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1. Introduction

If the COVID-19 pandemic affirmed anything to the educational community, it was that professional lives are incredibly connected, and a disruption across the globe has real and tangible effects on the ability to deliver education, the core business of universities and schools alike. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced rapid restructuring of education to enable educational continuity, and institutions heavily reliant on international student face-to-face attendance were significantly affected [1]. Students suffered, and struggled to belong to their university [2], but attempted to transition to a new way of working and studying [3].

The pandemic was in parallel to rapidly growing global concerns of unsustainable increases in greenhouse gas emissions, well behind Paris Agreement targets [4]. Universities in some nations led the way, with organizations seeking net carbon neutral positions over the past decade. Yet, as 2020 hit, priorities changed, and academic institutions opted toward rapid operational change to allow for emergency remote teaching for continuity of learning during lockdowns. Sustainability, and the achievement of the seventeen United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) beyond Quality Education (Goal 4) was sidelined [5]. Perhaps to the detriment of the long-term viability of the sector in an ever-changing world [6].

This book emerged as a separation of another text on Advancing Great Leaders and Good Leadership, where I called on scholars to evaluate the future of leadership across diverse contexts [7], and extended on a case for good leaders in an increasingly complex world [8]. During the receipt of chapters, a series of educational and sustainability studies emerged, giving rise to a separate volume to support a shared understanding of what good leadership may look like in an environment where sustainable and educational outcomes may exist with some degree of conflict (e.g., finite resources, infinite needs).

2. Where educational leadership needs to be

The study of educational leadership has been complicated at the best of times by higher education and school leadership contexts that are incredibly diverse. While managers in formal organizations have been studied in contexts of big business contrasted to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the educational climate is less homogenous. For instance, in one higher educational context, universities are large and dominated by strategies of transnational educational arrangements [9]. In another, free higher education offers a different university context for leaders.
Leadership in education has been dominated by theories of principal leadership [10], distributed leadership [11], and leadership theories based on roles and organizational structures over individual leaders [12]. These while offering theories to explain how people act in roles, neglect approaches to leadership that are more human, co-created, and behaviorally oriented [13]. In this book, I encouraged a stronger and more effective connection to leaders, and the kinds of cognitions, behaviors, and actions that may constitute good leadership in the educational context.

3. The need for leaders who are sustainable

The COVID-19 pandemic posed real challenges for leaders [14], and continuing to practice good leadership was difficult. In a systematic review of how universities addressed sustainability during COVID-19 [5], we identified a reprioritization of attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for fixing risks to continuity of education during lockdowns. As we transition out of a global pandemic, there is a real need to reflect on how leaders have addressed the crisis [15], and indeed where futureproofing and leadership development is needed. There are numerous chapters in this study that speak to the opportunities that educational leaders have to be, and do, good.

Beyond the educational context there are important conversations building regarding sustainable leaders. In one study [16], scholars adapted an existing authentic leadership tool to be more targeted toward environmental sustainability termed “green authentic leadership.” More recently, the leadership literature has begun to understand how leaders influence corporate sustainability. In some work, the use of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) metrics and disclosures are being used in conjunction to leadership theories [17–19]. In this book, I encouraged leadership scholars to consider how leaders can be, and do, good as they respond to the environmental, social, and governance challenges that the front-end of the twenty-first century is posing.

4. Close

The role of leaders has continued to play a significant role in how effective organizations are. The case of Volkswagen’s Dieselgate [19] is an incredible example of how leadership goes wrong in the environmental context; educational leaders are facing similar challenges [20]. The key takeaway I hope this book offers is to challenge conceptual differences between leader and leadership; person and process. For those seeking to build high quality leadership development programs, and for those trying to measure leadership efficacy... this distinction is essential. Understanding the difference may also enable better development of individuals who will enter and transition across multiple roles where they enact leadership. For example, a school principal who is promoted to a regional educational chief, or a middle-manager who can enact followership in their subordinate role to the senior manager, and enact leadership with their direct reports.

This book offers a series of unique perspectives on the nature of leadership in educational and sustainability contexts. Sometimes these overlap, and indeed successful education is a component to enable social sustainability and quality of life for graduates. I hope the reading challenges the current perspectives of the readers, and
creates space to reflect critically on the nature of leadership, leaders, and how they support achievement of organizational outcomes.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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