

Informing Education Research and the Praxis of Leadership through the Use of Autoethnography and Phenomenology

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the study of educational leadership by advancing autoethnography and phenomenology as a means for leaders to investigate and make sense of their identity and praxis. In advancing autoethnography and phenomenology, I discuss the importance of context, stance and reflexivity as they relate to the study and practice of educational leadership. In doing so, I address the following question: *how can educational leaders use a phenomenological lens and autoethnographic inquiry to create a better understanding of who they are as leaders in contexts rich in diversity?* Throughout this article I provide a discussion of the connections between educational leadership and the practice of autoethnography and phenomenology. This article will be of interest to individuals immersed in the study and practice of educational leadership particularly in K-12 contexts.

Introduction

Educational administrators, as designated leaders in schools, are immersed in and arguably responsible for managing the complex world of education. Graduate programs in leadership often offer insight into theoretical constructs relating to leadership and school organization, as well as in curricular leadership. However, there is less space devoted to understanding one's role in it. To develop such understanding, I argue that educational leaders must engage in the study of their own positioning within schools, as well as their actions, in order to better understand both the nature of leadership and their agency in it. Within the confines of this article, I thread discussion of diversity as a critical aspect of school culture that warrants an active and deliberate response from educational leaders in terms of how they situate themselves in schools.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, I intend to respond to Van der Mescht's (2004) observation that "to develop a clearer picture of what it is that some leaders possess (or do, or *are*) that makes their leadership effective has perhaps never been more urgent" (p. 3). Van der Mescht originally made this statement in response to the democratisation of education in South Africa, which left the education system struggling to meet the needs of students and communities. This movement was not about creating a formal curriculum to address the democratization of South African schools, rather the statement was made to call for a better understanding of what leaders do that contributes to the social climate of a school. Van der Mescht made the call to acknowledge the need for effective leadership, and also to draw attention to how effective leadership should be studied. While her statement was specific to South Africa, the importance of her claim extends far beyond those borders. While the political climate that precipitated Van der Mescht's call is not the same here in Canada, I argue that responding to the plurality of schools is similar enough to warrant the attention she calls for. Second, I offer autoethnography and phenomenological interpretation as an effective means for educational leaders to investigate and make sense of who they are. In advancing autoethnography and phenomenology, there are some key concepts that are foundational to understanding my approach. I will discuss the importance of an interpretivist stance and being reflexive, as well as

the contexts of educational research and educational leadership, which inform the arguments outlined in this article. Because these concepts, as well as the belief that autoethnography and phenomenology are important means to studying leadership, I advance the following question: *how can educational leaders use a phenomenological lens and autoethnographic inquiry to create a better understanding of who they are as leaders in contexts rich in diversity?* I approach the ideas presented here from a postmodern perspective similar to that advocated by Richardson (2003) where “a multitude of approaches to knowing and telling exist side by side” (p. 507), and that “partial, local, historical knowledge” (p. 508) is valid and important knowledge. The content here is not meant as a universal truth, instead one may consider what is presented here with a degree of doubt and skepticism. Such a critical stance creates the potential for greater understanding and meaning making both individually and collectively.

