
The Postmodern Turn in Educational Leadership: From Managerialism to Reflexive Praxis

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Abstract

Contemporary educational leadership remains largely trapped within the logic of managerialism an ideology that privileges efficiency, control, and performativity over meaning, ethics, and reflection. This article argues that the postmodern turn represents a necessary epistemological and moral shift away from technocratic rationality toward a reflexive praxis of leadership. Drawing on postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, and Bauman, this conceptual interpretive study deconstructs the dominant managerial discourse that has colonized educational institutions. Using hermeneutic and deconstructive analysis, the paper explores how power or knowledge relations shape leadership practices and how reflexivity can reorient leaders toward dialogical, ethical, and context-sensitive action. The proposed model of reflexive praxis leadership integrates critical awareness, ethical responsibility, and continuous self-reflection as core dimensions of educational leadership in liquid modernity. Rather than seeking certainty and control, postmodern leadership embraces ambiguity, multiplicity, and the moral imperative to “lead with consciousness.” This paradigm shift redefines educational leadership not as administrative management but as an ongoing act of meaning-making and ethical engagement with others. The study concludes that a postmodern approach offers a transformative framework for rehumanizing educational institutions and cultivating leadership as a practice of critical consciousness and moral imagination.

1. Introduction

The field of educational leadership has long been dominated by the rational and technocratic logic of managerialism. Since the late twentieth century, educational institutions have been increasingly shaped by managerial discourses that emphasize efficiency, performance, accountability, and measurable outcomes

(Ball, 2003; Clarke & Newman, 2012). The leader has been reconceived as a manager a custodian of performance indicators rather than a cultivator of meaning. This paradigm privileges control and productivity, translating educational values into administrative metrics and rendering schools as quasi-corporate entities. Consequently, education has been reduced to a process of optimization rather than human formation. Within such a system, teachers and leaders alike experience depersonalization, moral fatigue, and the erosion of reflective judgment. The pursuit of measurable excellence has displaced the pursuit of moral and intellectual depth.

From the perspective of critical theory, the term *managerialism* has become prominent over the past decade. Similar to other “-isms,” managerialism is an ideology that aims to concentrate power and control while diminishing the role (agency) of the working class, especially in collective decision-making. Such conditions result in unfair and oppressive work environments (Vong, 2022). Managerialism has emerged under the influence of neoliberalism as a political-economic ideology that promotes free-market capitalism with minimal government intervention. It is defined by an “ultra-individual” concept, which highlights improvement in various areas, work capacity, and performance, as well as personal satisfaction. (Sharron, 2020).

Consequently, managerialism is frequently linked to authoritarian management ideas or practices. Not only present in government institutions, but this reductive and oppressive approach toward the working class has also taken root in many higher-education settings, creating academic environments increasingly focused on business principles, obsessed with metrics and pseudo-quantifications (R. Spillane & Joullié, 2021). This, in turn, causes tensions with collegial values that emphasize intellectual freedom and academic independence. (Gasser, 2024; Labraña et al., 2025). Managerialism rests on what (Boyne & Habermas, 1986) described as instrumental rationality a mode of thinking that subordinates ethical and communicative dimensions to the logic of control and prediction.

In the educational domain, this manifests as a relentless focus on standards, targets, and audits that quantify learning and leadership success. Educational leadership, in this sense, becomes a technique of governance rather than a moral practice. Leaders are expected to “deliver results,” but not necessarily to cultivate wisdom, empathy, or critical awareness. The managerial approach therefore marginalizes reflection, dialogue, and ethical deliberation the very capacities that distinguish leadership as a human and transformative act.

Managerialism, in turn, shifts authority to technical experts (technocrats), or, in other words, it demonstrates a technocratic orientation (R. Spillane & Joullié, 2021). This is unsurprising since managerialism is closely linked to modern technology and constitutes an integral part of it, with technology itself becoming fundamentally managerial in nature (Malpas, 2018). From a Marxian perspective, technology acts as a “productive machine,” a tool for generating surplus value and reinforcing coercive and exploitative social relations, serving as an instrument of capitalist control over the working class. (Cini, 2023; Fasenfest, 2022). Technocratism, from a critical theory perspective, depicts a system where technological rationality and expert knowledge dominate and displace authentic democratic political discourse. Habermas argues that technocratism causes a “dissociation of society’s self-understanding” by replacing communicative action with instrumental reasoning. (Urban, 2020).

