Leading within Constraints: 
Lecturer and teacher perceptions

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Working Paper


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Abstract
Over the last two decades both Conservative and Labour administrations have championed the delegation of decision making capabilities to school and colleges whilst at the same time imposed constraints upon them through defined curriculum, assessment and accountability mechanisms. As Gorard et. al. (2002) argue educational policy in England has become focused on measurable targets set by government for the performance of each sector of education. Various government policies for schools, (National Curriculum, numeracy and literacy strategies, Standard assessment tests, OfSTED inspections) have increased accountability, workload and curriculum prescription. In further education the period since incorporation (1992) has witnessed the same tensions between increasing autonomy and market independence on the one hand and new forms of accountability through audit, and inspection regimes.

This emphasis on meeting externally driven targets has led to an emphasis in schools on the need for all staff to agree upon and move the organisation towards a common vision, different members of staff taking responsibility for particular initiatives in order to ‘improve standards’. Advice on improving schools has centred on the qualities of leadership, being values driven and its distribution within schools (NCSL 2001). As Gold et.al. (2003) argue, such models stress that teachers should be actively involved in leading improvement agendas. Brown and Rutherford (1999) argue that an evolutionary approach rather than grandiose aims and detailed long-term plans are the key to successful development. As Glatter (2003) points out the organic process of sharing visions which emerge from experience is likely to be more successful than change which is imposed. Blase and Blasé (1999) argue however, that shared forms of governance allow leaders to control staff at a more subtle level. They believe that in order for staff to participate fully their ultimate leaders have to delegate real power to the staff and be prepared to take the risks that go with such a decision.

In Further Education the emphasis was initially placed much more strongly on central direction, management by performance and targets via explicit models of quality assurance and the explicit demand for the “right to manage” (Gleeson and Shain 1999). It has taken the Further Education sector longer to discover the soft rhetoric of change. After the initial period which could legitimately be described as one of “managerial excess” (Simkins and Lumby, 2002) external policy pressures on colleges emphasised partnership, cooperation and community. As Gleeson (2001) and others suggest this change in external pressure was paralleled by a similar shift in language and managerial practice within colleges. However, this process may be less developed in further education and there may still be a reluctance to embrace models of devolved power and professional autonomy.

Therefore, despite rhetoric of increased professional autonomy and distributed leadership it would appear that schools and colleges are still constrained both through governmental agendas and through the ways in which power operates within their institutions. Fielding (1996; 2007) suggests that changes which apparently offer empowerment exercise, at the same time, a more sophisticated level of control producing a workforce more sympathetic to governmental objectives.
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Introduction
This paper contrasts experiences of leadership between primary schools, secondary schools and further education colleges, identifying differences in style and rhetoric. The authors consider the ways in which power, both explicit and implicit, is enacted though the leadership structures adopted. They also examine the appropriateness of these structures to the organisations within which the structures exist. Semi-structured interview data are examined from recent research collected from lecturers, teachers and senior leaders working in 5 secondary schools and 9 primary schools. Information was collected on the styles of leadership these teachers, lecturers and senior leaders had encountered and the extent to which individuals within these organisations were empowered in their roles. A further element of the research is an ongoing longitudinal study started in 2003 based on middle management in one FE college in NW England... Several of the questions posed by Edward and Coffield’s large scale study of change in the Learning and Skills Sector (2007), such as the impact of continuous policy change on leadership and professional practice are addressed in this research.

