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An intellectual history of school leadership practice and research

Helen M. Gunter, London: Bloomsbury, 2016. Pbk. 231 pp. ISBN 978-1-4725-7897-6

Seeing the bigger picture in the field of school leadership is quite a challenge for both novice practitioners and seasoned researchers. The field has developed over time and there are regional varieties across the globe. It is a subdiscipline of leadership *per sé*, it draws insights from multiple disciplines, and perspectives diverge within it. It is therefore highly commendable that professor Helen Gunter undertook the daunting task of writing *An intellectual history of school leadership practice and research*. It takes a researcher of enormous knowledge, not to mention grit, to finish a book like this, and I am impressed by the sheer amount of literature referred to, the scholarship, and the grasp of the field that the book demonstrates. The book is written from a secular paradigm, but it brings to light important issues to consider from a Christian perspective. I will first give a flavour of the book.

Gunter's "framing of the intellectual history is located in Bourdieu's (2000) thinking tools, where the dimensions of *field*, *habitus*, *capitals*, *doxa* and *misrecognition* enable explanations as a social and political practice" (p. 3). Gunter uses a multilevel framework to describe the history in terms of "knowledge production" (p. 2), that is, how knowledge comes about and grows. She distinguishes knowledge traditions ("positivist scientific, behaviourist science, values, experiential, critical science," p. 45), purposes, domains, and contexts. After having discussed the framework as such, she applies it to four so-called "networks" (p. 4): educational administration, educational effectiveness and improvement research, entrepreneurs and popularizers, and critical educational policy and leadership studies. The elaborate discussion of these roads taken within school leadership (some 40% of the book) gives the reader a sense of direction: where am I and what are the highways in this leadership maze? I found this the most helpful part of the book.

The book makes heavy reading though. The language tends toward the abstract and it takes considerable effort to understand sentences as 'the explication of this approach is a necessary anchor for the study, and the *Knowledge Production* framework provides the underpinning dimensions for how ideas and actions at a moment in time are located in a complex strategizing for agency interplayed with the structures that enable and limit" (p. 3). Such phrases abound.

This drawback comes on top of the complicated structure, which is imposed on the material at hand. I acknowledge that it is hard to avoid moulding the extensive material to make it accessible for discussion. However, the many interrelated levels make one lose sight of the wood for the trees. The framework chosen also tends to necessitate covering the same field more than once. Furthermore, as reality tends to elude and surpass any model, some of the boundaries between the four networks seem to be somewhat blurred and arbitrary. A key question arises: Are they mutually exclusive, and, hence, does the distinction do justice to the sources? Work done by researchers who published studies in more than one of the four networks seems to contradict this, for instance.

Finally, Gunter rightly acknowledges that she has written " 'a' history" (p. 1). The choice of a particular lens indeed both brings to light and obscures. Therefore an intriguing question for a final chapter would have been whether a different approach would have yielded

a different view on the complexity and history of the field. While I concede that this may be asking too much of the book, that brings us to two issues Christian scholars could consider.

The first is how we make sense of the concept, complexity and history of leadership, and its relation with biblical notions, including discipleship, authority, service. The book employs contemporaneous terms such as *followers* (e.g. p. 121), *power structures* (e.g. chapter 11) and *effectiveness* (e.g. chapter 9). What does the choice of terminology reveal and conceal? A second issue to consider is what framework to apply. What would an intellectual history look like, for example, from a Dooyeweerdian perspective? Suppose we try to map the field with only the flimsiest of pre-theoretical notions present: Can Christians expect a certain structure to emerge from the apparent chaos out there, just because God created order as well? The book brings these questions to mind for the field of leadership and that is valuable.

All told, this is an erudite but complicated study. I found the part in which the four networks are described and discussed most useful. Novice readers might love to consult the extensive bibliography. The book urges Christian scholars to ponder some difficult questions.

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