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Introducing the concept of salutogenesis to school leadership research: problematizing empirical methodologies and findings

ANTHONY KELLY

This paper introduces and explores the concept of ‘salutogenesis’ as a way of interpreting school leadership research and its findings in two significant areas: its effect on student outcomes and the motivation of incumbents. In its original setting, salutogenesis describes an approach that focuses on health, rather than on disease, but regards both as points on the same continuum. ‘Pathogenesis’ is the opposite, more traditional view. The two make very different *ab initio* assumptions: pathogenesis starts by regarding illness as a departure from the natural state and something to be cured; salutogenesis regards illness as the natural condition, and health as something to be created. In the context of adapting these concepts to schooling, where ‘illness’ can be read as ‘dysfunction’, the latter approach would take the view that schools are inherently imperfect and chaotic places, and that the aim of leadership is therefore to create a more functional state. The pathogenic approach, on the other hand, assumes that the natural state is inherently stable so that the purpose of leadership is to ward off malfunction.

Introduction

The concept of ‘leadership-as-panacea’, so popular with policy-makers over the past three decades, seems like an aspiration driven more by convenience than science. The anecdotal evidence suggests that good leadership on its own is not a sufficient condition for effective schooling, and that not all good principals can be snatched from one context and parachuted into another with the desired impact over the long term. Generally, research in the field has either been in pursuit of the effect on pupil outcomes (the search for effect) or about incumbents’ motivation¹ (the search for meaning), but in both cases it has been affected by the tension between, on the one hand, challenging and informing the evidential base for policy, and on the other hand delivering and evidencing improvement. This paper sifts through a sample of empirical research in these two areas—the search for effect and the search for meaning—in order to re-interrogate findings to see how they relate to methodology, and to see to what extent a salutogenic

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perspective can act as a theoretical bridge between method and interpretation. The aim is to offer an introduction to, and to problematize, the notion of salutogenesis in the interpretation of educational leadership research. Clearly not all the issues and subtleties that emerge can be addressed in one paper, though the approach may be superior to the traditional pathogenic one in both practical and theoretical terms.

Salutogenesis² (Antonovsky, 1979; see Becker, Glascoff, & Felts, 2010) focuses on health, rather than on disease. Adapting the concept to institutions, it regards illness/dysfunction as the natural state, and health/functionality as something ‘unnatural’ to be created. Pathogenesis is the opposite, more traditional view, which regards illness/dysfunction as a departure from the natural state and something to be ‘cured’. Salutogenesis focuses on factors that support well-being, rather than on factors that cause disease. It rejects the traditional medical dichotomy separating health and illness, instead regarding the relationship as a continuous variable; what Antonovsky called the ‘health-ease vs. dis-ease continuum’. Antonovsky developed the approach from his research on how people manage stress, noting that although stress was everywhere, not everyone had negative health outcomes as a result of exposure to it; and considerable evidence has been collected in recent decades in support of his approach (see Eriksson, 2007). In salutogenesis, people continually battle with hardship forces or ‘Resource Deficits’. Countering these, there are ‘Resistance Resources’—the things that help people manage stress—which include wealth, self-confidence and ego, a good attitude, family and other support networks, and various forms of social capital. Resource Deficits cause Resistance Resources to fail whenever one’s ‘Sense of Coherence’ is not robust enough, and this causes illness. Sense of Coherence is the extent to which one feels confident that the stimuli deriving from one’s environment are predictable and explicable (Comprehensibility), that adequate resources are available to control stress (Manageability), and most importantly, that the demands made on one by stress forces are worth fighting and may even be satisfying to overcome (Meaningfulness).

