

Questioning Leadership

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR
EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

EDITED BY GABRIELE LAKOMSKI,
SCOTT EACOTT AND COLIN W. EVERS

'In this important book Lakomski and her colleagues subject over-individualized understandings of leadership to sustained theoretical scrutiny. The impressive array of contributors and commentators offers us a rich choice of alternative ways of understanding school leadership.' **Geoff Whitty**, Director Emeritus, UCL Institute of Education, UK, and Global Innovation Chair for Equity in Higher Education, University of Newcastle, Australia

'This book is a welcome attempt to balance the glorified rhetoric of leadership with the structural and contextual constraints that make leadership difficult, situational, and paradoxical. *Questioning Leadership* is a timely challenge to the current canons of leader-centrism!' **Wayne K. Hoy**, Professor Emeritus, The Ohio State University, USA

'Lakomski, Eacott, and Evers have assembled some of the best scholars in the field today, and they provide the reader with some of their best ideas. Our schools and our students will be all the better for it.' **Duncan Waite**, Professor, Community and Educational Leadership, Texas State University, USA, and Director of The International Center for Educational Leadership and Social Change

Questioning Leadership offers a diverse mix of cutting-edge research in the field of educational leadership, with contributions from expert and emerging leadership scholars. It contextualises school leadership within broader social and historical contexts and traces its influence on school performance through time, from its relatively modest role within a systems theory paradigm to its growing influence from the 1980s onwards, as exercising leadership came to be perceived as being largely responsible for improving educational outcomes.

This book invites the reader to challenge the current orthodoxy of leader-centrism and instead reflect more broadly on the various structural and institutional interrelationships that determine how a school functions successfully. It poses challenging questions, such as:

- Is leadership really necessary for high-quality school performance?
- Can schools function effectively without leadership?
- Is it possible to describe the work that principals do without using the word 'leadership'?
- How do we challenge the assumption that leadership simply exists and that it is seen as the appropriate default explanation for school performance?

This book does not assume that leadership is the key to organisational performance, although it acknowledges the work that principals do. It goes against current orthodoxy and offers varied perspectives on how leadership might be repositioned vis-à-vis organisational and institutional structures. It also suggests some new directions for leading and learning and throws open a discussion on leadership that for too long has been captured by the assumption that the leader is the cause of organisational performance and learning outcomes in schools.

At a time when leadership's dominance seems unshakeable, this is a bold book that should appeal to postgraduate students of educational leadership and management, those undertaking training in educational administration and current school leaders interested in exploring the value of leadership for educational organisations.

Gabriele Lakomski is Professor Emeritus at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

Scott Eacott is Senior Lecturer at the School of Education at the University of New South Wales, Australia, and Adjunct Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada.

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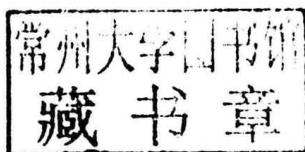
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Questioning Leadership – it's about time! Leadership is one of the most overused terms in contemporary society. Unfortunately, the concept of leadership has become ambiguous, misleading, a 'catch cry,' and in the end, a meaningless cliché, which makes its systematic analysis, discourse, and study perilous at best. This book is a welcome attempt to balance the glorified rhetoric of leadership with the structural and contextual constraints that make leadership difficult, situational, and paradoxical. *Questioning Leadership* is a timely challenge to the current canons of leader-centrism; it restores equilibrium and reflectiveness to a diverse term that has become a hackneyed slogan. This corrective collection is required reading for all who love to learn and dare to lead.

Wayne K. Hoy, *Professor Emeritus, The Ohio State University, USA*

Just as the reforming school principal has become a key part of the mythology of devolved systems of schooling, so have relatively unexamined notions of school leadership come to dominate academic accounts of contemporary school management. This important book helps us to move beyond such lazy thinking. Following on from her earlier work, *Managing without Leadership*, Lakomski and her colleagues subject over-individualized understandings of leadership to sustained theoretical scrutiny. Although the editors insist they are asking questions rather than providing answers, their impressive array of contributors and commentators offers us a rich choice of alternative ways of understanding school leadership.

