Educational Leadership Research: Is There a Compelling Reason to Change?

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Abstract	Article Info
This paper is a response to recent challenges to educational leadership research from Eacott. Using a personal narrative approach, and drawing, in the main, on research from the International Successful School Principalship Project, it is argued that current research questions are worthwhile, he methodologies used are trustworthy and appropriate, and that there is no compelling reason to abandon these.	

This paper is not written in a conventional academic style and it emphasises narrative and experience. I need to state at the beginning that in writing this piece I do not seek to diminish the work of others. Occasionally it might seem that this is the case, but many of the people I will write about are people that I know and I have enormous respect for them personally and professionally. Nevertheless, Scott Eacott has for several years challenged people, such as myself, to engage with his ideas, and from the respect I have for Eacott, I think this is the time to do this, albeit briefly.

I have read through Eacott (2018), which seems to be a call for reconsideration of Eacott's ideas by providing another account of his views on leadership and then asking several colleagues to comment on this. This special journal issue seems to be doing the same. I am left wondering why there is a need to reflect so much on ideas that appear to be largely reinterpretations of views that already exist and have done so for many years. Nevertheless, the summary of Eacott's views was useful and the commentaries came from a variety of perspectives, and so the volume makes a contribution to educational leadership discussions. The commentaries, whilst mostly polite, are also mostly critical of the contribution of Eacott's relational leadership; Bush's (2018) location of relational leadership in the story of educational leadership research rather than as an addition to it; English's (2018) positionality and language critique; Oplatka's (2018) counter to the need for a constructivist approach to leadership study; Wallin's (2018) critique of the lack of engagement with feminist and non-normative perspectives; Riveros' (2018) supportive application of the relational perspective to a leadership framework; and, Crawford's (2018) call for more clarity, purpose and a sense of the way forward if critical debates are to seriously challenge dominate views.

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I am not a critical theorist, or some derivative of this view, and rarely do I write in a way that engages with reflections about fundamental concerns about how educational leadership is researched and conceptualised. Others do that better than I would do. In more than 180 publications I think I have only done so twice, and both of these were early in my career. My first published peer reviewed paper was for Peter Gronn in the journal he founded for the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, *Leading and Managing* (Gurr, 1996a). In it I considered whether the idea of transformational leadership was useful for education, and I was somewhat critical of some of the ideas of Gronn and Gabriele Lakomski. In his generous style, Gronn asked me out to Monash University to chat about the draft of the paper, and to show me how to better dispute his views. Gronn published the paper and arranged for Lakomski (1996) and he (Gronn, 1996) to provide a reflection, and then for me to have another reflection (Gurr, 1996b). It was really my only foray into anything approaching critical commentary. Since these papers, I have largely written about empirical research I have been involved in, reviews of research about an area, and conceptual papers assembling various ideas to explore a topic. I haven't got back to write about how I critically reflect on what I do, and I am not sure that the invitation to this special issue is going to change that. Let me explain.

I am very comfortable in the research I do. I find people in key roles in schools endlessly fascinating, I enjoy talking to them, and I still, after 55 years in schools as a student, teacher, researcher and consultant, enjoy being in schools, talking to students, teacher and parents, and thinking that in some small way I contribute to school success. Now, I use the term educational leadership (or school leadership) to describe the field I work in. But that, of course, is an attributional statement because in reality I am interested in people, and

these people have key roles in schools, and to those people in those roles, I make the attribution that they are educational leaders engaged in leadership work. In my early academic career I used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, but over time have largely settled into a qualitative orientation, relying on interviews and observations in a light-touch, relatively unobtrusive manner. A multiple perspective, observational case study holds a lot of joy for me, and provides what I consider to be a trustworthy glimpse into what people do in schools. It is no longer an innovative or ground-breaking methodology, but it is a quality way to engage with people, in a manner that is not too intrusive, but which still provides useful and complex information about people and their connections to others. My area of interest is educational leadership but within that I have diverse interests including: principal leadership, middle leaders, technology and leadership, school governance, school supervision (inspection, self-review), and so forth. From this corpus of research and writing I can easily provide a statement about educational leadership and one that has both person and person-in-context perspectives. One I constructed recently was this:

