

ASPIRATIONS OF A LEADER: A BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY THROUGH A NARRATIVE LENS

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Abstract

Biography is often construed as life story, life history or memoir. The author who narrates the life of another the biographer may skim the surface to relate the events that occurred during the subject's life or dig deeply to explore the social and political issues that shaped her/his development. The subject of this biography is a man who grasped opportunity, had vision to lead and courage to implement change. Paralleling the biographical story is one that records an unfolding history of education in Victoria. As it follows the subject's life it reviews the evolution of secondary schooling, the impact of depression and war and the post war decades of growth. Correspondingly it appraises the lives of others whose leadership roles were significant in Victoria's educational growth.

As the biographer, my attempt to anchor the story in the lived experience of another took me into the subject's world. His narratives helped me delve into his past to understand the society in which he grew, and influences that shaped his philosophies of teaching, learning and leadership. Stepping into the life of another I witnessed the vision a leader requires, the skill to implement change and the thrill of success. I also observed the emotional stress of leadership and the subject's strategies to cope.

The subject whose leadership styles are reviewed rose through the ranks of the educational hierarchy to take on a significant leadership role. This paper introduces the biographical subject and considers the nature of biography and narrative as tools used in this research. It attempts to define educational leadership as gleaned from narrative interviews and ponders how the subject and others enacted their leadership roles.

Aspirations of a Leader: A Biographical History Through a Narrative Lens

Biography is often construed as life story, life history or memoir. The author who narrates the life of another the biographer may skim the surface to relate the events that occurred during the subject's life or dig deeply to explore the social and political issues that shaped her/his development. The subject of this biography is a man who grasped opportunity, had vision to lead and courage to implement change. Paralleling the biographical story is one that records an unfolding history of education in Victoria. As it follows the subject's life it reviews the evolution of secondary schooling, the impact of depression and war and the post war decades of growth. Correspondingly it appraises the lives of others whose leadership roles were significant in Victoria's educational growth.

Lawrence William Shears, the biographical subject, served education in varied capacities for over forty years during the mid twentieth century. As a teacher noted for his facility to lead he took on key roles at an early age. In successive positions he had vision and purpose to implement change. In 1973 he became senior administrator of Victoria's education system where as Director of Education in Victoria he introduced and implemented policies to change the administrative structure, distribute power through regions to school communities and introduce training for aspiring leaders. His success in doing this depended upon his ability to convey his rationale and engage with others, though they often opposed his views, and bring the proposed action to fruition.

As the biographer, my attempt to anchor the story in the lived experience of another took me into the subject's world. Delving into his past helped me to understand the society in which he grew and developed, and influences that shaped his philosophies of teaching, learning and leadership. Stepping into the life of another I witnessed the vision a leader requires, the skill to implement change and the thrill of success. I also observed the emotional stress of leadership and the subject's strategies to cope.

This paper is informed by the biographical history I am undertaking at the University of Melbourne. While it studies the life and influence of the subject it concurrently explores the history of education as the twentieth century unfolded. The story extends beyond the immediate years of his life (1921-) or his service to education (1939-1984) but begins with the passing of the Education Act in 1872. This act marked a milestone when education in Victoria became compulsory, secular and free.

This paper introduces the biographical subject and considers the nature of biography and narrative as tools used in this research. It attempts to define educational leadership as gleaned from narrative interviews and ponders how Shears and others enacted their leadership roles.

Research Subject

Lawrence William Shears was born in 1921. His career in education in 1939 when he joined the Education Department as a student teacher appointed to Grade 3 at Miller Street Primary School, North Fitzroy. He pursued studies in teacher training and in 1941 completed the required one-year to gain the Trained Primary Teachers' Certificate at Melbourne Teachers' College under principal A.J. Law. An extension

to university afforded a second year of training and prepared him to teach secondary classes. A teacher at Korong Vale Central School (1943) and Bairnsdale High School (1944-46) in country Victoria Shears took on leadership roles in the school and broader community. He was always interested, keen to be involved and to coordinate groups.

