Leadership in education transformation as reshaping the organisational discourse

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The restructuring of South African education poses continuous challenges for educational leaders to contribute towards constituting a just and equitable society. Competing discourses, however, create ongoing tensions that have to be negotiated and meaningfully mediated. The widely diverse, often conflicting, local discourses shaped by particular groups' histories and experiences, interacting with national/ provincial imperatives and the powerful neo-liberalist discourse, puts exceptional demands on educational leadership. These discourses shape not only the enactment of education leadership and management in school settings, but also its conceptualisation as a discipline and the concomitant enactment in schools and other education settings. In the context of the debate of what constitutes education leadership and/ or management, I focus on the conceptualisation of the organisational or structural context of leadership. Leadership is explored as engaging within and with schools as a construct of language, i.e. as a discursive construction where meanings are emergent, deferred, and dispersed. This has the ontological implication that schools as organisations do not have autonomous, stable, or structured status outside that of the interactive narratives and texts that constitute it. Also transformative educational leadership as a practice of power would — in the interests of social justice — have to engage with competing discourses and what they privilege.

Introduction

Education leadership and management — or education administration — are difficult to define and contain within a clear set of boundaries. The questions that arose during the accreditation process of the MEd in Educational Leadership and Management (course work) in 2005 opened up this field to the debates that characterise all fields of inquiry in post-modernist contexts. This means it became a space where positions on what constitutes leadership and management are contested and the ambiguity of reality is acknowledged. In this article an approach to leadership in education that focuses on the debate, about what constitutes an education institution, is explored.

This article grew from observing school leadership figures 'presenting' themselves and their schools according to the most prominent public indicators of education achievement, namely, in the Grade 12 examination or what is colloquially known as the 'matric exam'.[1] 'Matric results' in South Africa have become the most prominent indicator, with huge signifying power, of the achievement (or not) of the education system and concomitantly of racial injustice. Although the statistics for this examination have not been published by race group since 1995, the unequal achievement is reflected in the annual provincial statistics where the provinces with the most so-called 'ex-model-C' schools achieve better pass and matriculation exemption rates (*cf*. Berkhout

& Bergh, 2002). Not withstanding the implementation of a new curriculum in 1997 (Curriculum 2005) and its revision RNCS (RSA, 2001), this examination prominently shapes the public discourse in education. It is symbolically prominent as talk of transformation of this certificate always makes front-page news. It is the main gatekeeper that decides the life chances of individuals as it not only determines access to higher education, especially universities, but is also used as a selection mechanism for more lucrative jobs and legitimisation of the selection.

Concomitantly the so-called 'pass rate' in this examination discursively shapes schools as good or bad performers. This is not only a local discursive practice, visible in the annual reports and marketing brochures of schools, the questions parents ask about schools, and the media coverage of education in South Africa, but is also part of a powerful national discourse about social justice. This national discourse runs contrary to the intentions of education transformation and the implementation of the outcomes-based curriculum, reiterating the position of privileged schools and the learners attending those schools. This is emphasised in a process where the national Minister of Education, in a drive to promote 'quality' education in South Africa, commends schools that attain good 'pass rates' and threatens poor performing schools with closure.

Apart from the contradictory pull of the new national curriculum (Curriculum 2005, revised in 2001 with its attendant assessment policy to be implemented as the RNCS) and the historical national Grade 12 examination, the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1995) furthermore locates school leaders in the paradoxical centralisation/ decentralisation discourse. This policy discourse espouses democracy and decentralisation (Nzimande, 2002), while concurrently reasserting central control especially via the curriculum and assessment system. In a context of implementing controversial reforms, this puts school leaders in a position where they are at the centre of political conflict (Weiler, 1990). Puts them at the centre of challenging, re-interpreting, and re-creating (Ball, 1995) policy, even while espousing compliance. This creates complex interactive discursive regimes, where the historic 'matric examination' contradicts the transformative discourse of a new assessment system. Related to this the concomitant global discourse of competitiveness and performativity further precludes the transformative reconstitution of schools in the interests of democracy and social justice. If discursive regimes can be this powerful in shaping education development, it can be contended that leadership cannot only be viewed in terms of the powerful role of an autonomous agent with leadership traits neither can it be seen in terms of someone with excellent management skills or competences.

