

## WHAT KIND OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE SHOULD OUR LEADERS USE?

MORWENNA GRIFFITHS

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As educational researchers we hope to influence what goes on in education policy making at national or regional level and/or to influence school and classroom strategies and practices. To put it another way we are keen to contribute to evidence-informed policies and evidence-informed practices. But what kind of evidence should that be? What sort of knowledge is needed by leaders – whether they are policy makers, head teachers, or classroom teachers? I argue that context-specific, local, personal knowledge is indispensable for all leaders. I outline some examples of such knowledge, including personal narrative research and action research. Finally I make recommendations to the community of educational researchers about epistemology and about its relation to educational leadership.

The argument is made as follows. I start with general observations about leadership and about practical knowledge, going on to anchor these general observations in particular examples, before drawing some conclusions for the proper conduct of educational research. The argument begins by my considering some current images of good leadership. I then go on to discuss how the concept of leadership is anchored in ethical and political commitments and judgements. In particular, I argue, judgements of good leadership are bound up with judgements about social justice. Against this background, I consider the current calls for evidence-informed or research-informed policy, questioning what sort of ‘evidence’ or ‘research’ is wanted or needed. I argue that some recent moves to valorise so-called value-free, factual, certain, and universal empirical research are misguided. The argument is made by drawing on epistemologies of the practical, unique and particular, and by presenting evidence that policy makers can, and do, draw on educational research that uses unique, particular and context-bound stories. Recommendations for educational researchers are drawn.

### WHAT IS A (GOOD) LEADER?

In this section I briefly introduce the discussion of leadership through a look at popular representations of good leadership, using pictures, poetry and an aphorism. My purpose is to draw attention to some of the assumptions and wishes that underlie these representations, rather than to analyse leadership in general. The educational research literature contains many discussions of leadership and management. My purpose is not to carry out a review of different ways of categorising educational leadership. Of course, a reader who is already familiar with that literature will recognise some of the representations as falling within different categories of educational leadership, for instance: collaborative, interpersonal, transformational, distributed, charismatic, participative, democratic, and so on. (Gunter 2001; Fullan 2002; Nixon, Walker & Baron 2002; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond 2004.)

Perhaps the most usual image of a leader in the popular imagination is of a charismatic visionary with good communication skills. Images available on numerous websites show this in different ways. A study by Field (2002) compared 187 leadership images with 186 management images. The conclusion was that leadership was seen as being about action, the communication of values and motives, and that it was not seen as being confined to any particular level of the organisation. This emphasis on vision, charisma, communication and integrity continues in new images which appear and then disappear on the web. The leader is seen as having special virtues, fitting him or her to lead. The list is inevitably reminiscent of the kind of character ascribed to the ‘good teacher’, or, indeed, to

saints, heroes and heroines. Clearly this image of the good leader as somehow superior in virtue and vision to those being led is unrealistic. However, as Cowie and McKinney (2007) show in their study of the Applied Educational Research Scheme in Scotland, the idea of the hero-innovator is alive and well as a model of educational leadership.

Alternative images depend less on the special, superior qualities of a leader. Instead they draw attention to the process of choosing a leader. Such a leader may have to take the views of those being led into account, rather than relying on his or her own perspectives and vision. This thought is expressed – and affectionately satirised – in the popular poem by Roger McGough (1987):

*The Leader*  
I wanna be the leader  
I wanna be the leader  
Can I? I can?  
Promise? Promise?  
Yippee I'm the leader  
I'm the leader  
O.K. What shall we do?

The poem contains the possibility of collaboratively agreed, participative, joint action. However, this leader is only likely to lead the group if he or she is skilled at arriving at a group consensus.

Similarly, the well-known aphorism by Lao Tzu can be read as a model of such a collaboratively agreed, participative style of leadership:

A leader is best  
when people barely know he exists.  
When his work is done,  
his aim fulfilled,  
they will say:  
'We did it ourselves.'

