Chapter 11
Shaping a Strengths-Based Approach to Relational Leadership

Michael Bell
Flinders University, Australia
Carolyn Palmer
Flinders University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Much of the contemporary research and theorising on educational leaders’ practices has portrayed leadership as a relatively static set of interactions between entities. In contrast, the social constructionist literature revisits the organic, relational, and emerging becoming-in-the-world. This approach to leadership research has implications for the practices of leaders, leadership formation programs, research itself, and the position of the researcher. In this chapter, the authors argue that the formation of educational leadership is a critical, relational concern, to which considerable attention is warranted. The authors contend that rather than merely deconstructing the status quo, research through a relational lens engages in a co-re-constructing, or shaping, of our collective aspirations and the strategies we employ.

INTRODUCTION

Educational leaders have inherited understandings of leadership, organisation and culture that inadvertently constrain conversations about these phenomena. The language and conceptual structures framing these understandings are rooted in atomistic, mechanistic and empiricist views of human experience. Imbued with the heroic undertones of the modernist project, such views offer reassurance that humans are in fact taming the world through carefully calculated formulae that account for all that matters. This reassurance belies the complexity of human existence and offers an Icarean grasp of power thus blinding people to ontologies that would offer enriching insights into what it means to be in leadership.

As with all times, dominant ideologies play out in the litany of everyday conversation, the systemic structuring of our social organising and the discourses of our big ideas (Inayatullah, 2008). In contemporary times, the ‘neo-liberal
cascade’ (Connell, 2013) patterns so much of the everyday experiences of educational leaders it is difficult to escape its calculating embrace. Neo-liberalism mythologises the ‘invisible hand’ (Smith, 1776) extolling its virtues and almost deifying its capacity to determine what is in the public interest. Neo-liberal ideals laud the pursuit of individualistic passions as a morally virtuous endeavour that sustains the economic growth that in turn benefits all (Connell, 2013). This pervasive, apparently rational and certainly unambiguous framing of life makes the rules of the game clear, the goal posts evident and helps people select their teams. In short, individuals ought to pursue their consumptive desires, fight their way to the top of the ladder (thus ensuring sufficient income to sustain their consumption) and work with others only so long as these others help the individuals achieve their outcomes. In so doing, individuals will be contributing greater social order.

Neo-liberalism adopts the same building blocks as the atomistic and mechanistic world view of Newtonian physics. These building blocks are things and their inherent properties. The interacting of things (e.g., Newton’s laws), as governed by their inherent properties, constitutes the organising principles of the universe in which humans live. Thus the apparently inherent property of human beings, the pursuit of self-interest, then becomes an organising principle of our ‘natural’ social ordering. By extension, this ‘natural’ human tendency should be advocated through our procedures, structures and systems (Connell, 2013).

The building blocks of Newtonian physics and our current dominant ideology offer a comfort in the face of what might otherwise be an overwhelmingly ambiguous world. The tangibility of things is reassuring. People can experience them through their senses and be relatively confident that others can do the same. This to some extent reassures individuals that they cohabit and by so doing may reduce the existential angst created by dwelling in an apparently meaningless and absurd world (see Sartre, 1984 and Heidegger, 1962). Our preoccupation with things has a philosophical tradition dating back to Plato (Chia, 1996; Slife, 2004). Indeed, some strands of western philosophy insist on the primacy of the rational and advocate for the empirical nature of things over the irrational and intangible nature of that which is not a thing (Locke, 1690; Hume, 1902). But, as Deacon rightly points out “there is more here than stuff. There is how stuff is organised and related to other stuff. And there is more than what is actual, there is what could be and what should be...” (2012, p. 544).

Human experiences already offer glimpses (or indeed sustained views) of the worlds between things. Educational leaders, tasked with the responsibility for organisational change may be aware of the limits of linear change models. The living experience of leading change is more akin to ‘herding cats’ than rearranging your stationery drawer. It never stops, it’s always very hard to predict and the invisible accounts for more of what is going on than does the visible. Language equips people to only partially describe the worlds between them. People use terms like “you could cut the atmosphere with a knife”, “you could feel the difference” or “the energy was palpable”. However, much of what is between people falls outside the confines of everyday language. So our inquiries here will require both a revisiting of our constrained understandings and the development of neologisms that capture more of the nature of the ontologies between people.

Inquiries into the ontologies that exist between stuff open new possibilities for research and necessarily disrupt the hold of the reductionist world views that are grounded in the atomistic metaphor. Inquirers venturing here find the need to shed the inadequate certainties and embrace the enduringly ‘thrown’ (Heidegger, 1962) nature of our lives. In these explorations the primacy of context and the relational nature of existence take centre stage (Giles et al., 2012), how people understand who they are is reshaped (Slife, 2004; Uhl-Bien 2006)