Thinking about educational leadership would have to challenge the privileging power of indicators such as the 'matric results' in the shaping of educational leadership discourses. It is a discursive pattern that structures 'good practice' in terms of *competition* (especially as reflected in measurable outcomes) without regard for social justice. In this article it is suggested that

educational leadership needs to be re-interpreted beyond notions of the hier-archical (re)distribution of authority (power) and/or the right to power that achievement in terms of powerful indicators (signifiers or symbols) seems to imply. After an exploration of the notion of schools as discursive constructions and the privileging power of the dominant discourse related to powerful indi-cators such as the 'matric results', alternative ways of thinking about educa-tional leadership will be argued for.

Schools as discursive constructions

Education management and leadership studies in South Africa seldom go beyond a fairly neutral idea of improving education practice or, what Ribbins and Gunter (2002:372) describe as the immediacy of direct action. Reflexivity becomes an exercise in uncritically co-opting managerial procedures or processes into the educational domain, with little regard for the origin of or consequences for what would constitute a 'school' in a democratic society. Although leadership can be viewed in terms of the notion of 'leaders' and their qualities, or as an instrumental approach (activity compliance, according to Ribbins & Gunter, 2002: 377), it is argued that leadership should also be seen in terms of 'questioning how we want to live and organise our work'. Leaders and/or managers are not confronted with problems that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of complex interrelated contexts or systems of changing problems that interact with each other. Against the background of this premise, this argument focuses on the impli-cations of the epistemological assumptions (ways of knowing, understanding, and constituting the individual and reality) of leaders about the education institution that is being lead, managed, or administered. These explicit and implicit assumptions, that underpin leaders' notion of 'organisation' and how it is 'known' and constituted in particular contexts, structure leadership prac-tices and privilege particular foci and actions.

This argument is based on Foucault's view of schools, not in terms of

> the ideals of education or its hidden class functions but the detailed orga-nisation of the (monitorial) school as a purpose-built pedagogical environ-ment assembled from a mix of physical and moral elements; special archi-tectures; devices for organizing space and time; body techniques; practi-ces of surveillance and supervision; pedagogical relationships; procedures of administration and examination (Hunter, 1996:147).

This speaks to Ball's interest in educational sites as generators of a histori-cally specific (modern) discourse, i.e. as sites in which certain modern valida-tions of, and exclusions from, the 'right to speak' are generated. Education sites are not only subject to discourse, "but [are] also centrally involved in the propagation and selective dissemination of discourses, the 'social appropria-tion' of discourses" — not only with regard to the curriculum, but also with regard to the way students and colleagues are viewed and engaged with. Ball's (2003:3) argument with regard to performativity succinctly poses how the installation of a culture of competition, which involves the use of a combi-

nation of devolution, targets and incentives to bring about institutional re-design, shapes peoples lives and leadership actions through the deployment of incentives and sanctions deriving from competition and performativity. Educational institutions, according to Ball (*ibid*.), control the access of individuals to various kinds of discourses in discursive distribution of what it permits and what it prevents. For him "every educational system is a political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriateness of discourses with the knowledge and power they bring with them".

The maintenance or modification of discourses relates to the meaning attributed to them within particular contexts. This has the implication that the way assessment and the 'matric examination' are engaged with in a particular context constitutes 'reality' and consequently shapes agent's (individuals' and individual leaders') expectations and choices. The understanding and representation within a particular context thereby becomes constructive of the school as an organization and a discourse that is seldom considered in terms of social justice.

Within this context it becomes important to move away from "mainstream organisation theory that assumes and takes for granted the existence of organizations as material entities 'out there' in the world" (Westwood & Linstead, 2001:4). This has the implication of the model not as representing the organisation, but the organisation as representation of the model: "The construction of the object results from the application of a theory to the real word; the constructed object exists [has sense] only in relation to this theory" (Degot in Westwood & Linstead, 2001:4). Such construction furthermore means that the "organization has no autonomous, stable or structural status outside of the text that constitutes it. The text of organization itself consists of a shifting network of signifiers in dynamic relations of difference". It is not a scientific argument about the more accurate, rigorous, clear, consistent or parsimonious representation of school as an organisational reality, but is part of what Chia and King (2001) see as an ontological rethinking of the notion of organisation.

