Meeting the Needs of Local Communities and Businesses: From Transactional to Eco-Leadership in the English Further Education Sector

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Abstract

Leadership in the post-incorporation English Further Education system has not been distributed in nature, but transactional, driven by the external demands of funding and inspection regimes. There is, however, in light of the current rhetoric of localism in Further Education policy, a view that distributed leadership would be an appropriate alternative form of leadership within this context. This paper reviews the education literature, and argues that distributed leadership should be introduced to the sector but that this, on its own, will be insufficient for addressing the government's agenda of meeting the human capital needs of businesses, needs-based equity for disadvantaged adults or the wider benefits of education. This is because distributed leadership, whilst involving a dispersion of responsibility, may not equate to a dispersion of power. To disperse power to local areas, and to facilitate an authentic distributed leadership focused on local stakeholders a policy of localism is needed which encourages self-governance and open systems, and flexible accountability arrangements which encourage strategy and leadership at the local level. Such distributed leadership embedded within a local governance which facilitates dispersed power to key local stakeholders is similar to what is described as Eco-Leadership in the leadership literature.

Key words: **Distributed Leadership, Eco-Leadership, Further Education, Transactional Leadership, Managerialism**

Introduction

There has been a significant difference in leadership between the experience of post-incorporation Further Education (FE) colleges in England and that of schools (Lumby, 2003). Leadership in FE from 1993 has been driven by Incorporation and the resultant FE quasi-market which, through centralised funding formulae and inspection frameworks, has created a hierarchical and autocratic form of leadership (Jameson, 2008: 12), focused on achieving government targets (Elliott, 1996; Randle and Brady, 1997; Boocock, 2013). Such transactional, or managerial leadership, in which compliance is sought through rewards and punishments, continued under the New Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments between 1997 and 2017. This contrasts with the distributed leadership discussed in the school literature. Within this context schools have operated more organically through 'systemic leadership' involving many teachers adopting a leadership role throughout the school hierarchy (Harris, 2014).

Distributed leadership, under the current Conservative administration, is now on the agenda as part of a wider narrative of more devolved rather than central decision-making within a policy of localism in the Further Education sector (Keep, 2016). Support for distributed leadership is further promoted by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) which was established in 2013 to ensure an 'effective up-to-date workforce (in FE) supported by good leadership, management and governance' (Hughes, Berryman and Sheen, 2015: 4). Prior to the introduction of the ETF the LSIS (Learning and Skills Information Service) also supported a more distributed form of leadership in FE:

> One of the key challenges facing the sector is to move away from the age of the heroic leader to one where leadership within organisations is a genuine team effort; where leadership is distributed throughout the organisation, and senior teams and governance structures are created that contain the right individuals with all the skills, knowledge and qualities needed to lead and manage in a complex changing environment (LSIS, 2013: 6).

Distributed leadership is further suggested by Lord Lingfield in the report on Professionalism in Further Education (Lingfield, 2012) which encourages increased trust in professionals to direct the future success and priorities in FE Colleges.

In this article the funding and inspection of FE Colleges, which has shaped a transactional (or managerial) form of leadership is outlined. A review of the FE policy literature on post-incorporation FE colleges between 1993 and 2017 (under Conservative, New Labour and Coalition governments and the current Conservative administration) leads to the key conclusion that transactional leadership has led to a deprofessionalised and depoliticised work environment and to impression management activity to meet the external needs of funding and inspection regimes, at the expense of the needs of local businesses and communities (Elliott, 1996; Rennie, 2003; Kelly, 2005; Smith and Bailey, 2005; Boocock, 2014; Fletcher *et al*., 2015; Dennis, 2016; Boocock, 2017).

A review of the English secondary school literature on distributed leadership (Harris and Muijs, 2004; Harris, 2009; Harris, 2014) further suggests that a more distributed form of leadership may more effectively meet the needs of students, employers and the local community in Further Education colleges through the utilisation of local knowledge and professional communities of practice. Whilst there is a dearth of research on distributed leadership in FE (Lumby, 2003; Fox *et al*., 2005; Jameson, 2008) research on the relationship between Further Education policy and learning cultures also suggests the need for more respect for FE lecturers as pedagogic leaders and for the productive potential of collaboration within learning cultures (Hodkinson, 1997; Bathmaker and Avis, 2003; Scaife, 2004; Hodkinson, 2005; Biesta and James, 2007; Gleeson and James, 2007; Jameson, 2008; Coffield, 2014). A significant caveat relates to the

largely normative and descriptive nature of research on distributed leadership which disregards both power relations and the impact of policy (Bolden, 2011; Lumby, 2013).

