

# Learning-Centred Leadership or Pedagogical Leadership? An Alternative Approach to Leadership in Education Contexts

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## **Abstract**

*This paper critically reviews models of learning-centred leadership for self-determining educational organisations (i.e. those with a large degree of control over their own destiny and in vogue during the closing decades of the previous century) and argues for a more holistic approach to educational leadership based on pedagogical knowledge and understanding. In developing the case for pedagogical leadership in education we focus on key elements of education administration, such as the centrality of relationships, teaching and learning, and building communities of learning. On the basis of this discussion, it will be argued that, in education contexts, knowledge is the most important element. Knowledge is grounded in experience or in reason and as such Pedagogy is the key epistemological base addressing this (referred to in this article as the 'episteme'). Thus, leaders in education contexts should be concerned with the development of their episteme – Pedagogy – and to be more concerned with pedagogical leadership in education than with models of learning-centred leadership promulgated through the current body of literature, as well as through the actions of central government agencies. It will therefore be proposed that, for effective leadership to be evident in education contexts, pedagogical leadership is a more accurate approach, given that it is concerned with the context, people, and development /construction of knowledge.*

**Key words:** pedagogy, leadership, knowledge, learning-centred leadership, education administration, pedagogical leadership

## **Introduction**

The history of leadership in educational settings that has a principal focus on student learning is one dominated by Western cultures, particularly those in the USA; also, it has developed two near-identical models of leadership commonly known as 'instructional' or 'learning-centred'. This paper explores the relevance of these models in the context of the twenty-first century. Arguments are put forward that in order to create communities of leadership and practice in educational contexts, the concept of learning-centred leadership needs to be examined, given that it is a limited model focusing on outputs and outcomes. The notion of pedagogical leadership (a construct which places knowledge creation and management ahead of knowledge transmission) is offered as an alternative because it seems to address more fully the challenges facing educational leaders and managers, alongside providing a more holistic approach to the creation and sustenance of effective learning environments.

The paper will argue that the episteme of pedagogy is of greater relevance to leaders in education in an age where the promotion of effective learning involves more than merely ensuring that the relationship between teachers and learners is satisfactory or good. The centrality of relationships with others, such as the learners, parents, community, and government, and the building of a learning community are of greater significance than are behaviours promoted through the model of learning-centred leadership. Leadership approaches based on such principles need, it will be argued, in the context of learning in the digital environment of the twenty-first century, to be developed on the basis of constructing rather than transmitting knowledge.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first section a brief explanation of the historical developments in learning-centred leadership provides the foundation for the second section, which discusses the advantages and limitations of learning-centred leadership. The third section argues that in education leadership and management there is a need to consider pedagogy as an episteme, with the implications for pedagogical leadership being discussed in the final section.

## **From Instructional Leadership to Learning-Centred Leadership**

Interest in educational leadership models to extend the role of head or principal beyond that of building administration grew from research findings into elementary schools in the USA; these were 'instructionally effective' (e.g., Edmonds, 1979). Maintained schools in the USA are funded largely by state governments, with little direct federal involvement, and school systems are usually organised into districts governed by a directly elected board of officials and managed by a Superintendent. The Superintendent's Office is usually responsible for providing adequate numbers of school places for children in the district, for defining the curriculum, and for hiring and deploying the teacher workforce. In such a system principals are therefore the day-to-day managers of the school building to which they are deployed. They have the responsibility for ensuring teachers are timetabled appropriately and evaluated accordingly. Traditionally, principals have had little direct influence over the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom, as this was within the remit of the Superintendent.

The research into unusually effective schools, however, revealed certain principal behaviour to have affected the quality of teacher performance in the classroom. These pioneers were described as "strong, directive, goal-oriented leaders" and "culture builders" who frequently had "turned their school around" and sustained an "academic press ... that fostered high expectations and standards for students, as well as for teachers" (Hallinger, 2005: 3). The notion of 'academic press' offered here by Hallinger is important in this debate as it refers to the drive for enhanced levels of student and teacher performance (particularly in regard to outcomes) required by education systems across the world. The role of Instructional Leader was thus created and viewed in the early stages as the unique province of the school principal. By the mid-1980s, argued Hallinger, all US principals had been encouraged to assume this role in order to make their own schools more effective. A new education industry was born, with numerous research projects and doctoral studies investigating the phenomenon and promoting this model of educational leadership (see, for example, Hallinger and Heck, 1996).