Rationale

An undercurrent in this article is the belief that transactional or hierarchical leadership is ineffective in schools yet one that has become a default position for school leaders. No longer is the industrial captain of the ship metaphor adequate for the kind of leadership required in today’s schools where the student body is diverse and their needs complex. Nonetheless, this style of leadership can still be found and is arguably more prevalent in schools than it should be. However, just because an educational leader models a hierarchical style of leadership, and may have done so for several years, does not mean that s/he is incapable of change or transformation. I ground the use of transformation as it relates to transformative learning. Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, and Kasl (2006) asserted that transformative learning includes a holistic change in how a person both affectively relates to and conceptually frames his or her experience; thus, it requires a healthy interdependence between affective and rational ways of knowing. Schools are delicate and complex sites of cultural transmission very much influenced by emotional and rational thinking. As such, educational leaders immersed in and responsible for the direction of schools benefit from locating themselves within the educational system in order to build a foundation for transformative learning and even emancipatory pedagogy (Eisner, 2004). Austin and Hickey (2007) went further in their description of the importance of transformative practice by advocating for the intentional study of one’s positioning within a social dynamic, much like schooling. They argue that through such study, one not only develops understanding of the power structures within that social construct, but more importantly, their role in promoting or perpetuating “inequality, oppression and exploitation” (p. 22). The inequality, oppression, and exploitation referred to by Austin and Hickey (2007) are frequently related to diversity in schools. Though educational leaders may be able to recognize these issues and may even be able to respond to them, they do little to actively engage in their own role in perpetuating the issues.

Before proceeding, it is important to make clear what I am referring to by making reference to the term diversity. In some cases, use of the word diversity becomes generically synonymous with culture. This is a critical mistake that I do not wish to replicate here, so I will share the broad conceptions of diversity I draw on to inform the concepts in this article. Lumby and Coleman (2007) characterized diversity as “the range of characteristics which not only result in perceptions of difference between humans, but which can also meet a response in others which may advantage or disadvantage the individual in question” (p. 1). In reference to education, Rayner (2009) described diversity as a “range of individual differences, comprising a set of social and personal factors, which form a key aspect in any and every educational setting” (p. 433). I have intentionally excluded definitions that attempt to list criteria such as age, disability, economic status, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, or social class, because they inevitably fall short, as a comprehensive list is nearly impossible to meaningfully generate.

Contextualizing Educational Research

Despite innovations, such as autoethnography, as to how educational research is conducted, I cannot assume there is a common understanding of educational research. To further position myself, I offer the following explanation for the context in which this work is situated. Education, unlike other fields, is in the unique position of being known to all. Since the majority of Canadians attended school as part of their childhood and adolescent experiences, we feel as though we understand it and in turn are invested in its societal value (Phillips, 2006; Wotherspoon, 2009). Aside from assumptions about what education is or is not, the relational nature of education is an important consideration. Little if anything in education takes place in isolation, because education is a socio-cultural process open to the influence of a myriad of competing values and beliefs from both etic and emic perspectives (Phillips, 2006). Within

education are layers of dialectical relationships including the structural—teacher/student, teacher/leader, parent/teacher, as well as the agentic—individual/collective, oppression/emancipation, privileged/disadvantaged (Spry, 2001). Identifying a singular or even narrow purpose for educational research given its complexity is nearly impossible and fruitless, yet the question—*what is the purpose of the educational research?*—still needs to be asked and answered in order to ground the content of and shed light on the purpose of this article. The purpose of educational research in broad strokes is to deepen or extend our understanding of education and the phenomena that are connected to it. Personally, I feel obligated that educational research contributes to improvements to education and in turn the lives of those who dwell there. In this case, the educational phenomenon in question is educational leadership. For those new to autoethnographic work, there is sometimes an assumption that the focus is simply on the *auto* or self thus limiting the value of the work extended to a wider understanding of education or restricting its value, because it appears *un-relational*. While this is true in that the site of autoethnographic work is the self, the heart and soul of autoethnographic work, and arguably the value is because, like education and educational leadership, true ethnographic work is relational.

