

## **(Re)imagining method in educational leadership and management research**

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*Over the past thirty years we have witnessed a proliferation of educational methods/methodologies aimed at helping us to make sense of the world — to provide clarity about the meaning of social reality. However, although these methods/methodologies are useful frameworks, they do not capture fully the untidy realities of the real world. The discipline of Educational Leadership and Management is embedded in a broader social world and therefore resonates within fields of complexity, fluidity, heterogeneity, multiplicity, unpredictability, messiness, and so on. I suggest that conventional methods do not adequately capture social/educational reality fully, and argue that research should be less concerned about seeking clarity, but should rather — in Law’s terms — be concerned with seeking a “[d]isciplined lack of clarity”. Put simply, methods cannot give coherence to a world that is itself incoherent. The argument presented has applicability to social science research generally, but also to the field of Educational Leadership and Management more specifically.*

### **Introduction**

The purpose in this article is not to provide answers, but perhaps to raise questions, to open up a discussion on how we might perform or imagine method differently — how we might rescue method from that which produces smooth western metaphysical certainties.

The past three decades have witnessed a proliferation of methods/methodologies aimed at helping us to better describe social reality. Since the mid-1980s in particular, ethnography, phenomenology, hermeneutics, interpretive, feminist, critical, narrative inquiry, among other approaches, have emerged as alternative frames of reference (to that of positivism) for examining social reality. In the 1990s post-frameworks, particularly postmodernism and post-structuralism, also came into prominence. However, despite these developments many textbooks and university research methods courses still frame methods/methodologies narrowly, for example, the quantitative/qualitative representation with its divide frames much of what is discussed in contemporary research methods texts and university courses/modules. At the outset I wish to point out that I am not suggesting that the methods described in textbooks are not useful. They are, but they are limited in what they able to capture. It is the normativity of method depicted in texts that is particularly problematic. Dominant versions of method tend to distort the world in the sense that they only capture parts of it — modes of knowing in other ways are excluded. Law (2003:3) argues that accounts of method found in textbooks make social inquiry mostly “a form of hygiene”, since it seeks to give clarity and coherence to reality, which is not itself very coherent. He writes that it

becomes a case of:

Do your methods properly. Eat your epistemological greens. Wash your hands after mixing with the real world. Then you will lead the good research life. Your data will be clean. Your findings warrantable. The product you will produce will be pure. Guaranteed to have a long shelf-life.

Texts on educational leadership and management are not excluded from this criticism. For example, a useful and widely used book on research methods in educational leadership and management is the one edited by Coleman and Briggs (2004). Aimed primarily at postgraduate students, the book attempts to make an array of methods/methodologies available to the reader and raises important philosophical issues. In particular, it makes important contributions such as the chapter on cross-cultural differences, the inclusion of research approaches such as action research as well as the discussion on reflexivity in Chapter 1. Encouragingly, the book gives the reader access to a wider selection of methodological tools than some conventional texts do. However, overall the book is framed within the traditional positivist/interpretivist or quantitative/qualitative distinction. The book therefore does not transcend the condition of being “intellectual hygiene”, particularly with respect to the technical discussions on reliability and validity as well as those on quantitative and qualitative data analysis. As mentioned, discussions on these matters should feature in texts on methods. However, they are limited in the sense that they help in catching only parts of social reality, and in so doing fail to capture the complexity, multiplicity, fluidity, and messiness of it.

Against this background I wish to open up a discussion on method, on its limitations and on how it could be imagined differently. I will further explore the relevance of this discussion for educational leadership and management research in South Africa. I divide the remainder of the article into three sections. First, I discuss the nature of method. Second, I describe some of the realities faced by educational leaders and managers in South Africa. Third, I discuss how method may be imagined differently so as to capture the complexity, fluidity, and multiplicity of social reality generally and the background against which South African educational leadership and management research is practised, more specifically.

### **The nature of method**

Although the discussion in this article is about research method, it may be useful at the outset to distinguish between method and methodology. Sandra Harding (1987:2) points out that method refers to techniques for gathering empirical evidence (the way of proceeding) whereas methodology is the theory of knowledge and the interpretive framework guiding a particular research project (Harding, 1987:2). According to this understanding, methodology therefore is the philosophical framework that guides the research activity or could be viewed as the theories behind method. The distinction between method and methodology may be important for analytical/theoretical purposes. However, in practice method and methodology are closely interwoven. There-

fore my use of the term method in this article assumes that method and methodology are inextricably bound up with one another. Moreover, method is not simply techniques for gathering evidence. As Law (2004:143) writes:

Method is not ... a more or less successful set of procedures for reporting on a given reality. Rather it is performative. It helps to produce realities. It does not do so freely and at whim. There is a hinterland of realities, of manifest absences and Othernesses, resonances and patterns of one kind or another, already being enacted, and it cannot ignore these.