Further interest in and development of the model of instructional leadership were fostered through school effectiveness and improvement programmes, a feature of

the 1990s, as governments and school systems pressed for higher levels of student achievement. By the turn of the century, Hallinger suggests, the USA had become “infatuated with performance standards [...] principals again find themselves at the nexus of accountability and school improvement with an increasingly explicit expectation that they will function as instructional leaders” (Hallinger, 2005: 2). Hallinger also suggests how this infatuation had become a “global love affair”, with many countries pursuing similar educational goals and adopting similar leadership models.

The model of instructional leadership had evolved by this time to be collective in practice, rather than individual, and was frequently re-named as ‘learning-centred’ or ‘learner-centred’ leadership as it was adopted internationally. By the beginning of the twenty-first century there was a common core to these models, each of which recognised that the direct engagement of formal leaders in student learning was less instrumental in improving and enhancing student attainment than the impact that could be achieved through indirect activity. The three core behaviours of instructional leaders were recognised as ‘Defining the School’s Mission’, ‘Managing the Instructional Program’, and ‘Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate’ (Hallinger, 2001; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985). Leadership behaviour was indeed expected to define expectations and influence teacher motivation, although mostly to align the organisational structure and resources in support of enhanced student achievement. By the time the model was adopted by the National College for School Leadership in England it was labelled ‘Learner-centred Leadership’ and comprised the leadership behaviour of modelling, monitoring and dialogue (Southworth, 2002).

### **The Advantages and Disadvantages of Learning-Centred Leadership**

The model of learning-centred leadership became popular since in both the USA and in England it fulfilled governmental aims to raise educational standards and improve the performance outcomes of students. Driven by the desire to be highly effective in a globalised economy, both nations invested philosophically and financially in creating an environment where educational institutions were required to increase both student engagement and student attainment, and were subsequently to be judged on results in these categories. Learner-centred leaders of schools consequently tended to focus their efforts on the “academic press” and to “build

data-driven professional communities that hold all individuals accountable for student learning and instructional improvement” (Mazzeo, 2003: 2). Leadership in practice tended to become an exercise of staffing the teaching programme, providing teaching support, monitoring school activity, and buffering staff against distractions from their work (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006).

While student attainment in standard assessment tests did improve for school pupils where leaders engaged in such behaviours, there were two significant outcomes suggesting that the model of learning-centred leadership in such context needs further development. The first is that there has been a narrowing of the curriculum, with a number of attendant consequences; the second is that the upward trajectory of ‘improvement’ has stalled and, in some cases, slipped. Both outcomes are well documented in various critiques of the school improvement literature (see, for example, Thrupp, 2001) and signal a need to reconsider the pattern of behaviour needed by educational leaders as we move further into the twenty-first century.

In the wider context of education beyond schools we have seen the similar concept of “academic press” with a focus on increasing attainment levels, again at a cost both to the curriculum and to the learning process. Early Years’ curricula have leaned, for example, towards fixating on an acclimatisation-to-school approach, as opposed to aiming to produce active learners who are constructors of their own reality (Male, 2012: forthcoming). Similarly, we have seen the expansion of higher education as being driven by “economic arguments and national competitiveness within a context of globalisation” (Thomas, 2001: 42). In other words, knowledge has become formalised and fixed in order to meet a demand driven by outputs rather than by a liberal approach to learning that allows for the construction, examination, deconstruction, and reconstruction of knowledge.

The trend towards narrower curricula and an increased emphasis on outcomes coincides with an age where digital literacy is becoming ever more important and where technological advance changes the very nature of the learning environment. Students are becoming more familiar, for example, with emerging Web 2.0 technologies such as social media, virtual worlds and Internet telephony, which allow for multiple interactions in the learning process above those in the traditional

teacher-student relationship. These types of technologies encourage the development of collaborative platforms where the learners, teachers, parents, community, and government come to work together as co-constructors of knowledge with the vision to build a learning community.

