

Chapter 7

Using Narrative Inquiry to Explore “Wicked Problems” in Educational Leadership in the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

A highly contested issue in educational leadership research is the place of narrative inquiry to study school leadership practice. While the study of narratives has had long epistemological roots in the works of Dewey, Bruner, Clandinin, and Connelly, its potential for revealing the human condition and providing deeper insights into critical issues like power, inequity, social justice, and oppression is often underestimated. Moreover, the method has also drawn much debate for its limitations ranging from its highly reflexive nature to issues of validity and reliability of “storied” experiences. This chapter outlines some arguments for the use of narrative inquiry and suggests a nuanced and expanded understanding of the method as a viable approach to study “wicked” problems in the age of Anthropocene. The chapter also aims to inspire further discussions of how narrative inquiry could be further re-conceptualized to study educational leadership in the anthropogenic era.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter joins the considerable body of work that supports the use of narrative inquiry in educational research and its potential to contribute to contemporary debates in educational leadership research for the 21st century. It seeks to raise the possibility of narrative inquiry as a viable research method to critically examine and potentially contribute to knowledge and knowledge systems in the age of Anthropocene.

Narrative inquiry involves the deeper exploration of lived experiences, which can potentially shed light on ‘wicked problems’ commonly associated with the age of Anthropocene. Through an example of a narrative case study involving educational leaders in Singapore, it is hoped that the chapter can reveal the significance of the narrative method to re-story current discourses in the field that are predominantly positivistic and deterministic to a certain extent. It also hopes to demonstrate the value of the narrative method for educational research against the backdrop of Anthropocene by highlighting the importance of context and nuance in lived experiences of individuals so that different aspects and perspectives are preserved and understood more deeply.

The example of the narrative case study later in this chapter illustrates this point further and hopes to recast a new light into school leadership practice in Singapore’s high performing education system that draws inspiration from both oriental and western, neoliberal values, ideals of meritocracy and pragmatism as well as efficiency and efficacy (Ng, 2003).

Paul Crutzen originally coined the concept of ‘Anthropocene’ at the turn of the millennium and advanced for its wider use beyond the fields of geology and environmental sciences though this idea continues to be debated by researchers across many fields today (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). It is a new idea that is beginning to engage researchers in conversations in the fields of education and leadership in post-humanist society (Steffen et al, 2011). Hence, for the purposes of this chapter, we shall define the Anthropocene as follows:

The age of Anthropocene represents a new phase in the history of both humankind and of the Earth, when natural forces and human forces became intertwined, so that the fate of one determines the fate of the other (Zalasiewicz et al., 2010: 2231)

Narrative Inquiry and Its Beginnings

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research that seeks to explore personal stories through narratives of lived experiences, potentially illuminating aspects of political, socio-economic and cultural phenomena through resonant stories and

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