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Not enough science or not enough learning? : exploring the gaps between leadership theory and practice

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Abstract

This paper addresses the relationships between leadership theory, practice and development, drawing on both the higher education and wider leadership literature. It explores why challenges and problems exist within the contested field of leadership theory and why gaps remain between theory and practice after more than a century of research - and indeed, with increasing levels of research, scholarship and development in the last 25 years. After highlighting the importance of context for theory, practice and development, the first section of the paper examines a range of factors that contribute to theoretical 'contests' including different starting assumptions made by researchers, the different focus of studies, examination of different causal links to explain leadership, differences in values and cultural lenses and different constructs, terminology and perspectives. The second section examines the challenges faced by leadership practitioners, as individuals, and through exercising leadership as a collective responsibility in the context of changing operating environments within higher education institutions and across sectors and countries. The author highlights three areas where some re-thinking of the links

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between theory and practice are necessary - at the input stage, linking research findings and recruitment practices; in terms of outcomes, by researching links between leaders, leadership and performance; and in process terms, to examine more deeply complex and relational dynamic of leadership in action. The third section offers a number of specific suggestions as to how closer alignment between theory, practice and development can be achieved. The paper concludes by arguing for greater maturity (in research, practice and development) that acknowledges that leadership is played out in complex, dynamic and changing social systems. A stronger emphasis on 'leadership learning' should deliver both better science and better outcomes for leaders and led in higher education. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)