This technocratic orientation has provoked a growing sense of crisis in the theory and practice of educational leadership. As schools and universities struggle to reconcile bureaucratic efficiency with moral purpose, a disjunction arises between institutional demands and educators’ lived realities. Leadership becomes performative rather than authentic, prescriptive rather than reflective (Ball, 2003). Under these conditions, the question of meaning “what education is for” is often eclipsed by the question of measurement, how education performs. This crisis, both epistemological and ethical, signals the exhaustion of modernist frameworks that have historically underpinned educational administration.

In response, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed a growing postmodern turn in educational theory and philosophy. Postmodernism, as articulated by Lyotard et al. (1984); Foucault, (1980); Derrida & Bass, (2021); and Casanova & Bauman (1995), challenges the grand narratives of progress, efficiency, and rational mastery that sustained the modern educational project. Postmodernism, within the

context of the social sciences and humanities, re-examines modern knowledge and its claims to objectivity, questions reason and traditional democracy, and aims to influence political ideology through social movements. Postmodernist scholars highlight interdisciplinary approaches because contemporary “scientific conditions” have become increasingly complex, with philosophy, history, theology, gender studies, and the arts now interconnected with biology, genetics, cybernetics, economics, and other fields (Rosenau, 1992, p. 11; Vlasova et al., 2021).

Rather than seeking universal models of leadership, postmodern thought invites a pluralistic, interpretive, and context-sensitive understanding of how power, knowledge, and meaning circulate within educational organizations. From this perspective, leadership is no longer conceived as the linear transmission of authority but as a discursive and relational practice, an ongoing negotiation of values, identities, and interpretations among participants.

The postmodern turn thus reframes educational leadership as an act of meaning-making rather than managerial control. It resists the homogenizing tendencies of managerialism by emphasizing difference, contingency, and reflexivity. In contrast to the modernist quest for certainty and efficiency, postmodern leadership acknowledges the ambiguity and multiplicity inherent in educational life. It situates leadership within the moral complexity of human relationships and the ethical responsibility to the “other” (Bhola, 2002). This approach restores the dialogical and reflective dimensions of leadership that have been suppressed by managerial rationality.

Central to this transformation is the notion of reflexivity, the capacity of leaders to critically interrogate their own assumptions, power relations, and practices. Reflexivity transforms leadership from a position of authority to a process of ethical inquiry. It invites leaders to become aware of the conditions that shape their judgments and to act consciously within them. When combined with praxis, the unity of reflection and action (Freire, 2020) reflexive leadership becomes a moral and emancipatory endeavor. It challenges leaders to go beyond technical competence toward cultivating critical consciousness. This shift marks a departure from the managerial emphasis on external control toward an ethics of internal awareness and relational care.

Within this intellectual landscape, the postmodern turn offers not merely a critique but an alternative ontology of leadership, one grounded in dialogue, ethics, and interpretive understanding. Educational leadership is reconceived not as a set of administrative procedures, but as a living practice of engagement and co-creation of meaning. The leader becomes a facilitator of collective reflection, a “reflective practitioner.” (Visser, 2011) who learns and acts within the fluidity of social and moral contexts.

Such reflexive–postmodern inquiries are essential, mainly since leadership studies in Indonesia are dominated by narrow, single-discipline perspectives that lean toward managerialism. This is evident, for example, in Samudra et al. (2025) study on human resource management in the digital age, which highlights technical understanding and value-based considerations in employee recruitment. The study also emphasizes that effective selection improves employee performance and quality. However, it is clear that the term “digital” functions as an empty label, and the study’s findings are no different from human resource management discourse from forty years ago—managerialistic and outdated. Similarly, Subagyo et al. (2022) development-oriented research conceptualizes innovation solely through the lens of digital technology, reflecting a reductive and technocratic perspective.