This article adds to the existing literature on education (and distributed) leadership in illustrating the importance of power relations in FE, and the significance of this for meeting the needs of businesses and local communities. A review of the literature on power relations within distributed leadership in English secondary schools and on existing power relations within leadership in FE Colleges, leads to the conclusion that for distributed leadership to be effective in meeting the needs of students, local businesses and communities it will need to be embedded within a policy of localism where far more autonomy at the local level is provided in terms of funding and curriculum delivery (Gravatt, 2014); more particularly policy should shift away from the funding and monitoring systems, driven by marketization, managerialism, 'targets and terror' (Keep, 2016: 4) to enable an authentic distributed leadership to emerge in which trust in subordinate actors and local stakeholders is used to meet local needs (Keep, 2016). This would require government policy to focus on encouraging networking between colleges and other local education providers and stakeholders at the local level (Coffield *et al.,* 2008; Coffield and Williamson, 2011; Hodgson and Spours, 2015; Boocock, 2017).

Such embedded leadership (i.e. distributed leadership embedded within a local governance which facilitates dispersed power to key stakeholders) is similar to what is described as the Eco-Leadership discourse in the leadership literature (Western, 2013). Eco-Leadership would require colleges to be part of the fabric of the wider community, and leaders to be able to challenge existing power relations to uncover which 'discourses are privileged and which are marginalised' (Western, 2013: 257). Leaders, at each level within a college, would shift away from the current neoliberal philosophy of competition and transactional relationships to the

principles of mutuality, reciprocal relationships and fraternal relations. In this way, the introduction of Eco-Leadership would challenge the modernist hegemony in FE and facilitate a shift from transactional to distributed leadership linked to local community and business needs (Western, 2013).

Transactional Leadership in the Further Education Sector

As discussed in the introduction to this article, distributed leadership has not been as emphasised within the Further Education sector as in the school sector. The Incorporation of colleges in 1993 shifted the sector from Local Education Authority (LEA) control and historical funding to a quasi-market (Goddard, Patel and Whitehead, 2000) in which demand was determined by the state purchasing agency (the Further Education Funding Council – FEFC) and supply by FE Colleges within decentralised management environments. The result has been a series of external funding and inspection incentives, leading to a transactional (or managerial) leadership style in the sector.

Under the Conservative administration (1993-1997) a transactional leadership style was encouraged through FEFC funding incentives acting on leaders to increase the volume of students at lower unit cost. Such incentives included convergence in the average level of funding (the ALF) and 90% core funding (core funding was calculated at 90% of the previous year's total each year from 1993 to 2002) which required leaders to expand provision to receive the same level of funds as the previous year (Lucas 1999). Transactional leadership was further encouraged by the Demand Led Element (DLE) of the FEFC funding formula, in that it incentivised colleges to increase student enrolment beyond the total number forecast in a college's strategic plan to realise extra funding (but at a reduced rate - a third of the standard ALF - £6.50) (Lucas, 1999).

The policies introduced to create such 'managed competition' are sometimes collectively referred to as the New Public Sector Management Paradigm (NPM), a generic 'private sector' management model, introduced to the public sector in the 1980s and 1990s, predicated on classical management and scientific management theories (Pollitt, 1995). The ideological basis underpinning such reform is found within the discourse of neoclassical economics (and neoliberalism). Financial incentives expressed within funding signals within the FEFC funding methodology were assumed to induce competitive conduct in self-interested college agents leading to improved academic attainment in students (Zanzig, 1997).

There is evidence that the introduction of NPM, and resultant transactional/managerial leadership under the Conservative administration, had the desired effect in terms of an increased number of students enrolled in the FE sector, at lower unit cost (McClure, 2000). Financial incentives, in line with the assumptions of NPM, acted on colleges to improve advice and guidance systems, induction, tracking and information systems, and a closer focus on student retention (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Leney, Lucas and Taubman, 1998; Lucas, 1999).

Research on FE suggests, however, that transactional leadership, driven by funding incentives, also led to a significant deterioration in the quality of education outcomes. Cost-cutting strategies such as the casualisation of lecturers and college restructuring undermined the quality of teaching and learning (Guile and Lucas, 1996; Ainley and Bailey, 1997) and distracted colleges from investing in the training and development of staff (Hewitt and Crawford, 1997; Gleeson and Shain, 1999). A short-term management focus on satisfying the financial requirements of the FEFC was also at the expense of needs-based equity for disadvantaged students (requiring extra support) through a reduction in class contact (Lucas, 1999).