One of the predominant arguments in education policy discourse in South Africa focuses on what is uncritically described as 'realities'. These 'realities' are expressed in terms of statistical indicators (i.e. per capita expenditure; student:teacher ratios; and school-leaving examination results) which originated during the *apartheid* era out of the contestation of education and the state's representation of the 'realities' of education (RSA, 1988). This notion of 'reality' permeates the critique of education transformation and shapes school leadership thinking and stories (narratives) in a variety of contexts. This imposes constraints on the play of other signifiers in the 'text of organisation' and freezes other meanings that could inscribe an alternative order on the flow of events in schools.

The desire for social justice thereby becomes discursively shaped by the underpinning notions of competitiveness and profitability, with schools attaining a sense of reality that is equated with progression towards the 'ideal

school' as one with a 100% pass rate, excellent facilities (especially computers) and additional teachers or 'good teachers' appointed by the school governing body (trainers for the 'matric exam') — with no concern for social justice. In most, less well-endowed schools this has the demoralizing effect of expecting good schooling to result from the improvement of the physical facilities and 'equipping teachers with skills' necessary to make the school successful. The challenge this poses for leadership in education becomes clear when the 'reality of school' is questioned and seen merely as "contingent assemblages put together under 'blind' historical circumstances" (Hunter, 1996:147). When it is comprehended that schools do not have autonomous, stable, or structured organisational status outside of the interactive narratives and texts that constitute them, it becomes necessary to focus on the "the meta-language of organisation which deals with the ontological prior process of fixing, forming, framing and bounding rather than with the content or outcome of such processes" (Chia & King, 2001:326).

Rethinking schools as discursive constructions where meanings are emergent, deferred, and dispersed (Westwood & Linstead, 2001) opens up a critical creative space for school leaders to engage with competing discourses and narratives, in the interest of social justice and transformation, and to engage with what is vying for privilege.

Engaging with competing discourses in the interest of critical ecological interdependence

The debate regarding performativity and the attendant managerialism is fundamentally shaped by the neo-liberalist discourse of the free market and the power of autonomous agents which, according to Thrupp (2003), manifest in overt reference to restructuring schools to fit in with its ideologies and technologies or as more subtle forms of apologism. Contrary to the notion of the individual as a network of linkages (Wielemans, 1993; 2000), the neo-liberalist ideas that underpin this discourse promote the idea of possessive individualism. This is succinctly described by Popkewitz from a critical perspective (in Holland, 1998:9) as the idea that

> society is composed of free, equal individuals who are related to each other as proprietors of their own capabilities. Their successes and acquisitions are the products of their own initiatives, and it is the role of institutions to foster and support their personal development — not least because national revitalization — economic, cultural, and civic — will result from the good works of individuals.

As education qualifications signify 'merit' in terms of the knowledge, skills and/or competence of a particular individual, and this in turn mediates livelihood, this emphasis on the individual becomes crucial in the shaping of the market discourse. In South Africa this discourse, linked to the powerful symbolism and the social allocative effect of the 'matric results', seems to be the dominant one. And though redress and equity are dominant notions in the public debate, this discourse shapes the fundamental notions of democratic

development in terms of possessive individualism.

In his introduction to *Foucault and Education*, Ball (1990) portrays discourses as embodying meaning and social relationships, constituting both subjectivity and power relations, as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. "Discourses are about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention" (Foucault in Ball, 1990). Words and concepts change their meaning and their effects as they are deployed within different discourses. It is about what can be said and thought; who can speak; when; and with what authority. Discourses constrain the possibilities of thought and at the same constitute possibilities. They order and combine words in particular ways and exclude or displace other combinations. However, in so far as discourses are constituted by exclusions as well as inclusions, by what cannot as well as what can be said, they stand in antagonistic relationship to other discourses, other possibilities of meaning, other claims, rights and positions. This is Foucault's "principle of discontinuity": "We must make allowance for the complete and unstable powers whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (Foucault in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982:101).