Given these developments, this study seeks to explore the epistemological and ethical implications of the postmodern turn in educational leadership. Specifically, it aims to interrogate how postmodern thought challenges the managerial paradigm and to articulate the contours of a reflexive praxis model as a viable alternative for the future of educational institutions. The following research questions guide this inquiry:

- 1) How does the postmodern turn challenge the assumptions of managerialism in educational leadership?
- 2) What are the defining characteristics of reflexive praxis in postmodern educational leadership?
- 3) How can the integration of ethics, power, and reflexivity shape a more emancipatory form of educational leadership?

Through these questions, the article does not seek to construct a new grand theory, but rather to illuminate new possibilities for thinking and practicing leadership beyond the confines of modernist rationality. The intent is to reveal how postmodern perspectives enable a reimagining of leadership as a moral, dialogical, and contextually responsive practice.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to reposition educational leadership within a postfoundational epistemology one that values uncertainty, multiplicity, and ethical reflexivity over predictability and control. By deconstructing the ideology of managerialism, this paper offers a philosophical reorientation toward reflexive praxis leadership, where leaders act as moral agents who continuously negotiate meaning in the flux of educational life. Such a reorientation is urgent in an era characterized by rapid change, digitalization, and moral complexity, where rigid managerial systems increasingly fail to address the human and ethical dimensions of education. The postmodern turn, therefore, is not merely an intellectual critique but a call for the rehumanization of educational leadership: from managerial control to reflective consciousness, from efficiency to empathy, and from institutional compliance to ethical transformation.

2. Research Methods

This study employs a conceptual interpretive research design grounded in the postmodern interpretivist paradigm. Instead of measuring empirical variables or searching for generalizable laws, it approaches educational leadership as a cultural and philosophical construct shaped by discourse, history, and institutional practice. Leadership is not treated as an objective phenomenon but as something continuously produced, negotiated, and transformed through language and power. In this view, research becomes a dialogical engagement with texts, consistent with Gadamer's notion that understanding emerges through the fusion of horizons between interpreter and discourse.

Epistemologically, the study adopts postmodern interpretivism, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is always partial, situated, and mediated by culture and history. As argued by Guba and Lincoln, truth in a postmodern frame is not discovered but interpreted. Leadership terms such as "effectiveness," "managerial efficiency," or "quality" gain meaning only within the discourses that shape them. The researcher's task is therefore not to define leadership objectively but to interpret how particular narratives construct and legitimize certain understandings. Reflexivity becomes central: interpretation must acknowledge the researcher's own philosophical commitments, cultural background, and ethical stance. Rather than eliminating subjectivity, the study treats it as a source of insight in the interpretive process.

The sources of data consist of philosophical writings, leadership theories, and educational policy texts. These materials ranging from OECD and World Bank frameworks to classical and contemporary leadership literature are read as cultural artifacts that reveal how managerialism becomes normalized in education. Rather than analyzing empirical content, the study interrogates the discursive logic embedded in these texts. Works by Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Bauman, and Freire are placed in dialogue with contemporary policy narratives to expose the underlying assumptions about knowledge, power, and human purpose that shape educational leadership.

The analytical process integrates three interpretive strategies. First, deconstructive reading reveals binary oppositions such as leader/manager or rational/emotional showing how managerial narratives privilege control, predictability, and performance. Second, critical discourse analysis examines how managerialism functions as a regime of truth: shaping norms, producing subjectivities, and framing leadership as an instrument of accountability and efficiency. Third, hermeneutic interpretation reconstructs leadership through an ethical lens, emphasizing reflection, dialogue, and moral engagement. These three strategies form a spiral of interpretation: deconstruction disrupts fixed interpretations; discourse analysis situates them within power relations; and hermeneutics reimagines leadership as reflexive praxis.

Validity is conceptualized through postmodern criteria. Authenticity requires that interpretation preserves complexity and ambiguity rather than reducing phenomena to simple categories. Reflexivity ensures transparency regarding the researcher's interpretive decisions and positionality. Interpretive coherence is

achieved when the reconstructed understanding resonates philosophically and ethically with the nature of leadership under study, rather than through positivist metrics such as reliability or generalizability. These criteria reflect the shift from verification to meaning-making.