Adapting these notions to the context of education and schooling, a salutogenic approach would take the view that schools are inherently imperfect, chaotic places that will wind down to their natural state of dysfunction if left on their own, and that the aim of leadership is therefore to create a more desirable ‘healthy’ functional state. The pathogenic approach, on the other hand, assumes that the natural state is inherently *stable* and that the purpose of leadership is therefore ‘merely’ to ward off dysfunction. If the salutogenic assumption is accepted, purposive leadership can be re-theorized as ‘management working towards an unstable healthy state’, and this purposiveness can be seen as the driving force in incumbents’ search of meaning or ‘logos’. It can also help us re-conceptualize issues like leader turnover as natural *and desirable* consequences.

Antonovsky’s notion of Comprehensibility within his construct of Sense of Coherence (i.e. that the stimuli deriving from one’s environment are predictable and explicable) can be linked to Chaos Theory and the behaviour of dynamic systems that are so sensitive to initial conditions that small boundary differences produce very different outcomes and

make longer-term prediction virtually impossible.³ Therefore, there is not only a tension between salutogenesis and pathogenesis, but also between the traditional pathogenic approach and the extent to which Chaos Theory is accepted as a description of school leadership, both in research and in practice.

Salutogenesis and the search for effect: two methodological dichotomies and the interpretation of findings

The simple vs. the complex

The methodological underpinnings of research on school leadership have been analysed and queried on a number of occasions; in particular, the desirability in theory, but the difficulty in practice, of conducting robust research in the field. The insightful Hallinger and Heck (1996a, 1996b) review looked at 15 years (1980–1995)⁴ of empirical research on the role and impact of principalship within the school effectiveness paradigm, focusing on the conceptual underpinnings of various theoretical models. They grouped research studies into those that used simple bivariate designs (with or without controls) and those that used sophisticated theoretical models, stronger research designs and/or more powerful statistical methods. One-third of studies were in the latter category and showed a clear effort to build longitudinally on the conceptual and methodological work of others. All were theoretically informed and could define and defend their constructs, but only one-third were theoretically ‘sophisticated’; for example, in discussing how their leadership constructs were theoretically linked to intervening variables and student outcomes. In terms of research design, almost all the studies used a non-experimental cross-sectional correlational design with surveying or interviewing instruments, which fact alone would make it difficult to understand the causal relationships regarding impact. (The methodologies used in the research cited in this paper are noted in the relevant footnotes, and show a similar bias towards questionnaire and interview.) Hallinger and Heck concluded that research on school leadership would make better conceptual progress if greater use were made of more comprehensive, more complex models that placed the principal within the context of the school and its environment.

In terms of interpretation, Hallinger and Heck found that the methods used in the various studies affected findings: those that used simple bivariate designs made weak, conflicting or zero claims and were suspect in terms of validity; those that used more sophisticated theoretical models, with stronger research designs and/or more powerful statistical approaches, yielded more positive and more frequent findings. This is unexpected in the sense that more rigorous methods in school effectiveness research usually make it *more* difficult to make definitive claims, so it might be profitable to critique the methodology used by Hallinger and

Heck themselves, rather than confine the discussion to the methods used in the research they reviewed.

The Hallinger and Heck dichotomy between ‘simple bivariate’ and ‘sophisticated theoretical’ designs may be a false one, and may itself have determined *their* findings. It may be that sophisticated methodologies lead to more frequent and more positive findings not because of their sophistication per se but because they take account of process and context in a salutogenic manner. The real dichotomy therefore may not be between simple and complex methodologies, but between the underpinning presumptions of pathogenesis (with its problem-solving reactive outlook) and salutogenesis (with its process-improvement proactive outlook). The fact that the Hallinger and Heck review also found that a school’s socio-economic environment influences the type of leadership exercised, and that the type of leadership that makes the greatest difference is the one aimed at influencing internal (teaching and learning) *processes*, would support this view.