However this aphorism has a double edge. It may be read as advocating collaboration and participation. But it may also be read with an eye to the dangers of manipulation. The most effective form of power is that which is invisible, that shapes people's beliefs and preferences against their real interests, as Steven Lukes so elegantly showed in his essay, *Power* (Lukes 1974). If Lao Tzu's ideal leader is democratic he must also be ready to learn and change. 'His aim' will not necessarily be the same at the end (when it is fulfilled), as it was at the beginning. Rather it remains open and responsive to the ideas and perspectives of the people.

Yet other images show leadership as being a role rather than an individual. Flying geese are very popular images of leadership. As Greenhalgh and Maxwell (2006) point out in their study of undergraduate images of leadership, the image is 'representative of the fact that leadership is shared – one goose steps forward and another steps back'. Such a leader does not have special, superior qualities. Neither is he or she indispensable. On the other hand, the particular strengths of each new leader can be used and any weaknesses not prove fatal.

None of these images present an adequate representation of the possibilities and constraints of leadership. All of the ones presented so far are missing in one vital aspect. None of them mention the constraints that curtail a leader's freedom of action. None of them consider the social, political and historical contexts which restrict what a leader is able to do, or look at how far a leader is able to challenge those restrictions. To take again the metaphor of the flying geese, the birds have only a limited choice about when, where and how far to fly. Further, playing with the metaphor, we see that a goose, or a skein of geese, that becomes conscious of these constraints might be able to make different choices.

#### LEADERSHIP AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The discussion so far has not been neutral. Rather, it has revealed my own values and commitments by the way in which I have structured the discussion: in what was singled out for comment, and in the order in which different images were discussed. This lack of neutrality is not a cause for concern. On the contrary, it is an inevitable feature of the concept of leadership. Leadership is inescapably concerned with the questions: 'What should we do?' and 'How should we do it?'. 'Should' is a word indicating values, rather than technicalities. Of course, 'what should be done' is not independent of the technical question of 'what can be done': i.e. a 'should' implies a 'can', to use a well-known philosophical maxim.

Since leadership is a matter of ends as well as means, it is too important a matter to be left to 'experts'. Experts may couch questions of what to do as just a matter of expertise (of management?) but in so doing they merely hide their value position. They assume that the ends have already been agreed and the only question at issue is the question of means – and, further, that ends are independent of the means. As forcibly argued by Alisdair MacIntyre and many others since, these positions are untenable (MacIntyre 1985).

One of the value positions that I have been discussing is related to social justice. I have been implicitly talking both (a) of leadership of us by others, and also (b) of leadership of others by us. Moreover, I have been pointing out how this is likely to be a fuzzy distinction in that democratic, socially just leaders are likely to be influenced (led?) by those they lead. In order to make this point more strongly I shall explain further what is understood by 'social justice'. It is a concept with a long and contested history. As I have argued elsewhere, it is a complex concept, which implies action is (Griffiths 2003, p.54)

good for the common interest, where that is taken to include both the good of each and the good of all, in an acknowledgement that one depends on the other. The good depends on mutual recognition and also on a right distribution of benefits and responsibilities. It includes paying attention to individual perspectives and local conditions at the same time as dealing with issues of discrimination, exclusions and recognition, especially on the grounds of (any or all of) race, gender, sexuality, special needs and social class.

This definition implies that participation, consultation, partnership, voice, shared power and reflexivity are crucial components of social justice and so of a socially just leadership (Griffiths, 2003: p.59). To pay attention to individual perspectives and to the local context, it is necessary to listen to others and to work with them: to work participatively and consultatively. Recognition also implies taking care to listen to the voices of others, especially those who are usually not heard by leaders in the normal course of events. Finally shared power is essential as are a cultivated consciousness and reflexivity about power structures. The need for redistribution is, naturally, felt most sharply by those who have relatively less. When they share power with those who have relatively more, these feelings can be translated into action: ways in which unjust power structures can be challenged and changed.

To summarise, I have argued that evaluation of a leader always means making an ethical and political judgement. I have further stated a particular ethical, political position: one that is rooted in social justice. I argue for the desirability of a leader who is *of* rather than *apart from* those who are led, who takes care to learn from them, to debate ends as well as needs, and who recognises the bigger picture which includes systematic political and social constraints.