The researcher's positionality is integral to the inquiry. The researcher is seen not as an external observer but as a co-creator of meaning. Interpretation is shaped by personal experience, philosophical orientation, and moral commitments, all of which influence how texts are read and understood.

Through the integration of deconstruction, discourse analysis, and hermeneutics, this study critiques managerialism while offering an alternative vision of leadership grounded in reflexive praxis. It reimagines leadership not as a technocratic function but as a moral, interpretive, and humanistic practice shaped by dialogue, critical reflection, and ethical imagination.

3. Result and Discussion

The Crisis of Managerial Leadership

Over the past three decades, the discourse of managerialism has deeply permeated global education systems, reshaping the identity and purpose of leadership. The language of governance, accountability, quality assurance, and performance benchmarking popularized by organizations such as the OECD, the World Bank, and PISA frameworks has come to define what counts as "effective leadership." Educational leaders are now evaluated less by their capacity to cultivate human potential and more by their ability to demonstrate measurable outcomes (Ball, 2003; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). Within this logic, leadership is reconfigured as a form of technical management—a mechanism of control designed to produce consistency, comparability, and compliance across diverse educational contexts.

Through critical discourse analysis, the global policy rhetoric reveals a deep normalization of managerial rationality. OECD reports, for instance, frame leadership development in terms of efficiency, innovation, and system performance (OECD, 2016). The implicit assumption is that educational success can be engineered through managerial techniques and standardized frameworks. This discourse positions leaders as policy implementers rather than reflective intellectuals or ethical stewards of learning. Consequently, the managerial subject the leader who internalizes the logic of efficiency emerges as the archetype of contemporary education.

The cultural effect of this transformation is profound. As (Ball, 2003) warns, performativity becomes a "technology of power" that reshapes teachers' and leaders' sense of self. Under continuous surveillance through audits, rankings, and performance reviews, educators begin to live within a regime of visibility constantly measuring, documenting, and justifying their actions. In (Foucault, 1980) terms, the school becomes a panoptic institution, and leadership becomes the medium through which disciplinary power is exercised. The leader's task is not only to manage others but also to manage themselves to conform to the expectations of measurable performance.

The moral consequences of this system are equally troubling. The ethics of care and dialogue that once anchored education have been replaced by the ethics of efficiency. Decision-making becomes data-driven but value-blind. The result is a profound loss of meaning: the human and ethical dimensions of leadership are overshadowed by technical imperatives. Leaders and teachers experience emotional exhaustion, moral dissonance, and a growing sense of alienation from their own practice (Chiu & Fleming, 2025). As performance metrics become ends in themselves, the question "What is good education?" is replaced by "What can be measured?"

Thus, the crisis of managerial leadership is not merely organizational it is existential. It signifies a rupture between administrative rationality and educational purpose. Leadership that was once envisioned as moral guidance and intellectual vision has devolved into a procedural activity governed by metrics and accountability. This crisis lays the groundwork for the emergence of a new paradigm one that restores reflection, meaning, and ethical consciousness to the core of leadership.

Emergence of Reflexive Praxis

In contrast to managerial leadership, the postmodern turn redefines leadership as a relational and interpretive act rather than a positional function. Leadership is no longer tied to formal authority but arises from interactions, dialogues, and shared sense-making within communities of practice. This marks a profound ontological shift: leadership becomes an emergent phenomenon grounded in human relationships rather than institutional hierarchies.

Drawing from (Visser, 2011) notion of the reflective practitioner, the postmodern leader is characterized by an ongoing process of inquiry thinking in and about action. Reflection is not an isolated mental act but an ethical engagement with one's context, others, and self. Leaders learn from uncertainty, interpret contradictions, and act with awareness of the consequences their decisions create. Reflection, in this sense, becomes an instrument of emancipation, allowing leaders to navigate complexity without reverting to control.

This reflexive praxis integrates three interrelated dimensions:

1. Conscious Action – the awareness that every decision is value-laden and context-dependent;
2. Critical Dialogue – the use of language and communication to co-construct meaning;
3. Ethical Contextuality – the recognition that leadership decisions cannot be universal but must respond to the moral texture of local situations.

