

Educational Leadership and Michel Foucault

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Educational leadership and Michel Foucault by Donald Gillies (2013) examines the contemporary discourse of educational leadership from the ideas of Michel Foucault. Foucault was a French philosopher and literary critic. In this book, Gillies presents both theory and application of Foucauldian theory to study educational organizations, social hierarchy, and human nature in leadership roles. He highlights the hegemonic status of educational leadership associated with the strategic planning and school outcomes. He views educational leadership through the lenses of postmodernist ideas and concepts as plural discourses, instead of a single discourse. Gillies challenges leaders on the current education stage to advance the dominant educational leadership discourse by using Foucault's concepts of discourse, discipline, power, and governmentality whether they are from schools, academia, business, or government.

At first glance, it does not seem like a marriage made in heaven: the merger of dynamic, never static Foucauldian structuralism / anti-structuralism philosophy with the mundane principles of educational leadership. However, after reading a few pages of *Educational Leadership and Michel Foucault*, readers can explore the uncomfortable merging of Foucault's philosophical premise of *critique* and the educational leadership domain. In his book, Gillies proposes that the postmodernist ideas and concepts propounded by Michel Foucault, the 20th century French philosopher, be applied to the educational leadership environment. Using a Foucauldian theoretical lens, Gillies attempts to critically examine today's dominant discourse in educational leadership. In doing so, Gillies also confronts status quo educational leadership praxis with Foucault's theoretical and perpetually evolving social philosophy. Armed with this focus, Gillies characterizes the current educational leadership environment as an intensely global and geo-political stage upon which broadly defined educational stakeholders with diverse agendas interact with, and react to, continuous systemic change, ubiquitous reforms and levels of individual and collective accountability unheard of a generation ago. In Gillies' view, the ongoing discourse is a cacophony of voices, ranging from individuals to organizations to governments, all promoting transnational, evidence-based, and transferable *solutions*. Gillies identifies this noisy intersection of environment and discourse as the Transnational Leadership Package (TLP).

Gillies' intent is to challenge and spur actors on the current education stage to advance the dominant educational leadership discourse by using Foucault's concepts of *discourse*, *discipline*, *power* and *governmentality*. Gillies is confident that all educators, whether from schools, academia, business or government, while perhaps not embracing all Foucauldian philosophical axioms, can in practicality, significantly benefit from their unconventional

insights and alternative understanding of educational leadership all together.

The book is organized around four prominent Foucauldian concepts and their applicability to educational leadership: (a) educational leadership as *discourse*, (b) educational leadership as *discipline*, (c) *power* and educational leadership, and (d) *governmentality* and educational leadership. Gillies, by targeting today's leaders (administrators, academics, and practitioners at every level of education), urges them to consider both the application and critical examination of Foucault's substantial, if unsystematic potential, contributions to the evolution of existing educational leadership tenets.

Early in Chapter 1, Gillies reinforces his philosophical argument and propositions, first by introducing Michel Foucault and his ideas to a new generation of educators, and second by delineating the potential benefits and influences of these ideas on existing educational leadership thought. He readily admits Foucault's lack of attention to things educational in his lifetime, but he is a compelling advocate for the application of Foucault's (1977) enlightened and progressive arguments for educational leadership in his seminal work, *Discipline and Punish*.

Gillies frames the discussion of educational leadership from a Foucauldian perspective "as a discourse, or set of discourses" (p. 25) in Chapter 2, thus bringing Foucault's analytical *discourse* and *archaeology* to bear on existing and perceived imperfections of current educational leadership thought. According to Gillies, these deeper perspectives will explore "various different 'styles' and 'types' of leadership" (p. 25).

Moving from *discourse* to *discipline* in Chapter 3, Gillies applies Foucault's intensely penal view of *discipline* to the education environment. *Discipline*, as Gillies suggests, produces a stratification of individuals, functions and authority. Interestingly, Gillies positions educational discipline as an analysis of individual

development, self-disciplined behavior and interactions—harmonious or conflicting—between individuals and groups and the greater dominant educational leadership discourse.

Gillies presents how the Foucauldian term *power* can contribute immeasurably to the educational leadership discourse. It is in Chapter 4 that *power* is directly related to knowledge; but *power*, in Foucault's view, is *exercised rather than possessed*; it is, then, a circumstantial variable dependent upon micro and macro educational relationships. Gillies posits that *power* cannot simply be understood; it must be dissected into its myriad components – social, systemic, and situational.

Introducing and extending his discussion of the Foucault concept of *governmentality* in Chapters 5 and 6, Gillies clarifies that Foucault's idea of *governmentality* was the *conduct or influence* exercised by individuals upon other individuals. As presented by Gillies, Foucault's *governmentality* approximates today's consensus view of leaders as *influencers* rather than as authoritarians. In Chapter 7, Gillies acknowledges the real philosophical foibles and blemishes of Foucault as well as the skepticism and suspicion with which educators will view the appropriateness or practicality of his theoretical framework being applied to current educational leadership thought or praxis. Gillies notes, with uncommon honesty, both the "acclaim and distain in equal measure" that Foucault attracts (p. 106). Gillies predicts that what will be most disconcerting to current educators is Foucault's lack of workable alternative practices. Instead, Foucault offered continuous philosophical criticism while proposing no "suggestions of how to proceed otherwise" (p. 106).

However, Gillies maintains his position as an effective apologist by identifying several positive aspects of Foucauldian philosophy being applied to educational leadership: (a) that Foucault *critique* reveals the evolutionary, dynamic nature of educational leadership; (b) that Foucauldian analysis is, in fact, philosophical, comprehensive and non-directional; (c) that Foucault's view of power is insightful at both the organizational and individual levels of leadership; (d) that Foucault analysis is highly effective in *problematizing and questioning the discourse*, and by introspection, potential alternative approaches may be identified; and (e) that Foucault's relativism provides an optimistic assessment of educational leadership which is open-ended and contingent on future discourse.

Gillies' work is thought-provoking and expansive; it demands attention while conceding weaknesses and flaws in the philosophical theory. However, readers may find Gillies' recommendation to apply Foucauldian concepts and theory to the ongoing educational leadership discourse both confounding and impractical. Gillies, not unlike Foucault, clouds his proposals with esoteric and convoluted arguments. It is difficult to find a recommendation for expanding the educational leadership discourse that is

directly and simply stated. As an example near the end of the book, Gillies (2013) writes:

While this book has suggested its links to the school effectiveness agenda and the rise of managerialism and new public management, a thorough study of the relevant archive would be very helpful in plotting the discursive journey involved – a history of educational leadership problematics, as it were, how the discourse encountered problems and how it sought solutions (p. 114).

Readers may conclude that Gillies' proposals, much like Foucault's contradictory philosophies, are equally ambiguous and confusing. However, Gillies has also serendipitously held a reflecting mirror to the troubled face of higher education and its very real stress points of financial and budgetary pressures, the constant drone of doing more with less and its own battles with disparate voices concerning curricular standards, vision and accountability assessment. Time will reveal whether Gillies' challenging but overly generalized approach will be taken seriously as a reasonable educational leadership reformation within the community at large. *Educational Leadership and Michel Foucault* should be considered by educators as representing exotic, contemporary thinking about educational leadership theory and praxis. Readers may also consider the two other works that are included in this Routledge series: *Deconstructing Educational Leadership* by Richard Niesche and *Educational Leadership and Hannah Arendt*, by Helen M. Gunter.

References

- Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Great Britain: Penguin Books.
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