Paper Proposal: Expressions of Leadership in a Manitoba School Division: From the perspective of Foster's Critical Theory, an investigation of the personal conceptions of leadership by members of a superintendent's team

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During the past fifty years, an expanding and diverse literature has noted that organization leadership in public organizations in general (Doig & Hargrove, 1987; Rainey, 2003), and educational systems in particular (Bates, 2006; Foster, 2004; Hallinger et al, 1990; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995), is tremendously important to the success of public organizations. It is within this larger context that I will argue, that from a perspective of critical social theory (Bates, 1980, 1983, 1985, 2005, 2006; Foster, 1986, 1989, 2004; Habermas 1976, 1979, 1984, 1987), that the advanced capitalism characteristics of 20th century western economies have developed specific negative tendencies including a failure to provide sufficient goods for society, a growing imbalance between the interests of capital and the larger society, a withdrawal of assent due to a failure to provide social programs, and a motivational crisis when shared values and traditions are not maintained (Bates, 1985). In the so-called developed countries, a widening gap is developing in the life expectancy of those living in the poorest areas compared to those living in the richest which is resulting in exacerbated social, economic, and societal pressures (Fullan, 2006; Wilkerson). Bates (1980, 1983, 1985, 2005, 2006) extended Habermasian critical analysis of advanced capitalism to the field of education, by arguing that school systems help to sustain state legitimacy and control and that the very characteristics of the education system that help to sustain the state are also contributing to an emerging crisis, a failure to foster individual prosperity and societal harmony that ensures access to and the development of the substantial freedoms spoken of by the economist Amartya Sen (Garrett, 2005). It is argued that well intentioned educational administrators, wedded to the structural sensibilities that they have been grounded within, maintain many of the institutional inequalities that are at odds with the progressive storyline of public education. The lack of coherence between the progressive narrative of contemporary education and the structural, social, and communicative reality have widened to an extent that new critical analyses are required (Bates, 2006; Larson & Murtadha, 2002).

In addressing this gap, I have examined a methodology of educational administration that is grounded in critical social theory and aimed at social justice (Lindle, 2004; Culbertson, 1988; Donmoyer, Imber, & Scheurich, 1995; English 1992, 1994; Willower & Forsyth 19990), educational leadership that is focused upon notions of human emancipation and liberation (Bates, 2006; Foster, 1986, 1989, 2004). As
well, I explored the role of a school division senior leadership team (superintendent and assistant superintendent(s) as they reflected upon their attempts to foster critical perspectives upon their roles as leaders. This analysis is especially important in light of a recent high turnover rate in division level leadership positions in Manitoba (Crippin & Wallin, 2008).

Many educational administrators, immersed within administrative science theory, are oblivious to the possibilities of our work and as a result, it seems likely that a critical social theory, focused on the fundamental question of the relationships that exist between structures of knowledge and structures of control, is most likely to provide the groundwork for insightful comprehensive analysis. Specifically, the objectives of this research has been: (1) to examine division level leadership through Foster’s critical theoretical perspective (Foster, 1989, 2004; Hoffman & Burrello, 2004). I explored the importance he places upon narrative in understanding social systems and his application of critical theory to leadership: including his concerns of how Foucault’s *technologies of thought* (Miller & Rose, 1993) can control and limit the work of leaders. (2) I gained insights into the perspectives of a divisional leadership team regarding their individual and collective roles and positionalities as leaders; (3) and I documented their successes and failures from a critical perspective.

**Theoretical Framework and Positionality:** As a divisional administrator with nine years’ experience as an assistant superintendent and superintendent, I am well informed of the social, economic, and political challenges of organizational leadership. As a person of color with an experiential and scholarly interest in notions of social justice, I have continued to be grounded in notions of criticality (West, 2000) while being able to continue in leadership roles in relatively conservative systems. At the same time, I am wary of an unbounded epistemological relativism (Young, 2008) that can result in simply being able to critique current structures rather than developing and then test new theories. I believe in a praxis of educational administration that is grounded in critical social theory and aimed at social justice in the sense that hopeful, yet critical perspectives together with a dedication to political action can be required of educational leaders (Bates, 1980, 1983, 1985, 2005, 2006; Foster, 2004; Lindle, 2004).