The rest of the article will mainly focus on one set of leaders: educational policy makers. It will show what this view of leadership implies for the role of educational researchers in relation to those policy makers.

#### KNOWLEDGE FOR LEADERS

Current discussion of the relation between policy and research in the UK tends to be couched in terms such as 'research-informed' or 'evidence-informed' policy and strategy. These phrases have begun to replace the earlier term 'evidence-based' (Pollard 2006). There is also much current interest in what is termed 'knowledge transfer' (Ozga & Jones 2006). The change in terminology is a symptom of the ambiguity and contestation that is signified by the terms 'research', 'evidence' or 'knowledge'. It is clear that they all have something to do with truth and validity, but these too are contested notions. This ambiguity and contestation is much more obvious to those, like researchers, who have to grapple with the problems of evidence, knowledge and truth. Anyone who has not done so is likely to take a simpler view, one which applies better to science and technology than to education. Policy makers influenced by the simpler view are likely to assume that educational researchers will produce knowledge that is (a) value-free, (b) expressed as factual information, and which (c) is certain and universally applicable. In this section, I shall show that none of these assumptions are tenable in relation to knowledge gained in educational research. I also show at the same time that educational research is, nonetheless, useful to policy makers.

#### Value-free knowledge

Education is a value-laden concept. Indeed, since values are rarely universally agreed, it is an 'essentially contested concept' (Gallie 1956). The arguments about the purpose of education, its proper conduct, and who it is for will never end. Since the concept itself is value-laden, educational researchers are, in Wilfred Carr's terms, 'for education' (1997). He chose the phrase carefully. He means it in two senses: 'on behalf of' and 'on the side of'. We might disagree, he points out, about what education is, how it should be studied, how to do it or what it is for -- but we agree we cannot do without it. The term 'education' carries in its meaning a reference to good of some kind. So when we discuss education we are discussing our values. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere (Griffiths 1998), educational research is 'for education' in a third sense. It is *educational*, that is, action-oriented and passionate, rather than simply disinterestedly *about education*. (Such research can be done, but is merely a branch of sociology, psychology, history or philosophy, etc. and is usually more properly described as being not about education but about, variously and for instance, schooling, self-help classes, the changing conditions of childhood or the nature of learning.)

It follows that knowledge from educational research cannot be value-free, because research evidence and how it is presented depends on an understanding of education itself. Of course there are simple facts, as I shall say in the next section, but these are meaningless unless placed in context. Contextualisation may occur in the research questions addressed, in the way the data is identified and collected and in the way it is analysed and presented. Therefore, research is influenced by the educational values of educational researchers. In this respect we talk to our leaders, to the policy makers. Our research contributes to the debate about educational values. Or at least it does as long as our leaders are willing to listen.

#### Factual information

Knowledge cannot be reduced to factual information. In his extraordinarily prescient book, *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard (1979) predicted the rise of neutral knowledge-as-information, formulated in such a way that it can be stored on computers in bytes. Since he wrote that book there has been a knowledge explosion accompanied by an explosion in the use of Information and Communications Technology. In just the way he predicted, there has been pressure

to produce knowledge that can be encapsulated in bytes and stored on computers as information.

Recently, the tide has begun to turn. The use of ICT to store factual information has begun to give way to an explosion of knowledge in other forms, including the more dialogical wikis, personal blogs and e-learning at tertiary level. There is an increasing space for the recognition of different concepts of knowledge.

Philosophers have long studied epistemology and have developed several ways of categorising different kinds of knowledge. The area is extremely complex. It has long been established that knowledge includes factual information but also includes various other forms. One useful distinction has been the distinction between factual 'knowledge that' something is the case (e.g. The pupil is sitting at her desk) and skilful 'knowledge how to' (e.g. A skilled teacher knows how to tell if a student is attentive and how to attract her interest and engagement) (Ryle 1971). Other useful categories, which overlap with the previous two, include *practical wisdom* (to know what to do for the best), *understanding* (conceptualisation and realisation) and positionality (coming to see things differently as from different perspectives) (Dunne 1993; Lennon & Whitford 1994, Cockburn 1998). All three of these are required by a teacher deciding if, when, and how to include explorations of race or gender in the lesson – and why.