Method is also creative, that is, it re-works, re-bundles and re-crafts realities and creates new versions of the world (Law, 2004:143). So, method does not provide clarity about or simply describe something that is out there, but re-constructs the object or phenomenon it attempts to describe — in a sense it creates the objects or phenomena that it seeks to describe. Furthermore, method includes and it excludes, it creates presences, absences and othernesses. There are several implications here and I shall mention two: firstly, if method is parochially conceived and performed, it might capture only certain parts of the world, and secondly, if method is understood as being performative or enacted, then it could be (re)imagined more broadly and generously and as a consequence capture much more of the world. Put differently, method makes and draws together things in particular ways and describes them accordingly, but could also make and describe things differently.

Furthermore, method is a broader construct than formal representations of it such as, for example, those found in texts. It is a complex set or assemblage of relations beyond simplifications captured in texts. As Law (2004:144) writes:

... method is not just what is learned in textbooks and the lecture hall, or practiced in ethnography, survey research, geological field trips, or at laboratory benches. Even in these formal settings it also ramifies out into and resonates with materially and discursively heterogeneous relations which are, for the most, invisible to the methodologist.

The notion of method assemblage helps us to understand that when method is made or enacted, it necessarily constructs boundaries between *presence*, *absence*, and *otherness*. *Presence* refers to, for example, a representation of an object, *absence* to that which is relevant to presence and that can also be described, whereas *otherness* refers to that which is necessary to presence but hidden, muted, or uninteresting. The difference between absence and otherness may be likened to Wagner's (1993:16) distinction between *blank spots* and *blind spots*. *Blank spots* are what scientists know enough about to question but do not provide answers for, and *blind spots* are what they don't know enough about or care about.

When conventional academic methods are enacted, is it therefore critical to examine how the boundaries between presence, absence and otherness are constructed and most importantly what is excluded and muted when methods are enacted. With respect to what is excluded, we can generate an unending list of what conventional social sciences methods do not capture. Law (2004:2)

provides a useful start when he writes:

Pains and pleasures, hopes and horrors, intuitions and apprehensions, losses and redemptions, mundanities and visions, angels and demons, things that slip and slide, or appear and disappear, change shape or don't have much form at all, unpredictabilities, these are just a few of the phenomena that are hardly caught by social sciences methods.

He goes on to argue that only parts of the world are captured in our ethnographies, our histories and statistics — that conventional academic methods distort reality into apparent clarity. Law (2004) describes how method assemblage might be understood in a world of undecidable potentialities and undecidable flux. He writes:

Sometimes ... in method assemblage, out-there-ness crystallizes into particular forms or (a different metaphor) collapses for a moment into decidability. If method assemblage can be seen as resonance then this is because it detects all the periodicities, patterns or waveforms in the flux, but attends to, amplifies, and retransmits only a few whilst silencing the others.

And so, if we viewed the world through a metaphysics alternative to smooth and certain European-American metaphysics,<sup>1</sup> i.e. if the world is perceived as an undecidable flux, a kaleidoscope, as unpredictable, multiple, heterogeneous, ephemeral and vague, then a question that begs to be answered is what such a view of reality means for the way social sciences research should or might be performed? What parts of reality do conventional social sciences methods not catch and can method be (re)imagined so as to capture what is silenced by conventional academic methods? Before attempting to answer these questions I shall discuss the context in which South African educational leadership and management is practised, and in which educational leadership and management research is performed.

### **The changing South African educational environment**

The South African education landscape is a complex and changing one. Since 1994, in particular, we have witnessed the development of a plethora of education policies. Through the Schools Act of 1996, new governance structures have been introduced into schools ostensibly aimed at democratising school governance. New outcomes-based curriculum frameworks have been developed for general education and training (GET) as well as for further education and training (FET), so that all learners can be successful and able to learn at their own pace. New assessment and quality assurance policies and processes have been put in place in attempts to improve the quality of the South African education system. Mechanisms for regulating and monitoring the quality of the education system have been introduced. For example, a body, *Umalusi*, was established with the mandate to ensure quality in general education and training as well as further education and training. Over the past two decades we have witnessed the marketisation of schools, which has widened the gap between affluent and poor schools. Affluent schools are able to charge exorbi-

tant school fees, enabling them to appoint additional teachers and acquire additional material resources to those provided by the state. Furthermore, schools have increasingly come under scrutiny in relation to their performance. Based on their Grade 12 results, schools are ranked and categorized as, for example, excellent or poor-performing schools. This information, together with the 100 top-ranked schools, is published in national newspapers. The quality of the education system is measured almost exclusively by a single instrument, the performance of Grade 12 learners. One of main reasons given for why schools perform poorly is that their schools are not managed very well.