A significant final limitation of transactional leadership under the Conservative administration (1993-1997) related to the introduction of strict rules and procedures, in line with an increased demand for accountability (Ollin, 1996), which led to a proliferation of bureaucracy undermining the previous professional focus on teamwork and the pedagogic process (Ollin, 1996), and to increased workloads and stress which caused lecturers to focus on individual survival rather than educational goals (Hewitt and Crawford, 1997).

Under the New Labour administration (1997 – 2010) transactional leadership was also emphasised, but through a more centralist or traditionalist interventionist approach to education provision (Hodgson and Spours, 1999), including a more egalitarian approach to educational inclusion and an intensification at the meso (institutional) level of the 'New Managerialist' policies, initially introduced by the Conservatives. The resultant new model of governance associated with the discourse of modernisation (Newman, 2001) was constructed as a 'third way' in politics, combining neoliberalism and social inclusion.

Transactional leadership was particularly encouraged by Ofsted (the new inspectorate for the Learning and Skills sector) through a policy of benchmarking. This involved comparing college retention, achievement and success rate data with national benchmarks (averages) for 16–18, 19+ and 19+ basic-skills provision to inform inspection grades. Such a policy may be criticised for having little regard for the heterogeneity of education, the prior attainment of students or differing levels of advantage/disadvantage in terms of social and cultural capital. It meant that colleges with higher numbers of disadvantaged students were judged unfairly in the education market as disadvantaged students were unable to achieve at the level of the average student encapsulated in national benchmarks (Boocock, 2015).

Transactional leadership was also further encouraged by local LSCs (Learning and Skills Councils) through the use of success rate benchmarks in the implementation of New Labour's policy of rationalisation at the local level. More specifically, successful colleges achieving benchmarks would receive Centre of Vocational Excellence (COVE) status whilst college provision not achieving benchmarks faced the threat of course closure. Whilst Local LSCs did not have the power to fully implement New Labour's rationalisation agenda the resultant transactional leadership manifest in target-setting within colleges did lead to improved success rates in the sector from 53% in 1998/99 to 77% in 2005/06 (Coffield *et al*., 2008) and 79% in 2009/10 (SfA, 2013).

The validity of such success rates as a proxy measure for improved student performance is, however, questionable given the evidence of gaming behaviours including student plagiarism and ghost writing (Ainley and Allen, 2010), lecturers marking student work repetitively until all assessment criteria are achieved (i.e. criteria chasing) (Spours, Coffield and Gregson, 2006; Boocock, 2014) and colleges enrolling students onto unchallenging courses to improve college success rates (Wolf, 2011). In this way, transactional leadership was used to improve success rates through gaming behaviours and grade inflation ('education by numbers') (Ainley, 1999; Ainley and Allen, 2010) as a means of achieving effectiveness for the market and for Inspection rather than a genuine improvement in line with New labour's skills and egalitarian agenda (Smith, 2007).

Transactional leadership in college leaders was further encouraged by a top-down Ofsted inspection framework, including a prescribed approach to teaching and learning: what O'Leary (2015), drawing on the work of Foucault (1980), describes as a 'regime of truth' and 'apparatus of control'. To ensure colleges were auditable Observation of Teaching and Learning (OTL)

policies were introduced within colleges, which required teaching staff to follow prescribed pedagogical teaching practices. The grading of observed lessons became the norm in the FE sector and evolved into a normalized, performative tool, with a focus on teacher accountability rather than teacher development (O'Leary, 2015: 16).

Graded observations in Further Education, in being linked to capability and disciplinary procedures (O'Leary, 2015), exemplify a transactional form of leadership in FE. Within this 'new managerialist' context OTL became the key means of collecting data (within quality systems) to evidence continuous improvement in the quality of teaching and learning (O'Leary, 2013). This is criticised by Gleeson *et al.,* (2015) as creating a struggle between 'structure' and 'teacher agency'; more specifically a tension between the developmental needs of staff and homogenous OTL systems and procedures. Significantly, the emphasis on OTL as a surveillance device has taken precedence over an emphasis on the productive potential of collaboration within professional communities of practice.