Walking my Talk: A Research Stance

In an effort to walk the talk I am presenting throughout this article, I am compelled to situate myself as a researcher. Throughout this article, I am suggesting educational leaders must situate themselves in contexts of diversity in order to better understand their role as a leader and in turn understand how their actions and choices inform the hidden curriculum of schooling. Though this work is not empirically based, I identify myself as a researcher. It is from that perspective that I present this article. While phenomenological research as a methodology often seeks to determine an essence of lived experience (Rehorick & Malhotra Bentz, 2008), the use of phenomenology as I am suggesting here is not methodological it is perspectival. I will explain the meaning of this in greater detail later as well how a phenomenological perspective can inform educational leadership. What I present here is my interpretation and consideration born of my research into and understanding of educational leadership. I consider myself integral yet not essential to research. To be essential implies that the research process cannot take place without me or the knowledge generated here is exclusive to my understanding alone. Being integral more accurately reflects my position as a member within the greater whole, as one facet leading to a better understanding of educational leadership. This parallels the role of the educational leader as being integral in both the functioning of a school and determining the social atmosphere, yet that individual is not essential given that many others play a role in the operation of schools. Because I am advocating for the use of autoethnography in the study of educational leadership, participants, in this case prospective educational leaders, are central to the researcher process. Though the voices of educational leaders are not directly present here, I am unabashedly suggesting that the voices, thoughts, experiences, and understandings that educational leaders interpret and make sense of by engaging in autoethnography are critical to the development of effective leadership in school contexts where diversity features prominently.

The phenomenological perspective I assume as a researcher is one of many layers of interpretation; an important one in the construction of research but not necessarily a perspective essential to creating meaning or in understanding the process of the lived experience of educational leaders. The ends I seek to achieve are both pragmatic and catalytic. Pragmatically, I wish to present educational leaders with alternatives to the captain of the ship metaphor. The intention of potential alternatives is to promote a greater sense of relationality in leadership as opposed to the singular directionality that exists as a captain directs her/his troops. The notion of relationality comes from Wheatley's (2006) belief that we can no longer view leadership as a singular act, because it occurs within an interconnected and interrelated "web of relationships through which all work is accomplished" (p. 165). The potentially catalytic value of autoethnography as a means to understand educational leadership is arguably more important and certainly more impactful than my role as the researcher. As the author, my voice is integral in communicating the value of autoethnography as a means to study educational leadership, but it is the future voices of educational leaders that are essential. I hope that what I present in this article addresses the verisimilitude of my claims. The emphasis on understanding how potential educational leaders exist in the world opens an important window to understanding the interplay between leadership and diversity.

Because I have referenced interpretation in generating understanding and meaning, I will clarify my meaning here. Ponterotto (2005) explained that an interpretivist approach "maintains that meaning is hidden and must be brought

to the surface through deep reflection” (p. 129). While I agree with Ponterotto, I believe that reflexivity is a more applicable term than reflection. The two are frequently used interchangeably, yet their meaning is distinctly different. Reflection is akin to looking in the mirror to adjust one’s hair. Once you have made the correction, there is no need to consider the problem, because it is fixed. In this sense, reflection is more superficial than *reflexion* and is devoid of a cycle of action that leads to understanding. Reflexivity is a stance critical to autoethnography, because it fosters “knowledge that is experientially derived, seldom articulated, but constantly and consistently acted upon” (St. Germain & Quinn, 2005, p. 79). It is this reflexive knowledge that educational leaders must seek out in order to not only navigate diverse educational contexts but lead in them.

The Importance of Reflexivity in Understanding Educational Leadership

In keeping with the idea of walking my own talk, I share my perspective on the importance of reflexivity as well as its necessity in autoethnographic inquiry with a phenomenological perspective. Reflexivity is a stance critical in many types of inquiry, because it fosters the possibility that “knowledge that is experientially derived, seldom articulated, but constantly and consistently acted upon” (St. Germain & Quinn, 2005, p.79) can inform our practice. As I discuss and consider leadership, I am developing my own practice as a leader. Olivares, Peterson, and Hess (2007) suggested that what was missing from understanding leadership was a deeper exploration of how leadership is experienced. Bryman (2004) agreed. He held that the qualitative study of leadership had been underdeveloped and would benefit from further inquiry. Through phenomenological bridling and epoche, the researcher is able to take a reflexive and interpretivist stance to better understand the meaning of leadership. Reflexivity and interpretation also feature significantly for the participants in their use of autoethnographic inquiry, because they are simultaneously participant and researcher, learner and leader. The further construction of meaning and understanding is stimulated by the interactive researcher–participant dialogue created by the meshing of autoethnography and phenomenology. The researcher as participant mindfully constructs findings from her/his interaction and interpretation of leadership (Ponterotto, 2005) as a central phenomena or unifying principle. Dilthey (as cited in Ponterotto, 2005) emphasized understanding (*Verstehen*) the “meaning” of social phenomena:

