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# Deconstructing educational leadership: Derrida and Lyotard

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*Deconstructing educational leadership: Derrida and Lyotard*

by Richard Niesche (review)

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college course, whether taught by a (rare) conservative academic or a liberal academic should include teaching and assessment of these skills, his point becomes muddled by a persistent reverberation of anti-conservative views. He fails to leave room for the possibility that a student who was properly taught to be open-minded, self-reflective, and able to critically evaluate would wind up after 4 years as anything but a leftist liberal. He treats "intellectual conservatives" as anomalies rather than a likely (or legitimate) end to a well-developed undergraduate education. He simultaneously begs for open and honest debate with his conservative counterparts while giving only brief and superficial nods to "intellectual conservatives" working in pockets. However, the "uninformed conservatives" he lambasts are portrayed as working in planned hegemonic concert for the hearts and minds of the country, filling his classrooms with static and unmalleable undergraduates.

Lazere's rally against the hegemonic nature of the conservative mainstream neglects to respect the lived experiences that make conservatism makes sense to so many in American society. Lazere's argument gets bogged down in the particulars of names and events, failing to see that the issue of impenetrable undergraduate minds is contextual and has been repeated throughout history. The problem is systemic—not able to be remedied at the university-level—by then it is largely too late. Indeed, teaching critical evaluation and presenting alternative thinking will continue to be ineffective when leftist academics teach over or at their students and decry the conservative mainstream that, as Lazere described in detail, has been injected into most students' entire lives.

Hegemony does not just happen, it occurs when something makes sense within the frame of society or a group's worldview. It is a lived reality tethered to their thoughts, which college students bring into their classrooms, and which academia itself is designed to purposefully and thoughtfully challenge. Lazere fails to provide those tethers for either his thinking or those whom his leftist bias seeks to counter. Instead, Lazere's argument is that he is leaning toward the left simply because it isn't the right and that his students lean to the right simply because they were manipulatively told to do so. It is an argument with no tangible solution presented.

Lazere's delivery of his argument is often unnecessarily wordy and often backhanded. If he seeks to open real debate with the "intellectual conservatives," his writing may do only that with the small pocket of academics who trudge through the overly heavy text. Lazere laments about the "countless daily manifestations of the conservatism that saturates American culture and education" and then saturates his entire argument with elitist,

liberal ideas that offer no space for even legitimate counter arguments (p. 17). He continually makes the freshman mistake of ending arguments with quotes or plopping entire dialogues into the middle of a chapter without fleshing out the point of the citation, speaking only to those who would "get it" before they ever opened the book.

The issue with this book, and others like it, is the moment that a reader scans the table of contents, they already know what the argument is. Lazere fails to surprise readers with anything but an inaccurate representation of society as a two-sided coin. He seems to want to focus on the value of critical evaluation in a society and how it should be taught to college students, but does not get to it. Bias is a given. But to claim that it should be the go-to standard in higher education classrooms to solve an imbalance in society is to grossly underestimate the systemic issues that begin far younger for American youth. To claim that one type of bias provides something more freeing than another is a dangerous assertion, especially anywhere in education. Indeed it is what polarized radicals across the globe into camps so entrenched in their own ideology despite knowing about others. While Lazere focuses on conservative's use of well-known and practiced marketing schemes, the larger issue is why those practices (so blatantly dangerous, non-inclusive, and unwavering) work so well in America and the world.

If leftist academics cannot get their students off of a heavy dose of non-objectivity by simply presenting the other side's better researched arguments—they need to find another pedagogical approach. Lazere fails to provide concrete solutions, strategies, or even case studies that demonstrate the pedagogy of critical evaluation, self-reflection, or openness. The vast, well-researched pedagogy for critical evaluation is indeed out there and used throughout higher education, as well as secondary and elementary education—it just isn't mentioned in this treatise.