Through these dimensions, reflexive praxis transcends the managerial fixation on outcomes. It restores the interpretive dimension of leadership as praxis the unity of reflection and action directed toward human transformation (Freire, 1985). Freire's conception of conscientização the development of critical consciousness—resonates deeply here. Leadership becomes an act of awakening awareness in oneself and others: the capacity to question, to listen, and to act responsibly.

In practice, this means that the leader's authority derives not from hierarchical position but from reflexive credibility—a moral legitimacy grounded in openness and integrity. Leadership thus becomes dialogical, distributed, and collective. It aligns with (J. P. Spillane, 2005) notion of distributed leadership, but goes further by emphasizing ethical reflexivity rather than mere task distribution. The leader operates as a facilitator of meaning, a conscious participant in the co-construction of institutional values.

Under this model, learning and leadership merge into a single movement: both are processes of reflection, adaptation, and ethical negotiation. The educational organization becomes a learning community rather than a performance machine. Knowledge flows horizontally rather than vertically; power circulates through dialogue rather than decree. In this sense, reflexive praxis represents both a philosophical critique and a practical alternative to the modernist managerial regime it reimagines leadership as a moral conversation rather than an administrative command.

The Ethics of Postmodern Leadership

The postmodern turn not only reconfigures epistemology but also redefines ethics. In a world no longer governed by universal certainties, leadership cannot rely on predetermined rules or abstract moral codes. Instead, it must be grounded in contextual, relational, and reflexive ethics what (D. C. Bauman, 2013) describes as the ethics of uncertainty. For Bauman, the moral life begins where certainty ends; ethics emerges from the recognition of ambiguity and the willingness to respond to the vulnerability of others.

In this ethical framework, leadership becomes an ongoing negotiation between self and other, responsibility and freedom. (Bhola, 2002) advances this view by positioning ethics as the responsibility for the Other. To lead, then, is to respond to be answerable to others' needs, suffering, and dignity. Leadership as care replaces leadership as control. The leader's authority lies in their responsiveness, empathy, and humility rather than in their mastery of systems.

This reconceptualization transforms the power dynamic of leadership. Power is no longer exercised over others but with them what (Foucault, 1984) calls ethical self-care. For Foucault, freedom is not the absence of power but the conscious practice of relating to oneself and others ethically within power relations. A postmodern leader cultivates this reflexive freedom by recognizing how institutional discourses shape their

identity while simultaneously resisting total absorption into those discourses. In other words, leadership becomes a spiritual and ethical discipline of self-awareness and relational care.

Within the educational context, such ethics demands a move from managerial accountability to moral responsibility. Accountability focuses on external validation meeting standards, metrics, and indicators. Responsibility, by contrast, focuses on internal consciousness doing what is right, not merely what is required. This shift aligns with (Bokova, 2017) ethics of care, which locates moral value in attentiveness and compassion. Postmodern leadership thus aspires to rehumanize education: to restore moral depth to institutions that have been hollowed by performative rationality.

The implications of this ethical transformation are far-reaching. In uncertain times marked by globalization, digital disruption, and cultural pluralism leaders must navigate contradictions without retreating to rigid frameworks. Ethical reflexivity enables them to act responsibly in fluid and diverse contexts, recognizing that moral understanding emerges through dialogue, not decree. Leadership becomes a practice of humility and responsiveness: to lead is to be continuously transformed by the encounter with others.

Constructing the Reflexive Praxis Model

The interpretive synthesis of these findings culminates in a conceptual model of Reflexive Praxis Leadership. This model integrates insights from postmodern philosophy, critical theory, and reflective practice into a cyclical, non-hierarchical process of leadership development. It rejects the linearity of modernist management models and replaces it with a dynamic spiral of consciousness and action, reflecting the fluidity of postmodern ethics and epistemology.

