Ethical Curriculum Leadership and Alain Badiou's Ethics

Petro du Preez
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9100-6461
North-West University, South Africa
Petro.DuPreez@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

Several curriculum scholars have argued for an ethical turn in the study of curriculum based on concerns about the debunking of ethics in postmodern society. The notion of ethics in curriculum scholarship, with specific emphasis on curriculum leadership, is explored through a narrative of a school principal and contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou's theory of ethics. The data indicated several conditions (which are by no means exhaustive) for ethical curriculum leadership to transpire. These include a truthful aspiration towards curriculum excellence and deep transformation, a loving encounter as a truth procedure underpinning ethical curriculum leadership, a longing for the truth, developing a collective fidelity, and creating a reflexive aptitude. It is argued that ethical curriculum leadership begins with love, that is, the antidote to acting in one's own interest. In addition, it is seen as a dialectic between managing school efficiency, building infrastructure and managing talent to enable optimal curriculum enactment, and a continual process of curriculum leadership. This article reports on one aspect of a larger research project titled "Women Leading in Disadvantaged School Communities".

Keywords: curriculum leadership; ethical turn; ethics; Alain Badiou; love

Introduction: Ethics and Curriculum Leadership

The conceptions of curriculum from traditionalist, conceptual-empiricist and reconceptualist perspectives have been criticised for their inability to "move on; discover and invent new worlds and new ideas" (Morrison 2004, 487). In addition, an argument has been made for an ethical turn in curriculum studies based on the concern with the debunking of ethics in postmodern society (Cary 2007). Badiou (2002, 2) states that

> ethics designates today a principle that governs how we relate to "what is going on", a vague way of regulating our commentary on historical situations (the ethics of human rights), technico-scientific situations (medical ethics, bio-ethics), "social" situations (the ethics of being-together), media situations (the ethics of communication), and so on.

What I am proposing is that if we have saturated the exploration of the ethical turn in the study of curriculum, why have we not been able to transcend the arguments of universalist versus particularist conceptions of ethics underpinning curriculum praxis? Why are we constantly engaged with questions of otherness when engaging in curriculum scholarship? Badiou (2002) would argue that these questions are the result of a confined liberal-humanist take on ethics, as described in the quotation above, and that we ought to think about ethics beyond the philosophical poles created as a result of this ethical ideology. For him, ethics concerns the part of philosophy that organises practical existence around representations of the Good (Badiou 2002). Following the work of Badiou, which is described by one reviewer as an assessment of the validity of the ethical turn (Gillespie 2001), I would suggest that we take a little more time to think about the ethical turn in the study of curriculum and accept Kesson and Henderson's (2010, 75) challenge: "Enacting a philosophically-informed ethical curriculum leadership practice will require us to undertake new ways of knowing, being and acting that embody new professional identities, and to maintain fidelity to strongly held personal values, beliefs and truths. Are we up to the challenge?" Following up on this challenge, I posed the following research question: What sort of being is required for ethical curriculum leadership to transpire? The aim is not to provide a prescriptive, instrumental answer to this question, but to explore what ethical curriculum leadership might encompass.

Perhaps at this point it is important to clarify the place of research in curriculum leadership in the broader context of curriculum scholarship. Curriculum leadership has been defined as "practical explanation, justification, guidance, and demonstration of a disciplined theoretical position on innovative curriculum work" (Henderson 2010, 220). This distinction is based on three principal differences, namely the differences between curriculum leadership and curriculum management, curriculum leadership and instructional leadership, and disciplined and undisciplined curriculum studies (Henderson 2010). The first distinction is concerned with whether school leaders engage in business efficiency or whether they encourage educational innovation (Henderson 2010). The second distinction concerns whether a school leader is merely interested in

advancing innovative teaching practices or whether they understand that teaching is only one fundamental of curriculum work, and that questions about curriculum leadership require a more complex, interrelated understanding (Henderson 2010). With reference to the last distinction, Henderson raises the following questions: "Is the innovative idea properly situated in current educational circumstances? … Has the curriculum scholar(s) carefully considered the relationship between theory and practice? … Is the theoretical project thoughtfully informed by the history of curriculum studies, or does it attempt to advance a short-term fad?" (2010, 222). Next, I will introduce the research context that informed this article as well as the research process.

