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Critical perspectives in educational leadership

Richard Niesche



Research Brief

What is the problem?

Educational leadership is an essential ingredient in the performance of our schools and education systems. However, leadership itself is a very vague and ubiquitous term that often gets used to label many activities. In recent years leadership has been presented as the solution to many of education's problems. For instance, how often does one hear the call for 'good leadership' as a solution to some enduring or even wicked educational problem?

Yes, leadership is vital for a well-functioning school and education system but what exactly does it entail? What does leadership 'look like'? And what do we need to better understand and use this concept so that it really helps educators negotiate their complex, context bound practice? There are a vast a number of gurus selling products and solutions that rely on simplistic, seductive and unrealistic versions of leadership that overgeneralise what needs to be done so that context and the voices of educators become irrelevant.

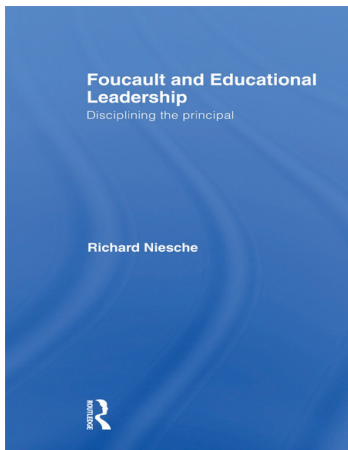
What I did about it

As a result of these concerns, I have been developing a program of research that seeks to better understand these complexities so that school leaders can better understand the conditions of their work and leadership practice. It is from these circumstances and understandings that real change and leadership can emerge. A core element of this work is theorising leadership from a wide range of sociological and philosophical perspectives that can properly take account of complex educational contexts in which our leaders work. It is from here that genuine, long lasting solutions can be devised with leaders and educators at the forefront of decision-making.

Over the last 10 years, this work has included detailed case studies of leadership practice in complex, diverse schools and communities e.g. Qld, WA, NSW, England. Key themes include:

- Socially just leadership
- School principalship
- Leader identity formation
- Culturally responsive leadership
- Power and resistance

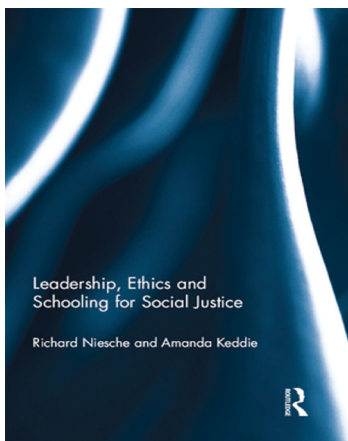
Publications



This book (2011) draws upon the work of Michel Foucault to provoke new thought into how the principalship is lived and 'disciplined' in ways that produce both contradictions and tensions for school principals. This book provides a powerful example of theory working through practice to move beyond traditional approaches to school leadership.

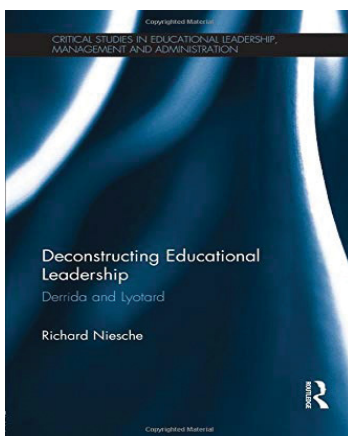
Key elements of the research:

- A well theorised analysis of leadership practices
- Acknowledges the messy reality of life for school principals
- Provides key insights to the 'real' work that principals undertake every day
- Examines the production of principals' subjectivities in education, foregrounding issues of gender and race
- Includes the principals' voices through rich interview data.



This book co-authored with Professor Amanda Keddie (2016) provides in depth case studies of leadership that work towards social justice. Drawing on case studies from both Australia and England we show how complex and challenging this work is and how important advocacy and resistance is for principals' leadership.

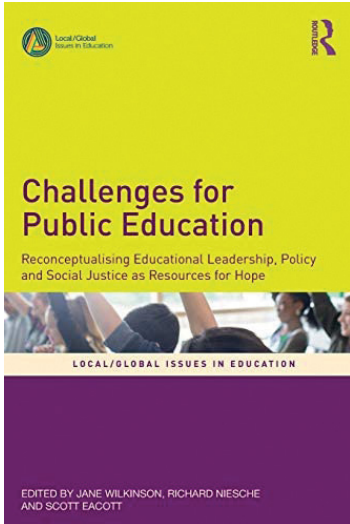
This research makes transparent the ethical work that leaders in these contexts conduct on themselves towards creating schools that can address the equity challenges of the present climate. It illuminates and enables critical analysis of the moral imperatives shaping the equity work of school leaders and, in particular, the possibilities for transformative leadership that can work to create schools and school systems that are more socially just.



In this book (2013), I theorise educational leadership using philosophical concepts of Derrida and Lyotard to critique common assumptions about leadership models and discourse. I provide alternative theoretical perspectives to undertake research in educational leadership.

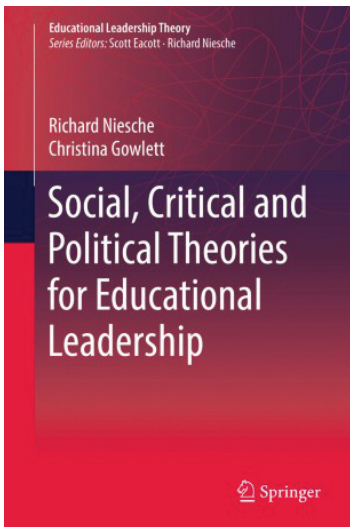
This research explores the key concepts central to the work of Derrida and Lyotard in relation to educational leadership, and reveals how these ideas challenge existing structures, hierarchies and models of thought. The book provides concrete examples of the application of theories to policy, literature and empirical data, and identifies ideas which continue to impact contemporary practices of educational leadership and management.