The predominant neo-liberal discourse is, however, challenged and contested by a variety of communal and ecological discourses. Since the time of Freud and Marx the fundamental assumptions underpinning the idea of the autonomous individual have been critiqued from a variety of perspectives within the context of the structure-agency debate. In structuralist critiques of education an early source was Bowles and Gintis (1976:11), who from a correspondence approach saw education as "best understood as an institution which serves to perpetuate the social relationships of economic life through which these patterns are set, by facilitating a smooth integration of youth into the labo[u]r force". The work of these two researchers relies on a rational/ functional understanding of structure (in other words, the hierarchical division of power and management style and the allocation of sources) and the correspondence between the position of the learners in the class structure and the type of school they attend.

> For Marxian educational sociology — for example — it is not rational individuals that matter, but classes and their economic interests, and the school is typically treated as the instrument by which the dominant class imposed its interests, thereby reproducing social inequality (Hunter, 1996:145).

The fundamental contradiction between the notions of the autonomous individual, and this view of individual lives as structurally determined, underpins the debate on the possibility of education change. The underpinning assumptions of these two contenting discourses shape what is enacted in schools.

This is succinctly captured in Bourdieu's (1992:28) plea that we should consider, in a radical and systematic manner, the unconsidered categories

and structures of thought that create boundaries to what we regard as conceivable and, at the same time, predetermine our thoughts and thus co-constitute or structure our practice. The idea of humans being structurally determined can be seen in approaches that are related to alternative views where 'structures' are viewed not as things that exist apart from individuals, but as sets of 'rules' and 'resources' which individuals draw on, and hence reproduce, in social interaction. Structural rules are techniques or generalisable procedures applied in the enactment and reproduction of social practices. They include knowledge of social conventions and their contexts of application, and provide actors with a set of 'tools' for accomplishing social interaction. These structural rules can vary widely from the rules of language to the procedures used by actors in managing appearances in public settings and are powerfully shaped by dominant discourses.

The notion of being discursively structured through discourses and narratives has become particularly prominent. Post-structuralism is a broad label referring to a range of theoretical positions developed, in the wake of the structuralist linguistics of De Saussure, in and from the writings of Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, and Foucault. These writers share a concern with the importance of language and representation. Language does not reflect a pre-existing world, but conditions and creates all meaning we have of the world. The central position of the individual or human subject is questioned in postmodern discourses ('decentred'). This means that the agency role of the individual leader to steer self change and social transformation without consideration for a discursively constituted world, is questioned. According to Weedon (in Biesta, 1998:5), human beings are viewed as "produced in a whole range of discursive practices — economic, political, and social — the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle for power".

The idea of duality is reflected in the work of Foucault, who queried the idea of a "natural subject". He emphasised that the individual is not only a given entity on whom power is exercised; the human being is "the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces" (Foucault in Biesta, 1998:7). The human being is historically rooted in a past that was not written by him/herself, constituted in a language not personally created, and socially entwined in an intersubjectivity that precedes his/her own. The so-called decentring of the human being (a shift from the individual person as the centre of all interpretations, and creator of ideas and force for change) does not mean the end of the individual, but only the end of a specific form in which identity is expressed. This also means that the responsibility for change can be traced back to a critical duality in which both structure and agency are emphasised.

Against the background of the above argument, a conceptual model for school leaders to engage with the dominant and contending discourses is proposed (Figure 1). This model is based on Wielemans's notion of going *beyond the individual* (1993; 2000) and proposes three embracing or enfolded layers of progressive awareness, which enables the questioning of the epistemological assumptions (ways of knowing, understanding and constituting the indi-

vidual and reality) within the context of contending discourses. This heuristic model could contribute to informing school leaders about the implicit assumptions that underpin their notion of 'organisation' and how it is 'known' and constituted in particular contexts, privileging and patterning leadership and educational practices in the interest of social justice (or not) and promoting actions towards mediating alternative practices.
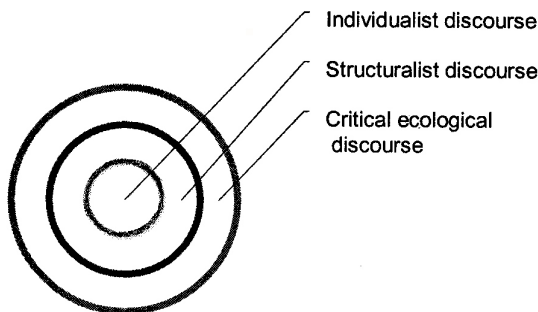