> *There is now consensus that leadership matters to schools. Not only does it matter, but also there is an expectation that school leaders will make a difference to the school they are in, and for those in more senior leadership roles, that they will make a difference across schools. There is broad agreement that there are four areas of common practice. Successful leaders tend to have a long-term view of education, and they have the skills to bring a school community together to establish an agreed direction. They are able to articulate a vision for ten or more years, and make sense of this so that school communities not only understand what is happening in the present, but also how this fits with the future progress of the school. These leaders are people-centred. They help people to develop, and in more senior leadership roles, the focus is mainly on developing the adults in the school. They are good at leading change and putting in place the*

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organisational aspects that will lead to sustained success. Successful school leaders know about good curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and how to help improve teaching and learning in their school. The four leadership areas – vision, developing people, leading change, and improving teaching and learning – transcend contexts and work across all levels of education across the world. Yet there is no formula for successful leadership. These leaders do not subscribe to one view of leadership – they are not instructional, transformational leaders, or aligned to a leadership standard - rather they take ideas from various views of leadership and use these as sign-posts to construct a personal view of leadership that makes sense for their current role and context. To these four areas of practice, there are at least three other areas that promote school success. Leaders understand that ultimately they are responsible for their own professional development and are proactive in their development and restless for new ideas. They also understand that leadership is about influencing the behaviours of others in a deliberate process that leads to behaviour change. Finally, they understand the multiple contexts in which their school exists, and they are able to respond to, and influence, these contexts. They become a sense maker to help others understand a school's place in a complex set of contexts.

There are qualities that successful leaders have that promote success and traits such as acumen, alertness, benevolence, curiosity, empathy, honesty, humbleness, openness, optimism, persistence, resilience, respectfulness, and tolerance are evident. They have expectations that are high, yet reasonable, which are applied to all in the school community. They are not afraid to be heroic leaders, to put their own reputation and career on the line for what they believe is best for their school. Yet they don't do this alone, because they understand the importance of involving many in the leadership of a school, and indeed they seek collaboration to instil a sense of collective endeavour. These leaders engender trust be-because they act with integrity, are transparent with their values, beliefs and actions, model good practice, are fair in dealing with people, and involve many in decision making.

In partnership with my colleague and collaborator, Lawrie Drysdale, several models and conceptual frameworks have been produced to describe our knowledge, with the most recent being the one shown in Figure 1 (Drysdale & Gurr, 2017). This uses the seven element conceptual framework mentioned in the leadership description above, with each element supported by several leadership capabilities which we consider important for leading in times of uncertainty; it is an adaptation of empirically grounded framework we have used to guide our teaching programs, with the adaptation in this case focusing on what capabilities school leaders might need to develop to help them work in a VUCA world (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity; Johansen, 2012).

Now, perhaps after 25 years of researching this is not enough, but, of course, the statement, and the models and conceptual diagrams, describe some of what I think I know, and it is supported by the 60 theses of my research students, my own research and publications, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of research papers of the other researchers I have used to help describe elements of the work of people in schools. The challenge posed by Eacott is largely that this knowledge base is false – it has been researched poorly, about ideas that are poorly formed. Yet I know at a practical level that the ideas match well with what people do, in that those in schools can relate to the ideas and make use of them in their practice.

Figure 1

Leadership Domains and Capabilities Framework
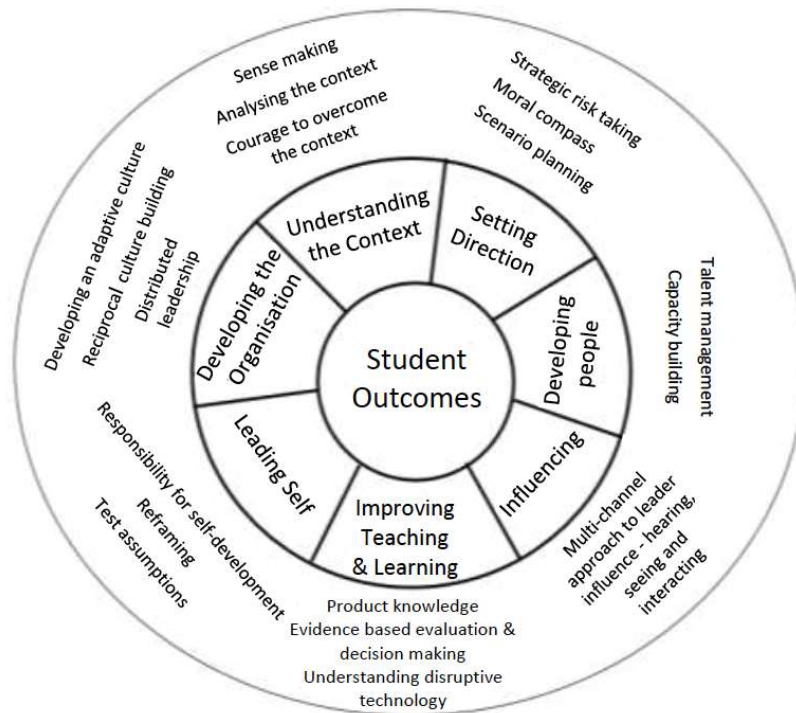
So, what does Eacott's view have to offer? It is essentially a constructivist view that fits with the complexity of work at this time, is emphasising ideas that have been around for some time (e.g. Bell & Palmer, 2015; Eacott, 2018; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Uhi-Bien, 2006), and which, through the work of people like Spillane on his relational view of distributed leadership, remain important. In their influential review of successful school leadership research, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) described how one of their five foundational understandings

