

**Griffiths, D., & Portelli, J. P. (2016). *Key Questions for Educational Leaders*. Burlington, ON: Word & Deed Publishing Incorporated & Ed Phil Books. Pages: 288. ISBN: 978-0-9918626-1-0 (hardcover/paperback/e-book)**

Reviewed by: Kendra Gottschall & David C. Young, St. Francis Xavier University

*Key Questions for Educational Leaders* sets out to explore the broad topic of leadership in the field of education, and achieves this, through exploring various issues with an underlying social justice orientation. The book begins with a foreword that sets the tone for the entire collection. In the foreword, Griffiths and Portelli argue that educational leadership and equity must co-exist in order for either to be effective, and this position is apparent throughout the book. The editors cite the human context of educational leadership as the reason why equity and educational leadership are intertwined; they note that concerns such as racism and ethical considerations cannot be separated from the positions that educational leaders occupy. Indeed, the articles in this book speak to these key issues of concern and a social justice theme is interwoven throughout the essays. The editors further state that both theoretical and practical matters are of crucial importance for those involved in educational leadership and neither should be held in higher regard than the other. The authors cite Dewey's philosophy of *doing* as a form of *thinking* and vice versa. This association reflects the core objectives of education, which leaders in the field must constantly reflect upon.

This book is divided into four sections, each with a distinct theme presented in the form of a question to be answered by the essays included in that section. The first part addresses the question of "What is the Purpose of Education?" Next, "What is Educational Leadership?" followed by "What is a Good School?" The final section asks, "What is Student Achievement?" followed by an afterword from Griffiths and Portelli. In sum, the scope of the topics covered was more than adequate to answer the question the text seeks to address. At the beginning of each section are short abstracts from authors who speak to the title question of that section. These abstracts were quite helpful in setting the tone for grappling with the subject matter. The four categories that this text is divided into are interrelated and at times repetitive. It seems doubtful this could have been avoided since the abstracts all spoke directly to the issue each was addressing.

As previously stated, the first section of this book addresses the question, "What is the Purpose of Education?" The short abstracts at the beginning of this section vary in their perspectives about the purpose of education. Short answers to the above stated question include: to help human's achieve their full potential; the answer depends upon the experiences of the person answering the question; to read critically and be prepared to live in a complex world; and for Aboriginal students, it is to learn the teachings of elders and to learn to succeed in a non-Aboriginal world and to create a culturally relevant learning setting; and finally, that the most important purpose of education for all students is the preparation for citizenship. Reading these short abstracts before delving into the more substantive articles helped to prepare our conceptions for considering more specific topics. The shorter articles focused on answering the broader question of "What is the Purpose of Education", and the content was theoretically and philosophically positioned. The articles with more specific questions presented in the titles focused on the same philosophical and theoretical material, however, this was grounded using

more concrete examples and situational material.

It seemed as though the first three chapters of the section entitled “What is the Purpose of Education” were more philosophically grounded. The chapters written by Sultana and Gunter focused on matters concerning what knowledge is and how it gets passed on to others to learn. These chapters focused on *how* to learn and *what* is being presented as knowledge, and this was a crucially important starting point for considering key questions for educational leaders. The third chapter by MacBeath addresses seven vital questions to be asked concerning leadership. This chapter highlighted the key philosophical questions behind the actions leaders take. The first section of the book also addresses equity, critical thinking, indoctrination, accountability, and authority. The editors seem to be refining the reader’s thinking from considering grand scheme ideas regarding education, to the human relationship aspect of education, which this book focuses on. Each of the chapters that followed addressed specific issues related to education such as class, sexuality, and racism, and are useful for teachers working with diverse populations who can bear in mind the realities of circumstances in the lives of a particular population of students or an individual student.

In terms of critical thinking, the authors of the articles did a superior job overall of conveying critical thoughts. The editors pieced together this section in a comprehensive way that allows the reader to move from larger philosophical concerns to more specific practice-based considerations, while aligning with the editor’s proclamation about the important of both theory and practice for educational leadership.

As a minor critique, Ibrahim’s chapter, which focuses on whether school leaders should take equity seriously in their work, could have conveyed a more critical perspective: when Ibrahim speaks about accessibility, for example, there is no mention of the contradiction of locations designated as being accessible but truly being inaccessible. Examples of this would include door handles being too high for someone in a wheelchair to reach or walls that do not permit space for wheelchair users to access the room. The author differentiates between equity and equality nicely, however, when using the example of access to public buildings for people who require a wheelchair to illustrate how equal access for all means special treatment for some, the author does not take the analysis far enough to convey a critical argument by critically questioning any assumptions they may be holding.

Part II of *Key Questions for Educational Leaders*, addresses the question, “What is Educational Leadership?” Like the first part of the book, Part II begins with short abstracts from authors addressing the title question of the section. The authors identify educational leadership as involving clear educational goals and action plans, as well as a moral endeavor, involving equitable and socially just goals and facilitating active engagement in learning and an eagerness to learn. Also like Part I, Part II of this book addresses broad issues before moving into specific areas of concern. Democratic leadership and ethical leadership are discussed in the first two chapters of this section. The chapter on democratic leadership details dimensions of participation, power sharing and transforming dialogue as well as holistic meaning and well-being. In chapter 16 (pp. 111–115), Ryan positions inclusive leadership as essentially involving anti-oppressive, student-centered educational practices. Here, critical forms of learning are promoted and horizontal relationships among leaders exist. This is a key practice in person-centred, anti-oppressive, critical education practice.