Research Design: Women Leading in Disadvantaged School Communities

The research reported on here formed part of a larger research project titled "Women Leading in Disadvantaged School Communities" (Perumal and Smit 2009). The project, which was funded by the South African Netherlands Partnership for Alternatives in Development, aimed at investigating how women educational leaders navigate the challenges of leading in disadvantaged school contexts.

The general conceptual tenor of the project was situated in a critical feminist paradigm. Methodologically, a qualitative critical ethnography from an advocacy and developmental perspective (Creswell 2007) was employed. Drawing from the work of Quinlan (2008), Hollingsworth (1992), Ortlipp (2008) and Clandinin (2007), data sources and fieldwork were generated through extended observations using video and photographs, shadowing principals to observe their day-to-day operations with the intention of observing the time they devote to curriculum-related matters, collaborative conversations with participants to service the aims of the research, and participant narratives regarding their conceptions of curriculum leadership. The primary participants comprised women in leadership positions (i.e. principals, deputy principals and school curriculum specialists) in disadvantaged schools in the Gauteng and North West provinces of South Africa. Purposeful sampling using network and snowball strategies was used to select information-rich participants for this inquiry. Discourse analysis was used to make sense of the data.

The case to be explored and discussed in this article is from a rural township area in the North West province's Kenneth Kaunda District. The primary participant was a female principal, Mrs Mbuli, in a secondary school. In line with the research process outlined above, this article focuses on her experiences of leadership more so than on other stakeholders' experiences.

Alain Badiou and Mrs Mbuli

For the purpose of this research I decided, for reasons that have been given in the introduction of this article, to explore my data sources with Alain Badiou's *Ethics: An*

Essay on the Understanding of Evil (2002). Badiou (2002) describes his rendezvous with ethics as

> a contradictory state of mind … I was driven by a genuine fury. The world was deeply plunged in "ethical" delirium. Everyone was busily confusing politics with the hypocrisy of a mindless catechism. The intellectual counter-revolution, in the form of moral terrorism, was imposing the infamies of Western capitalism as the new universal model. The presumed "rights of man" were serving at every point to annihilate any attempt to invent forms of free thought. (2002, liii)

Stated differently, Badiou (2002) describes the current state of ethical affairs as an ethical ideology that is reminiscent of the liberal-humanist take on ethics. This ethical ideology leads to a priori evil (violence and suffering) with the ethics of human rights as riposte. Ethics in this sense is reduced to mere protection from abusive interference. This understanding of ethics intellectually justifies evil and the status quo. Badiou argues that "[w]e must reject the ideological framework of 'ethics' and concede nothing to the negative and victimary definition of man [sic]" (2002, 16). Furthermore, ethics in this conception is confirmed by two philosophical poles: the universalising pole and the differential pole. The former embraces a view of ethics as an abstract universality inscribed in human rights, while the latter conceives of ethics as an abstract respect for otherness (Badiou 2002). Neither of these conceptions is adequate for Badiou, as he argues that both these philosophical positions designate "the incapacity … to name and strive for a Good" and consequently he suggests an ethic of *truths* (2002, 30).

