The result is an assemblage of ideas and activities that focus primarily on the needs of educational systems and national governments. These do not necessarily meet the needs of individual schools, their students or their communities. The package is in fact constantly repackaged and contains a few genuinely new ideas but plenty of normative rhetoric about the urgency to buy and use.

The TLP consists of three mutually supporting strands:

- 1 a set of policy prescriptions based on the experiences of consultants working in contractual (and often informal) partnerships with governments and agencies in particular jurisdictions, mostly North America and

England, but also now including PISA success story, Finland. There are ready-made sound bites in this strand combined with the authority of “best practice.”

- 2 a series of meta-analyses and effectiveness studies, whose impressive statistical manipulations mostly boil down to saying that if you want to improve students’ learning, then you have to focus on how teachers and classroom practice can “deliver” higher outcome standards—and not on networks, teams or devolution of funding since these alone won’t produce the desired test result improvements.
- 3 a cultural professional deficit where the identification of problems, agenda setting and strategising is often perceived as rightly located outside of the school and where notions of professional agency are reduced to tactical localised delivery. However, some TLP manifestations have taken up the Finland exemplar to argue that a well-qualified and intellectually active teaching force is vital and that too much emphasis on testing and league tabling is counter-productive. However, the role of leaders remains the same in both versions, as does the primary goal of meeting system needs.

The TLP provides a kind of (largely) Anglocentric IKEA flat-pack of policy “levers” that will produce the actions and effects that count in national elections and international testing. While modern but cheap, it is worth “buying into” largely because to be seen as different is risky.

However, there is considerable debate about whether these objectives meet the needs of schools, communities, teachers and students in countries as diverse as Denmark, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, Wales and Singapore. At a time when populations in many countries are also becoming more diverse and less egalitarian, it is not clear that the TLP is up to the challenge.

We are not arguing here that the international circulation of ideas and people is to be discouraged. Obviously, finding out what others are doing can be very helpful as a means of generating new perspectives. The debate and discussion that occur when people with different positions come together are a Good Thing. However, we think it is ironic that at the same time as national governments and transnational agencies are concerned about maintaining the diversity of plants, animals and habitats, precisely the opposite is occurring with education policy ideas and practices. “Good” leadership features prominently among one-best global prescriptions and representations. Many ELMA scholars not in the TLP, including those from critical paradigm, suggest that there is no one best way of leading or changing a school and that the models of transnational “success” need to promote diverse approaches that are tailored to local needs histories and circumstances.

We take the view that what is needed in education is more than PISA envy and “what works.” Prescribing a set of steps that governments and leaders can take, regardless of wherever and whoever they are, eliminates one of the most significant educational resources we have—our capacity to understand, analyse and imagine within our local contexts. It is a fine irony that

these intellectual practices are precisely the ones that education systems are designed to inculcate in the next generation.

In these times, those who are engaged in *educational* leadership need, more than ever, to think about their work—its purposes and processes as well as its effects and outcomes. Our emphasis is on the *educational*, where the knowledge, skills and processes that constitute professional practice are located in teaching and learning; these provide the basis for leading and managing. This series of books aims to support this kind of reflective *educational* work. Each volume will focus on the conceptual tools and methodologies of a particular social science theory and theorists. We draw on scholarship from sociology, anthropology, philosophy, politics and cultural studies in order to interrogate, interrupt and offer alternative ideas to the contemporary versions of TLP and the broader field of ELMA. The series provides theoretical and methodological options for those who are engaged in the formal study of educational leadership, management and administration. It provides alternative resources for naming, framing and acting for those who are engaged in the practice of educational leadership, management or administration or who are providing training and policy for practising educational leaders.

The books series and critical thinking tools

This series of books might at first glance seem to be very removed from the kinds of pressures that we have described. However, our motivation for generating the series is highly practical. As series editors, we come to and, we hope, have informed the field of ELMA from different intellectual and occupational histories.

Together, we take the view that now, more than ever, leading any educational institution requires intellectual work. Educational professionals must, in our view, be able not simply to follow policy prescriptions. In order to do the work of leading and leadership, educational professionals need to be able to critically analyse policy directions, assess and evaluate their own institution and its local national and international contexts, not only understand how and why particular educational issues come to be center stage while others are sidelined but also communicate this to others and call on a rich set of ideas in order to develop directions for the institution in particular and for education more generally. This requires, among other things, a set of critical thinking tools. These are not all that are required, but they are an essential component of professional practice.