Figure 1 Discourse embedded leadership

The humanist focus on the autonomous, rational individual able to act as change agent was historically followed by notions of structural awareness and the need for restructuring society to enable a more just distribution of power. Instead of viewing reality as natural and materially given post-modernist or post-structuralist approaches, focus on the discursive construction of identity within a globally connected world. Post-modernism and post-structuralism are umbrella concepts, sheltering notoriously complex and diverse approaches, often viewed as "an open intellectual landscape with no distinctive or defining features" other than the critique of what Pring (in Humes & Bryce, 2003:176-177) has described as the "five interrelated features of conventional approaches to knowledge construction in the physical and social sciences". Post-structuralism and post-modernism critiques the "commitment to the construction of an objective and universal account of 'reality', an account that assumes that language serves as a reliable instrument of explanation."

The above distinguished discourses are generally accepted as competitive and contradictory. Viewing them as enfolding layers of awareness would allow school leadership the productive possibility of re-'organising', re-'narrating' schooling in the interest of critical ecological interdependence, rather than contending for or against a particular view. Engaging with the notion of school as organisation in terms of what the three ideal-typical enfolded layers of

awareness privilege would enable school leaders (as agents) to mediate communitarian spaces (as structures) for individual interaction in the context of a critical ecological awareness. The one-sided 'reality' constituted by the individualist notion of learning and symbolic 'representation' of school in terms of statistically measured performance indicators could be critiqued in terms of its notion of community and its inclusivity/exclusivity against the background of its global-ecological implications. It would become possible to critique the structure or '*habitus*' (Bourdieu) of the school as it plays out within the entwined fields. It would become possible to think of the interactive discursive practices that shape it as a "system of embodied dispositions which generate practice in accordance with the structural principles of the social world" (Nash, 1990).

Understanding how 'formal structures' and implicit notions of organisation in a particular time and space construct storied or narrative spaces, would enable the identification of the '*story that I find myself part of* — it would become possible to re-'story' schooling. Rather than being determined by the grand-narrative of the now dominant neo-liberalist free-market discourse and what it constitutes as 'reality', it would enable the uncovering of what is privileged and marginalised by a dominant discourse. It would furthermore enable permeating the related dichotomous 'representation of reality' as either real or socially constructed. School leadership could become part of the powerful re-constitutive force in the interests of critical ecological awareness and action. The privileging of notions of leadership linked to individualist autonomy and agency could be meshed with notions of communitarian approaches in a space privileging critical ecological awareness and action. It would enable leadership to open up spaces where power is truly distributed in continuous dialogical action.

Using narrative spaces to reconstitute organisational discourses and identity

A school leadership model aware of the constituting and contending discourses should provide for or mediate spaces where the rewording of the world becomes possible. The question 'What should be done?' can only be answered fruitfully if it is understood which story, metaphor or model representing/constituting schooling one forms part of and whose interests this serves.

As narratives and the related metaphors are ways of presenting and re-presenting the world, experience, and expectations, creating spaces to engage critically with contenting or affirming discourses, narratives, and metaphors would be crucial to transformation. Discursive practice, narratives, shape not only what are identified as challenges or problems, but also what is decided and acted on within a particular time and context. Narrative includes a vast genre that varies from stories, metaphors and reports, photographs, and videos to agendas and minutes of meetings. What, according to Ochs, holds them together is that "all narratives depict a temporal transition from one state of affairs to another" (1997:189). A narrative is not only a factual description or chronological depiction of events, for it is located in what Riceour refers to as existential time, where present, past, and future fuse: "We ex-

perience ourselves in the present world, but with a memory of the past and an anxiety of the future" (1997:191). This means that narratives of the past are always about the present and the future as well. Narratives envisioning or imagining the future, as would be the assumption with policy changes, are meant to open up new possibilities to shape the future differently. Policy as narrative interacts with concerns about the present and the future based on the memories of the past, as narrative accounts of the past help to manage an uncertain future. And if this is linked to Westwood's position (2001:5), that sees "organisation/text not as a product but as a productivity — the site of ongoing signifying work in a politicized arena of contestations over the signifying process", then the need for the continuous (re)narrating becomes visible.