More recently, under the Coalition government (2010-2015) managerial leadership continued to be encouraged by a significant reduction in funds made available to FE Colleges in an era of austerity, requiring senior leaders to focus on their role as CEO rather than leaders of learning (Dennis, 2016). A fundamental change in policy also altered the nature of managerial leadership. Rather than colleges (and leaders) being incentivised to supply human capital for the state-purchasing agency a new demand-side approach involved the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) allocating funds to employers to invest in the skills of their employees at an education provider of their choice (Keep and Mayhew, 2013). The aim, of incentivising each FE College to supply more vocationally relevant curricula in line with the human capital needs of businesses, was intensified further by the increased competition created by the government

allowing new private sector providers (of skills) to enter the market (Nash and Jones, 2015).

The evidence from the FE literature suggests that the use of the above centralised funding and inspection directives has led to a transactional form of leadership which has not met the needs of local communities, needs-based equity for disadvantaged students or the human capital needs of businesses (Wolf, 2011; Lupton, Unwin and Thomas, 2015; Wolf, 2015). The economising of education (Kenway, 1994), predicated on an assumption that educational goals are best achieved through incentives acting on agent self-interest, has created a compliant leadership in the face of a series of external funding and inspection regimes, and a disregard for local knowledge and the productive potential of professional learning communities within colleges (Hodkinson, 1997; Scaife, 2004; Biesta and James, 2007; Gleeson and James, 2007; Jameson, 2008; Coffield, 2014, Boocock, 2017). Instead of a focus on meeting the needs of local businesses and communities the leadership focus has been on impression management and seeking legitimacy from funding and inspection regimes (Elliott, 1996; Rennie, 2003; Kelly, 2005; Smith and Bailey, 2005; Fletcher *et al*., 2015).

To secure compliance internally, college leaders and managers have also been required to de-professionalise and depoliticise lecturing staff to inculcate a culture of performativity and student commodification (Elliott, 1996; Randle and Brady, 1997; Stoten, 2013; Dennis, 2016). This is manifest in gaming behaviours such as lowering standards to certify a larger volume of students to meet achievement targets set (Ainley, 1999; Steer *et al*., 2007; Smith, 2007; Ainley and Allen, 2010), withdrawing lower ability students from A level examinations to improve student achievement captured by newspaper league tables (Boocock, 2013) and steering students onto undemanding courses to improve student retention and achievement at the expense of students' employability and needs-based equity (Wolf, 2011). The introduction of Ofsted's common inspection framework, including the imposition of narrow pedagogies and

excessive bureaucracy, has also incentivised leaders to create an 'audit culture' (Power, 1999) which, it is argued, has undermined the altruism of lecturers, and marginalised the productive potential of learning cultures and professional learning communities (Hodkinson, 1997; Bathmaker and Avis, 2003; Biesta and James, 2007; Nixon *et al*., 2008).

Overall, distant government diktats, focused on quantitative measures of success, have encouraged transactional leadership and rituals of verification, to meet the external requirements of Ofsted and funding agencies and for survival within the FE quasi-market. This has been at the expense of genuine (and more informed) improvements in teaching and learning, which may be achieved through reflective practice within learning cultures, informed by research on teaching and learning and knowledge of the needs of local communities and businesses (Hodkinson, 2004; Lucas, 2004; Elliott, 2015a).

More recently Dennis (2016), in a critique of the FE leadership literature under the Coalition government (2000-2015), discusses the deterioration of values, purpose and equity within leaders in colleges (or ethical fading) in the face of huge funding cuts in the current era of austerity (Keep, 2016). Dennis (2016) describes such ethical fading as college principals' shifting role towards that of CEO to ensure college survival in meeting funding and inspection targets, at the expense of that of 'leader of learning'. Senior leadership, within this context, is less about leading education institutions than facilitating target-hitting enterprises (i.e. transactional leadership), with students reduced to funding units, and leadership more about managing funding cuts and organisational change than teaching and learning. A significant feature of such managerial leadership is an ethical silence regarding the needs of disadvantaged learners and the local community which are not valued by outside agencies:

> My suggestion is that the now dominant culture of education – managerialism – implies ethical corrosion … The ethical corrosion goes deeper and is more

> fundamental, leading to ethical silence: the idea of 'ethics' itself as a resource for educators in defining who they are, their motivations, and its purposes. The sector no longer has the vocabulary that enables it to think and talk about itself in terms of this ethical desire. For college leaders, what matters is being outstanding; the future viability of the college depends on it. And being outstanding means complying with the detailed specification bestowed by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) according to criteria that change on a triennial basis (Dennis, 2016: 125).

Time for a shift from Transactional to Distributed leadership?