Young people of today, therefore, will be entering an adult world that is substantially different from that occupied and managed by the previous generation. This future world is ill defined: the pace of scientific and technological advance is such that at present its potential may only be estimated. Defining a curriculum for such a future life is fanciful; consequently, the emphasis needs to shift towards learning itself, rather than student attainment, as being the desired outcome. In short, “the future curriculum needs to focus on enabling and encouraging [young people] to learn, to understand the process of learning, and to question” (West-Burnham and Coates, 2005). This is because the currency of the future lies in the ability to absorb, adapt to and amend the environment – and allows students to enter the adult world; to do so successfully, a learner will need to be an active learner. This approach is precisely the prescribed pattern of behaviour for, as an example, postgraduate students in the UK, who are typically encouraged to analyse critically the current body of knowledge in order to clarify their understanding and, in some instances, to create new knowledge. The pattern of examining, deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge, to which we refer above, has such a quality and is an approach to learning which also embraces an economic prerogative.

The ability to learn continuously is a necessity in an environment where human knowledge, imagination and creativity are the key ingredients of a global economy (Bottery, 2006). Similarly, there is a pressing need to create social networks where the emphasis is on people working together to achieve aims each could not achieve on their own (Field, 2003). The establishment of a learning environment that successfully underpins the development of intellectual and social capital, the essential ingredients of the knowledge economy, requires a change of leadership style from top-down direction to multi-level collaboration (Stewart, 1998). It is a leadership style for which educators seem ill equipped, given the degree of standardisation and inflexibility in education, and its continued focus on the “academic press”. Educational leaders, suggests Bottery, need to:

[R]ecognize the need for an epistemological provisionality - a requirement to be suitably humble about their own capacity to 'know' any final answers, and to recognize that others have significant input here, not least those normally described as 'clients'. (Bottery, 2006: 110)

Learning is, therefore, integral to the future well-being of individuals and to their national economies. This statement carries with it the implication for education systems to shift their emphasis onto process rather than on outcomes, to learning rather than on knowledge, and to focus on developing learners in much the way envisaged by Heffer (1990):

In times of change the learners will inherit the earth while the knowers will find themselves beautifully equipped for a world that no longer exists.

Educational environments that encourage learning rather than a 'product' require, therefore, a leadership model different from those described as 'learning-centred'. Behaviours associated with learning-centred leadership have often sought only to create the space for teachers to operate successfully, rather than for them to explore and develop their pedagogic capability. We propose an alternative approach to leadership that enhances the learning environment through the medium of pedagogy.

### **Pedagogy as an Episteme for Educational Leaders**

Although learning-centred leadership has been presented as a collective model of leadership that underpins sustained improvement, we argue that this model is limited and fragmented; furthermore, it fails to capture the changing nature of education illustrated above. Pedagogical leadership, we suggest, is much closer to the contemporary nature of education.

To start with, a vast body of literature (Adair, 1983, 1984, 1988; Allen, 1995; Arkin, 2004; Bailey, 2000; Spencer, 1994; Hartley, 2010) suggests that the key elements in educational leadership and management are the centrality of relationships with others such as the learners, parents, community, government, and teaching and learning; finally, the importance of building a learning community or – as we shall later argue – pedagogical communities. Our assessment of learning-centred

leadership is that it is largely facilitative in creating the environment in which teachers are able to work more successfully with learners. Such facilitation is supportive, bounded as it is by the notion of an “academic press”, underpinned by secure data systems and through a combination of directive, collective leadership activities and allocation of adequate resources. However, key elements of successful educational leadership are absent.