Just as there is an increasing recognition that there are different forms of knowledge, there is an increasing recognition of the different ways that research can inform policy. Again, educational research contributes to the understanding of what matters in educational policy. Or at least it does as long as our leaders are willing to listen.

Within the UK it is well known that the relationship between researchers and policy makers is more constructive in Scotland than in England. Perhaps then it is not surprising that Scotland appears to be in the forefront of theorising this tendency. Sandra Nutley and her colleagues (for social sciences) and Pamela Munn (for education – which is both social science and humanity) have pointed out that research can be for identification of the problem and agenda setting, analysis, creation, legislation and/or adoption, implementation, and evaluation. Munn also emphasises the importance of 'blue skies' research which produces knowledge which filters in to the received wisdom and so indirectly influences policy (Munn 2005; Nutley, Walter & Davies 2007). Philosophy has its role to play even though it does not produce information or facts. Biesta (2007) argues for the significance of educational research which he terms 'cultural' and which is concerned with making problems visible, seeing things differently, and which, he argues, is rightly concerned with questions of ends as well as means. Similarly, Hogan, another philosopher, deplores the vacancy in educational policy making which arises if it is not informed by a rich, qualitative understanding of education itself (Hogan 2000). Such an understanding, he argues, recognises that learning requires a pedagogic relation in which the learner moves into new imaginative neighbourhoods of comprehension, often experiencing such movement as an epiphany (Hogan 2005; 2007).

Knowledge that is certain and universally applicable over time and place  
Science and technology produce knowledge that can reasonably be said to be certain and universally applicable over time and in all places on the planet. This is powerful knowledge that can everywhere keep aeroplanes in the air, bridges in place, water clean and measles cured. It is not surprising that education policy makers desire something similar. How easy it would be if only some simple formula could be found which would solve our educational problems once and for all.

Unfortunately, such knowledge is rare in the sphere of education for a number of reasons. (Some of these will be addressed in the next section.) Nutrition and child



development are evidently relevant to educational decisions. This kind of knowledge is the best candidate for certain and universally applicable educational knowledge. But other kinds of knowledge are much less amenable to generalisation.

There are powerful forces keeping alive the hope of finding such educational knowledge. One of these is the power of the USA. There is a powerful lobby there which has a narrow idea of what evidence is useful for policy. There is pressure on researchers to produce empirical educational research based on random control trials with the aim of producing context-free knowledge about what works. This policy has travelled, to use Ozga and Jones's term (2006). Fortunately, it has not remained unchanged in translation, since as Nixon, Walker and Baron (2002) show for Scotland, as policy migrates it is culturally mediated. While there is pressure to produce such knowledge in the UK, it appears to be lessening and anyway has been less relentless (Pollard 2006).

There are also powerful reasons to reject the hope of finding such knowledge. It has been the subject of cogent criticism (Biesta 2007; Oancea & Pring 2008; Smeyers 2008). More simply, anyone who reflects on education historically or geographically will recognise that knowledge of one situation will transfer to another, but not in the form of the universal laws of science and technology. Consider, for instance, the much studied case of teaching children to read. The issues are familiar to us: phonics, word recognition, pleasure in reading, are some of the most obvious. However, beyond that statement there is little general to say. Consider what it takes to teach a child to read in modern day Scotland, where children grow up surrounded by print, are used to words appearing on the television, are taught in classrooms that have many books written especially for children and usually in their native tongue, where reading has particular gendered and class-based cultural meanings. Now consider the same situation but move it back a century, or two centuries. Alternatively, consider the same situation but move it across the continents to remote classrooms in Botswana, where all this changes. Then move it across other continents to Iran or China, where it all changes again but differently.

In the next section I consider alternatives. Knowledge, I argue, need not be certain and universally applicable in order to be useful to educational leaders. On the contrary, I shall argue that they need knowledge rooted in the lovely diversity and endless creativity of human beings. Again, educational research has a contribution to make to an understanding of how education works, or at least it does as long as our leaders are willing to listen.

#### AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE UNIQUE AND PARTICULAR

While certain, universal knowledge is mostly unavailable to educational policy makers, useful and trustworthy knowledge is obtainable. Such knowledge starts from the observation that knowledge of human actions and activities is necessarily different from knowledge in the world of science and technology. It is obtained differently if only because the objects of knowledge (human beings) are conscious and reactive, and it is used differently if only because ethical considerations are inescapable.

The difference between knowledge of human beings and other forms of knowledge was discussed by Aristotle, especially in *The Nicomachean Ethics* (1925). His threefold division of knowledge into the purely theoretical, and two forms of practical activity (*techne and praxis*) remain influential as a way of distinguishing the different kinds of intelligence needed for contemplation of the world, for acting in it or for solving technical problems. As Dunne so usefully expresses it (in Dunne & Pendlebury, 2003: 200):

But the great significance of Aristotle lies in the fact that he ... provided a rich analysis of the kind of knowledge that guides, and is well fitted to,

characteristically human -- and therefore inescapably ethical -- activity (praxis).

A leader with practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is engaged in praxis in order to make a judgement about what to do for the best in any particular situation. What is needed for practical wisdom is both the ability to learn from experience of similar situations and also an understanding of the ethical issues at stake.

But how can a leader gain practical wisdom? Adriana Cavarero (2002) argues that human affairs need a particular kind of knowledge, an epistemology of the unique and particular. She draws on Hannah Arendt to point up some particular attributes of human beings which explain why universally certain knowledge is unattainable. She goes on to argue that individual stories and voices, heard in specific contexts, are an essential feature of the knowledge needed by wise policy makers.

Cavarero draws attention to three features of Arendt's conclusions about human beings in drawing up the principles by which policy making is to be understood. She says that they are (2002: 512):

exemplarily illustrated by Hannah Arendt, [and] have to do with the plurality of human beings insofar as they are unique beings rather than fictitious entities like the individual of modern political doctrine, and they have most of all to do with the relational dimension of reciprocal dependency.

Arendt describes the uniqueness of human beings as follows (1958: 8):

Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.

Here Arendt points out the diversity of human beings. Educational policies need to take account of this.

Arendt also emphasises the significance of social and political bonds to human beings. They are not, Arendt says, merely individuals in private or intimate relationships. In her penetrating analysis of totalitarianism (and drawing on her own experience as Jew in Nazi Germany), she discusses the dehumanised position of displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers (1966: 301-2):

The human being who has lost his place in a community, his political status in the struggle of his time, and the legal personality which makes his actions and part of his destiny a consistent whole, is left with those qualities which usually can become articulate only in the sphere of private life ... [and which] can be adequately dealt with only by the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy, or by the great and incalculable grace of love. ... The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant that a person becomes a human being in general – without a profession, without a citizenship, representing nothing but his own absolutely unique individuality.

In other words, we are human because of our history and culture and because we form groups outside the family in which we act. It is indeed hard to imagine a human being without such bonds. Or as I have put it (Griffiths 1995: 16):

'I' is a fragment rather than an atom (I am always part of a 'we').

Therefore, educational policies are always made in relation not only to a diverse, but also to a social world.

The social world is not a stable one. As new human beings are born (what Arendt calls 'natality') newness comes into the world. Therefore, the social world itself is always in a state of change. As Arendt explains (1958: 191):

The frailty of human institutions and laws and, generally, of all matters pertaining to men's living together, arises from the human condition of natality and is quite independent of the frailty of human nature.

Educational policies, then, are always made not only in relation to a diverse world, not only to a social world but also to a changing one. That is, it is a world which is not homogeneous either over different places or different times. There are few unchanging, universal, certain truths to be found about human societies.

This human world is so much more difficult to deal with than the world of things. Approaches that work for that world are of limited use. What is needed is an epistemology of the unique and particular. But what does this mean in practice? It means that policy makers always need to understand the changing, context-bound nature of anything they know about the human beings they are dealing with. Therefore, they need to hear fully contextualised individual stories as well as more generalised ones

As for any epistemology, questions about trustworthiness need to be answered. How might individual stories useful for policy makers be distinguished from anecdotes, journalism, fables or outright lies? These are questions about the soundness of such research, its truthfulness and validity.