Current policy narratives in FE regarding localism and distributed leadership have emerged in response to the ineffectiveness of transactional/managerial leadership under successive governments, driven by the funding and inspection steers discussed above. A particular criticism relates to:

> 'Measures of quality (in FE) ignore what is meaningful when what is meaningful is difficult to measure' (Orr, 2015: 175)

Distributed leadership moves the focus away from the individual leadership traits and behaviours assumed in traditional 'heroic' leadership theories which include transactional leadership (but also transformational, charismatic and situational leadership styles) (Lumby, 2013: 585).

A significant criticism of heroic leadership theories (within critical leadership studies) relates to the social construction of leadership as a top-down leader-follower relationship predicated on the assumed qualities of a few special individuals imposing change, the individualism of western culture (Collinson, 2011) and the dualist assumption of leader versus follower; particularly the assumption that leaders influence acquiescent followers but followers, as knowledgeable agents, do not influence leaders – a supposition which ignores dialectics and power asymmetries within organisational relations (Collinson, 2011). Criticism also relates to the extent to which heroic leadership is correlated with improved organisational performance.

Gemmill and Oakley (1992), for instance, describe such leadership as an 'alienating social myth' and as an ideology inculcated in followers to create learned helplessness.

In discussing leadership in FE Fox *et al*., (2005) also dismiss the view of leadership as about a few special individuals imposing change, arguing that it is instead a 'complex network of situated leadership practices involving staff from across the organization' (Fox *et al*., 2005, 2.2). Jameson (2008) similarly argues for a shift from transactional leadership to a respect for FE lecturers as pedagogic leaders who collaborate with managers to improve practice. This requires effective leader-member exchanges, high trust cooperation and critical friendships to achieve improved education outcomes (Jameson, 2008: 17).

The alternative post-heroic view of distributed leadership thus shifts attention away from the assumption of a few exceptional individuals, adopting a more social and inclusive process, involving fluid and emergent leadership, spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relationships and institutionalised practices based on conjoint agency (Gronn, 2002; Bolden, 2011). Three themes emerge as significant to distributed leadership. Firstly, it is an emergent property of a group or network. Secondly leadership is not bounded and thirdly, ability and knowledge is not the property of the few but the many (Bolden, 2011).

Harris (2014) provides a persuasive critique of the research on distributed leadership in English schools as a means of transforming education: to alleviate an unequal society 'which is associated with lower life expectancy, homicides, imprisonment, poor mental health' (Harris, 2014: 2). This requires a focus on planned social capital and collective professional capacity, involving the development of cohesive teams and collaborative professional learning which is realised through high levels of 'transferring knowledge, trust and shared purposes' (Harris, 2014: 14) and 'reciprocal accountability and shared purpose' (Harris, 2014: 16). Such

distributed leadership, research suggests, should be aligned with organisational goals (relating to the needs of students, businesses and the wider community), and intrinsic motivation rewarded to encourage the desired high performing and cohesive teams. International research also suggests that high performing education systems (e.g. Finish, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai education system), rather than focusing on quantitative targets (and transactional leadership), as in the UK, emphasise instead teacher research and collaboration, professional learning and teacher inquiry. A key argument here is that the creation of a professional learning community through distributed leadership, in facilitating collaboration between professionals within a stimulating social context, will lead to deeper learning in teachers who are challenged in relation to practice. This also impacts positively on education outcomes as a mediated relationship associated with staff morale (Harris, 2009).

The evidence in FE mirrors that of compulsory education in suggesting that distributed leadership would be a more effective form of leadership than the dominant transactional approach in tapping into the productive potential of communities of practice which generate social capital (Fox *et al*., 2005; Jameson, 2008). Research into teaching and learning and transforming cultures (a large-scale longitudinal research project) (James and Biesta, 2007), for instance, emphasises the importance of leaders creating and supporting professional learning cultures and teaching groups so that tutors can make decisions relating to teaching and learning, informed by creativity, innovation and collaboration. Within these more positive learning cultures tutor professionalism would be maximised through expansive work environments in which mutual learning is encouraged and practice critically challenged with reference to research on teaching and learning in differing contexts, rather than assumed pedagogies (James and Biesta, 2007).

Research on FE, however, also suggests that new managerialism and transactional leadership, introduced in response to marketization, has undermined such learning cultures and expansive work environments as the outcome has been one of individual lecturer performance embedded within a corporate culture, rather than a learning one (Mather *et al*., 2012; Dennis, 2016).