Educational leaders noted Shears' organizational skills and plucked him from the system to work conjointly with the Department of Agriculture. In his new role as lecturer and Second In Charge he played a vital role in the rehabilitation of several groups of ex-servicemen based at the Rural Training Centre, an annex of Dookie Agricultural College (1947-50). Most men were just a year younger than Shears. Since their course began just four months prior numbers had dropped by one third. It required skill to create order from chaos, attain the men's confidence and help them envisage a positive future in their transition back to civilian life. Success in his educational studies taken correspondingly earned Shears the chance to study abroad. His doctoral studies at the Institute of Education at the University of London (1950-52) gave insight into other education systems while his thesis examined the dynamics of leadership among secondary school groups. This shaped his concepts of leadership, which he put into practice throughout his career.

The biography follows Shears' ongoing service as teachers' college lecturer (1952-54), promotion to leadership as Survey and Planning Officer in the Education Department (1954-61). In that position he led a team of three who helped plan the development of schools at the peak of post war expansion. Sequentially the story follows a second opportunity to study abroad as a Harkness Fellow (1959-60) and his influence as a teachers' college principal. At Burwood Teachers' College (1961-69) he led a team of up to ninety staff where he put his leadership skills into action. The next step in Shears' career was to senior administration, firstly as Assistant-Director-General (1969-73) and then Director-General of Education in Victoria 1973. In this position he administered Victoria's entire education system.

In writing the story of Shears and the history of education I support the idea that an educational leader must consider the past when planning the future. Shears constructed the future as a modified past where lessons learnt were used to inform. The history of education, as with all histories, should not be overlooked. Geoff Pryor (2012, p 81) who recently wrote a biography of his father Leonard quotes from his father's thesis written in 1942, also supports this notion,

History revolves around man and that man has always made his own history. History has been made as man has managed his own affairs and these have been intellectual and material, political and economic, aesthetic and domestic, personal and social. History is a record of man's determination and indecision, of his weakness and his strength, of his follies and his triumphs, of his strivings to achieve ideals and his backslidings.

In this sense the history of education as unveiled through the biography brings light to the past and paves the way to our understanding. Leonard Pryor, teacher of History and Social Studies at Melbourne Teachers' College in the 1940s defined the making of history, which aptly applies to my endeavour to record it through the current biographical study. Pryor had lectured Shears when he embarked on his teaching career as a trainee at the teachers' college in 1941.

Research Approach

Everyone has a story to tell. To listen to learn and then recount to another requires the researcher, author or storyteller to build and maintain rapport. Fundamental, according to biographer Brenda Niall (2007, pp. xi, xii), this paves the way to share experiences, visit significant places together and meet the people who have played a part in the subject's life. From this perspective the author gains entrée into the life of the other while the story becomes part of the author's life. Whether the life of the subject lies in the past or present the story offers 'a handshake across time' (Holmes, 2000, cited in Niall). In undertaking biographical research Niall warns the biographer to remain vigilant as the craft involves 'complex possibilities, complex choices'. It requires shaping the life, developing an authorial tone and narrative stance, looking 'inwards as well as outwards', scrutinising self-bias and remaining aware of whose life they portray. These are issues that I have confronted and only as my task is nearing an end am I content with my effort. To bring life to the story I sketched a portrait of Shears and located this within the social landscape, and thus was able to trace the evolving educational history.

Interviews and conversation gave the chance to shake hands across time and insight into the social, economic and political scene that coloured his life. Like an artist I hooned the portrait to resemble the person as I met the people he knew, visited significant places, through stories told and examination of books. I have shared life experiences through the narratives of Shears and others to gain insights into multiple highlights and occasional lows. The stories helped me understand the influences that shaped the subject's life, his personal qualities and characteristics, and how he used these throughout his career. The background knowledge or 'landscape' has alerted me to the challenges faced by educators of the era, their means of facing these and strategies to cope with complex changes in social, political and educational tides.

