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Understanding Educational Leadership: Critical Perspectives and Approaches

STEVEN J. COURTNEY, HELEN M. GUNTER, RICHARD NIESCHE & TINA RUJILLO, 2021

London, Bloomsbury Publishing

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“Understanding Educational Leadership: Critical Perspectives and Approaches” is a multi-authored book which is aimed at practitioners from all educational sectors, as well as students, interested in the field of educational leadership. An impressive range of international editors and authors, with a wide variety of academic and practical backgrounds, provide a rich tapestry of insights which make this book a potentially valuable resource for those involved or interested in leadership within an educational context. According to the editors, the main aim of this publication is to explore educational leadership from a highly critical perspective and challenge entrenched orthodoxies associated with it. In the Forward, Smythe (p.xviii) states that often, literature around educational leadership is concerned with conformity to what could be termed a “marketized” ideology of organisations. The premise of this book, however, is that educational establishments do not fit with a simplistic market model but instead involve highly complex sets of components and variables which makes educational leadership a phenomenon requiring a high level of criticality.

Understanding Educational Leadership is divided into three main parts. Part one is entitled “Critical perspectives and approaches across the world”. In this section there are eight chapters and each one is focused on an education system within a particular country. Countries featured include the United States of America, England, China and Chile. This section of the book provides an insight into the nuances of the different educational contexts under examination while also allowing the reader to make comparisons and draw out similarities between them. Part two of the book is called “Critical perspectives on models and methods in educational leadership”. Here, different leadership theories and paradigms such as “distributed leadership” and “instructional leadership” are presented and analysed, enabling the reader to gain a deeper understanding of each. Part three focuses on “Critical perspectives and approaches to contemporary issues in educational leadership”. Topics such as gender, socio-economic class, governance and performativity in relation to educational leadership are explored and relevant and critical questions are raised for the reader to reflect on and engage with.

The book is organised in a very reader-friendly way. Each of the chapters follow the same structure with a helpful summary given at the beginning outlining key content. The book is fairly lengthy, but the summaries make it easy to navigate to the most appropriate parts quickly. There are information sections which provide an overview of what is contained within the chapter and the key questions that it addresses. At the end, a list of sources points to further reading before the reference list appears. Key terms are defined in boxed inserts throughout, and this is helpful in facilitating a more focused engagement with the text, reducing the need to stop and look up what may be unfamiliar words and phrases. It also supports a shared understanding, helping to ensure that what the author means when they use particular terms is comprehended more fully by the reader.

Another useful feature of this text is that it contains case studies and activities in relation to the different chapter topics and these are peppered throughout. While case studies illustrate the points being made and help to bring the theory to life, the suggested activities present practical tasks that practitioners as well as students could potentially find beneficial. It could be envisaged, for example, that the activities are used to provide a focus for staff development, discussion and critical reflection in a practical setting. Equally students could engage individually with them to enhance their studies and critical thinking skills.

To conclude, this is a comprehensive and coherent book which is highly relevant to anyone working or studying in the field of educational leadership today. While it covers a wide range of contemporary educational issues, it also encourages readers to think critically and reflect on their own unique contexts and experiences. The fact that this book clearly recognises that educational leadership is extremely complex and differs from leadership practices in other settings is very refreshing and this text provides a welcome addition to the academic literature in this area.

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Word Count - 708