I have used the term 'sound' because as a term in logic it includes both truth and validity. In formal logic, validity is a property of a logical argument, while truth is the property of a premise. Truth is a property of a conclusion only if both the premises are true and the argument is valid. Similarly, research has to be sound: that is it has to pay attention to both truthfulness and validity. In the case of individual stories the question is raised about how it is possible to tell if somebody is being truthful. Even if they think they are being truthful, they may be romancing their lives somehow, for instance seeing themselves as victims, heroes, or tragic heroes. It may be thought the question of validity is even more thorny than the question of truthfulness. However, luckily, this is not so. The natural sciences have developed a specialised, technical vocabulary suitable for themselves. In this discourse, 'validity' determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure. But we in the social sciences and humanities need not follow the natural sciences. 'Valid' was not originally a word especially associated with measurement. Rather it comes from the Latin 'validus' meaning 'strong'. The dictionary definition makes clear that its central meanings include (1) well grounded or justifiable: being at once relevant and meaningful; (2) having a conclusion correctly derived from premises.

Recognising the truthfulness and validity of stories is an everyday practice for human beings. We have developed ways of weighing the strength of people's stories, of recognising when they are self-serving or self-deceiving for instance. Indeed people routinely stake a great deal on their ability to tell when somebody is being truthful – so it is probable that they are usually right. There are hard cases. Barristers, no doubt, develop a particular skill in recognising truthfulness. And, necessarily, so do teachers. It is an ordinary human skill. Surrounded by personal stories as we are, how could we live without it?

Researchers need to become clearer about how they draw on – and refine – the ordinary practices of recognising truthfulness and validity. Some suggestions are made about this in Griffiths and Macleod (2008) in a philosophical article which investigates the epistemology underlying personal story in the context of social action. We argue that:

Sound auto/biographical research needs to show that the researcher has taken account of the following:

- (1) Truthfulness: accuracy and sincerity.
- (2) Representativeness.
- (3) Representation.
- (4) Re-framing of the matter at hand.
- (5) Genre.



- (6) Literary quality.
- (7) Reflexivity.

We point out that researchers do in fact take account of these matters, but suggest that it would be helpful if all these criteria for soundness were more widely recognised and used.

There are many examples of the use of auto/biographical accounts by policy makers. Some of them have been influential. For instance Gow and McPherson's book, *Tell them from me*, was drawn from personal, autobiographical accounts. In the introduction to the book they explain that (1980: 3):

[These accounts] have been written by young people who left school in Scotland in the second half of the 1970s...The book is about their experience, their opinions and feelings, about their grudges and gratitude. It is about the way education, work and employment seemed to young people.

The book was exemplary in the way its introduction addressed questions of truthfulness, representativeness and re-framing (of the understanding of Scottish education as fair). It was, rightly, significant in Scotland in the reform of assessment in the 80s. Indeed, this research continues to be cited in government documents over 20 years later (Scottish Parliament, 2002). Government education departments throughout the UK continue to be not only receptive to, but to actively seek out research which focuses on the experiences of individuals. Much of this research draws on personal stories. Munn *et al's* (2005) work on the deployment of additional staff to support behaviour in schools explored the individual circumstances of staff and young people (Munn 2005). The Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families) have recently commissioned research on the experiences of young people permanently excluded from special schools and Pupil Referral Units in England and Wales. The collection of autobiographical narratives from these young people is key to the evidence being analysed in the report (Pirrie & Macleod 2007).

There are implications for our work as educational researchers. In the first place it is necessary to affirm that all our work is *personal, passionate and committed*. This is part of being an educational researcher, and not something for which to apologise.

Further, *the unique and particular*, the individual human being at the centre of webs of social relations, is at the core of our concerns as educators, and is also at the core of our concerns as researchers. For both these reasons *reflexivity* is essential. It is important for us to be aware of what and why we do what we do. This is partly so we are able to keep a grip on our ethical and political values in education, but it is also so that *we can educate our leaders*. Part of our job is to explain ourselves to those who assume (and it is not a stupid assumption, even though it is quite wrong) that we can find out 'what works' and then apply it.

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