In the twenty-first century, the establishment of effective learning environments concerns not only the relationship of teachers with the learners/students; it also concerns the relationships with families, policies, reforms, and a number of other services such as health, social work, and local, national and global issues. In short, this is the ecology of the community. In our view, leaders in education contexts need to be moving towards working in partnership with a greater number of partners than has been the case within the model of learning-centred leadership. Teamwork and family participation in decision-making are becoming ever more central to education administration. Effective education settings are those to have developed productive and synergistic relationships between learners, families, the team, and the community, because the context, the locality and the culture in which learners live are vitally important. Consequently, these factors have their impact on the teaching and learning environment and in that sense, education administration is asked to tackle changes, to develop its vision and a new experience of learning. This would require an approach (as one of us argues elsewhere) based on sharing knowledge, experience, and practice, and providing unconditional access to continuously changing resources for all participants, through collaboration and cooperation, in an atmosphere of openness and trust (Palaiologou, 2011).

In other words, teaching and learning no longer occur in isolation or solely in the education buildings; they have become part of the community ecology, with the learners, families, community and government all being partners. More than ever all parties involved in teaching and learning should be moving together in a new way of thinking where intercommunicative actions are required (Palaiologou, 2011). It is essential, therefore, to further our understanding of what is involved in teaching and learning. Central to the processes of teaching and learning is the communication of knowledge.



A simple but dominant explanation of knowledge from socio-constructivists and through cognitive lenses defines the ability of the learner to understand information, to critically question explanations and relate explanations to specific contexts (Bruner, 1976, 1991, 1996, 2006a, 2006b; Rogoff, 1998, 1990; Wood and Wood, 1996; Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976). Knowledge, however, is about justifying and believing (Audi, 2011; Bruce, 1991; Bonjour, 2009). In education, therefore, all parties involved should be concerned with the fundamental question of what counts as knowledge. This is a large discussion from philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and educational perspectives, however, and is not one we attempt to address in this paper – although we are concerned with how knowledge is developed and constructed. Consequently, our focus is on raising the awareness then the capability of leaders in education contexts to take appropriate account of the centrality of knowledge to their policy decisions and behaviours.

Central to education contexts is the realisation that we cannot know in advance the way in which someone learns. We are, though, able to know in advance that an environment needs to be created which will provide the recognition and representation of knowledge and will not be restricted within the limited cognitive forms traditionally dominating the nature of education. Furthermore, education has also been dominated by what is deemed knowledge essential to learners with the consequence that the ethical and political discussions about what learners should “be” have been concerned with whether learners should be autonomous, constructivist or reflective learners. This, we consider, is a politicised approach that has had an impact on teaching and learning strategies and has tended to reduce the process to one of how best to ensure knowledge is communicated to learners. In the current context we argue, and particularly with the growing centrality of digital technologies, consideration of teaching and learning strategies require further examination and should be the direct concern of leaders at all levels in education contexts.

In an attempt to examine what counts as knowledge it is necessary to understand what constitutes knowledge. Audi (2011) describes knowledge as “the property of being justified” (p.2) and claims that knowledge is constructed by propositional

justifications where learners try to answer and explain the world with questions. Such questions need not only to be justified for the person whose situation provides good reason for believing in the proposed knowledge (situational justification), but also for the learner who needs to have justification for believing it (doxastic justification). The second key element in the construction of knowledge, therefore, is the doxastic justification as this is concerned with the actual beliefs of the learner (Audi, 2011; Goldman, 1986, 2002; Chisholm, 1982). Both situational and doxastic justification are required in the construction of knowledge. Without belief, learners would have no effective base for the learning process; without situational justification, learners are not in a position to pose questions about the world.

Belief justification pre-supposes situational justification, yet both are required in the construction of knowledge. When learners try to understand the “knowing that” and “knowing how”, they create conditions for the construction of epistemic chains, which provide in-depth understanding of a situation. These epistemic chains end in direct knowledge. From this position, knowledge is grounded in experience or in a reason; knowledge arises directly from perception, memory, introspection or reason. It is therefore argued that the construction of knowledge is a complex, synergetic intra-relation among context, beliefs, and cognitive processes. Paulo Freire’s voice precisely articulates this process:

In the first moment, that of the experience of and in daily living, my conscious self exposing itself to facts, to deeds, without, nevertheless, asking itself about them, without looking for their “reason for being”. I repeat that the knowing “because” there is also the “knowing” that results from these involvements is that made from pure experience. In the second moment, in which our minds work epistemologically, the methodological rigor with which we come closer to the object, having “distance ourselves” from it, that is, having objectified it, offers us another kind of knowing, a knowing whose exactitude gives to the investigator or the thinking subject a margin of security that does not exist in the first kind of knowing, that of common sense (Freire, 1998: 93).