The Reflexive Praxis Leadership Model

Awareness → Deconstruction → Dialogue → Action → Reflection → Renewal

1. Awareness – The process begins with moral and cognitive awakening: recognizing the limitations of managerial thinking and the constructed nature of power and knowledge. This stage corresponds to Foucault's call for problematization the ability to question what is taken for granted.
2. Deconstruction – Inspired by (Derrida & Bass, 2021), this stage involves critically unpacking dominant binaries (leader/follower, control/freedom, efficiency/ethics). It reveals the hidden hierarchies and exclusions embedded in leadership discourse.
3. Dialogue – Once deconstructed, meanings are reconstituted through dialogue. Drawing from Gadamer's hermeneutics and Freire's pedagogy, dialogue becomes the site where shared understanding and ethical consensus emerge. Leadership shifts from direction to communication, from instruction to co-construction.
4. Action – Reflexive insight must lead to transformative action. Action here is not managerial implementation but ethical engagement acting with awareness of consequences, power relations, and contextual sensitivities. It is praxis in the Freirean sense: reflection embodied in ethical action.
5. Reflection – After action, leaders engage in continuous reflection analyzing outcomes, intentions, and ethical implications. Reflection restores consciousness, ensuring that practice remains self-critical rather than self-justifying.
6. Renewal – The final stage is renewal a return to awareness transformed by experience. This cyclical process embodies the postmodern ethos of becoming (Kern, 2015): leadership as continuous self-creation, responsive to new challenges and meanings.

This model envisions leadership as a reflexive loop, not a managerial ladder. It is non-hierarchical, recursive, and participatory. Each stage informs and reshapes the others, creating a living process of learning, dialogue, and ethical growth. Leadership thus becomes a practice of consciousness—a movement from managing institutions to nurturing humanity within them.

In this postmodern framing, the leader's role is best described as a conscious facilitator rather than a controller. The leader facilitates spaces for dialogue, critical reflection, and collective learning. Power becomes a shared resource, ethics becomes a lived practice, and leadership becomes an evolving art of relational awareness. This redefinition aligns with Constantinescu et al. (2021); García-Martínez et al., (2020); and Bauman et al., (2014) vision of liquid ethics: an ethics flexible enough to adapt to uncertainty yet grounded in responsibility and care.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this study affirm that the postmodern turn in educational leadership is not a passing intellectual trend but a profound ontological shift in how leadership is conceived, practiced, and valued. It redefines the very essence of what it means to lead within education moving from the logic of managerial control toward the ethics of reflective consciousness. Where modern managerialism seeks order, efficiency, and predictability, postmodern reflexivity embraces complexity, dialogue, and moral awareness. This transformation marks a departure from the mechanistic view of leadership as control over systems to a humanistic vision of leadership as participation in meaning-making.

At its core, this postmodern turn invites educational leaders to transcend the technocratic confines of managerial rationality and reclaim leadership as a moral and interpretive practice. Leadership is no longer the art of organizing others around predetermined goals but the craft of cultivating shared consciousness within a community of learners. It demands sensitivity to context, attentiveness to difference, and humility before uncertainty. As (Lyotard et al., 1984) reminds us, postmodern knowledge does not aim for consensus but for “refined sensitivity to differences.” In this sense, leadership becomes less about governing institutions and more about understanding and co-creating meaning within them.

The concept of reflexive praxis introduced in this study offers a foundation for this new ethical paradigm. Rooted in (Freire, 1985) unity of reflection and action, and enriched by Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Foucault’s ethics of the self, reflexive praxis transforms leadership into an ongoing dialogue between awareness, deconstruction, action, and renewal. It restores to leadership what managerialism has eroded its moral depth, its interpretive openness, and its capacity for human care. Reflexive praxis thus emerges as the ethical foundation for rehumanizing education, bridging the gap between thought and practice, authority and empathy, self and other.

To lead, in the postmodern sense, is not to manage others, but to awaken consciousness in oneself and in the community. Leadership becomes an act of awakening an invitation to think, to question, and to act with awareness of our shared humanity. This awakening resists the reduction of education to performance and reaffirms it as a space of moral growth and collective becoming.

In conclusion, the postmodern turn challenges educators and policymakers alike to imagine leadership beyond the boundaries of managerial reason. It calls for leaders who are philosophers of their own practice, interpreters of meaning, and facilitators of ethical dialogue. Such leaders do not seek to perfect systems but to humanize them to cultivate spaces where learning and leading are acts of consciousness, compassion, and continuous renewal. In this lies the enduring promise of reflexive praxis leadership: the possibility of an education that thinks, feels, and acts as a living expression of human awareness.

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