Publications



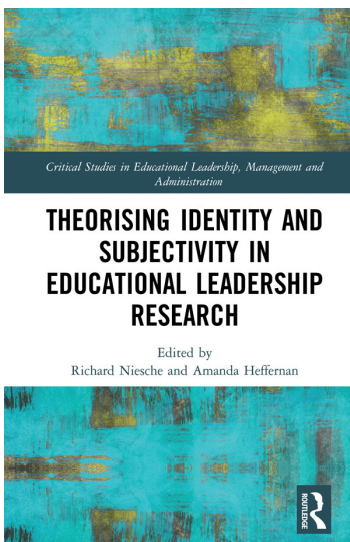
This edited book (co-edited with Professor Jane Wilkinson and Professor Scott Eacott, 2018) brings together leading international scholars to examine how educational leadership can work to bring social justice in a number of education systems around the world.

This research examines the educational leadership, policy and social justice implications of these trends in Australia and internationally. It maps this movement through early shifts to school-based management in Australia, New Zealand and Sweden and recent moves such as the academies programme in England and charter schools in the United States. The book provides a crucial forum for illuminating alternate ways to conceptualise educational leadership, policy and social justice as resources for hope.



Co-authored with Dr Christina Gowlett (2019), this book draws on a range of theorists to provide an entry point for readers, scholars and professionals in educational leadership with which to look at research, policy and practice differently from the mainstream research. While both engaging in critique, we also provide generative tools for research and analysis of educational problems and issues.

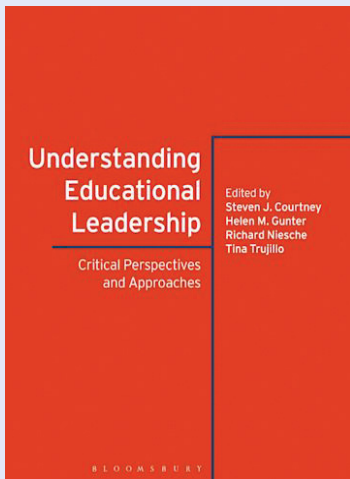
This book makes the case for the continued and expanded use of social, critical and political theories in the field of educational leadership. It helps readers understand educational leadership by introducing them to a wide variety of theoretical and philosophical approaches and positions.



This edited collection (co-edited with Dr Amanda Heffernan, 2020) brings together a range of international scholars to examine identity and subjectivities in educational leadership in new and original ways. The chapters draw on a variety of approaches in theory and method to demonstrate the important new developments in understanding identity and subjectivity beyond the traditional ways of understanding and thinking about identity in the field of educational leadership.

The book highlights empirical, theoretical and conceptual research that offers new ways of thinking about the work of educational leaders. The authors take critical approaches to exploring the influences of gender, race, sexuality, class, power and discourse on the identity and subjectivity formation of educational leaders. It provides global perspectives on educational leadership research and researchers, and offer exciting new approaches to theorising and researching these issues.

Publications



This book (co-edited with Dr Steven Courtney, Professor Helen Gunter and Dr Tina Trujillo, 2021) guides the reader through critical perspectives and approaches across the world, taking in the global north and south, and explores the ways in which educational leadership is currently understood, theorised, researched, modelled and practised. The book also covers contemporary issues including gender, sexual identity and race, as well as topics such as governance, performativity and corporatisation. It brings together evidence and ideas that illuminate the power structures and relations in educational leaders, leading and leadership and helps the reader to consider the impact on policy and practice, and to think about changes needed to mitigate the issues identified. The book showcases a wide range of theorists, including Bourdieu, Foucault and Fraser. Its impressive scope includes analyses of collectivist, neoliberal and historical influences on educational leadership. It explores forensically leadership styles, with an explicit focus on distributed, instructional, democratic, autocratic, laissez-faire and organisational forms.

The Bottom Line

In summary, this body of work provides a strong case for critical perspectives in educational leadership to play a major role in research and policy development so that there can be a better understanding of the issues facing school leaders beyond simple, seductive solutions.

About the Researcher



Richard Niesche

Richard Niesche is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. His research interests include educational leadership, the principalship and social justice. His particular research focus is to use critical perspectives in educational leadership to examine the work of school principals in disadvantaged schools and how they can work towards achieving more socially just outcomes. He has published his research in a number of books and peer reviewed journals, and he is also the founding co-editor of the 'Educational Leadership Theory' book series with Springer.



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Educational Leadership and Policy Research Community

Internationally, there is an unwavering confidence in education to transform the individual and society for the better, yet across much of the Western world there is a belief that educational institutions are deficient and in need of reform. How to improve education and to what ends remains a question of fundamental significance. Educational leadership is widely considered important for enhancing outcomes yet the demand for well-crafted analyses based on credible and independent applied and basic research on educational innovations and reforms is currently not being met.

The Educational Leadership and Policy research community provides interdisciplinary expertise and thought leadership by galvanizing outstanding UNSW researchers and collaborators to understand contemporary issues impacting on education nationally and internationally. Internationally, there is confidence in education to transform the individual and society for the better, yet how to improve education and to what end remain questions of fundamental significance. The Educational Leadership and Policy research community conducts diverse and collaborative research activity aimed at meeting this demand.