Proponents of constructivism–interpretivism emphasize the goal of understanding the “lived experiences” (*Erlebnis*) from the point of view of those who live it day to day (Schwandt, 1994, 2000) [...] these lived experiences may be outside the immediate awareness of the individual but could be brought to consciousness. (p. 129)

The use of phenomenology and autoethnography provides significant advantage in uncovering that which lies beneath our awareness or *natural attitude*, our everyday attitude towards the world (LeVasseur, 2003). In reference to my earlier discussion of the hidden curriculum, the actions, decisions, emotions, and interactions that occur daily in the lives of educational leaders, and that unduly influence the hidden curriculum, are deliberately and systematically considered with the intention of moving beyond the surface to better understand the implications of a leader’s positioning in the school. While such engagement has value in many settings, in contexts where diversity features prominently, this type of interrogation is particularly important in order to move past the hegemonic reproduction of marginalization and oppression. The researcher as participant investigates and interrogates those experiences, while the reflexive act of bridling offers the perspective of the other creating a dialectic, much like that which serves as the backbone of education. The result of this process is “a shift in focus away from the myth of leadership and its potential alienation, deskilling and reification of organisational forms, towards the dynamics of leadership as a social process” (Ford & Lawler, 2007, p. 418).

Several noteworthy researchers have advocated for a greater sense of reflexivity as being key to successful leadership (Begley, 2006; Begley & Stefkovich; 2004; Bruner, 2008; McDonald, 2009). The absence of reflexivity contributes to the uncritical emulation of the behaviours and actions of principals or leaders much to the detriment of the “lives of traditionally marginalized and oppressed students” (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009, p. 4). In order to understand and respond to the “value orientations of others” (p. 575) as they exist in contexts of diversity, the school leader should be prompted to understand their own “values and ethical predispositions” (p. 575). Autoethnography and phenomenology in the context of what has been discussed here have powerful potential to positively influence the practice of leadership.

Contextualizing the Praxis of Leadership

Administrators need to be able to look critically at themselves, reflect on their often-privileged positions, and understand how they can assist in including others in the leadership process.
(Ryan, 2007, p. 345)

Ryan's (2007) call bears the elements of *praxis*: critical reflection, understanding, and action. Praxis is a term frequently referenced in scholarly work. Broadly, Seo and Creed (2002) asserted that praxis was based on the free and creative reconstruction of patterns of analysis that includes constraints and capacities. Individuals are active not only in the reconstruction of the social but of the personal as well. Structurally, in praxis, theory and action continually interact to inform each other. Specific to educational leadership, Cardno (2007) suggested that for each interaction that a leader engages in, praxis occurs as the "theory of learning associated with managing leadership dilemmas interacts with the practice in a reciprocal way" (p. 34). In this sense praxis as a process of leadership could be conceivably engaged in daily as educational leaders face encounters and subsequently act upon them. My question here is how does the educational leader decide what theory of learning should be chosen in responding to leadership dilemmas? Embedded in Cardno's (2007) suggestion is a belief that praxis is a conscious and deliberate act. While this may be the case, there are many experiential and intuitive factors beyond theories of learning that an educational leader may draw on in any given situation. Conceivably, the beliefs, values, and ideas born of life experience that an educational leader draws upon are extremely valuable. Yet, those beliefs, values, and ideas lack the intentionality necessary to create conscious, actionable meaning. This observation is an important one, because it draws attention to the theory-practice gap in leadership. There is an implicit assumption that theory informs practice, but in my own experience as an educator, I am not convinced this is a reality, or if it is, the theory put into practice lacks the critically reflexive element necessary to contextualize theory. This is especially relevant in schools where diversity features prominently. Literature on educational leadership indicates that "school leaders respond to diversity by retreating into cultural norms, sameness and traditional approaches" (Starr, 2010, p. 18).