How might we understand these developments? Many of these developments could be ascribed to a rising culture of performativity. Ball (2003:216) argues that “performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change — based on rewards and sanctions”. The rising culture of performativity is closely intertwined with the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the past four decades. Neoliberalism can be traced back to the liberal perspectives of the 17th century, which became marginalised as a result of the rise of welfare state liberalism in the late 19th century and the Keynesian economics of the 20th century. Its revival in recent decades has been associated with the emergence of the ‘new right’ in Europe and the United States of America, notably referred to as Reaganism and Thatcherism after two of its key proponents. The revival of neoliberal politics has witnessed the erosion of the welfare state, the privatisation of state assets and a return to neoclassical economics. Neoliberalism is a contentious term (both among its proponents and critics), but there are common principles which all neoliberals share. I shall briefly mention three of these: a commitment to individual liberty and a reduced state; a shift in policy and ideology against government intervention; and a view that market forces should be allowed to operate so as to be capable of self-regulation. (For a comprehensive discussion on the ascendancy of neoliberalism, see Olssen, Codd & O’Neill, 2004.)

With the revival of neoliberal politics we have witnessed the role of the state changing. The role of the state has changed from that of provider (of basic needs of citizens) to that of monitor and regulator. This changing role is felt in all spheres of society but particularly in arenas such as education and health. Moreover, transition states (often weak states) tend to adopt neoliberal policies to legitimate themselves globally so as to give the appearance of being progressive and modern. In South Africa, for example, we witnessed the post-*apartheid* state adopt neoliberal policies, even though the governing party (the African National Congress) had predicated its political/economic manifesto on socialist and nationalist idea(l)s, during its struggle against *apartheid*. The educational changes described earlier are largely underpinned by neoliberal agendas. The influence of market forces is evident in the growth of private schools and the devolution of powers to governing bodies has reinforced the marketisation of schools — that schools should be run as

businesses. Traces of neoclassical economics are evident in outcomes-based education, which focuses on skills development so as to prepare learners for their future roles as contributors to the national economy.

In this context method is produced in particular ways and associated with movements such as school effectiveness research (SER). School effectiveness research favours certain approaches to school organisation, management, curriculum, teaching and assessment that place an emphasis on efficiency and accountability to state-sanctioned knowledge and values. A key notion in this approach to educational research is that of the “school effect” — that which makes some schools perform better than others, even though they are located in similar environments. I wish to reinforce the point here that method is not innocent, but is produced and influenced by particular contexts (their hinterlands and hidden supports) — when schools are located in a neoliberal political climate, then education practices, including educational leadership and management research and its methods, are likely to be products of neoliberal forces.

But, the hinterland in terms of which educational leadership and management are practised encompasses a great deal more than what I have described. Huge inequalities exist in South African society, and these are reflected in and reproduced by the school system. Many South Africans suffer daily because of poverty and diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV/AIDS. Even curable diseases such as malaria are difficult to control, because the disease has multiple strains including drug-resistant ones. The unemployment rate in South Africa is high and violent crime threatens the safety of South African citizens. Schools are not isolated from these influences; for example, many educators and learners go to schools every day fearing that they might become victims of crime. It is not uncommon for teachers to encounter learners who are “exhausted and struggling to concentrate because of pregnancy, tuberculosis, chronic bilharzia, and other parasitic infections such as roundworms and hookworms, and undernutrition because crops will no longer grow on barren land” (Doidge, 1996:46). South Africa has 11 official languages and many more spoken ones that need to be managed in such a way that diversity is celebrated rather than becoming the source of conflict. Over the past decade there have been conflicts around the language policies of schools and some conflicts ended up in litigation. Furthermore, as global discourses such as neoliberalism are being taken up, simultaneously there are discourses on African philosophy and indigenous knowledge that are gaining prominence in South Africa, perhaps best understood as part of the struggle for an African identity in post-colonial/*apartheid* South Africa. I can continue to mention issues which highlight the complexity of South African society and the context of schooling, but I think the point is sufficiently made. The issues that I have raised are sources of fear, despair, suffering, but also of hope, drive, motivation, etc. They form the parts of our world that we don’t catch adequately in our research investigations, but also provide the impetus for imagining method differently, a discussion to which I now turn.

### **(Re)imagining method**

The world is complex and textured in so many different ways. As described, South African society is no exception. And so, if the world is not tidily uniform and there are no metaphysical certainties, what does this mean for educational science; what does it mean for the way(s) in which educational leadership and management research might be performed? Moreover, how might we move away from the idea that method is a technical (or normative) set of procedures — away, that is, from completed and closed accounts of method? How might we (re)imagine educational leadership and management research in South Africa?