I have become known as an educational historian and as such have a story to narrate to others. The scope of the narrative experience is broad and I drew on Chase's (2005 pp 656-658) concept, which offered a lens to give depth. It offered a means to understand my own as well as another's actions, and to organize the historic events to make a meaningful whole. This concept gave comfort as I struggled to balance biography and history, untangle the fragments and find a positive voice. It enabled me to make connections and see the consequence of actions that occurred over time. Beyond a matter-of-fact approach to describe sequential events as in many biographies it gave me integrity to interpret events at a deeper level and explore the subject's actions, emotions and thoughts.

The process of researching and writing has been lengthy. A series of interviews with Shears provided my primary data, which was supported by input from numerous others involved in the spectrum of educational activity. Conducted over a two-year period, the conversational nature of the interviews presented narrative histories in which participants introduced themselves, discussed their role in education and shared insights from the perspective of administrators, politicians, teachers, union members and parent organizations. I became aware of loyalties and tensions within the ranks of the Education Department as each interviewee conveyed personal beliefs and group ethos. Each depicted a particular viewpoint of the educational landscape, and as I worked my way through this tangled web, the cultural commentary illuminated institutional values, customs and group consciousness (Goodson, 2003).

Over time I became part of the story. My life interwove with those of the others involved. Our interactions, whether a momentary reflection during our conversational interview, over a cup of coffee, at a chance meeting on another

occasion, or an email exchange, gave insight that coloured the whole. In my interview procedure I maintained the possibility of meeting again, to clarify data or to gain additional insight. It seemed as if the person left the phone to ring or latch off the door for my return. Over time the subject's community became part of my community though my stance differed from his. I gained insider status as those I interviewed shared stories with me, and in several instances they were comforted to get things off their chest. They seemed to unburden themselves as they opened to me, the researcher who felt humble in the confidence I was able to share. Though I filed these confidences away in my mind their hues shaded my understanding. But confidentiality was a yoke around my neck, a code of ethics and convention by which I must abide.

To support the narrative interview data public and private sources of literature and documents added depth. They enriched the biography with historic fact and new insights. 'Facts matter', claimed Niall, 'the richer the archive the better of understanding the life it represents'. (p xii). Over time I collected a rich archive from newspapers, photographs, and policy papers. These supported personal papers presented to me by Shears. At first confusing, over time my reward has been to observe multiple planes of the life, see it through multiple lenses, like those of a crystal described by Richardson (2000). Little by little the diverse data sources enriched my understanding.

This multidimensional approach was necessary for this biographer-cum-educational historian to realise the social and personal dimensions of the life I explored and the institutional history. Its culture gained meaning and I realized the loyalties within 'Our Department' and the day-to-day practices of those employed (Goodson, 2003). I had entrée into the working world of Shears, understood the constraints that bound him, the loyalties that supported him and recognized those who opposed his views or leadership skills. His work environment over the years was subject to various pressures as social attitudes changed, party politics affected educational growth and individuals sought to challenge his power.

Leadership in theory

Like definitions of love, to define leadership is a complex multi-faceted task. The Macquarie Dictionary (1991) ascribes a leader as one who guides others in direction, action or opinion; one who administers has talent and ability to manage or direct the cause (The Macquarie Dictionary, 1991). The administrator builds on the present, has vision to make improvements and ability to implement change. Such occurs in educational contexts from the smallest school to the highest echelons (Shears, 1961 p 3) but regardless of context, skill underlies success. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002, p xii) identify the leadership life as 'a complex balance of conflicting forces and tension that manage to function most of the time'. They warn that leadership in schools 'can take a person from an inspired moment to a crisis in an instant'. They identify the 'endemic state of leadership life' as 'constant embroilment in the needs of other people and continual decision-making in close quarters with people whose hopes ride on the outcome.' Psychologically draining and emotionally exhausting it is a personal expression to engage their deepest desire.

