
Introduction

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About the Guest Editors Gabriele Lakomski is Director of the Centre for Organizational Learning & Leadership in the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, Australia. Her research activities are in the areas of educational administration and policy with particular emphasis on organizational theory and leadership studies; educational philosophy and theory; educational research methodology and social theory. Colin W. Evers is a Professor in the Department of Education at the University of Hong Kong. His research interests include theory of knowledge, nature of justification, and knowledge representation; naturalistic epistemology, including neural network models of learning; philosophy of education, the structure of educational theory, ethics; administrative theory, organizational learning and research methodology. The Guest Editors have been involved in a major research programme that has become known as naturalistic coherentism, a systematic attempt to develop a new conceptual framework for dealing with the central themes of educational administration.

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With this special issue the *Journal of Educational Administration* makes a further substantive contribution to the discussion of the role and nature of theory and theory development in educational administration. It thus continues its tradition of pushing the theoretical boundaries of the field further, a task laid out for the *JEA* by its founder, W.G. Walker, in 1963, and one sustained by its long-serving, present editor, A. Ross Thomas. Two points bear repeating in the present context. First, from the very beginnings of Australian educational administration as a field of study and a discipline, the fledgling profession had a solid intellectual foundation, that of the "theory movement", whose ideas found access to Australian education and administration through publication in the *JEA*. In this way the works of some of its most important North American advocates, amongst them Halpin, Griffiths, and Culbertson, became available to Australian scholars. Second, related to the previous point is the fact that Australian educational administration from its inception was directly connected to, and indeed formed by, the best theoretical movement of the time. In this sense it was always and already part of the international research community, which it, in turn, also shaped through, for example, Richard Bates' work on critical theory and educational administration, to name but one very prominent writer and theoretical perspective. A third point worth adding is that educational administration was thus also centrally interested in examining what it meant for the discipline to be a science – then by means of the theoretical machinery of logical empiricism and positivism, the dominant theory of knowledge available at the time.

This special issue, entitled "Theory, practice and cognition in educational administration", constitutes a comprehensive, mature and critical discussion of our new science of educational administration, which has sought to update a conception of science no longer defended and accepted in its home disciplines. Naturalistic coherentism, as we call our new science, is in important ways an updating of Walker's view of theory which was heavily influenced by Deweyan philosophy. Walker, like Dewey, disliked dichotomies such as "theory" and "practice", and held firm to the view that there is only one relevant distinction

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to be drawn, the distinction between good theory and bad theory. He was quite clear on the point that we all theorize, but that we do not do so equally well or effectively. We need to develop good theory, that is, theory that helps us see uniformities in whatever subject-matter is under investigation, that makes prediction possible, and thus aids us in the development of guides to action.

Our purposes in developing a new science of educational administration have in significant respects remained identical to those of Walker, as well as Dewey, but the tools of this new science are, we believe, both sharper and more robust, aided by recent developments in epistemology and especially cognitive science. As we have stated throughout our research careers, we are heavily indebted to Dewey's naturalistic conception of science and we have argued for almost two decades that science continues to deliver results over its alternatives in all domains; from this point of view we have always maintained that it would be counter-productive for educational administration to deny itself a powerful source of knowledge that explains both its theory and its practice. Recent developments, particularly in modern cognitive science, have expanded considerably our ability to understand human practice in its causal fine-grained detail. It is this kind of neurophysiological knowledge that can be considered a further naturalizing of the early account of human nature and conduct, so powerfully begun in Dewey's work with the theoretical and empirical means he then had at his disposal. In an important sense, the naturalistic directions we indicate in our work, both in the lead article of this special issue, and in *Doing Educational Administration* (2000) particularly, constitute a filling-out of Dewey's earlier conceptions of human conduct and nature, with the scientific means we now have at our disposal. We thus support a (Deweyan) view of science as ongoing, open-ended inquiry that is determined by the specificities of place and time, and is conducted by human agents whose particular brain architecture makes them superbly skilled at recognizing patterns in their social and natural environments, wherever patterns are to be found.