During the last twenty years across all sectors and indeed in the public sector as a whole, demands for accountability and market testing began to be seen as undermining the claims to autonomy and self direction of a wide range of occupations including some old established professions such as medicine, as strategies based on “new managerialism” began to develop an ambivalent relationship with professionalism. New managerialism stressed management by objectives a systematic approach to planning and evaluating performance, a direct responsiveness to market funding and other accountability pressures imposed from outside. In this contest professionalism as it had been traditionally understood, particularly in its stress on autonomy and flexibility, was attacked and undermined when it was seen as representing “producer interests” against the sovereign consumer, but it was evoked and celebrated when there was a need to appeal to practitioners’ responsibility to clients, patients, students etc. (Clarke and Newman 1997)

One way in which the state’s ambivalent relationship to forms of professional discourse could be managed was through the development of models of managerial control which “respected” the professional autonomy of staff and offered them a role in the direction of institutions through the sharing of a common vision. Within this framework the language often changed from management to leadership from top-down direction to distributed structures and a key goal was what Gleeson calls the “management of consent which...requires a different set of organisational values to those previously associated with public sector professionalism ...often disguising managerialist ambitions in core values associated with inclusivity teamwork and communication.” (2001 p184)

These are the key themes of this study. To what extent have colleagues working in schools and colleagues experienced a similar shift in rhetoric and style, from “new managerialism” to “distributed leadership” and it terms of practitioner perceptions what is the significance of the shifts that have occurred?

Leadership vs. innovation

Organisational leaders are viewed by government as vehicles through which public services can be modernised (see OPSR, 2002). As Hoyle and Wallace (2005) point out, in this way central governmental goals are implemented through the activities of leaders within the public services sector. This requires leaders to faithfully transmit the government agenda and then to promote activities which support its
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implementation. Hoyle and Wallace go on to argue that in education governments over time have systematically removed any basis for radical transformation and any innovation that may meet government disapproval. They further argue that giving primacy to change initiatives promotes a strong top-down model of leadership which had been challenged by organisationally based innovation. Indeed despite a rhetoric of transformational leadership where educational leaders may ‘shape the future’, they are also required to ‘secure accountability’ meeting externally imposed aims and targets. Thus we can be attracted to the ideals promoted by Gronn (2002) who suggests that there is an important role for all staff in moving educational organisations towards a shared vision, pooling their expertise and initiatives in a way that produces actions and benefits that are greater than those they could achieve alone, but at the same time need to be aware of the constraints operating to mediate the innovative force of such activity. That is not to deny the potential efficacy or benefits of collaborative working practices but more to point out that as Busher et al (2007) argue,

...some people have more access to power or authority than others. This allows the more powerful to have greater influence than others over the ways in which the culture and practices of a community are shaped and, so, limits the ways in which the identities of participants in those communities may evolve (p.418)

Hence in educational organisations, staff may become cynical and disaffected where staff-led innovation is suppressed or quashed in the face of accountability agendas.

In contrast to a government-led view of leadership Ruth (2006) stresses that leadership is about adopting ‘a large and visionary perspective’ which has a ‘central transforming or liberating role’ (p. 68). He makes a distinction between leadership, authority and authoritarianism. The benefits of making this separation is that it emphasizes the need for leaders to consider that what they do is important rather than linking leadership automatically to authority. It also makes the point that anyone can exercise leadership. This notion challenges more hierarchical presentations of leadership. Consequently educational organisations are facing a tension between acting to meet standards and regulatory frameworks and acting upon their professional judgement. In terms of schools Smithers (2003) points out that whilst there may be some rhetoric promoting innovative practice, until schools receive recognition for taking such approaches then they are likely to be reluctant to act. Further, Tomlinson (2005) argues that if government is truly interested in promoting social justice and inclusion agendas then there is a need for ‘some leadership towards re-developing the notion of the common good’ (p 222) across the education sector.

The development of models of management and leadership within the FE sector has been slightly different. Edwards and Coffield (2007) stress the size and complexity of sector and make the point that it is difficult to characterize it but suggest that two factors stand out in its recent history: “unprecedented and welcome level of funding; and an unrelenting and generally less welcome, waves of change and turbulence” (p. 123).