Geoff Whitty, *Director Emeritus, UCL Institute of Education, UK, and Global Innovation Chair for Equity in Higher Education, University of Newcastle, Australia*

Questioning Leadership edited by Gabriele Lakomski, Scott Eacott and Colin Evers arrives on the scene at a critical time. Educational leadership is in need of critical examination right now, before we jump off a cliff after the next big thing, the next leadership fad or fetish.

Well-conceived and adroitly executed, the book speaks to an important issue of our time: leadership, generally, and educational leadership more specifically. Lest the book be pigeon-holed and, therefore, dismissed, be it known that this book speaks to leadership writ large; any and all can come away from reading it more considerate, more enlightened, more thoughtful. The format of the book is unique and uniquely suited to its intended aim – to look at leadership from top to bottom, head to tail, and inside out, and from multiple vantage points.

Lakomski, Eacott, and Evers have assembled some of the best scholars in the field today, and they provide the reader with some of their best ideas. The tone of the book is such that all can engage with its content, concepts and concerns, and we, our schools and our students will be all the better for it.

Duncan Waite, *Professor, Community and Educational Leadership, Texas State University, USA, and Director of The International Center for Educational Leadership and Social Change*

Questioning Leadership

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Foundations and Futures of Education focuses on key emerging issues in education as well as continuing debates within the field. The series is inter-disciplinary, and includes historical, philosophical, sociological, psychological and comparative perspectives on three major themes: the purposes and nature of education; increasing interdisciplinarity within the subject; and the theory-practice divide.

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Preface

The purpose of this book is to raise some important questions about leadership in education and to suggest some directions for future travel. It promotes no party line and privileges no model. Indeed, it does not engage in a discussion of individual approaches to school leadership. Rather, it questions the whole enterprise. This was a deliberate choice.

The idea for this book arose from a number of working meetings convened by the editors, which were dedicated to exploring the prominence of 'leadership' in education discourse and to asking whether it is possible to describe and explain the work of school principals and teachers in terms that do not make reference to this term as an *a priori* explanation. The reason we think it important to raise the leadership question in this way can best be appreciated by considering the historical context.

Leadership has not always been considered the prime candidate for explaining the organisational performance of schools. Indeed, from the 1950s to the 1980s, systems theory served as the major explanatory paradigm for educational administration. This is best exemplified by Wayne Hoy and Cecil Miskel's book *Educational Administration: Theory, Research and Practice*, which constituted the core textbook for the field. Its emphasis, true to systems theory, lies in the assumption that organisational phenomena can be explained by reference to the interrelationships that determine how organisations – including schools – function. While leadership was important, it was seen to be constrained and determined by other organisational features. A leader's agency was thus located within the context of the larger quest for a science of organisations, making law-like generalisations possible. This in turn led to the search to identify what all leaders supposedly had in common.

Since the 1980s, a change of emphasis has taken place that focuses more directly on leadership and the leader as the dominant cause of desirable organisational outcomes. The evidence for this change can be seen in the emergence of new academic education journals with *leadership* in their titles. Furthermore, established top-tier educational administration journals such as the erstwhile British journal *Educational Management and Administration* saw fit to amend their titles to include *leadership*. In universities, this change was also evident in job descriptions and promotion criteria, which started to include *leadership* as a

required category. Subsequently, research in educational administration shifted to an emphasis on leadership, and leadership training and standards have become prominent in practically all organisations. What has receded into the background are the structural features that affect organisational functioning, making way instead for agent-oriented perspectives, as can be found in many current theoretical accounts.

This book seeks to restore the balance in explanation by exploring the importance of the organisational and, more broadly, the institutional factors that provide both the context for leadership and exercise their own constraints on organisational performance. As such, *Questioning Leadership* places itself in the critical tradition initiated by Lakomski's (2005) earlier book *Managing without Leadership – Towards a Theory of Organizational Functioning*. This examined the very foundations of leadership, advocating for less leader-centric ways of understanding and managing organisations. Since 2005, there has not been another book of its kind.

This edited book takes up the challenge of conceptualising leadership in a new way without necessarily suggesting that we can manage without the *L* word. The perspectives offered by emerging and established scholars are diverse. They illuminate the leadership issue from a rich variety of theoretical standpoints. They challenge the traditional assumptions of leadership as being the default option for the explanation of organisational functioning by emphasising the structural, institutional and generally relational features that constrain organisations and thus challenge the current orthodoxy of leader-centrism.