Part II delves deeper into more specific issues of concern related to what educational leadership involves. Anti-racist educational leadership, advocacy leadership, feminist leadership, culturally proficient leadership, social justice leadership, spiritual leadership, rural school leadership, and urban school leadership are discussed. Again, teachers working with populations with diverse needs could benefit from reading this book, but exposure to these

issues is beneficial even if the issues are not at the forefront of one's practice. Learning about urban school leadership, for example, can enhance knowledge of rural school practitioners who liaise with urban school leaders on a regular basis. It should be noted that Chapter 22, which discussed distributed leadership, seemed oddly placed between chapters dealing with rural and urban school leaders. Still, it might be possible to argue this chapter was specifically inserted at this particular juncture to highlight the importance of leaders working together and sharing perspectives in order to create a balanced and effective educational experience for all involved in the school system.

Part III of *Key Questions for Educational Leaders* asks the question, "What is a Good School?" The abstracts, which are again presented prior to the more substantive pieces, address the issue in a succinct manner. According to Roberts (p. 169), a good school involves not only the structural elements of the building, but the people and supports in the school that contribute to high academic achievement. As in his previous abstract, Roberts (p. 82, 169) highlights the experiences of an Aboriginal student, giving specific details as to what contributes to a good school for Aboriginal learners. This specific information is valuable for practitioners working in any area in Canada or elsewhere. Shields (p. 170) and Ayers (p. 171) state that a good school involves but is not limited to such things as a sense of community, engagement, respect, acceptance, self-exploration. Orelus (p. 172) compares a good school to a tree, stating it should only be judged by what it produces and that the definition of a good school is contextual and influenced by people's differing perceptions and values.

Unlike the previous sections of this book, Part III of *Key Questions for Educational Leaders* intertwines philosophical and practical matters throughout the chapters. This is appropriate, given that the reader, by this time, has had a comprehensive exposure to philosophical educational ideas. What are addressed in this section are the relationships that exist between educational leaders and students and the daily practices within schools that affect individual students in different ways. The importance of those in positions of leadership critically reflecting upon their practices and philosophies is also highlighted. Chapter 28, written by Bai (pp. 193–196) is particularly relevant as it outlines the process of inquiry, which is something crucial to educational leadership. Bai states that inquiry is a way of living that involves being curious and engaging with each other in dialogue instead of mind-reading, assuming, pre-judging, and predicting. Bai also argues that inquiry begins with a wondering about something, and not a demand to know. Although Bai makes connections between inquiry and democracy, very little direct reference is made to education and working with children. As such, a stronger connection between the specific topic and the overall aims of this collection would have added to the overall cogency of this chapter.

The final section of this book addresses the question "What is Student Achievement?" The answer to this question, according to the short abstracts presented at the outset, is that it ultimately depends on the student. Shields (p. 170) asserts that student achievement is measured by whether students have developed knowledge and skills for future opportunities and to benefit society. Ayers (p. 171) summarizes the experience of student achievement, stating education is the active process of living itself. Ayers believes learning begins at birth and should be looked at as the process of living itself, rather than a formal, structured necessity that can be viewed by some as being cumbersome. While Ayers' position is compelling, it is a relatively brief explanation, and more detail would have been appreciated. Orelus (p.172), like Shields, holds that the notion of student achievement needs to be situated within contexts that influence individual students. As a final introductory snippet, Roberts situates the notion of student achievement within the context of education for Aboriginal students, emphasizing that Aboriginal student success cannot and should not be solely compared with that of non-Aborig-

inal students, and that other factors need to be taken into consideration.

Part IV of *Key Questions for Educational Leaders* focuses both on specific issues of concern and more broad issues that could affect any educational leader. In fact, educational scholars, practitioners and administrators could all benefit from reading this section of the book. An example of this assertion can be found in Chapter 33 by Moos (p. 225), which discusses tensions in educational leadership between testing and curiosity. The author cautions teachers that focusing on the outcomes of learning via testing risks losing emphasis on the learning process itself and teachers adapting their teaching styles to the way tests are constructed, rather than how students learn best. This is a well-reasoned argument in a time when “teaching to the test” remains an ongoing debate in various educational circles.

Carsley and Heath’s (p. 241, Chapter 36) piece on educational leaders promoting mental health in schools was an important matter for the editors to include in this text, as this is an important issue in the current context, with mental health concerns such as depression and suicide permeating school cultures, with much media attention being paid to these subjects. The final two chapters (Bon, p. 275, Chapter 41; Kress, p. 281, Chapter 42) in this section focused on “dropouts” and educator leader burnout. These chapters might have been better situated at the end of the book, but in an edited collection such as this, it is difficult to maintain an overall sense of fluidity. One might also ponder or perhaps even take issue with Bon’s point in Chapter 41 (pp. 275–280) that the needs of students with (dis)Abilities are often dramatically different than those of their non-(dis)Able peers. Further, the legal concepts surrounding the education of students with (dis)Abilities comprised a large portion of this chapter, and although legalities might be a reality educational leaders need to consider, it would have been advantageous to also explore ethical and human matters in greater detail.

The afterword by Griffiths and Portelli highlight their critical insights and summarizes the aim of compiling these essays. Their position that change begins with school leaders who facilitate a significant shift in worldviews at higher levels of power was most appropriate. Clearly, the influence of teachers on student’s development and on the people who come to operate in the world and influence the lives of others begins the moment the student steps into the school and shapes the way they influence their world for decades to come. Overall, this edited collection of chapters is thoughtful and readable, and aside from a few minor critiques as highlighted throughout this review, each of the author’s worldviews aligned with that of the editors as displayed through the introduction and afterword. This book certainly achieves its goal and is a most valuable work for all educational leaders to consider.