This series draws on social and political theories from selected key thinkers and activists to develop some critical thinking leadership tools. Each text uses the work of a particular theorist or theoretical approach, explains the theory, suggests what it might bring to the ELMA field and then offers analysis and case studies to show how the tools might be used. Each book also offers a set of questions that might be used by individual leaders in their own practices and some possible areas for further research by ELMA scholars.

In elaborating the particular approaches, each of the books also suggests a professional and political agenda which addresses aspects of the tensions and problems created by neoliberal and neoconservative policy agendas and by the ongoing need for educational systems to do better for many more of their students than they do at present.

Pat Thomson, Helen Gunter, Jill Blackmore
Series Editors

Acknowledgments

The making of a book is a collective enterprise, even if it is a single-authored volume. It is a sociomaterial practice that involves a network of people, technologies and materialities. There is, therefore, the need to recognise that it comes to fruition thanks to many circumstances.

First of all, I have to thank the editors of the series, namely Pat Thomson, Helen Gunter and Julie Blackmore. While initially the idea of introducing actor-network theory to the field of educational management, administration and leadership sounded odd to me, I accepted the challenge. I think at the end that it was a useful exercise and led me back to one of my first fields of expertise, organisation studies. This book welcomes the interference between education and organisation studies. I have tried to argue that this overlap is not necessarily entrapped in a managerialistic, neoliberal and modernistic discourse.

Secondly, it is essential to acknowledge that this book benefitted from a collaboration with ANDIS (the National Association of School Headteachers), one of the most representative professional associations of school leaders in Italy, which helped me in understanding the contemporary transformations of the managerial work in schools because of the policy of school autonomy and in particular the change due to digitalisation. This collaboration has been sustained by a research project called “The Sociomateriality of Work of the Headteacher,” which led to an agreement between ANDIS and the overall program known with the acronym INPOS (Innovation in Social Policies) of the Institute of Research on Population and Social Policies. Here, I would like to thank Paolino Marotta and the executive board of ANDIS, who sustained my research even when it looked exoteric and was out of the perimeter of the mainstream Italian literature.

Thirdly, without the almost year-long collaboration with the headteachers and the schools, this volume would not have been possible. I learned a lot, and I collected more materials than I was able to include. I had the chance to interact with several headteachers I had met several years before at the beginning of the policy of school autonomy when I supported them in training for the passage to the new tasks of the independent schools. Thanks in particular to Rossella De Luca, Emilia Di Blasi and Mena Nocera. My only hope is

that this volume can offer them, the headteachers and teachers, some exciting ideas. In that respect, this book is the first step in a collaboration I would like to keep on developing.

Finally, I have to express thanks for the conversations I had with Emiliano Grimaldi and Danilo Taglietti. They both helped me to better understand the Foucauldian heritage of ANT.



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1 Introducing actor-network theory

Aramis was a personal rapid transport system tested in Paris for a long time from 1970, but finally abandoned in 1987. Officially, nobody knows why this system failed. Alternatively, better, there are many reasons. Someone or something killed the innovation, and if it were an Agatha Christie novel there would be many potentially guilty parties in the detective's notebook. A list of 21 explanations can be offered, some of them equally possible, and some that contradict one another. It could have been the ministers, the local elected officials in Paris. Maybe, Aramis was not technically feasible, or economically sustainable. Perhaps more experimentations, refinements, and trials were needed to fix its hardware. Probably there is more than one guilty party in this failure. Reconsidering this story, however, suggests that there is a solution to the quandary. Aramis was not loved! The technical project remained the same, while the social environment changed. There was no connection between the social and technical aspects. Engineers and technologists had separated technology from society.

(Latour, 1996)

The preceding story is a summary of Bruno Latour's book called *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* (1996). The book is the story of a failed technology or, more precisely, of a failed engagement between society and technology. It is a story where non-humans (here "Aramis") fail to acquire the capacity to act. Like the Creature in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, Aramis was abandoned to its destiny. No one loved Aramis, it is said, and its bits and pieces were finally disassembled.

Patient readers of this book might now feel somewhat disoriented: "What am I reading? Is this an academic book or a sci-fi novel? Why are we talking about non-human agency? Are we talking about robust theory?" Some may have already closed the book. For the remaining (hopefully not few) readers, however, the story offers, as will become more evident, some of the themes (non-human agency, entanglement of technology and society) of an impressive contemporary intellectual endeavor: actor-network theory (ANT), a helpful arena for rethinking the theory of agency and re-describing the dynamics of educational leadership and management.

What is ANT? There are many definitions: a theory, a methodology, a sensibility. ANT is less a single definite object of investigation, however, and