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**Richard Niesche. *Deconstructing educational leadership: Derrida and Lyotard*. New York, NY: Routledge. 2014. 144 pp. Hardcover: \$130.34. ISBN: 978-0-415-81920-6.**

REVIEWED BY KRISHNA BISTA, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF LOUISIANA AT MONROE

With my general interest and background in the Western philosophy, I was surprised to see a new title published in educational leadership that followed the conceptual framework laid out by Jacques Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard, two

prominent French post-structural philosophers. As a young scholar in educational administration, the first question that came to mind was “what do Derrida and Lyotard have to do with educational leadership?” Post-structuralist authors argue that there is no such structure in human culture, and no such self-sufficiency of the structures. In the post-structuralist approach, the reader offers a critical review of normative concepts, replaces the author (center), and examines other sources for meaning such as cultural norms or other literary works (periphery). Readers offer multiple meanings and interpretations of the same text or objects instead of one single meaning.

As I unpacked the entire seven chapters in Richard Niesche’s *Deconstructing Educational Leadership: Derrida and Lyotard*, I remember my graduate school classes in Western philosophy that forced me to think about politics within education; as well as educational reform through the lenses of post-structuralism and deconstruction. Post-structuralism is a reaction against scientific objectivity and universality; it challenges Western logocentrism (idea that there is no center or a foundation for all thoughts, language, experience) and constructs a discourse outside the center, whereas deconstruction focuses on the structures of binary opposition (day/night, black/white, divine/human) to differentiate the hierarchies and social systems. Harcourt (2007) states,

Post-structuralism is a style of critical reasoning that focuses on the moment of slippage in our systems of meaning as a way to identify—right there, in that ambiguous space—the ethical choices that we make, whether in our writings or in everyday life. (p. 1)

Personally, I was fascinated and driven by the question—how am I going to use Derrida and Lyotard in leadership? How do we assess “truth,” “reality,” “knowledge,” and “certainty” in our management and leadership?

The intended audience for this book is educational leaders, policy makers, and administrators in the field of Educational Leadership, Management, and Administration. This book urges the readers to think of leadership as development “prompted by international gurus with modernizing know-how” (p. viii). In other words, it offers a different perspective to the leadership industry located in schools, universities, and companies and their policies and solutions. In general, this book is a critical thinking resource for professionals, whether in academia or business, who are interested in leadership and administration to evaluate the art of leading and leadership, policy directions and reforms, educational issues and outcomes in the local and/or

national contexts. Moreover, it offers the reader a framework, from social and political theories, by Derrida and Lyotard. These theories help educators and leaders examine the existing administrative systems critically, identify the ambiguity and ethical choices, and explore the shared social agreement over the structure of meaning.

Tightly organized around three contemporary themes of educational leadership discourse, the author has examined: a) the school accountability system and its impact on educational leaders, b) the quest for the best educational model and the subsequent rise of educational reform and standards, and c) the issues of social justice and equity in leadership professions. Written within 114 pages, excluding notes and references, the author is able to bring a new perspective to reflect our own leadership patterns, compare the works established by experts in the field, and re-design new leadership models.

Of the seven chapters, the first two chapters provide context and background regarding various theoretical perspectives. In chapter 1, the author briefly introduces the intellectual movement led by the 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophers (Derrida and Lyotard), and the basic meaning of major terms and concepts used by these philosophers such as “postmodern condition,” “the differend,” “sublime,” “deconstruction,” “*différance*,” [a coinage suggesting in French “to be different” or “to defer”] and “supplement.” Chapter 2 mentions the current leadership standards (e.g., Educational Leadership Constituent Council standards), competencies (e.g., high-stakes testing), and educational reforms (e.g., *No Child Left Behind*), and the author critically explores “the relevance of Lyotard’s notion of performativity” and Derrida’s “work on deconstruction . . . within the texts and discourses” of educational leadership (p. 41). In other words, Lyotard’s concept of ‘performativity’ played a significant role in understanding the major shifts in the institutional discourse of universities in recent times. This affects academia in terms of academic freedom and knowledge-based performance. Derrida’s work “builds on the notion that meanings are derived from relations of difference, that these are largely subconscious, and that they form a structure. But it emphasizes the gaps and ambiguities in the structure of meanings” (Harcourt, 2007, p. 17).