Referring back to the earlier idea of education being comprised of multiple structural and agentic layers, I draw attention to the educational leader's agency in a process of praxis. Walker and Quong (1998) suggested agency represents the ability and willingness to "act in order to achieve one's mission, goals, and objectives in a proactive way" (p. 5). In acting, individuals consider the importance, desirability, and truth in a particular context. Action then is contextual, relevant, and very much based in the experience of being a leader. The ability to think critically is carefully balanced against action with deference to the many pressures to adapt to cultural, institutional, professional and social pressures that bog down education. Autoethnography is a methodology that allows the educational leader to critically analyze beliefs, values, and ideas in ways that generate understanding of the self in relation to others but also as a means to inform decisions in dealing with a multitude of dilemmas.

Connecting Autoethnography and Educational Leadership

Autoethnographic texts reveal the fractures, sutures and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience. (Spry, 2001, p. 712)

My intent here is to shed light on not only understanding what autoethnography is but also its value for understanding educational leadership. I will follow a similar process in my discussion of phenomenology in the following section. While there are many characterizations and descriptions of what autoethnography is, I share the most straightforward ones here. When broken down into the components of the word, autoethnography is based on a systematic analysis (*graphy*) of personal experience (*auto*) with the intent of understanding cultural experience (*ethno*) (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). Ellis and Bochner (2000) described autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). In a similar fashion, Spry (2001) defined autoethnography as "a self-narrative that critiques the situations of self with others in social contexts" (p. 710). Autoethnography frequently includes narratives of self as sources of data, which creates approaches useful in exploring the complexity of educational leadership (Møller & Eggen, 2005).

Accessing the multiple layers described by Ellis & Bochner (2000) is particularly important for the educational leader who dwells daily in a convoluted hybrid of the personal and professional, institutional and organizational, as well as the local and global. Being positioned in an environment that is in constant flux requires a sense of groundedness, which comes from knowing one's story and how that story interacts with the stories of others. Engaging in autoethnography is a means of making sense of the tensions and struggles involved in leadership as the individual leader intersects with the culture and ethos of schools. Because autoethnography revolves around the exploration of self in relation to others and the space created between them, relational disciplines like education and leadership are fertile grounds for autoethnographic study. Embedded in the educational setting is the social construction of knowledge, identity, and culture. The very acts that agents engage in each day through teaching, leading, and learning occur as those agents co-construct meaning (Starr, 2010). This is particularly true for those engaged in leadership who often teeter along a tight rope between how they have come to understand leadership through experiences in sport, student council, or workplaces versus how they have been told via graduate level leadership theory to enact leadership. Often a process of transformation occurs as a result of engaging in autoethnographic study. As mentioned earlier, leadership evokes a conception of the individual as the captain of a ship making the leader responsible for the direction of the vessel but also for dictating the terms of the journey. This view and interpretation of leadership goes relatively unchallenged in schools yet does little to respond to a growing call to transform the ways in which we lead and learn (Van der Mescht, 2004), particularly given the diversity that exists in schools. The understanding of leadership that can emerge through autoethnographic inquiry is socially constructed and in line with a more relational approach to leadership. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) described relational leadership as "a way of engaging with the world in which the leader holds herself/himself as always in relation with, and therefore morally accountable to others; recognizes the inherently polyphonic and heteroglossic nature of life; and engages in relational dialogue" (p. 1425).