These powerful concepts of leadership in schools give insight into the size of the task undertaken by senior administrators. It is not the intent to analyse the pressures of one against the other, rather to realize the unseen emotional tension a leader experiences. In the day-to-day he or she must grapple with the school's function to

satisfy the needs of the students, teachers, parents on the one hand and the governing body and the political powers on the other. My research leads me to understand that the passion to serve, to improve the status quo to and make significant change overshadowed self-doubt and the toil and trouble that leaders confront.

In order to make a difference a leader must identify needs, set goals, establish policies with a purpose and develop strategies to implement change. This requires planning, preparation and evaluation of progress while maintaining momentum (Simanungkalit & Moyle, 1987). Leadership demands courage, fortitude and imagination. A leader must envisage a possible future, make careful preparations to activate this from its inception to fruition (Shears, 1961). Shears described an inclusive process wherein the leader recognised what others were doing and paid heed to their performance. A leader must have the capacity to take stock of the here and now, imagine alternatives, implement change and inspire others to carry things through. It is a team event where those employed in a group or organization work together. Correspondingly the leader and his/her cohort must deal with events of the day-to-day.

Leadership in action

Leadership is a powerful force in education as many biographical studies show. In his biography of Frank Tate, Director of Education (1902-1928) Richard Selleck depicted the politics and economics of schooling and gave insight into the social climate of a newly formed nation. He showed how Tate led the way with vision to provide secondary education in Victoria. It took a strong man to fight for this cause but through Tate's pursuit all Victorian children were offered the chance to an education beyond their primary years. His successors each played their part to develop schooling, teacher education, reform the curriculum and expand local knowledge through travel, study and invited guests of renown from abroad.

Jack Hoadley's biography of his father Arch Hoadley tells of another young man who rose from the rank and file. He developed leadership skills though had no formal training and played a vital role in establishing Footscray Technical School. 'Progressive vision' guided his leadership of the school while his philosophy for 'every boy to develop so they could live life to the full' (p. 233) served his students well. He believed that education lay beyond practical and utilitarian. Its 'broad and full curriculum' should embrace artistic, mathematical and scientific dimensions. Hoadley recognized the value of character training and citizenship to develop individuals whose skills would in turn enrich their community. From his perspective a leader should be self-reliant, self-disciplined and able to draw on internal resources. He should see determined opposition as a challenge, and consider the benefits of negotiation. Clarity of mind, vision and moral courage were fundamental.

In her biography of Phillip Law Kathleen Ralston wrote of his career beginning as a student teacher. On his appointment to a country school he studied at night by kerosene lamp in the pub where he lived while townsfolk and visitors played pool. Law's career diverged when he entered the scientific field but his leadership flourished. Having led Antarctic exploration (1949-66) and founded Mawson, Davis and Casey bases he returned to education in 1967 to preside over the Victoria Institute of Colleges. He reflected on his Antarctic experience and described his leadership style.

I didn't give orders from the top and didn't act aggressively. I used to collaborate with the men and try to enthuse them. I had very close contact working with them, leading from the

front and taking part in all the difficult things, rather than sitting in an office giving instructions.

