

Qualities of papers we like: An editorial perspective

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Introduction

In this edition of Culture, Education, and Future, I think I can helpfully discuss the qualities we, the editors, seek in a paper. This discussion develops ideas that are not necessarily covered in author guidelines (see the [CEF webpage](#)); instead, these ideas reflect our preferences for the journal and the qualities that attract our attention. This editorial's audience is broad: It speaks to authors, reviewers, editors, and even those wanting to learn more about the dynamics of journal editors' decision-making.

The first quality we seek is CEF preference papers that are theoretically or conceptually current. I am not referring only to its applicability to today's administrators or teachers—although that is important as well—rather, this refers to papers that are responsive to current theoretical trends and movements. In 2001, Hunt and Dodge wrote a piece for The Leadership Quarterly in which they argued that had they gone to sleep 20 years earlier and just awakened, they would have found that leadership theory had not changed in the intervening years. This was a clear call for a new perspective on leadership. Hunt's voice was quite influential, and others were making similar grumblings. Anyone with their "ear to the ground" would have realized that the theoretical wind was shifting. What evolved was a set of perspectives that described leadership as a collective rather than an individual activity. Like Hunt, we, the CEF editors, are looking for a scholarship that is aware of trends and aware of where the pressure points are in current thought.

Second, to accomplish the first preference, we look for scholarship that demonstrates genuine expertise in the subjects developed in the paper. Of the many submissions I have read over the years, I find a depressing number that were obviously written by authors who exhibit a lack of mastery of the material they are discussing. They misinterpret or misapply ideas; they have not explored the weaknesses in the current literature on their subject, or they are not sufficiently mature in the subject to spot those weaknesses. For example, the literature on relationships between leaders and followers has been criticized for being ineffectively defined (i.e., it fails to clarify whether measures are defined as the perceptions of followers or as the differences in perceptions by leaders and followers; Gottfredson et al., 2020). Other submission authors may misunderstand incompatibilities between epistemologies, as when they use statistics (which assumes independencies among cases and stability across time) to evaluate a phenomenon that is clearly interdependent and changing; for more, see Cilliers, 1998).

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We prefer work that is interesting. I sometimes see submissions in which the logic and analyses are well-conceived, but the topic fails to pass what might be called the “so what” test. That is, they are boring. Their subjects are unimportant (students perform better in buildings made of bricks than of wood—disclaimer, I have not actually seen this one, but it illustrates the point) or self-evident (e.g., children who pay for their lunch perform better than students who are subsidized—this is about socio-economic disadvantages, and the effects are well-known). A reader should come away from a paper with the feeling that they have been enlightened and interested in the subject.

Some journals favor papers that are guided only by currently accepted paradigms or logic, while others embrace creative new approaches and paradigms (Kuhn, 1970). We favor articles that examine issues with unique perspectives. There is an important caveat, however: The unique scholarship we seek does not include random musings, personal opinions, conspiracy theories, or anything disconnected from logical epistemology or from that which derives from useful, emerging knowledge. Possible examples include the following:

- A manuscript arguing that Trump evokes theories of discord (critical theory, anarchy, conflict theory) despite presenting himself as an institutionalist striving to rebuild norms from the past. What might this mean for higher education?
- How do cultural perspectives of reality among Indigenous people influence their approach to educating their young, and how does it differ from traditional thought about education?
- How will the trans-gender movement affect sports programs in schools, and what are the options for resolving the conflicts?

These questions are interesting and creative; they are current, and perhaps, excepting the trans question, they are grounded in rich philosophical or theoretical precedencies.

Manuscripts must be documented with credible references. Documentation links authors' claims to previous thought thus showing how the author's arguments evolve out of previous explorations. Writing skills matter. This is more than proper grammar; good writing is logical, it leads one to a conclusion, it is logically organized, non-repetitive, using words that are active (e.g., “strolled” rather than “went” or “possessed” rather than “had,” etc.) and which capture the nuance of the idea being expressed. Information that is not directly pertinent to the point being pressed should be excluded. Writing is the tool by which one transmits information and garners interest; it needs to be done well.

I read too many papers in which the Conclusion and Discussion sections are treated cavalierly. In essence, these authors devote a few paragraphs to reviewing arguments and add a few sentences about the paper's perceived importance in practice. Instead, good Discussion/Conclusion sections explain one's arguments. It describes what results mean for science and practitioners, obviously, but also explains what the results mean. Where does the paper's findings or logic lead us in the bigger scheme of things—how is it led by epistemology, where should others move with research, how does it modify or change what we once thought, and what is surprising about the new logic developed by the paper, where has the paper taken us that we haven't gone before?

Finally, well-crafted, thoughtful figures and tables can help explain the concepts in a paper, but they can also be unhelpful and confusing. Figures can graphically represent complex ideas or complicated logic with numerous parts. However, they can also leave the reader confused about how the figure relates to the text that describes it. Tables, likewise, are meant to summarize extended explanations or complicated text. Figures and Tables need to be carefully conceived and well-structured. They should never be gratuitous or lack usefulness.

These, then, are major qualities we prefer in a desirable paper, and I present them to give you insights into this editor's expectations. We want well-written, interesting, current, creative, and revealing manuscripts. The list is not complete, in part because there is much we could discuss and in part because our mission is evolving, and there are topics that have not yet been decided. Issues regarding the use of AI are changing, but at present, AI is not dependably accurate enough for us to endorse. Should we encourage greater use of empirical research? We will be monitoring trends and changes in scholarship and will revisit our preferences in this editorial from time to time. Meanwhile, we present six excellent papers in this edition of CEF and hope you find them interesting and useful to your own scholarship.

Declarations

Acknowledgments: Not applicable.

Authors' contributions: A single author performed all aspects of this editorial.

Competing interests: The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Not applicable.

Publisher's note: Culture, Education, and Future remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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