To understand Badiou's notion of an ethic of truths, it is necessary to delve a little more deeply into his thoughts on this. For Badiou (2002), human action is divided into two separate but overlapping realms: the ordinary realm of approved knowledges that is structured in accordance with those who dominate and govern and that signals "the state of the situation", and the exceptional realm of singular innovations or truths constituted by a truth procedure that succeeds and evades the domination of the state of a situation. First, it should be noted that in the ordinary realm of approved knowledges a situation is not merely a set, but also consists of the network of relations that sustains a set (Badiou 2002). For example, if we think of poverty as a situation, it is not a one-dimensional set, but is constituted by and constitutes a network of relations such as, for example, HIV/Aids and crime. Second, the realm of the exceptional awakens when subjects instigate and maintain singular innovations (or truths) from within the realm of the ordinary (Badiou 2002). This is referred to as an event. An event is both situated, in that it is related to a specific situation, and supplementary, in that it is detached from all the rules of the situation (Badiou 2002). Such an event ruptures the ordinary realm and sets a truth procedure in motion (Badiou 2002). Badiou (2002) describes this process as follows: "To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by *thinking* … the situation 'according to' the event. And this … compels the subject to *invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation" (2002, 41–42). This process could only be maintained through faithful "subjects who 'bear' its [the event's] trajectory" (Badiou 2002, ix), that is, people who reveal fidelity, perseverance and

encouragement through selfless devotion to resist anything that could beset a truth (Badiou 2002). It is exactly this fidelity to the truth and perseverance to maintain the truth of the event that Badiou describes as the ethical, "the single imperative: 'Keep going!'" (2002, xi). This powerful truth is described as "the multiple, internal to the situation, that the fidelity constructs, bit by bit; it is what the fidelity gathers together and produces" (Badiou 2002, 68).

Badiou (2002) calls for the importance of bringing the reflexive "I" back into a thoughtful relation to an event, which perhaps calls for a change in one's *being*, where one's *will* plays a significant part. The sort of ethics or truths that Badiou (2002) argues for is one in which the individual "I" pursues a purposeful "good" in a particular event, and hence such a "courageous" stance is in contrast to nihilism. He observes that inevitably the reflexive subject will have to "invent a new way of being" in contrast to the apathetic manner in which consent from public opinion is usually gained, especially if one's presence in an event is to be regarded as "a loving encounter" (Badiou 2002, 42).

For Badiou (2012), love is a truth procedure: an encounter with an event, a desire to endure, and a powerful antidote to pursuing one's own self-interest. He states:

> To make a declaration of love is to move on from the event-encounter to embark on a construction of truth. The chance nature of the encounter morphs into the assumption of a beginning. And often what starts there lasts so long, is so charged with novelty and experience of the world that in retrospect it doesn't seem at all random and contingent, as it appeared initially, but almost a necessity. (Badiou 2012, 42)

In an attempt to determine what sort of person/being is required for curriculum leadership to transpire, analytical questions were identified from the theory and used to think through the data sources.

The State of the Situation

What is the nature of the ordinary realm and the state of the situation in which the narrative unfolds?

Mrs Mbuli commenced her narrative with a historical overview of how the school started. The story of this school began in February 1994, just after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the abolishment of apartheid. After his release, he requested that all children who had not previously attended school as a result of the struggle return to school. This created an influx of learners from all areas to schools, especially those closer to cities, so that they could be closer to places of employment after schooling. This resulted in the need for a school to be established in the local area because at the time there were only "three or so secondary schools", Mrs Mbuli explained. Because new schools could not be built immediately, some schools commenced with a platoon-model in which one building hosted two schools. The time allocated for teaching in the

primary school was 07:00–11:00, and from 12:00–17:00 the building was used as a secondary school. Mrs Mbuli elaborated on the difficulty of "platooning" since they did not have the basic resources to manage the school (such as bank accounts, paper and electronic equipment) and to allow for effective teaching and learning (for example, textbooks, stationery). She also mentioned that much difficulty was experienced with the learners at the time because many of them had been involved in the struggle and as a result had served time in prison, which gave rise to several disciplinary challenges. In addition, they had 709 learners and only six teachers.