From a postmodern perspective, exploration or understanding of leadership identity is "a process of infinite interpretation, reinterpretation of experiences, circumstances and conditions emphasizing the interconnectedness of past and present, lived and living" (Starr, 2010, p. 4). This process yields a conception of identity that is contextual and adaptive resulting in a responsiveness based on the demands placed upon it (Slattery, 1995). I argue that being a successful or effective leader requires engagement in a similar process where the individual is constantly being called upon to adapt to a wide array of situations and individuals, such as those presented in contexts rich in diversity. The transformative value of autoethnography in educational leadership stems from the focussed, in-depth, complex actions and interactions born of the lived experiences of the self. The subsequent iteration of identity is one born of deliberate and conscious attention to the self in relation to others and the culture in which we and others dwell. Educational leaders who are embedded in the construction of education and are responsible for its direction benefit from consciously locating themselves within the complexity of the educational system in order to create authenticity in their relationships (Starr, 2010).

By engaging in autoethnography, the school leader is presented with an otherwise obscure opportunity. Through the conscious and intentional act of studying one's self in relation to the culture and agents in that culture, one not only acknowledges the pragmatic demands of education, but, more importantly, examines how their experiences influence their leadership identity and actions. This process leads to a conscientization, which potentially liberates individuals from the hegemony of sameness that plagues educational leadership so they may critically examine spaces of "nationality, religion, gender, education, ethnicity socioeconomic class, and geography" (Chang, 2008, p. 52). That reflexive examination and subsequent understanding of preconceptions and feeling informs future acts of leadership in ways that otherwise may go unnoticed or unchallenged. The emphasis of a critical process of self-analysis in relation to cultural and social discourses, and therefore greater understanding, makes autoethnography a valuable tool in examining the complex, diverse, and messy intersection of leadership and culture.

One empirical example is Pepper and Hamilton Thomas' (2002) autoethnographic examinations of leadership style, and its impact on the school climate. As principal, Pepper identified her leadership style as authoritarian where she dictated the terms of what, when, and how things needed to be done. This approach generated an atmosphere of frustration and low morale. After conducting her own research on school leadership, Pepper began to contemplate the contribution that her authoritarian style was having to her own frustration as well as to the low morale in the school. As part of her own autoethnographic inquiry, Pepper used journal writing and reflection to interrogate both her purpose and her impact as an educational leader. As a result, Pepper shifted towards a transformational style of

leadership. The change contributed to creating a more positive and caring school environment where a climate of collaboration, including a cycle of support and feedback, was instrumental in establishing realistic, attainable school goals that all stakeholders, including those representing diverse groups, were willing to invest in.

Hickey and Austin (2007) summarized the value and purpose of autoethnography as a means to create the critical dialogue advocated by Begley (2006), Ryan (2007), as well as Walker and Quong (1998), the intent of which is to deeply interrogate the lived experiences that shape our philosophical and ideological practices; reflection is embedded in this engagement. From these critical realizations of the processes of identity formation, conscientised approaches to understanding the world, critiquing the various power structures that moderate it, and, perhaps most significantly, transforming these understandings into emancipatory professional practice feature as significant outcomes.

The capacity for social change and the creation of dialogue are arguably the most valuable yet least understood aspects of autoethnography. As Sparkes (2002) stated:

This kind of writing can inform, awaken, and disturb readers by illustrating their involvement in social processes about which they might not have been consciously aware. Once aware, individuals may find the consequences of their involvement (or lack of it) unacceptable and seek to change the situation. In such circumstances, the potential for individual and collective restorying is enhanced. (p. 221)

The awakening that occurs is necessary to destabilize that captain of the ship metaphor, which perpetuates power dynamics and in some instances furthers the oppression of diversity that occurs in schools, yet does little to serve the individuals collectively invested in those same schools. The potential for autoethnographic inquiry to be transformative or catalytic for the educational leader and in turn for the diverse students, staff, and teachers with whom those leaders work is simply too powerful to be labeled self-indulgent. Through autoethnographic inquiry, discourse is created between the educational leader and the relevant experiences in which they have engaged in socially, culturally, and personally resulting in the potential for improved practice.