An explanation for the small *size* of the leadership effect found in these reviews is offered by Leithwood (2001) who makes the distinction between generic leadership practices intended to be useful *in most situations* from those suited *to a particular policy context*. According to Leithwood, the quantitative studies reviewed by Hallinger and Heck measured only those leadership practices *common across all contexts* and not the additional practices used by school leaders as a means of dealing with their unique circumstances, and for this reason, Leithwood suggests empirical research underestimates the effect of leadership on student outcomes.

The experimental vs. the non-experimental

From the 1950s to the start of the period reviewed by Hallinger and Heck, logical positivism and the ‘theory movement’ framed leadership research, but during the Hallinger and Heck review period, researchers in the field tended to criticize traditional conceptualizations and develop new ways of thinking about knowledge construction, so in this respect their review needs to be viewed in context. The challenge today is to *integrate* findings from these different philosophical perspectives and methodologies. It is relatively easy to summarize research approaches and findings; what is needed is a theoretical approach that will *reconcile* them and enable us to respond to criticisms of the field, like those of Thomas (2007), Pan and Chen (2011) and others who note that educational leadership has failed to keep pace with business leadership (say) and leadership psychology (say) on both theoretical and methodological levels. The concern is that, theoretically, educational leadership has become a compendium of low-reliability folk wisdom⁵ and that methodologically, survey-by-questionnaire predominates to such an extent that there are problems with the identification of matching sample populations and the equivalency of scales. Levačić (2005) has produced a significant review in this area; specifically, on the methodological problems of trying to establish the causal effect of leadership on student outcomes, as implied in UK

national policy and in the claims of research. She reminds us that any attempt to test such a causal relationship must be able to take account of other factors affecting student outcomes, but that this cannot be replicated in natural settings like it can in a laboratory, and that the counterfactual cannot be directly observed. The easiest way around this would be to mimic experimental conditions using the random assignment of cases into ‘control’ and ‘treatment’ groups, but while this randomized controlled trial (RCT) approach is the preferred design if the objective is to obtain unbiased estimates of the size of the effect, it is a minority pursuit in education (c.f. Gove, 2013; c.f. Hutchison & Styles, 2010) and is regarded by some as unsuitable, even in Medicine where it has been most frequently and most successfully applied (e.g. Garbutt & Davies, 2011).

The next-best alternative would seem to be quasi-experimentation, which has many similarities with both traditional experimental design and RCT, but lacks the element of random assignment to treatment and control groups so that there are concerns in relation to internal validity. Levačić (2005) points out that research on the effects of educational leadership on student outcomes has not employed either of these two research designs to any significant extent because leadership is not regarded as a ‘treatment’ to be applied or not. If it is accepted that leadership *has* a significant effect on pupil outcomes, it is difficult to conceive of leadership studies that could use RCT as a methodology and still remain ethical, so that studies in the field have traditionally used data generated from natural settings.

Levačić suggested a three-way typology: a ‘Direct Effects’ model; a ‘Mediated Effects’ model; and a ‘Reciprocal Effects’ model. In the first, student outcome (adjusted for prior attainment) is the dependent variable, and the model can include antecedent variables that can directly affect both student outcomes and leadership. In the mediated effects model, leadership is regarded as having an indirect effect on student outcomes; in that, it affects intervening variables such as school culture and classroom practice. The reciprocal effects model is a dynamic model which assumes a two-way causality: not only does leadership affect mediating variables, but it is in turn affected by them. Research by Gu, Sammons, and Mehta (2008), which found that leadership has a significant effect on pupil outcomes in schools with low attainment and low value-added, is an example of the counterfactual approach favoured by Levačić. They studied national attainment data-sets in relation to the leadership of three sub-groups of schools,⁶ finding that while some schools had significant and sustained improvement *with no change of principal*, changing the principal could contribute to the rapid improvement of schools with an initial low attainment profile. The underpinning assumption here is clearly pathogenic, as it is with most RCT and quasi-experimental approaches: that leadership can correct an ‘unnatural’ state of underachievement and dysfunction. However, the problem remains that in the absence of a warranted theoretical framework, the alternative is not considered; namely, that leadership is not necessarily about maintaining a naturally functional state of achievement, but may be about maintaining an *unnatural* functional state against an entropic pull back to chaos and dysfunction.