This can be related to Goia, Corley and Fabbri's (2001) notion of leadership visioning as 'future perfect thinking'. They argue that history taken as 'fact' comes with baggage that puts constraints on future actions, if leaders feel compelled to act in a manner that maintains consistency with the past. "If change is essentially a cognitive enterprise as well as a behavioural venture with substantive outcomes, then the ability to alter the conception of the past confers a great deal of flexibility on the future" (2001: 630). In the context of what (re)narrating purports to enable, it is also important to allow for "the maintenance of a valued sense of continuity with the past, while still preparing the organization for a (perhaps radically) different future" (*ibid.*.). For school leaders in South African schools, where the 'matric exam', individual achievement, and competition are predominantly contrasted in public discourses with notions of social justice, communal and ecological linkages, it becomes crucial to constitute discursive practices. This has the implication, to follow Gunter (in Thrupp, 2003:167), that concepts, and their potential meaning, such as empowerment, collaboration, and participation are not translated into "sprayed around aerosol words" but rather are opened up and 'leadership distributed' to politicize schools around pedagogy rather than in terms of illusionary indicators. Genuinely sharing power in the interest of critical ecological awareness would include explicit reflection on powerful discourses and the implicit power this has in shaping what schools are and can become.

The 'matric results' discourse in the shaping of school leadership practice is a discourse that structures leadership notions of organisation in terms of individualised achievement without regard for the injustice and oppression it sustains and intensifies within the broader context of a more ecological awareness. This discourse promotes 'stories' about schools that emulate 'matric pass rates' and distinctions with little regard for the concomitant disempowering pedagogy and learning this constitutes. Leaders that find themselves part of this singular focus, become part of a story that reinforces existing patterns of schooling, pre-empting an engagement with education policy in the interest of social justice.

Conclusion
In this article I have argued that the restructuring of education is reflected in

discourses that create ongoing tensions that have to be negotiated and meaningfully mediated. The widely diverse, often conflicting, local discourses shaped by particular groups' histories and experiences, interacting with national/provincial imperatives and the powerful neo-liberalist discourse, put exceptional demands on educational leadership.

It is furthermore contended that leadership should be seen as engaging with discursive constructions that shape education practice and that this should contribute toward understanding and rethinking how social justice is constituted in local education contexts. Schools it is argued do not have an autonomous, stable, or structured organisational status outside of the inter-active narratives and texts that locally constitute them. Transformative edu-cational leadership as a practice of power would, in the interests of social justice, have to engage with competing discourses and what they privilege.

The education discourse in South African education lacks reference to notions such as acceptance, collegiality, creativity, morale, commitment to individual development, productive confrontation (information seeking and or mature confrontation), respect, trust, and encouragement, which Plas and Lewis (2001:65) found to be crucial in person-centred high-pressure service provision. In a dynamic context of contradiction and challenge, attempts at (re)storying or (re)narrating the school need to create reiterative contexts where the 'labels' (such as 'matric results') are not overtly disputed but en-gaged with, reinterpreted and '(re)organised' to become more constructive in the more equitable distribution of power. It may become possible to visualise and constitute what Hoy (2003) calls enabling and mindful school structures.

Leadership that engages in the global discourse as encapsulating, rather than contradicting, social justice could contribute to rethinking the economic integration of youth. Genuinely sharing power in the interest of critical ecolo-gical awareness would include leadership that continuously reflects on the constitutive power of discursive practices and the representation of the school as an organisation.

Note

1. 'Matric exam' is used to refer to the Grade 12 examinations for which the Senior Certificate is conferred. 'Matric exam' is the signifier that is used in the media and colloquially for the examination that originated from the 'matriculation' examina-tion set by the Matriculation Board as early as 1918. Matriculation exemption was later used to refer to students that sat for provincial examinations and passed this examination to the satisfaction of the Matriculation Board. Matriculation exemp-tion therefore served as the most basic admission criterion of universities.

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