Connecting Phenomenology and Educational Leadership

My use of phenomenology as a means for interpretation differs from its application as a methodology. While the two are obviously connected, I focus on a philosophical understanding of phenomenology that informs how we understand educational leadership. The phenomenological approach I have chosen comes primarily from the philosophical underpinnings of Heidegger's (1962) interpretive phenomenology. I have chosen this stance because of its emphasis on understanding "the way human beings exist, act, or are involved in the world" (Dowling, 2007, p. 133) as opposed to Husserl's emphasis on a reductionist description of essence. While phenomenological studies, regardless of philosophical origins, share core elements like bracketing and epoche, Heideggerian phenomenology acknowledges that interpretation cannot be completely eliminated (Abramson & Senshyn, 2009). I also draw from Gadamer's (1998) hermeneutics in which space is created for participants to interrogate and interpret their own experiences, much like autoethnography, but the researcher also resides in that space, open to be influenced and changed by the participant (Rehorick & Malhotra Bentz, 2008).

According to Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) "phenomenology contributes to deeper understanding of lived experiences by exposing taken-for-granted assumptions about these ways of knowing" (p. 1373). Creswell (2007) described phenomenology as "the meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a concept or phenomena" (p. 57). For Creswell, the focus is what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon and he stated that the purpose of phenomenology was to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of a universal essence" (p. 58). The lived experience emphasized in a phenomenological perspective becomes the site as well as the source of data for autoethnographic inquiry. Though the use of the term *universal essence* is problematic, its importance is more true to phenomenology as a methodology than as a perspective. I do not believe that human experience can be reduced to a fixed entity without recognition of the unique contexts, relations, and experiences that constitute our experience and inform our identity. The truth is an abstract structure that "is subjective and knowable only through embodied perception; we create meaning through the experience of

moving through space and across time” (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374) and is subject to “the process of free imagination, intuition and reflection” (Ehrich, 2003, p. 5). Rehorick and Malhotra Bentz’s (2008) less restrictive explanation of phenomenology is one that can be more accurately applied to the study of educational leadership as I am taking it up here. According to Rehorick and Malhotra Bentz (2008), the purpose of studying a phenomena like leadership is to bring about “awareness and understanding of direct experience” (p. 3) as it occurs in the lifeworld of those engaging in the act of leading. Who better to contribute to a rich understanding of educational leadership than those actively engaging in it? Olivares, Peterson, and Hess (2007) utilized an existential-phenomenological framework to generate understanding of the features of experiences that substantially contribute to the development of leadership. The authors note that the core of phenomenology is guided by the principle of intentionality where “experiences are directed toward things in the world: Humans live (exist) in relation to a world, other persons, and objects; that is, as humans we exist and are constructed by our relations with others” (p. 77). This philosophical approach applies to understanding the nature and meaning of leadership.

Abramson and Senshyn (2009) made use of a phenomenological approach to understand punishment and forgiveness in leadership. Through an archetypical metaphor, the authors sought to understand the presence and role of punishment in leader-follower relations in education. Ford and Lawler (2007) suggested the benefits of phenomenological study move leadership research away from an objectivist search for “certainty and predictability” (p. 409) towards valuing the “individual, subjective, relational experience and perspective” (p. 413) required to better understand the world. St. Germain and Quinn (2005) highlighted the space created by phenomenological methodologies to commingle the experience of the researcher with the reflections and insights of the participant and researcher to produce findings through “a process of unfolding discovery” (p. 78). In their study, St. Germain and Quinn sought to use pre-reflective experience to discover how those beliefs influenced the expertise of principals. In keeping with a phenomenological focus on lived experience, their research was not centered on significant events but rather the banal, common demands “faced by principals who hold myriad responsibilities” (p. 79).