Such a thoroughgoing naturalism, and indeed other central components that constitute our new science, are still widely considered controversial. There have been, in the last decade or so, robust exposure of and critical debate on the new science, especially in the international arena. A special issue of the UK journal *Educational Management and Administration* in 1993 was dedicated to naturalistic coherentism. The North American *Educational Administration Quarterly* (1996) was given over to exploring post-positivism in educational administration. This special issue of the *JEA* closes the loop, as it were, and offers its readers the most recent developments of the new science and its implications for practice in a variety of organizational contexts and for different professional practices. It also makes available some of the most trenchant and thoughtful criticisms of parts (and even the whole of) our research programme, offered by our colleagues in the spirit of ongoing debate and further growth of knowledge in the field of educational administration.

The five critical contributions to follow are wide-ranging in terms of their concerns, and will only be introduced briefly here. We conclude this issue, as is our wont, with a few comments on our critics' comments.

Viviane Robinson focuses especially on the implications of naturalistic coherentism for the development of a robust theory of ethical practice. In her view, naturalistic coherentism does not sufficiently differentiate between general epistemic activity and ethics, and also leads to ethical conservatism, since all epistemic activity, which includes the ethical, is determined by local and specific contexts and communities. What are needed are additional "more readily discernible" ethical standards that supplement general social problem solving. She suggests the concept of "virtues as moral prototypes" to help distinguish ethical from other practice.

Derek Allison reviews the origins of naturalistic coherentism and addresses especially what, he argues, are the limitations for understanding social action. His particular concern is the understanding of social behaviour and meaning, i.e. the naturalization of meaning, following the kind of Churchlandian reductionism we advocate. While he agrees that science provides powerful tools for gaining knowledge, his view of science differs in that the neural net (cognitive science) account is not appropriate to provide an account of human morality. Rather than relying on the naturalized epistemology of the new science, he advocates adoption of a "cultured-folk frame epistemology".

Robert Donmoyer notes that we construct our research program in the manner in which programs in the academic disciplines are constructed. While he applauds the consistency, connectedness, and incremental nature of the program, in his view, such an approach is problematic in an applied field such as educational administration. He does not believe that the methods of natural science are appropriate models for inquiry in educational administration; nor does he agree that "the substance of educational administration theory must cohere with . . . theory in natural science". He argues that the nature of his fundamental disagreement is a conflicting vision of the field and of the role of academic work within it. Donmoyer offers a view that conceptualizes educational administration not as an academic discipline but as a public policy field to which can be applied many theories. Such an approach avoids the – inappropriate – quest for a single, all-inclusive theory such as naturalistic coherentism.

Spencer Maxcy, while finding quite a few points of agreement, argues that our "coherentist project" is really three projects rolled into one and that, rather than supporting our post-positivist underpinnings, project three – the most practical in terms of its leadership practice implications – moves us toward a "raw pragmatism". Maxcy argues that, while he supports coherentism as useful, it is "best redescribed from a pragmatic aesthetic perspective". This view, so he believes, provides a more meaningful way to understand the relationship between coherentist theorizing and leadership action in the school context.

Sun Hyung Park takes issue with some of the epistemological assumptions of naturalistic coherentism, such as the rejection of foundationalism. He argues that such a move is hasty and that there are ways in which coherentism could be seen as another version of foundationalism. He is also concerned that we have not sufficiently differentiated between “weak” and “strong” naturalism and that such clarification would lead to a further revision of our view of folk psychology, which he finds similarly unclear. He advocates our further investigation of “reliabilism”, as well as Haack’s “foundherentism” in order to provide better support for the empirical foundations of naturalistic coherentism.

Each of the above articles deserves to be read with careful attention, because their argumentation and discussion are far more detailed than could be indicated in these brief introductory comments. In the concluding comments we attempt to do at least some justice to some of the more persistent critical points that have been raised in order to clarify issues, or possibly even eliminate misunderstanding.

Finally, we would like to express our thanks and appreciation to all colleagues who contributed their intellectual efforts and time to this task, and to the Editor of the *Journal of Educational Administration*, Ross Thomas, without whose support this special issue would not have come about. We could not be more pleased and honoured by the high standard of the discussion, the collegial tone in which it was conducted, and the extraordinary level of theorizing engaged in by all. Whatever our views of educational administration as a study and a set of practices, the discussion displayed in these pages of the *Journal of Educational Administration* is the best example that the field is well and truly alive and flourishing as an intellectual endeavour.

John Dewey and Bill Walker (as well as Don Willower) might not approve of all the detail, especially in naturalistic coherentism, but we think that they might be well pleased with the quality of the ongoing inquiry in the field of educational administration.

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Colin W. Evers**
Guest Editors