We argue here that leaders in education contexts should be concerned not only with what counts as knowledge, but also how knowledge is constructed. It is significant for leaders to pose the question of how knowledge is built. There is a need for epistemic justification of what constitutes knowledge and how knowledge is constructed. Consequently, knowledge is limited not only in the simplicity of the

development of teaching and learning strategies. The issues around what constitutes knowledge and how it is best served should be the main concern in educational leadership and management.

Instead of being concerned with the development of teaching and learning in education as the main focus of the learning-centred leadership, leaders need, rather, to concern themselves with the development of this epistemic agency, articulated as pedagogy. The complexity of teaching and learning is epistemic; the processes of learning, knowledge, and the communication of knowledge are all issues that substantiate epistemic chains furthering our understanding. It is therefore suggested that pedagogy is in essence the study of all these issues and as such it may claim to be epistemic in nature.

To convey our view of pedagogy and why we believe it is the episteme housed in education contexts, we claim that pedagogy as an episteme invites theories to inform it. Pedagogy deals with beliefs and dialogue as well as with courses of actions and methods realized in the daily interactions of learners and teachers in education contexts. Finally, pedagogy as an episteme is dynamic. It evolves as the epistemic chains develop as beliefs and values, ethics develop, and – as an episteme – pedagogy cannot be static. In support of this view, Leach and Moon describe the non-static epistemic nature of pedagogy:

[P]edagogy must encompass all the complex factors that influence the process of learning and teaching. Our discourse is, therefore wide ranging. In creating and sustaining pedagogic settings teachers crucially determine both the nature and the quality of learning. Pedagogy is more than the accumulation of techniques and strategies, more than arranging a classroom, formulating questions and developing explanations. It is informed by a view of mind, of learning and learners and the kinds of knowledge and outcomes are valued. (Leach and Moon, 2008: 6)

It was mentioned above that the construction of knowledge is not limited only to the cognitive forms of education: cognitive processes still hold a crucial and at the same time complex role in teaching and learning – and in the development of teaching strategies in order to develop the learners' understanding of their social context.

In that respect pedagogy is concerned with teaching and learning as a social process and thus learning has to go beyond the characteristics of any

individual learner to embrace all the influences that impinge on learning in their social settings. A social view of learning recognises that learning is ongoing in every aspect of our lives. It takes the broader view of learners' trajectories through the world-their sense of self, where they are coming from, where they think they are going, what sort of person they want to be. (Leach and Moon, 2008: 7)

Central to pedagogy is knowledge. The development of knowledge is inseparable from the community ecology and its culture of practice, the physical space, its resources, and global or local issues. The epistemic nature of pedagogy seeks to consider a wide range of tools, technologies, materials, methods, and methodologies that help educators to make sense of the world in which we live, assuming that we wish successfully to communicate this world to the learners. The construction of knowledge lies at the heart of the learning process; it should be the main aim in education.

Pedagogy, we conclude, is concerned with and examines in depth the ways in which learners develop their sense of what they believe, construct their respective learning identities, and experiment with what they are capable of achieving. In that sense education contexts should create the conditions for: reflection and dialogue; productive cognitive, intellectual conflict; the subversion of traditional values; critique; questioning, and analysis. Based on those principles, therefore, the main course of action of pedagogy is not how the information delivery happens, rather it concerns the understanding of habits developing among the learners and how they develop relationships between education and the growth of knowledge.