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about leadership was the relational nature of the work; the other four related to purpose and direction, leadership as an influence process, leadership as a function, and the contextual and contingent nature of leadership.

Understanding behaviour in context is clearly important. Personally, I have been interested in this in several ways but mostly at the broader levels of context and not the day-to-day interactional level. Much of this has been through my involvement in the most comprehensive study of educational leadership, the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP – https://www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/). For example, I have been involved in considering our research on successful school leadership through country contexts (Day & Gurr, 2014; Gurr, 2014), or through a multi-layered approach using Hallinger's (2018) context and culture framework for school improvement to help understand how school leaders work (Gurr, Drysdale, Longmuir & McCrohan, 2018). Both of these strains of research led to the conclusion that successful school leaders seem to be less constrained by context, and that whilst context matters, perhaps it matters less than is commonly claimed. Nevertheless, there is a reciprocal element that may be important, in that whilst some principals were clearly able to influence contexts, their behaviours were also influenced by the contexts they worked in (e.g. Doherty, 2008). In the case of Doherty's (2008) research, it was the ISSPP multiple-perspective interview and observation research method she used, in an intensive study over a year on the work of a principal in a successful school, that allowed her to develop a reciprocal influence version of the Australian successful school leadership model. Now, the ISSPP is a research project that continues to develop and reflect on what, why and how issues. In addition to the original strand that

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focussed on successful principals leading successful schools, the ISSPP has added strands that have focussed on leadership of underperforming schools, and principal identity. It continues to develop with new foci on middle leaders, teacher quality and governance being developed in 2019. It also continues to reflect on how the research is conducted. I have been part of many deep, engaging and, occasionally, confronting debates about the project's protocols. These have, in the main, confirmed the core methodology (multiple perspective and observational case studies) as the best way to explore the areas of interest.

Independent of these developments I have explored successful leadership in additional ways. For example, pre-dating the discussions by Eacott and others, but only emerging now, Nicholas (in press) has extended the ISSPP research by considering how leadership is dispersed in successful schools. His research used network analysis of work connections and individual interviews to both map and understand the leadership and management connections in three secondary schools. The study showed that all three schools had a distributed pattern of leadership, with this primarily attached to various roles that reflected school leadership structures and strategic goals and planning, and that the enactment of leadership in these roles was influenced by influenced by interpersonal factors including leader expertise, professional relationships, behaviours that are supportive of other people, and the development of trust.

It is not from arrogance or a lack of interest in the discussions that I can say I am very comfortable in the research I do. Rather, it is a statement that in terms of how I understand knowledge generation for the areas that interest me, I am well settled in how I go about this. Yet, as I am working on this paper I have been sitting in a conference and

hearing someone talk about their research and it sounds like me and sounds like what is found in chapters that provide standard methodology overviews such as Brooks and Normore (2018) – but my over-riding impression is that perhaps it is not enough. What does this paper that I am writing sound like? Is it perhaps merely a justification for inaction? And so, the next part of this article describes how I respond at a research level to a book like *Beyond Leadership. A relational approach to organizational theory in education* (Eacott, 2018); does it influence what I do?

