

Eacott, S. (2018). *Beyond leadership: A relational approach to organizational theory in education*. Singapore: Springer.

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Scott Eacott and Richard Niesche are in the process of editing a book series under the banner of Educational Leadership Theory. The intent of the series is “to deliver an innovative and provocative dialogue whose coherence comes not from the adoption of a single paradigmatic lens but rather in an engagement with the theoretical and methodological preliminaries of scholarship” (Eacott, 2018, p. v). In the book, *Beyond Leadership: A Relational Approach to Organizational Theory in Education*, Eacott engages in an act of scholarship designed to stimulate a style of academic debate as noted by the preface to Educational Leadership Theory series. Eacott’s stated purpose of the book is to present a “relatively new approach to scholarship in educational administration [one that] offers a means of overcoming limitations in the explanatory value of contemporary terms and the need for theoretical resources to engage with organizing activity” (p. 5). True to his stated purpose, Eacott delivers a seventeen-chapter book where he presents his argument (chapters one to eight), provides other academics with a venue for dialogue and debate (chapters nine to fifteen), and concludes with a section that he calls “Moving Forward” where he offers a response through his commentary and conclusion (chapters sixteen and seventeen).

In Chapter 1, Eacott questions whether leadership as a construct holds up to rigorous and robust methodological critique. By so doing, he moves the focal point of leadership from the act to the concept of organization. He then proceeds to raise four key considerations about organizing, organizations, and leadership vs. administration: A group (equal to or greater than 2) requires some form of organizing; If there is leadership, there is group change (his simple answer is “no” – it does not); “leadership” involves “administration” and/or “management,” but offers something “more” – the something more is the focus on the relational; and (1) leadership, (2) management, and (3) administration are three distinct, even if related, analytical categories. These last two considerations lead Eacott to argue that “Thinking relationally breaks down binaries (e.g., structure/agency, individualism/holism, and particular/universal) and provides for the possibility of productive theorizing” (p. 9).

Throughout Chapter 2, Eacott builds on the historical evolution of the relational and its importance to the social sciences. He argues that the relational extends beyond any “disciplinary background, national tradition, or analytic and empirical point of view” (p. 26). In essence, he makes the point that relational scholarship is not a theory to be applied or a method to be used; it is a way of doing research. It is through doing research in this relational way that scholars need to attend to the epistemological and ontological understandings emanating from their field of study.

Chapter 3 provides a move from the generalities of social sciences to the specificity of educational administration. Eacott builds an argument for the relational approach as a useful methodological tool for understanding the concept of the organizing activity. Again, Eacott differentiates between the act of leadership and that of organizing. He argues, “To privilege relations, one has to confront the hegemonic structuralism—with its inherent determinism—of ‘the organization’” (p. 43). Eacott identifies four relational approaches to scholarship: adjectival, co-determinism, conflationism, and the relational. The relational itself offers educational administration the means to theorize how it is perceived, understood, and enacted within contemporary spatio-temporal conditions.

In the second part of the book (chapters 4 through 8) Eacott introduces, explains, and connects five key terms to the relational approach of scholarly work: auctor, organizing activity, context, analytical dualism, and productive thinking. Each term, in its own way, advocates for a cautious approach regarding the study of educational administration.

As a term, auctors “draw on socially provided resources such as (substantialist) categories and correlate and coordinate their accounts with the accounts of others in an ongoing reciprocal process” (p. 82). Auctors conduct scholarly research and make knowledge claims that are generated in an environment that is in flux, and where argument and refutation are valued and supported throughout the process.

Throughout Chapter 5, Eacott addresses why terms like leadership, administration, and management are misplaced within research, and further that they lead to what he refers to as “monologues that plague educational administration” (p. 95). By breaking each term into its commensurate parts, he develops an argument for what he calls organizing activity. Particular attention is paid to the use of the term “leadership” and why it has come to be misplaced in scholarly educational administrative works. As the term leadership is often applied liberally, it loses its power of study – a nebulous term that means all things to all people. It is from this point of logic that Eacott develops the use of organizing activity.

Eacott begins Chapter 6 by stating, “the uncritical acceptance of the ordinary language of the everyday in educational administration means that the underlying generative principles of claims are rarely brought into question” (p. 114). Context, Eacott purports, is one of the terms used in educational administration research that is rarely questioned; it is assumed that meaning is known. He builds an understanding around organizing activity as context by stating,

Core to my claim that organizing is context is recognition that relations are the focus of analysis and a framework (theory) for inquiry. In doing so, I move beyond the attribution of causation in contexts (as per structural/determinist accounts) and the conflation of context with time and place. Instead, I have sought to advance an argument built upon the relations of temporality and space where auctors generate spatio-temporal conditions rather than interact with, context. Relations are ontological and not merely an attribute of the social (the latter being a strict empiricist position). To that end, relations are not, as Aristotle would have it, subordinate to substances. Substance is, at best, co-primal with relations, but quite possibly, subservant. (p. 125)

In Chapter 7 Eacott puts forth a number of ways that researchers in the field of educational administration can overcome, what he refers to as, analytical dualism. True to form, Eacott builds a position around the relational being distinct from, not alternative to, substantialist approaches to research. He worries that this research will reproduce analytical dualism in its knowledge claims. It does so by building arguments on, what he refers to as, simplistic representations of the social world. These representations are simplistic because they frequently pay little attention to the alternative perspectives. To Eacott, this approach leads to binary thinking, which does little to advance knowledge. Throughout this chapter, Eacott picks up on “common analytical dualism mobilized in educational administration research (structure/agency, universalism/particularism, and individualism/holism) and demonstrate[s] how the key terms of the relational program (auctor, organizing activity, and spatio-temporal conditions) overcome them” (p. 129).