Leadership within further education has to be viewed within the constraints of such a consistently turbulent environment. Gleeson points out that in the period immediately following incorporation of FE colleges in 1992, the emphasis was initially placed much more strongly on central direction, management by performance and targets via external models of quality assurance and the explicit demand for the “right to
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manage” (Gleeson and Shain 1999). Colleges were encouraged to see themselves as competitors within an open market aiming to maximise funding through the development of an entrepreneurial culture in response to new external funding models. It was not until the late 1990s that Further Education Colleges began to discover the “soft rhetoric of change”. After the initial period which could legitimately be described as one of “managerial excess” (Simkins and Lumby, 2002) external policy pressures on colleges emphasised partnership, cooperation and community. As Gleeson (2001) and others suggest this change in external pressure was paralleled by a similar shift in language and managerial practice within colleges. Gleeson identifies this interestingly with a very slight shift in the gender pattern of managers and middle managers. Some key roles in FE colleges came to be occupied by women who saw the new language of communication and vision as more sympathetic to their preferred styles (Gleeson 2001 p 190).

However, Gleeson emphasises that over time it is clear that these gender shifts and the general shift towards a rhetoric of leadership and collegiality remain less developed and embedded in further education than elsewhere in the public sector and there may still be a marked reluctance to embrace models of devolved power and professional autonomy. (Gleeson 2005).

Our research outlined here examines these apparent differences between FE and schools and attempts to assess their significance and identify any future changes. The study compares the perceptions of managers in the school sector with those in FE and provides some sense of how managers view their leadership role within a context of policy and funding driven change.

Method

The data on which this paper draws is in two parts. The school based evidence was produced as a result of projects commissioned by two local authorities (LA) from the English midlands. The first and largest of these projects was designed to contribute to LA consideration of the impact of workforce remodelling and in particular to find out if, as a result of what they described as a ‘unique venture’, schools are now ‘thinking and doing things differently’. This project involved 550 questionnaires (a 12% sample of all staff in all schools) and three sets of semi-structured interviews with head teachers, teachers, teaching assistants and administrators across four primary and four secondary schools. Data was collected in 2004 and 2006. The second project involved semi-structured interviews with head teachers, governors, teachers, teaching assistants and administrators from five primary and one secondary school and sought to gather data for similar reasons to the first LA. Data was collected in 2006.

The data on FE comes from a longitudinal project which was conducted with one large college and includes semi-structured interviews with senior managers and three focus groups. These data represent five years work to date and is an ongoing project mapping changes in senior managers’ perspectives and experiences of leadership. Data from twenty interviews are utilised for this paper collected during 2008.

The data considers how professionals make sense of the changes facing them (O’Brien et al 2008). Thus perceptions of educators’ own roles and their changing views of professionalism are investigated. It was essential to ensure both
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confidentiality and anonymity to informants (BERA 2004 ethical guidelines were carefully adhered to throughout the studies reported here). In undertaking the qualitative part of the project it was therefore essential, as far as possible to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in terms of the source of any comments being traced back to an institution or individual. Of the data collected only that relating to senior leaders views expressed through interview are utilized in this paper.

The longitudinal study of one FE College suffers from the limitations of a case study approach but does suggest that local ecology; learners, history, institutional context and mission (Hamilton 2007) may be of particular significance in assessing the impact of policy on practice particularly in the Further Education context. The longitudinal research took the form of semi-structured interviews and focus group meetings with middle managers and aspiring middle managers from a large further education college in the North West of England. The research project has been running since 2003. Initially middle managers interviewed were exclusively lecturers promoted to middle management positions such as curriculum group leaders and course team leaders as the project developed the group also included managers and leaders from student support services, administration and Human Resource managers.

Findings

School Responses

School managers clearly saw themselves as occupying a mediating position between the staff of their institution and the external forces demanding change:

“…you have to take in the context of the huge amount of change that has been forced on us as head teachers and schools, you know, the promised land of stability well, if anything in the last twelve months its been more frenetic change and many colleagues are just trying to cope with what they literally have to do…”
Secondary 1 head teacher

It is also clear from the schools data that managers and middle managers see communication and “managing consent” both from teachers and the broader school community as central to their role:

…I suppose we’ve got a very open policy with staff meetings … you know its all very much open, I mean, parents are informed we have…fortnightly newsletters or whatever, you know I think that’s a real strength at our school… Primary 2 senior leader