From a curriculum point of view, the frequent reviewing and changing of the curriculum since 1997 created further difficulties. Due to all the confusion regarding the curriculum transformations, their matriculation (final school year) pass rate declined from 98% to 61%. According to Mrs Mbuli, this was mainly the result of inadequate guidance and ineffectual professional development workshops from the government on dealing with the changes in the mathematics and accountancy curricula.

The Event

What marked the event? What were the innovations that exceeded the ordinary realm? Who were the subjects who primarily bore the trajectory of the event?

Mrs Mbuli explained how she came to meet a director-general who was transferred from England and who was committed to school transformation in South Africa. He set her on the path of applying for a new school building. She explained, "it was hectic, because the only thing that they told me was that 'you are better off platooning, at least you don't teach under a tree' … . So I had to fight and fight and fight and fight, and ultimately the building was granted." After the tender process for the building, they encountered a series of problems. The first was that the school was to be constructed on a dumping site in the township, and second, informal housing covered part of the proposed construction site. She explained the negotiations that accompanied the relocation of these people in detail. For them, building a school was a luxury given their daily struggle for food, clothes and a dry place to sleep. She commented that "although they lived in a shack [informal housing], it meant a lot to them because it was what they called home". When the people agreed to relocate, the school building was built and occupied by the teachers and learners on 25 August 1997.

The fact that the school premises were built on a dumping site posed problems because Mrs Mbuli and her staff were responsible for cleaning it up themselves. One of the teachers initiated a project in which each class teacher and her learners were responsible for putting all the refuse on the premises in heaps to form terraces. They then planted a lawn and made gardens on the terraces from grass that they had bought and divided into small pieces to form the lawn.

Mrs Mbuli explained how they also had to initiate extra-curricular activities such as sport to offer to the learners. They were not given any subsidy or assistance from the

government in this regard. Fortunately, one of the male teachers in the school had a passion for sport and plenty of expertise in coaching soccer. Another female teacher took responsibility for the development of netball in the school. They sought international partnerships with the United Kingdom and Sweden to assist in the process of developing these sporting activities. As a result, the school has won many awards for sport. Through the partnerships, some of the teachers and learners were also given the opportunity to visit some of the partner schools in the United Kingdom.

New Ways of Being and Acting

In what ways was the event situated in the ordinary realm? And where was it detached from the rules of the ordinary realm? In particular, how were new ways of being and acting invented?

In a situation such as this, it is easy for schools and principals to remain bogged down by the privations they experience as a result of the ordinary realm. The principal, staff and learners in this school were in fact situated in this ordinary realm, but through the events that resulted from their innovations they were in a position to transcend the rules of the ordinary realm. Mrs Mbuli explained how she (and those who shared her passion) did not "sit down and push back" as a result of their privations. They continued to work around what they did not have by trying to get organisations, the Department of Basic Education, and international partners on board in their quest for advancement.

This disposition has created new ways of being and acting both on the part of the principal and the teachers and learners. In terms of school leadership, Mrs Mbuli explained:

> [A] principal should manage and guide … you should try to convene … because when you are in front of those people, you'll end up being far ahead of them. You should be at a point where you could look backwards all the time, and see if there are people who … are moving forward together with you, [otherwise] you might find yourself alone in front. … There is no school that can belong to a principal. … [A] school is an organisation. … You need to get people to be with you all the time, otherwise you'll fail. … Guiding is really a process. … It's not an event where you say I've done it. … [As a principal,] you're supposed to be visible; … people should feel that you are there.

She explained that a good principal should be aware of the community's needs and truly understand them to bring about change. For example, she described how the government had suggested that the school governing body should manage school finances, but explained that their situation was different because most of the people on the school governing body were functionally illiterate. Therefore, she dealt with all the finances, based on her postgraduate experience in education management and leadership, and then used the school governing body meetings to explain to people how she managed school funds and how she budgeted for the future. In doing this, she transformed her position of power (due to her education and position at the school) into a learning and

empowerment opportunity. She also stressed the importance of being visible to learners in classrooms and described how she shared her aspirations for the school with the learners and teachers. She was convinced that without their support no transformation would be possible.