The next three chapters (3 through 5) are the central focus of the book in which the author used “the ideas associated with *deconstruction*, *différance* and the *supplement*” to explore the study and practice of educational leadership (p. 23). In Chapter 3, the author examines leadership standards and assumptions. He argues that “these leadership standards consist of incommensurable moves and approaches over others and those that tend to reinforce heroic assumptions about leadership practice

and encourage conformity rather than diversity" (p. 44). Using Lyotard's notion of *language games* and the *differend* as conceptual tools, the author examines Australian national leadership standards document, *Leadership Matters*, as "examples of these problematic leadership discourses" (p. 45).

Written by two guest authors, Chapter 4 builds on Lyotard's notion of *performativity* and analyzes leadership discourse and practice of the Lowbridge School in England. The chapter suggests that the reader should look into school performance, leadership culture, and control through the lense of critical theory (postmodernism). Readers may find this chapter interesting to understand how postmodernism challenges the change and skeptical attitudes and beliefs in religion, language, history, economics, agriculture, and literature. Tierney (1996) wrote that postmodernist approach was "the idea of leadership becomes contested, and the assumption about what constitutes good leadership is open for interpretation and redefinition" (p. 374). Postmodernists search for clarity or persuasion through rational logic because "absolutes no longer exist, and one assumes that multiple representations exist within one organization" (Tierney, 1996, p. 374).

Chapter 5 examines leadership discourse through the Derridean concept of deconstruction. The author seeks to explore "different relations between leaders and followers across a broad spectrum" of leadership where he says "the leader as presence and follower as lack—a form of *logocentrism* that Derrida sought to deconstruct in his writings" (p. 84). In this chapter, the author analyzes two canonical leadership texts (Burn's *Leadership*, 1978 and Bass' *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*, 1985) through the leader-follower dualism (binary) as a form of *logocentrism* to enact transformational leadership and distributed leadership models. The author informs the readers that "this dualism is at the bedrock of leadership studies and is what 'makes' leadership what it is" (p. 85).

Chapter 6 offers the limitations and critiques of Derrida and Lyotard in general and specifically in the context of educational leadership, management, and administration. Although Derrida and Lyotard are less relevant in education, the author believes their theories serve as tools to "understanding the complexities of school and educational contexts for those working in schools and also for looking for different and new ways of offering alternative perspectives and of being educational leaders" (p. 111). In the final section of the chapter, the author provides future avenues of research that explore additional thoughts related to Derrida and Lyotard in leadership studies.

Chapter 7 is the final chapter and the author lists further reading and resources related to Der-

rida and Lyotard with a synopsis of each list. He has organized the list into a general category of resources related to these two philosophers and a specific category of resources on education.

In this edition, the author has done a wonderful job by applying the work and ideas of Derrida and Lyotard in educational leadership studies. Although, by nature, the postmodern critical theories as such of Derrida and Lyotard, are complex and less directly related to education, the author is successful in highlighting the value of those obscure concepts (e.g., *deconstruction*, *differance*, *performativity*) as they pertain to leadership studies.

Overall, this book is a useful resource for scholars interested in postmodern critical studies in educational leadership and takes advantage of the work of Lyotard and Derrida. Readers may also find other titles in the critical studies series (e.g., Gunter's *Educational Leadership* and Hannah Arendt, and Gilles' *Educational Leadership* and Michel Foucault) helpful in understanding professional and political ideologies of education. However, for general readers of education, this book (as well as other titles in the series) is complicated. Many postmodern philosophical concepts are abstract, fuzzy and require at least a general understanding of Derrida and Lyotard to apply to the work in leadership discourse and exploration. Despite such facts, this book has opened a venue for future readers and researchers to explore in this area of leadership studies. Personally, I recommend reading *Deconstructing Educational Leadership: Derrida and Lyotard* to better understand the contemporary issues in educational leadership and critical theories.

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