The Levačić typology also reflects this pathogenic bias, as do her preferred RCT and experimental paradigms. They assume in the manner of traditional medical treatment that leadership is the cure for an ailment, whether in a direct or an indirect way, in what would otherwise be a ‘healthy’ school, accepting that there might be reciprocal effects of the ‘leadership treatment’ much like the unintended side effects of a drug on the mediating organs of a patient. The problem with these conceptual models is that they make the unproven assumption that schools are inherently ‘perfect’ contexts, without considering the alternative view—the salutogenic view—that school leadership is not about impacting (directly or indirectly) on the problem of organizational dysfunction, but about constructing a desirable state of effectiveness *from a natural state of chaos* and working towards it creatively by increasing capability.

Salutogenesis and the search for meaning in leadership research: manifestations of motivation

Salutogenesis, agency and supply

Most research in the field of educational leadership, when not in search of its effect on pupil outcomes, is about incumbents’ search for meaning or ‘logos’ (Frankl, 2006 edition). This is an existential perspective: a ‘will to meaning’ view, after Kierkegaard, as opposed to the ‘will to power’ view of Adler (after Nietzsche) or the ‘will to pleasure’ view of Freud. In the sense in which it is adapted here for use in education, it is the belief that the act of striving to find professional meaning is the primary motivating force in school headship, which has (and needs) meaning no matter what the size of its effect on student attainment or the nature of the school, the system or the cultural setting. The hypothesized link with salutogenesis is that such an outlook is more likely to be associated with a successful logos, strong professional values and a dedication to clearly envisioned goals; and that both logos and salutogenesis are likely to be linked antecedently to developmental maturity (which we define as the extent to which there is an understanding of the ‘intentionality’ of educational leadership).

The search for meaning, and the extent to which that need is met, is by definition linked to the retention and recruitment of incumbents. In fact, recruitment can be seen as a proxy measure for logos, and research on the turnover of school leaders has been a focus of attention in developed systems because of the large number of principals approaching retirement age and because the role is perceived as becoming more managerialist. In the pathogenic paradigm, leader turnover is theorized as being acutely problematic because it diminishes a school’s sense of purpose and makes it difficult to maintain an institution’s effectiveness trajectory. In the salutogenic paradigm, without ignoring the obvious difficulties associated with change, leader turnover is regarded as an inevitable but desirable fact of life; a consequence of the chaotic nature of schools. This acknowledgement that leader turnover is a desirable thing is

mostly absent from the literature, so that the question of how to maximize the opportunities presented by it and how to use it to leverage improvement has largely gone unanswered empirically because of the prevailing pathogenic paradigm. For example, in Canada, Mascall and Leithwood (2010)⁷ found that where there is high principal turnover, taking a coordinated approach to the distribution of leadership can mitigate its negative effects; quite a pathogenic view.

Linking turnover to the training of recruits has also been a feature of research in this field, especially outside Europe and North America. Wong (2004), for example, looked at promotion to, and training for, principalship in Hong Kong, where since the 1990's the paradigm has shifted from a traditional concentration on maintenance and hierarchy to change management and effective team working. Prior to 2002, qualified teachers in Hong Kong with a minimum of five years teaching experience were eligible for principalship and were prepared through an induction programme that followed centralized administrative rubrics. Wong found that the idea of ongoing training for principals was not popular among practitioners and interpreted this (as did Agezo & Hope, 2011, in Ghana) as meaning that they were too tied up with the daily administrative grind to engage with development opportunities. However, an alternative explanation is that although head teachers are certainly busy, their negative reaction to the prospect of ongoing training reflects a belief that such training is unlikely to meet their need for logos. In other words, if a logos interpretation is allowed, it is the *quality and intentionality* of training that is suspect, not the concept. Similar findings were reported from Uganda (De Jaeghere, Williams, & Kyeyune, 2009).⁸