…but if you’re not all pulling in the same direction and if you’ve got people who’ve got different aims and objectives then you know, you’re not going to get where you want to get… we talked about schools where the Head’s got fantastic vision but because they’re not able to share that … when it’s been OFSTED’ed … the management has come out poor. … everybody’s got to have a least, well at least be aware of what the vision is for the school and the mission statement … but then its how you get that into practice and get people to actually get on board really…
Primary 3 acting head teacher

This stress on communication translated into a general concern with what was seen as “changing the culture” of the school. School managers see the key object of their practice as being the culture of the school:

…we’re trying to change the whole culture of the school… we’re changing the culture of the teachers as well because the people who have always gotta change the most are the teachers, and not the students!.. one thing we have tried to do is to shorten the chain of communication. To, in a sense have less opportunities for people to feel out of touch. So the idea is you’re never more than one step away in the structure from a member of the Senior management team…

Secondary 3 head teacher

This role is seen as intimately related to a style which emphasise consultation and discussion as well as empowering other staff in leadership roles.

…it's [the Head] that pushes everything through but with discussion you know it’s not something that happens without us all being aware…

Secondary 4 teacher leader

…We have different people that make decisions. The majority of decisions in this school will be talked about with all members of staff, and sometimes the children as well, depending on what the decision is…

Primary 5 head teacher

…[The Head] will very much empower of you, you know, and that sort of has two sides to it, you know, you have a lot to do potentially, but more often than not if you go to her and say I think this is really good, I think this will benefit the children, I think we can do it, this is how we’ll do it, if it’s not ridiculous she’ll say, hey, great, do it…

Primary 5 teacher leader

…The Head is very, very adamant that all staff have an input, the staffing structures have all been put to staff before they went to governors, before they went to senior managers, so that everybody knew what was going on, it was very open, very honest…

Primary 6 teacher leader

It is clear from the schools data that managers see their roles in terms a of a rhetoric that emphasises communication, cultural change and consent. There is also a rhetoric of leadership which emphasise the idea of distributed power and decision-making. Of course much of this can be seen as an alternative structure of control to ensure compliance with central drivers of change. However it is clear that the language of management in schools emphasises this “softer” approach and language.
FE Responses

In the case of our data from the FE college managers and middle managers, it is less obvious that these new leadership models have been fully embraced. Although respondents were aware of the duality of their role, Briggs’ (2004) concept of the new professional in Further Education was used as the main prompt for discussion of their role. Briggs’ suggestion that the New Professional in further education required managerial understanding and professional understanding to perform their role was supported by most of the respondents.

“Almost everything I have to deal with in my management role is a curriculum issue, if you think curriculum means everything related to student learning. This is the easier thing to deal with, managing people whether it is my staff or working with senior colleagues is much more challenging.”
(Curriculum Group Manager)

Most of the staff shared the school managers’ view that part of their role was to act as an intermediary for centrally generated pressures and requirement.

“I have never really seen myself as a middle manager but the term is used more and more now in college and I do find myself playing the middle management role. I do see it as difficult role. What I seem to spend a lot of my time doing is explaining the inevitability of changes to staff. The message that we have to get recruitment, retention and achievement right to produce income to allow us to do the job is now my mantra. I hear senior managers justifying unpopular actions in this way and I am doing it myself.”
(Head of Centre)

What is less apparent is the kind of stress on leadership, communication and “winning people over” which seems to characterise the school managers’ responses. Interestingly little mention was made of leadership as such and their role was seen as fundamentally managerial in character. However, focus group responses to prompts about the leadership/management debate produced some important insights.

“Leadership is not mentioned much in college. We seem to only have leadership as a title for course team leaders which is not a very senior position in the hierarchy. Management does seem to dominate and formally my job is to work with staff to make sure that they are doing what they are supposed to be doing in terms of hours and paper work.”
(Curriculum Group Manager)

Another respondent made a significant observation when pushed to consider where leadership was demonstrated in the College.