The first approach might be to learn to know in different or alternative ways. If the world is multiple, then we need to know in multiple ways in our attempts to catch it. Law (2004:3) identifies four alternative ways of knowing: knowing as embodiment, knowing as emotionality and apprehension, knowing through deliberate imprecision, and knowing as situated enquiry. Knowing as embodiment is to know through the hungers, tastes, discomforts, or pains of our bodies. Knowing as emotionality is about opening ourselves to worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals. Knowing through deliberate imprecision is about rethinking our ideas about clarity and rigour, and about finding ways of knowing the indistinct and slippery without trying to hold them tightly. And knowing as situated enquiry is about rethinking how far knowledge is able to travel and whether it still makes sense in other locations. These alternative ways of knowing present challenges for educational leadership and management research in South Africa. Conventional academic methods tend to exorcise the emotions and bodily experiences in a quest for objectivity but, because suffering and pain are not captured by statistics, there are parts of South African education that are not caught by dominant approaches. If method is to resonate with the metaphorical hinterland of South African educational leadership and management, then it has to be enacted in alternative ways through bodily expressions such as art and dance (integral to African cultures), and through fears, passions, intuitions, and so on. Furthermore, the appropriateness of importing constructs or methods from elsewhere should be scrutinised and the focus should be on developing endogenous methods. I am of course not suggesting that methods produced from elsewhere do not have value, but I am suggesting that it should become a matter of recognizing their limitations and rethinking how far they might travel. We should learn more from education leadership and management from the way it is practised in local contexts rather than simply viewing the practices through lenses imported from elsewhere. At this juncture, it is fitting for me to briefly review some further suggestions that Law (2004) makes for imagining method more broadly and generously.

Firstly, Euro-American method has a bias against process in favour of product. Law (2004:152) suggests that this may be reversed and that process instead needs to be privileged. An emphasis on process would mean that method would focus on analysing leadership and management practices as they are enacted in local contexts rather than beginning the research with a

theoretical framework derived from a text. This is a crucial consideration, given the tendency of South African educational researchers to import exogenous methods rather than producing endogenous ones. Secondly, Euro-American approaches tend to categorise methods as either good or bad on the assumption that bad methods produce bad results and good methods produce good results. Such a categorization views method as closed and complete. Law (2004:152) challenges us to think more generously about method and the way in which we define it. Therefore, the challenge for educational leadership and management researchers is to open up or widen method, to be more inclusive in their conception of method. For example, can dreams, visions, art, poetry, artefacts be included in method? Thirdly, if educational leadership and management practice is characterised by multiplicity, then truth cannot be the only arbiter. Because educational leadership and management research is practised in multiple ways and crafts multiple realities, it should not enact method so that it produces singularity but should rather perform modes of crafting that apprehend multiplicity. Fourthly, reflexivity is a construct that is also crucial to imagining method more generously. The crucial point here is the recognition that method is performative, i.e. that methods craft realities. For educational leadership and management researchers it is important to critically examine how the methods they employ define the boundaries between presence, absence and otherness. Fifthly, educational leadership and management might favour the use of allegory as a way of knowing the multiple and the ambivalent, as a way of avoiding discourses about coherence, consistency, the universal or the general. Sixthly, educational leadership and management researchers may wish to examine critically the materials that they use and privilege in enacting methods. Are there other materials that they might use, materials other than academic texts? These are some strategies that might be employed by educational leadership and management researchers so as to imagine method more generously in their work.

### **Conclusion**

Knowing through conventional methods is important and has its place. For example, statistics are helpful in showing social injustices such as the fact that, even though the majority of teachers in South African schools are female, only a small percentage of them occupy leadership/management positions. However, our statistics, our phenomenologies, our ethnographies, and our histories only catch parts of our world and as a consequence exclude and subdue other realities and voices. I have begun a discussion on how method might be imagined differently so that it could be crafted in ways that recognize that the world is multiple, complex, fluid, heterogeneous, ephemeral, vague, and so on. I have suggested strategies that might be employed so as to imagine method more generously. I have opened up a discussion rather than provided answers, and I invite educational leadership and management researchers to rethink their practices so that methods are liberated from the shackles of smooth Euro-American metaphysical certainties. In Kappeler's (1986:30) neatly captured words:



I do not really wish to conclude and sum up, rounding off the arguments so as to dump it in a nutshell for the reader. A lot more could be said about any of the topics I have touched upon ... I have meant to ask questions, to break out of the frame ... The point is not a set of answers, but making possible a different practice ...

### Note

1. I refer here to European-American metaphysics that has come to dominate thought in the western(ised) world and as a consequence has come to dominate social science research practices. There are, of course, scholars working within the western tradition that have questioned this dominance and who have argued for the decentring of western science.

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