Weaving Phenomenology and Autoethnography to inform Educational Leadership

As I have suggested throughout this article, the use of autoethnography and phenomenology has rich potential in informing the praxis of educational leadership. I enter into this final section attempting to make that case once again. Palmer (1997) offered a quote frequently used in education, “we teach who we are” (p. 4). In my past experience as a secondary school teacher and my current experience working with pre-service teachers and in-service teachers, this quote resonates with me in that who we are, what we value, and what we believe very much influences how we teach and interact with students, colleagues, and parents. Perhaps in part because the majority of educational leaders were teachers first, the sentiment *we lead who we are* seems equally true. In the following passage, Palmer (1997) described in part how a teacher’s sense of self complexly intersects with the *entanglements* experienced in the classroom:

If students and subjects accounted for all the complexities of teaching, our standard ways of coping would do—keep up with our fields as best we can, and learn enough techniques to stay ahead of the student psyche. But there is another reason for these complexities: *we teach who we are*. Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. (p.15)

If one replaces the words teach and teaching with lead and leading and extends the notion of classroom beyond four walls and one grade level or subject area, Palmer’s words are equally profound. As much as we like the idea that we wear different hats in different situations, those hats are just accessories, which we use to decorate; the wearer of the hats remains the same. What we value and believe in remains at our core and guides the choices we make regardless of the outfits we wear. In pursuit of becoming a teacher, Palmer (1997) discussed the interweaving of three domains: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. The intellectual refers to how we think about teaching and learning and I argue that leading is an extension of teaching and learning. The way institutions and teacher education programs approach the preparation of both teaching and leading is heavily intellectual. Coursework, readings, and papers are products

frequently produced *about* leading with little opportunity to formally and intentionally connect how we experience leading with its theoretical perspectives. Those experiences often reside in the emotional and spiritual domains that Palmer refers to, yet, despite their importance go unexplored, because there is little formal attention given to the study of those experiences.

As an educator and leader, I believe autoethnography and phenomenology have the potential to not only help leaders access experiences that inform leadership, but to help future school leaders be relationally responsive to people more than paper. I acknowledge that my experience as a teacher, seeing many educational leaders struggle, drives my study of leadership as well as the pursuit of better ways to lead in schools. This is not to suggest that all educational leadership is flawed or that individuals leading in schools are wrong. Far from it. Leadership is a complex task in today's schools. However, I do see those of us immersed in education as being the architects of our own frustration. As long as we continue to base understanding of leadership as a primarily intellectual endeavour, we will continue to limit those engaged in leadership from approaching it relationally.

At the outset of this article, I stated two purposes. First, I set out to respond to a call for the development of a clearer picture of effective leadership, and second to provide insight into the use of autoethnography and phenomenology in developing that picture. I believe that knowing one's story means that we must look to understand how and why we have chosen to teach and lead, but in order to understand those motivations and how our experiences influence our practice, we must engage in the challenging work of interrogating our beliefs, values, and dispositions. Revisiting Palmer's (1997) quote, which I shared previously, teaching and leading emerge from "one's inwardness, for better or worse" (p. 5).

The improvement I see as a result of leaders engaging in autoethnography using a phenomenological lens is in generating a better understanding of leadership that is not restricted to positional or title, but to relationships and integrity. In doing so the impact of the intangible, yet, important, lines created in diverse contexts are made permeable. Hickey and Austin (2007) spoke of interrogating one's own beliefs as a means to create the critical dialogue advocated by Begley (2006), Ryan (2007), as well as Walker and Quong (1998), the intent of which is to deeply interrogate the lived experiences that shape our philosophical and ideological practices; reflexivity is embedded in this engagement. From these critical realizations of the processes of identity formation, conscientized approaches to understanding the world, critiquing the various power structures that moderate it, and, perhaps most significantly, transforming these understandings into emancipatory professional practice feature as potential outcomes. For institutions offering structured seminar-type spaces in their leadership programs, these are critical spaces for educational leaders to make sense of what they are seeing, experiencing, and learning.

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