“Probably a lot of leadership takes place informally in team meetings and in the support provided for staff and students. I am not sure how much of this is recognised formally but a lot of good practice is maintained by staff at all levels taking personal responsibility arguing or simply doing what they think is right to make sure that the students’ needs are met.”
(Course Team Leader)

The point was elaborated by several managers when prompted
“I don’t think that I would have described the process as leadership but I can now see the link. Many staff make sense of the directives from management and try to make sure that their students and their curriculum is not damaged by changes.”

(Course Team Leader)

Where there was a clear overlap between the responses of school and FE managers’ responses was in the sense of acting as a pivot between funding, national and governmental processes and the staff in their institutions. Respondents were all middle managers or aspiring middle managers with some staff, systems or resource allocation responsibility. They saw themselves as playing a middle management role as the lynchpin between senior management and core staff. Questions about their role as leaders from the middle generated a range of responses. Most did not seem themselves as leaders or necessarily agents of change. The strong feeling among the FE respondents was that although the College and Further Education in general were experiencing high velocity discontinuous change (Doyle (2002)) they did not see themselves as dispersed leaders or champions of the change.

“I accept that we are going through continuous change and that my role as a curriculum group manager is to manage the outcomes of this change but I don’t see me having any significant role in either deciding what the change should be or even really how we should respond to it apart from making it work .”

Curriculum Group Manager

“I don’t accept that I am a change agent. I like the term it sounds dynamic and creative but I don’t do this. My job really is about convincing staff that we have to do what is required and ideally convince staff to do it or at least make sure that they comply.”

Curriculum Group Manager

It is tempting to identify the differences outlined above between schools and FE as simply indicating a “cultural lag” whereby FE colleges are simply further behind on an inevitable route of progression towards devolved and collegial models of leadership. However another finding from the FE data suggests that the recent partial shifts towards a less managerialist model are seen as under threat. Here again the key factor is seen as central direction and changes in funding notably those associated with the Leitch report and the new skills agenda. Throughout the longitudinal study respondents have consistently expressed a view that although change is constant it has been possible to make sense of this locally and consequently to maintain the fundamental community mission of the College. The latest policy changes with their strong levers of legislation, funding and audit, performance indicators and public opinion (Hamilton, 2007) particularly in relation to skills deficits seem to be having a new and perceived detrimental effect at the local level.

“It is now clear that we are all simply having to do what the Government is telling us to. I know the Principal doesn’t want to label us a business college or an employers’ college. It is painful to watch the senior management team and the Principal justifying this when they don’t believe it”

Curriculum Manager
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“This is a major change and we may be able to ride it out but I don’t think so. We are losing a lot of what we are good at and what we have gained awards and outstanding inspections for. I don’t think it is a good change and I struggle to justify it to colleagues. I am really reluctant to quote the bottom line, do this or else but I am struggling to find an other way of asking staff to meet the new requirements”

Student Services Manager

Conclusion

The data we collected while relatively small scale and limited suggest that there is indeed a contrast between perceptions of leadership and management roles in schools and FE. What seems to be shared by both sets of respondents is the view that the management role was not fundamentally a leadership or change role but rather one of confirming and operationalising policy driven change. This suggests that some managers see themselves as not necessarily being part of a sophisticated process of creating a workforce sympathetic to government objectives (Fielding, 1996, 2007) but part of a process of management implementation within the local context. The general conclusion suggested by the research is that the explicit rhetorics of management developed within different institutions are much less significant in the final experience of professionals on the ground than the central drivers of policy accountability and funding. A clear indicator of this is the strong sense among FE managers that their own values and sense of what their role should be was secondary to central policy pressures for change.

The contrast between the sectors seems to re-inforce the view developed by Gleeson that while the rhetorics of management and leadership within organisations may differ and change the reality for practicing professionals is more significantly determined by external pressures from funding bodies curriculum authorities, inspectorates etc. The shifts in language and personal style may reflect differences in history and professional identity but they may turn out to be surface phenomena in terms of the survival of teachers or lecturers as autonomous practitioners.

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