Leadership according to Shears

Shears shared many qualities of leadership attributed to Hoadley and Law. He developed his philosophies in the UK while completing his doctoral studies and implemented them throughout his career. He believed everybody had leadership potential and group situations gave opportunity for those involved to alter positions, as the leadership task would frequently change. Stemming from his doctoral thesis he maintained that *Training for leadership* offered the ‘means for acquiring practice in recognising qualities in other individuals and for enabling as many individuals as possible to gain practice in learning and using the techniques in intra-group cooperation’ (Shears, 1952 p 322). He disregarded claims that more intelligent group members were better adjusted and that high intelligence was a crucial attribute. Rather he claimed, ‘the emergence of leaders was specific to the situation in which the group functioned’ (Shears, 1952 p 234). Shears favoured involvement or ‘*activity*’ by which to assess leadership capacity. By providing challenge and stimulating problems group members’ operational and analytical behaviour could be seen. Training and participation *increased possibilities for responsibility*, while active involvement was the basis of autonomous democratically operating groups. Their functioning with a common purpose developed healthy *intra-group relationships* and optimised learning among and between individuals (Shears, 1952). Flexibility in group structure, composition and responsibilities enabled members to reposition themselves and to take on leadership positions where their skills were best suited.

In later years as Director-General Shears was not content to sit at his desk but was frequently out and about. On the political plane he received and gave directions while on the personal plane he met with those who knew education and worked at its grass roots. Overseas travel afforded him new knowledge and alternative organizational approaches. He had capacity to learn, plan in detail, to orchestrate and carry out change. Upholding philosophies of leadership gleaned from his doctoral thesis throughout his career he believed that decision-making was a shared activity and during periods of negotiation morale was considered important. Adept in consultation with and among political, educational and allied groups enabled evaluation to smooth matters out he took heed of other’s opinions and though he yielded somewhat to opposing views maintained his ground.

An administrator, according to Shears, should *plan, allocate resources and stimulate effort* and at the same time continually *coordinate activities and evaluate effects*. The administrative process entailed *decision-making, communicating and morale building*. Depicted on a grid each cell acted independently according to the project’s developmental stage. Shears explained the complexity of this and exalting his own capacity claimed,

few people will be able to see it as a whole, in balance, and all moving towards a known purpose. The ability to attain such perspective, and to transmit to others the balance and the equanimity this must produce, are features of leadership at any level. (p 13).

The democratic ideals of leadership embraced *decision-making, communicating and building morale* in part with collaboration. With semblance to the approach described by Caldwell & Spinks (1985 p. 1) the leader ‘secure[d] appropriate involvement of staff and the community, with clearly defined roles and relationships’. Shears’ (1970) principles adhered to the philosophy to maintain a clearly discernible line of authority while minimising the distance between policy-

makers and those responsible for the implementation. Though he presented ideals as democratic, he maintained an autocratic stance; while he spread the power base he retained ultimate responsibility throughout. He claimed,

This responsibility he cannot shelve; any delegation that he makes must be clear-cut but the final responsibility is his. His authority necessary to enable him to carry responsibility is, in the final analysis, the power of the legislature to enforce its will; his power, and the power of many officers and teachers in the system rests on the power of the legislature. The source of his authority is the will of the people expressed through the legislation and the process of law. (Shears, 1961 p 3)

In his reflections on leadership Shears told of a lonely pursuit. Publicly seen as a man in control who lived a flamboyant life making public comment and media appearance, travelling interstate and abroad he found loneliness a constant shadow. Naivety was another shadow that haunted him unaware. '

Biographical perspectives on leadership

The history of education as it unfolded through this biographical study has depicted the landscape upon which to draw a portrait of Lawrie Shears. Narratives shared have brought to light his contributions as leaders during turbulent years of intense educational change.

The story of Shears together with insights from others has shown the qualities of vision, fortitude and steadfastness required of leaders. Faith in the ideal proved important as well as faith in self, and faith the future. New horizons offered new challenges, and a chance to rekindle self-esteem. The Shears' biography has shown the importance of others throughout each pursuit. Their circle of support and loyalties to the leader and the organization invigorated the mission with fresh ideas. For the leader, balance lay between his own dependability and dependence on others, willingness to serve through his aspirations while being served in return, acting as mentor but not being afraid to accept advice, and while nurturing others accepting their nurture in turn. The successful pursuit of the goal was reliant upon achieving balance of power in relationships and maintaining direction but remaining alert to imbalance when foul winds that blew.

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