Turning back to the supply side, Barty, Thomson, Blackmore, and Sachs (2005) examined the declining number of applications for principalship in Australia, finding that location, size of school, the presence of an incumbent and local politics were key issues. Increased bureaucratic burden was explicitly ignored by Barty et al., but *was* considered by Kwan (2012) when researching the recruitment of principals in Hong Kong. Somewhat unusually, Kwan analysed the criteria used to assess applicants as a proxy for the traits that school governors believe will result in success.⁹ Like other research (e.g. in Israel by Addi-Racah, 2006), Kwan acknowledged the importance of context, particularly as school leadership in Hong Kong over the previous two decades had (it was thought) made the job less attractive, finding that governor recruiters treated *active religious affiliation* as the most useful proxy indicator—more useful than criteria like experience and communication skills—in judging the value orientation of potential recruits. This suggests that the notion of logos extends beyond incumbents *to those selecting* school leaders, in the sense that those with an 'appropriate' active religious affiliation were assumed to have a matching search-for-meaning ethic.

Staying with the theme of ethics and affiliation, Alsbury (2004) explored the retirement and resignation of *school board members* in the USA and its effect on school governance. Hypothesizing a distinction between 'political' and 'apolitical' turnover, Alsbury found that turnover among school board members mostly (in 73% of cases) resulted from the

political defeat of board members, rather than from personal, financial or ethical events. The research also found that there was more politically motivated turnover in larger communities and in communities with higher political stakes, which could be interpreted (though Alsbury did not do so) as meaning greater disruption in larger urban schools and in schools serving more ethnically diverse communities. This suggests that we might need to look at how the pathogenic presumptions of the prevailing paradigm might be impacting subliminally on how we explain the churn in school effects research as it relates to school size, ethnicity and socio-economic deprivation.

Salutogenesis and efficacy

Catano and Stronge (2007) examined the evaluation of professional standards for principals in school districts in the USA¹⁰ where, like most places in the developed world, principals find themselves juggling to satisfy the competing demands of various stakeholders. Catano and Stronge conceptualized this tension as being between ‘external’ and ‘internal’ stakeholders, and in their Content Analysis of job descriptions and evaluation instruments, suggest that performance evaluation for principals should be based on what they are expected to do, and that evaluation instruments (framed within accepted professional standards) should match these expectations. Also in the USA, Torres, Zellner, and Erlandson (2008) analysed principal perceptions of school improvement policies,¹¹ recognizing like Catano and Stronge that principals are under pressure to run their schools *and* implement state and local initiatives which have over time caused the job to shift from resource management to accountability. Torres et al. suggest that principals regard *site-based* professional development as more focused than external initiatives and that as a result *internal* drivers have a greater impact on pupil outcomes. They interpret this as suggesting that while aggressive school improvement policies can have positive outcomes, they also have unintended consequences—low staff morale, loss of confidence and reduced commitment—that is essentially an absence of logos, although it was not described in this way. Similar research was carried out in Flanders by Tuytens and Devos (2010) on the influence of leadership on *teachers’* perceptions of policy,¹² which found that the vision of the principal significantly influences teachers’ perception of *the need for* certain policies, but not their perception of *the characteristics of* those policies.

The alternative interpretation of findings in these reports and in others like them is that the complexity of principalship stems from the initial conditions set by external agencies, and that these conditions are *at the boundary of what is known to be the effect of an action*. This is where principals spend most of their time working, and it makes the formulation of appropriate assessment metrics for the job a daunting task, especially when the expectations of school principals are so often grounded (from their training and induction) in pathogenic conceptualizations of leadership, which compete with the day-to-day salutogenic functions of running a school.