The perspectives offered include modern French social theory – from Bourdieu to Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard – but extend to encompass the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt. The book's approach incorporates the notions of wisdom, ethics and social justice, as well as the idea of distributed leadership. Eclectic in terms of theoretical perspectives, the common thread at the core of *Questioning Leadership* is that its contributors question leadership! At a time when leadership's dominance seems unshakeable and when its wide acceptance is taken for granted, this book is not just bold; it is controversial. We hope, however, that it will further the growth of knowledge in education, a goal that can best be achieved, as Karl Popper famously suggested, through 'conjectures' and 'refutations'. As editors, we feel this book is overdue in terms of pointing leadership research in more realistic and productive directions that will have real purchase on the functioning of schools and their leaders, wherever they might be.

We have divided the text into three major parts, each part containing four chapters plus an additional chapter that offers a critical commentary. The order in which the parts appear represents a progression from foundational, epistemological and ontological issues in leadership theory in Part 1 to what might be described as the major alternative perspectives in leadership in Part 2, that of Postmodern theory in its various expressions. Part 3 identifies specific issues in leadership theory and practice that are in need of further critical examination, with one exception. A book that advocates questioning leadership, in our view, should also include work that supports leadership as successful practice. This we

have done. We end the book by marking out some new directions that leading and learning might take in the future.

We were fortunate to have been able to attract senior international scholars to comment on each part, to provide their assessment of the success (or otherwise) of the type of questioning represented in the chapters they reviewed and to comment on possible theoretical advances emanating from them. As is the case with all books of this kind, the final arbiter, however, is the reader, and the ultimate mark of success is if the book creates new momentum for critical debates in schools and universities – in fact everywhere where leadership is an issue. That is what we hope for!

Gabriele Lakomski, Scott Eacott and Colin W. Evers
Melbourne and Sydney, May 2016

Acknowledgements

The old adage that ‘too many cooks spoil the broth’ may well apply in the kitchen, but it does not apply to the creation of this book. On the contrary, the richness, diversity, and even ‘spiciness’ of this book is the result of many contributors who were willing to share their ideas freely and to work towards the common goal of questioning leadership. So first and foremost, we want to record our gratitude to the contributors of this volume. The opportunity afforded to academics to engage with exciting ideas and a diversity of opinion is a real privilege. Reading drafts, reviews and revised papers – and the multitude of exchanges throughout – has highlighted the depth and breadth of scholarship in educational administration and leadership that is represented here. The dialogue and debates that this volume has sparked between us – and hopefully beyond – is something we all wish to continue.

Secondly, the ideas presented throughout this volume have had varied trajectories. Initial stimulus for this collection came from a workshop organized by Scott Eacott and hosted at the Australian Catholic University (North Sydney). Specific thanks go to Dean Tania Aspland for finding the funds to support this initiative. Earlier versions of some of the papers were presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education conference as a symposium of the Educational Leadership Special Interest Group. The questions and discussions with participants at these events helped shape and refine the ideas and push them in new directions.

Thirdly, quality scholarship is forged through rigorous and robust peer review. To that end, we would like to acknowledge the many reviewers who gave their time generously to read (and in some cases, re-read) and comment on chapters in the interests of producing the highest quality arguments. The quality of this collection is a testament to your efforts. Thank you.

Fourthly, we also thank our respective institutions, the University of Melbourne and the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Australia for the ongoing support of rigorous and robust scholarship at a time when edited collections do not count in certain metrics. We greatly appreciate the support of scholarship in all forms that our respective institutions continue to uphold.

Fifthly, we want to express our appreciation and thanks to Peter Aggleton, joint editor of the *Foundations and Futures of Education* series of books, not

only for supporting the publication of this book in the series but also, more importantly, for reading drafts of the manuscript and giving constructive advice about our ideas and the ways we expressed them. The end result is all the more polished for his input.

Finally, as all creative endeavours require periods of withdrawal, we owe a debt of gratitude to our families and friends and wish to acknowledge their support and understanding here.

Gabriele Lakowski, Scott Eacott and Colin W. Evers
Melbourne and Sydney, May 2016

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