One response is to abandon the questions I have explored, and the qualitative and quantitative ways I have researched for more than 30 years, and begin again. That is not likely to happen, as I can see no compelling arguments in Eacott (2018) that would cause me to do this. But, taking a less intrusive view, and just focussing on successful school leadership research as part of the ISSPP, is there anything about relational leadership that would cause me to add to, or modify, the way I have researched successful school leadership? A multiple perspective approach to research proceeds on the premise that studying a phenomenon needs to be done from several perspectives. This seems to be an important idea when considering the work of principals, and was one of the driving forces for the construction of the ISSPP, as most prior studies on principals had relied on principal perceptions only. The nature of the questions of the ISSPP are invitational, and the invitation is mostly about respondent perceptions in a broad sense. For example, we ask of the principal: 'What has been your contribution to the success of the school? How do you know? How have you acted to bring about success? (Evidence/concrete examples).' We ask of the teachers a similar question: 'What has been the principal's contribution to the success of your school? (How? Evidence/concrete examples?).' Questions like these are only examples

from a complicated research protocol that is described in 13,000 words and 52 pages. Typically, the responses are rich and detailed, especially as we ask for respondents to describe examples of what principals do. For example, in relation to a question about what a principal had contributed to a school's success, a teacher participant said:

> *Some would say buildings, but I would say the relationships he has established within the VGS community – people feel listened to, that they are heard and are important. This is priceless and far better than any building. He works tirelessly, he is constantly thinking, meets with people, he is at sport every Saturday, chatting to parents. You can feel that you are part of a phenomenon working with him [principal]. (Doherty, 2008, p. 84).*

There is complexity in this. Whilst the teacher noted the obvious impacts in terms of new/refurbished buildings, the more substantial impact was to do with culture through the way the principal modelled positive relationships. As mentioned previously, Doherty's research also highlighted how the school had influenced this principal's behaviour, with, for example, the need to run a Saturday sport program also being an opportunity to connect with parents. Findings like these partially reveal some of the relational nature of principal leadership. We probe this further through questions related to how principals relate to the stakeholders in the school – students, parents, staff, external people. A student involved in Doherty's (2008, p.121) research commented:

> *He's open, he's welcoming, he's nice. He's really friendly and always interesting to talk to. He's also a really honourable guy. He doesn't promote himself. He tries to cater for everybody not just purely academic or purely sport. He tries to get a range of things and interests. He's genuinely interested in like everything that goes on, and he's always looking for ways to make things better, and he gets the respect of everyone.*

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In those cases, in which the ISSPP researchers included observation, we also observe some of the work of principals. Again, following the principal from Doherty's (2008) research, Goode (2017) observed the retirement assembly of the principal. At this assembly, all the students had, under the formal school uniform, a t-shirt with the principal's image in an Andy Warhol style. At a cue, they all stood-up, took their blazers and shirts off, and stood wearing the t-shirts in appreciation of the principal's service to the school.

The relational nature of principal work is part of the focus of the ISSPP research, it is evident in the information we collect and it allows for general statements to be made. For example, reviewing cases across the ISSPP project, Gurr, Drysdale, Swann, Doherty, Ford & Goode (2006, p.43) described how the quality of relationships throughout the school community was a vital component of the work of principals. Working with and through others was a feature of the way the principals worked, even in those cases where principals adopted a very strong, almost authoritarian leadership style. Gurr and Day (2014), in a synthesis of findings from 15 principal cases from 13 countries, identified 13 generalisable themes that included: high expectations; post-heroic leadership; collaboration/collective effort/share vision/alignment; symbolic role; integrity , trust and transparency; people centred; the power of 'AND': transformational AND instructional leadership; improving schools in challenging circumstances; developing as a leader; personal qualities, beliefs and values that include themes related to personal acumen, qualities and dispositions and beliefs and values. These, with summaries contained in the other three project books (in sequence: Day & Leithwood, 2007; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011; Moos, Johansson & Day, 2011), provide a deep and complex insight into the work of successful principals.

The writings and reflections of people such as Eacott are important to remind educational leadership researchers to reflect upon what they do, why they do it, and the extent to which their research is trustworthy. What I have suggested in this paper is that the challenge/provocation of Eacott over the past several years, is not sufficiently compelling for me to change what I am interested in researching and how I go about this. The research of international research projects, like the ISSPP, is well-developed, extensive, contextually rich and relies on methodologies that are trustworthy and appropriate (see Gurr, Drysdale and Goode, in press, for a discussion of the four major international educational leadership research project of the last two decades: the ISSPP, the International Study of the Preparation of Principals, Leadership for Learning, and the International School Leadership Development Network). I see no reason to doubt these findings and readers should similarly feel assured about the robustness of our educational leadership knowledge base. That is not say that there will not be new questions to answer and new ways to do research; see for example the edited collection of methodology chapters in Lochmiller (2018). But, for me, my core research work will not change substantially with the current challenges presented by critical authors such as Eacott.

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