Conclusion

The impact of principalship is complex and not easily made subject to empirical verification. Research suggests that it is best conceived as a web of contextual, personal and professional relationships, which combine with other factors to influence schooling outcomes, but much of the research in the field—specifically, looking at the impact of leadership on pupil outcomes, and motivation to and within leadership—has not done justice to the complexity involved in terms of theoretical and methodological sophistication. This paper suggests that the natural state for schools is one of dysfunction rather than function. If this salutogenic assumption is made, leadership and the search for meaning within it can be re-theorized as management working towards an unstable healthy state, which in turn can provide an alternative interpretation of findings to the traditional dominant pathogenic view. The theoretical construct of logos within salutogenesis can also help re-conceptualize issues like leader turnover by treating it as a *desirable* consequence of dysfunction, and justify the need for high-quality *intentional* training as a way of addressing it in a practical way.

The paper is not a review of existing research, but rather uses well-cited findings at the (for this paper's thesis, more challenging) empirical end of the research spectrum to illustrate the potential of the salutogenic approach to re-interpreting our understanding. It hypothesizes that a salutogenesis paradigm can help reconcile seemingly contradictory research findings on the relationship between the school leader, the school context and pupil outcomes. From the point of view of research, the salutogenesis conceptualization also challenges the assumptions often made by empiricists in the field, but in a positive sense can link interpretation and methodology in a new way while supporting their work. We have shown that while previous reviews have found that sophisticated theoretical models and strong research designs yield more positive findings, these reviews may themselves be skewed by their own underpinning pathogenesis, as may be the commentaries in support of RCT and quasi-experimental methods, which assume in the manner of traditional medical treatment that leadership is the cure for an ailment.

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Notes

1. In which we include recruitment to the leadership profession and the retention of incumbents.
2. Literally, 'the origin of health'.
3. More precisely, chaos is defined as a dynamic system that is sensitive to initial conditions, is 'topologically transitive' and has dense periodic orbits. Sensitivity to initial conditions—the butterfly effect—means that each point in the system is closely approximated by other points with

significantly different future trajectories, so that an arbitrarily small disturbance of a current trajectory can lead to a significantly different chain of future events. In practice, if we have only a finite amount of information about a system, then beyond a certain point, the system will no longer be predictable. ‘Topological transitive’ (or ‘topologically mixing’) means that the system will evolve over time so that any given set will eventually overlap with another given region. ‘Density of periodic orbits’ means that every point in the space is approached arbitrarily closely by periodic orbits.

4. By the 1980s, accountability had become *the* major driving force in the allocation of resources to education, with diverse pro- and anti-privatization reforms emerging, particularly in the USA. Within a decade, the evaluation of principals had gone from being mandatory in 9 of the 50 US states to being mandatory in 40.
5. Though folk wisdom is not in itself ‘bad’, as we know from (auto)biographical and arts-based research.
6. ‘Low start’, ‘moderate start’ and ‘high start’. ‘Low start’ schools were defined as improving from a position of low attainment and were very effective in value added terms, ‘moderate start’ schools as improving from moderate to higher attainment with high value-added, and ‘high start’ schools were defined as schools consistently high in both attainment and value-added terms.
7. Two thousand five hundred and seventy teachers from a total of 80 schools were surveyed, with a 78% response rate.
8. Interviews were conducted with 97 principals and deputy principals. The sample was drawn from schools in three geographical areas of Uganda; one urban and two rural.
9. Two hundred and forty six questionnaires were sent out, to which 93 (40%) responded.
10. Specifically, the 132 school districts in the state of Virginia.
11. Forty five percent of elementary school principals in Texas were surveyed online (20% middle-school and 25% high school).
12. Thirty seven secondary schools (selected randomly from the 956 Flemish secondary schools) participated. 610 teachers filled out the questionnaire representing a return rate of 82%. Three years previously, the government had issued a new policy on teacher evaluation, which obliged schools to evaluate all staff every four years.

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