In terms of her role in curriculum transformation, Mrs Mbuli acknowledged that in the existing situation she had no influence on national curriculum-making activities, but she believed that she was responsible for making a situational analysis of the local context and determining what was needed in terms of resources and infrastructure, human resource management, and the needs of the learners to meaningfully enact the curriculum so that learning experiences would be useful to the learners.

The Ethic of "Keep Going"

Are there specific examples when loyalty, perseverance, encouragement and selfless devotion (the notions that underscore the ethic of "keep going") were present in the narrative?

Mrs Mbuli's narrative demonstrates many examples of loyalty, perseverance, encouragement and selfless devotion, both from her side and from those who worked with her to realise their innovations and bring about positive change in a situation that could so easily ensnare them in negativity and static acceptance of the ordinary. She explained that it is essential to motivate people to persevere in situations such as theirs by recognising the good they do: "recognition goes a long way in influencing people to work better. … If they realise that what they do matters to you, then they will do better." Her fidelity and selfless devotion as a school principal are also evident in the following statements:

> With me sweetheart it's about nursing a baby really … with my work. You know I stay at school in the afternoon, people don't understand why … sometimes I do not understand why, but I spend most of my time here. … I want to retire … but I won't leave the school as it is right now. I want it developed—properly.

To realise this development ideal, she wrote letters to the Independent Development Trust, the local city council and the Department of Basic Education to seek assistance to finance some books for the school library. She optimistically said, "it's worth trying … try is free".

Evil

Badiou (2002, 91) warns that "Evil is possible only through an encounter with the Good". In this sense, any ethic of truths holds the possibility for evil. It is therefore important to detect possibilities for evil and to deal with them openly so that good intentions are not corrupted. The question for this research was thus: Has any form of evil arisen from the good in this situation? This Evil, emanating from the Good, Badiou

states, could manifest in three figures. The first of these is referred to as simulacrum and is signified by the confusion of a mere likeness of an event with the real event (Badiou 2002). The second evil, betrayal, occurs when a difficult fidelity is abandoned as a result of temptation or fatigue. The third evil concerns the unnameable—the situation in which the power of a truth is forced or imposed as a result of arrogance and in so doing brings about the objectification and totalisation of truth. Badiou summarises these forms of evil as follows: "the *simulacrum* (to be the terrorizing follower of a false event); *betrayal* (to give up on a truth in the name of one's interest); the forcing of the unnameable, or *disaster* (to believe in the total power of a truth)" (2002, 91). He continues that the ethic of truths with its imperative to "keep going" serves as resources of discernment, courage and moderation (Badiou 2002). Discernment serves to remind a subject not to fall under delusions concerning the event; courage teaches the subject not to give up, and moderation warns the subject not to get caught up in totalitarian extremes.

Based on the above, it is also necessary to pose the following questions: Are there any traces of evil as a result of the good? Are there traces of a terrorising follower or a false event? Are there specific examples when the truth was discerned from the false? Did anyone give up on the truth as a result of their own interest? Or are there specific examples of courage? Are there traces of totalitarianism or is moderation in terms of the truth maintained?

To attend to these questions, it would probably have been better to expand the data sources and include in-depth narratives of other stakeholders in the school to obtain alternative perspectives. However, as mentioned initially in this article, this would fall beyond the scope of this research. In Mrs Mbuli's narrative there were no traces of evil as a result of the good in terms of curriculum leadership. There were no traces of a terrorising follower, of a false event or of someone who gave up on the event due to their own interest. For me, Badiou's theory of ethics and the subsequent understanding of evil do not draw a clear enough line between a healthy fidelity towards the truth versus a contaminated totalitarian agenda. This is probably because he uses very extreme cases, such as clandestine workers in the political situation of contemporary France, the French Revolution that constituted a definite break with classical monarchy, and Nazism as examples to illustrate the various forms of evil (Badiou 2002; Gillespie 2001). These extreme cases of evil are difficult to compare with minor cases and as a result it is difficult to make sense of them. By this I do not suggest that we essentialise the debate, but that we think of *moderation* in terms of a healthy fidelity towards the truth in the wake of *obsession* that might contaminate a healthy fidelity. Thinking about this can assist in detecting opaque traces of evil lurking in the good, so that we can deal with these openly and not taint good intentions.

