CHAPTER TWO

ENGAGING WITH THE LITERATURE

Where are we now?

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of any scientific field of inquiry depends on the soundness of the research methodologies employed by its members (Ketchen & Bergh, 2004). Despite many educational leadership issues generating a great deal of scholarly interest internationally over the years, reviewers have generally suggested it has not been an area given to rigorous empirical investigation and knowledge accumulation (Bridges, 1982; Erickson, 1967). Firestone and Robinson (2010) however contend that things have improved considerably since the 1980s as the field has become more theoretically complex, has drawn on a greater variety of intellectual sources from the study of organisations, and has become more methodologically diverse and sophisticated. Of course, such claims are highly contested. For an interesting discussion of the nature of writing in educational leadership I encourage a reading of Thrupp and Willmott’s (2003) Educational management in managerialist times: beyond the textual apologist. In this work, they critique what Gunter (1997) calls the ‘educational management industry’ to argue that despite the apparent popularity of educational management literature, this literature is harmful because of the ways it fails to challenge existing social inequalities and the way it chimes with managerialist policies that will only further intensify existing inequalities. This argument sits comfortably with this author due to my critical disposition, but in an era where matters of social justice are granted additional attention – both scholarly and politically – this is significant.

Gorard (2005) suggests that the difference between educational leadership research and other educational research is the uniformity of methods used, mainly small scale qualitative work with little transparency and no comparison groups. Although this perspective reflects a somewhat bias approach to assessing the quality of research – one that favours logical empiricism. He further adds that the lack of inclusion in the Social Science Citation Index of the majority of educational leadership and management journals is perhaps itself an indicator of the non-impact of research in the field. This needs to be acknowledged in the context that relatively few education/social science journals (in comparison to hard sciences) have impact factor measured. Lumby, Foskett and Fidler (2005) add that there is a dearth of literature which deals with the nature, adequacy and possibilities of methodology specifically in relationship to educational leadership and management. Despite a 2005 special issue of Educational Management Administration and Leadership (the leading UK based journal in the field) on ‘Researching educational leadership and management’, edited by Lumby, Foskett
and Fidler, very little, if any, attention is given to defining what is meant by the term ‘methodology’. For the purpose of this book, I follow Prasad (1997), among others, in conceptualising methodology as ‘an intricate set of ontological and epistemological assumptions that a researcher brings to his or her work (p. 2). As such, methodology is the bringing together of theory and research methods. This has significant implications for research. This positions research as inquiry into questions derived from an understanding of theory and the selection of the most appropriate tool or technique (e.g. methods) to answer those questions. Evers (2010) notes the rarity of discussion in relation to the philosophical issues of educational leadership research yet the enormous influence that such matters have over the way educational leadership is understood, theorised and practised.

As a domain of inquiry educational leadership is dominated by a pragmatic empirical approach (Scheerens, 1997). The theoretical development of the field is still at the ‘discovery orientation’ and not empirically oriented studies. Firestone and Robinson (2010) contend that this may be the result of the lack of a small number of identified common problems universally accepted within the field in which a quantum of scholars is committed. While on one level this may be true, one does have to wonder as to whether reducing the focus of research to a small number of common problems is beneficial for the intellectual advancement of knowledge on educational leadership. There will always be trends and contemporarily popular debates, but should this stop research on the periphery?

The establishment of educational administration as a scholarly pursuit in the US universities in the early 1900s sought to establish a science of educational administration (Allison, 2001; Bates, 2010; Griffiths, 1985). This quest reached its peak during the Theory movement of the mid 1900s. During the Theory Movement, a good scientific theory of educational leadership was claimed to possess the following properties:

1. A hypothetico-deductive structure of empirical claims, with more general claims at the top of the structure and more particular derivable claims descending downward from the top.
2. A procedure of justification based on empirical testability having two components. If empirical claims derived from the theory are actually observed to be the case, then the theory is confirmed. If they are refuted by empirical evidence, then the theory is said to be disconfirmed. A theory is more justified than its rivals if it has more confirmations and fewer, or no, disconfirmations.
3. All theoretical concepts should be operationally defined in terms of some measurement procedure or instrument (Evers, 2010, p. 710).

These underlying assumptions of the Theory movement continue to exert an influence in the accounts of educational leadership today. Bates (2010) however notes that this is more of the case in the US than the Commonwealth and there has long been agreement in the Commonwealth that the social sciences are a useful source of theory and methodology for educational leadership (see Baron & Taylor, 1969; Greenfield, 1968; Walker, Crane, & Thomas, 1973). He goes on to argue that it is hardly surprising that in 1974 when Thom Greenfield delivered his address to the International Intervisitation Program in Bristol, that those from the