Knowledge is, as has already been argued, politicised by the ethics, values, and beliefs of the education context and the community ecology. This has major implications for leadership in education contexts. Leaders need to acknowledge that pedagogy is politicised and take this into account in their actions. Any episteme, including pedagogy, is politicised and thus contains the potential to create conflicts in daily interactions. Learning-centred leadership is thus limited because it may not acknowledge this aspect of the leader's role in relation to the ecology of the community they seek to serve. Leadership concerns the vision, values, ethics, mission and addressing of wide ideas for education purposes. In that respect pedagogy as an episteme aims to develop synergies among theories, teachers,

learners, and contexts, which is why leaders should aim to synchronise their actions with the collaborative, interactive nature of pedagogy. These actions may be developed as part of a learning community or – we would claim – as part of a pedagogic community in education contexts.

Pedagogy evolves over time in the ecology of the community; leadership should similarly evolve alongside this flow. Learning-centred leadership in that respect appears static and may limit its focus to the outcomes and outputs, rather than absorbing the whole process. Revisiting the classic work of Freire (1972), who comments on the distinction between “banking” education and the “problem posing” education, his work appears to be more relevant than ever to this argument. Banking education views learners as empty bank accounts waiting for teachers to deposit knowledge; when the learners are filled, the aims have been met. Such a perception conflicts utterly with the nature of pedagogy. Furthermore, it fails to assume its epistemic nature. Learning-centred leadership appears to be concerned with the “banking” education rather than the “problem posing” education, yet leaders hold the responsibility to build pedagogical communities.

Key elements in the pedagogical communities are people, context, and knowledge. It is suggested that a pedagogical community empowers individual people/learners, and does not strive for mastery; rather, it aims to open dialogue and focus on functions rather than on outcomes and outputs (Palaiologou, 2011). Leaders here aim to gain an in-depth understanding of the ecology of the community and seek change as to where, when and how to intervene in the learning process in a manner natural to the learner’s locality. Finally, the focus on knowledge should be not only on what counts as knowledge, but also on how knowledge is constructed.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The above discussion on the epistemic nature of pedagogy has a number of implications in terms of revisiting the models and the role of leaders in education contexts. What we claim is that pedagogical leadership is an alternative means of viewing leadership in education administration, one collectively and therefore optimally capturing the functions of education.

In contrast to the emphasis on learning-centred leadership, pedagogical leadership respects teachers as intellectuals, and requires leaders to acknowledge the complexity of the interplay between theory and practice, teaching and learning. Pedagogical leadership also needs to consider the intimate relationships among learning, the learner's identities, and the community ecology. Pedagogical leadership shifts away from focusing on the outcomes and outputs, and is concerned with the development of pedagogical courses of action relevant to all of these contexts.

Pedagogical leadership is thus a collaborative process among teachers, learners, and other members of the community. It evolves over time, seeks to bring out the learner's best selves, works with institutional barriers such as policies, race, gender, or class, and cooperates with the community in the attempt collectively to contribute to the growth of knowledge at the collective as well as the individual levels. Pedagogical leadership is concerned not only with the learner's learning and achievement, but with the learning of themselves, and the learning of the team and of the community. Pedagogical leadership is concerned with the situational justifications that derive from the context at a certain time, to be able to understand the flow and make informed decisions about future directions. Conversely, learning-centred leadership is concerned with the quality of the delivery of the curriculum and the achievements at an individual as well as at a collective level. We argue, however, that the latter focus is limited and limiting within contemporary education contexts; it is a fragmented approach that in practice divorces the leaders from the nature of their role. We suggest that pedagogical leadership conveys a purposeful role, characterised by leading people, where those involved develop an attachment and feelings of responsibility towards the ethics, values, and beliefs central to the standards. Results are illustrated in personalising recognition, working together with the community ecology in order to encourage an understanding of knowledge and towards developing pedagogy as an episteme.

A number of critics argue (Bruner, 1996; Ball, 2003; Bernstein, 2000; Osgood; 2008) that education settings have become so preoccupied with performance and with the bureaucratic demands of education as an institution that we have neglected the personal side of education and the pedagogy. We must, unfortunately, agree. Taking

the notion further, we would suggest that the epistemic nature of pedagogy is usually ignored in the daily routine of meeting the demands of outcomes and outputs – and this is perhaps the greatest challenge for pedagogical leadership today: to create institutional structures and settings such that these are responsive to the nature of pedagogy and realise the endless potential brought by pedagogy to education.

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