Discussion: Lessons Learned from Mrs Mbuli

Based on collaborative innovations and initiatives it is clear that the principal and her staff jointly bore the trajectory of the event and that they sought assistance beyond the boundaries of the situation to sustain their innovations. Mrs Mbuli stressed the

importance of a support system when one ventures beyond the realm of the ordinary. These innovations, however small they might seem, contributed substantially to the development of the learners, and assisted in creating a culture of excellence in the school. These innovations also proved to move the school beyond the confines of the situation in which they found themselves. In short then, what is it that Mrs Mbuli was true to? She was true to excellence and continual renewal through collaborative partnerships. To realise what she was true to, she balanced her management and leadership styles efficiently.

Mrs Mbuli's narrative illustrates a process of faithful commitment to the event and in so doing demonstrates the process of rethinking the situation according to the event. Her leadership style enabled her to invent new ways of being and acting in the situation. Throughout her narrative the ethic of truths is evident and revealed through the fidelity that she expressed. No forms of abstract ethics are revealed as such. As a matter of fact, she challenged othering processes when she stated that "we need to make them understand that South Africa is no more about black and white, it is about South Africa. It is for the good of the country."

In terms of dealing with the challenges posed by the curriculum, innovations were undertaken to address the ever-changing curriculum landscape. Mrs Mbuli encouraged her staff to engage and learn to deal with curriculum contents in communities of practice. These communities consisted of teachers from the surrounding schools who could learn from one another to better interpret and enact the curriculum. She also encouraged teachers to take short courses at the local university to better equip them to deal with the curriculum challenges they faced. It also involved a system where the learners from Mrs Mbuli's school would go to good neighbouring schools for winter camp classes where they received additional learning enrichment in an attempt to raise the pass rate through preparing the learners for examinations.

Mrs Mbuli's narrative illustrates how innovative ways of being and acting can inform ethical curriculum leadership practice (cf. Kesson and Henderson 2010). Being and acting in this sense require fidelity, perseverance and encouragement through selfless devotion on the part of the curriculum leader. In addition, her narrative illustrated how a thoughtful engagement with the event can facilitate the ideals of ethical curriculum leadership practice. Such engagement ought to be self-reflexive (a character trait she demonstrates throughout her narrative) and collaborative in nature.

Finally, three more remarks are necessary. One, Mrs Mbuli aspired towards a truth framed by curriculum excellence and deep transformation. Two, her work can, in Badiou's terms, be regarded as a loving encounter as love *is* a truth procedure in itself. Three, her will to invent a new way of being mobilised those around her to join her in striving for the truth, developing a collective fidelity, and creating a reflexive aptitude.

Parting Thoughts on Ethical Curriculum Leadership

Descriptively speaking, an ethical curriculum leadership practice could be seen as a dialectic between managing school efficiency, building infrastructure and managing talent to enable optimal curriculum enactment, and a continual process of curriculum leadership. Curriculum leadership requires a focus on "what is going on" but, more importantly, on "what should be going on". The latter is a visionary enterprise—one that continually seeks alignment of innovative curriculum imaginations and a culture of curriculum excellence.

On a normative level, ethical curriculum leadership begins with love, that is, the antidote to acting in one's own interest. Love is the essence of fidelity that starts with an encounter with an event that is marked by a severe desire to endure in an attempt to remain true to an event.

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