Eacott turns his attention to what he refers to as productive thinking and his critique of what he claims to be the monologue of traditional educational administration research: lack of attention to the alternative. Throughout the chapter, he offers the relational as a means to overcome the monologue and its utility in offering the space for theorizing to occur. Additionally, a series of helpful tables are offered to the reader to help clarify the perspective that he develops while comparing the relational to other research approaches.

In conjunction with his writing of this book, Eacott invited many highly respected educational administration scholars to engage with, and critique, the ideas published in his 2015 book, *Educational Leadership Relationally*. Noted here are some of the more salient points addressed by each scholar:

Helen Gunter (Chapter 9) argues for an advancement of the intellectual development of the field of educational administration. To do so will require “thinking with theory and theorizing to enable relationality to shift from understanding through sharing a situation to explaining that situation from which a way forward can be generated” (p. 171).

Tony Bush (Chapter 10) provides a synopsis of leadership theory and positions relational thereof. He questions whether the relational is something genuinely new or the addressing of a previously known quantity in a new form. Bush concludes the chapter by stating, “He [Eacott] has succeeded in locating

relational thinking on the map of leadership theory, but more analysis is required to assess how it fits with contemporary understanding of schools and what may be its distinctive contribution to establish notions of organizations” (p. 185).

Fenwick English (Chapter 11) shares many of Eacott’s perspectives. However, even English questions whether Eacott can achieve the breaking down of the epistemic boundaries of objects (e.g. leaders, schools, and systems) and, if successful, the recasting of educational administrative labour. English states, “such epistemic revelations...are among the most difficult, intractable, and volatile of human exchanges, overlaid with the politics of domination, power, hierarchy, competition, and academic settings are no exception to such activities and conflict” (p. 196).

Izhar Oplatka (Chapter 12) argues that “the unique characteristics of the teaching profession, the core technology of the school organization, are more universal than particular and therefore they engender similar professional and organizational contexts for schoolteachers and educational leaders worldwide” (p. 200). It is through these core technologies that the field of educational administration exists.

Dawn Wallin (Chapter 13) takes Eacott to task about the lack of feminist scholars cited in the book, as well as his lack of attention to the language used about feminist scholarship. However, Wallin is appreciative of Eacott’s focus on the relational approach to conducting educational administration research, while also noting the historical connections between what Eacott writes and the work already done by feminist scholars.

Augusto Riveros (Chapter 14) utilizes Eacott’s relational approach to analyze the recent enactments of standards of practice for school leaders. Additionally, he questions the efficacy of this approach in the field of educational administration. Riveros concludes, “Perhaps one critical aspect that should be carefully considered by those interested in the study of relations is the interrogation of the nature of relations. What counts as a relation and what type of relations should be taken into account? If relations are ontologically primitive, the definition of what a relation is and what type of relations are constitutive of the object is of utmost importance” (p. 239). Indeed, these are important questions to ask.

Megan Crawford (Chapter 15) concludes the “Dialogue and Debate” section of the book in a manner that affirms Eacott’s work of questioning how educational administration scholars do research, while also acknowledging their important roles regarding the development of theory in the field. Crawford states,

If a state of disequilibrium and dissatisfaction with the status quo can help build a new norm for researchers in educational administration, then writers and thinkers need to actively consider how best, and where to, promote such a new norm. As I have noted above, and Eacott underlines in his writing, where authority lies is a crucial factor. Although it may be very difficult to determine where that authority lies in terms of research into the field, this does not mean that we should not try. Indeed, a step that might be taken next by those researchers and writers particularly interested in moving ideas forward is to engage in some writing, and/or workshops about where authority lies in certain areas. The policy would seem, initially to be an area of investigation where authority is clear-cut, because in many countries research is driven by policy imperatives. However, the nuances of this might be a useful discussion in terms of the debate on educational leadership from a relational perspective. I am heartened by the exhortation to shake off complacency, and even promote disequilibrium and dissatisfaction (in a positive way, of course). (p. 247)

In the final two chapters, in a part that Eacott calls “Moving Forward,” he responds to the critiques offered in Part Three. In some instances, Eacott indicates that the critical issues raised regarding the substance of Educational Leadership Relationally were addressed in the present text. However, he also uses the final two chapters to clarify the issues from the ways in which he uses certain terms. For example, he explains what is meant by relational (the role of scholarly identity), the use of the term science (grounding the narrative), and how the relational might impact knowledge mobilization.

As readers, we enjoyed the experience of interacting with the ideas presented by Scott Eacott. We were constantly intrigued by his call for scholars to return to the act of theorizing, and, by so doing, bring meaning to the study of educational administration. As scholars, we understand where that clarion call is coming from; however, as researchers, we are left wondering how we would practically implement Eacott’s teachings into our work, and what impact the Relational Approach to Educational Administration would have on our relationships with the practitioners in our field.

References

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