The importance of senior leaders in the creation of learning cultures in FE (James and Biesta 2007) resonates with research on school literature which also reveals senior leadership as significant to developing a culture of collaboration involving professional connections focused on teaching and learning (e.g. Leithwood and Jantzi , 2000; Harris and Muijs, 2004; Harris, 2014). Research suggests that the distribution of tasks by leaders, if undertaken effectively, has a positive impact in terms of organisational change and the creation of professional learning communities (Louis and Marks, 1998). Conversely, if task distribution and influence processes are not appropriately considered by formal leaders there may be a negative impact on education outcomes through less effective team work (Bolden, 2012). The senior leader (or leadership team) thus has a crucial role in facilitating the inculcation of collegial norms and values relating to collective inquiry (Harris, 2014), focussed on creative solutions to emerging teaching and learning concerns, as opposed to standardised approaches or pre-determined ones.

Research into the impact of policy on post-compulsory education (Coffield *et al*., 2008) suggests that for such distributed leadership to be facilitated requires a devolved social partnership which encourages professional-institutional collaboration and 'professional innovation and empowerment' (172)

> Teaching and learning is more than an individual task for all tutors; it is also a collective responsibility, which requires an institutional strategy to create a learning culture within the institution. The job of the senior management team is to provide the necessary structures, resources, spaces and opportunities for all members of the community to collaborate in a focus on learning (Reed and Lodge, 2006: 8 cited in Coffield *et al*., 2008: 177).

A shift from transactional to distributed leadership, as discussed above, would also allow democratic professionalism to replace managerial professionalism; in other words, 'collaborative, cooperative action between education professionals and other education stakeholders' (Taubman, 2015: 116), leading to a more democratic society in which local community and business needs are emphasised rather than distant funding and inspection diktats.

A key argument in the next section, however, is that democratic professionalism and a wider regard for community and business needs, will not be realised in FE through a shift from transactional to distributed leadership alone. A review of the literature on secondary education suggests that distributed leadership, rather than increasing local democracy and decision-making, has had the effect of further inculcating neoliberal values through the diffusion of responsibility, rather than power, within educational hierarchies.

More specifically it is argued that for distributed leadership to succeed, it will need to be embedded, not within neoliberal values and marketization, but a policy of localism which genuinely encourages local collaboration, knowledge and democracy. This will require a dispersion of power, as well as responsibility, to enable governance, leadership, teaching and learning, within a more collaborative learning environment, to more effectively meet the needs of local businesses, communities and students.

The limitations of Distributed leadership

A key question arises as to the extent to which distributed leadership might compensate for the unethical leadership in FE described above, whilst education policy remains predicated on neoliberal values and marketization. Harris (2014), in discussing the school sector, suggests

that distributed leadership can be implemented irrespective of the dominant neoliberal ideology underlying education policy. She challenges the argument, in the school literature, that distributed leadership is normative and uncritical, 'insidious' and 'a profoundly political phenomenon' (Harris, 2014: xiii). It is instead, she argues, merely an approach to leadership practice which considers how influence may be configurated/reconfigurated within an organisation to affect change. It is not, she emphasises, a means of controlling professionals to implement education orthodoxy, neither is it a social construct imposed on education professionals to manipulate them into the ideology of the government. Harris (2014) argues that change is the responsibility of those within the school system rather than the product of external accountability, and should focus on capacity building, group work, pedagogy and systemic solutions to change the culture:

A significant alternative perspective in both the wider literature on leadership (e.g. Grint 2010) and on education leadership in schools (Hatcher, 2005; Tseng, 2015) is that challenging marketization through distributed leadership is unlikely to succeed. Hatcher (2005), for instance, is critical of the lack of regard for power and resources in the use of distributed leadership; more specifically in the school sector he argues that it has been encouraged by government to control head teachers who, acting as agents for the government, adopt distributed leadership to drive through the neoliberal agenda:

> Thus officially sanctioned "distributed leadership" is always delegated, licensed, exercised on behalf of and revocable by authority (Hatcher, 2005: 268).

In the school sector Lumby (2013) also argues that 'Distributed leadership has been used largely to create a mirage, an apolitical workplace' (Lumby, 2013: 581). She further considers 'as dubious the claims that distributed leadership opens up new opportunities for staff or empowers them' but that it instead 'reconciles staff to growing workloads and accountability'

(Lumby 2013: 582). Distributed leadership, Lumby (2013) contends, does not consider sufficiently or problematize the redistribution of power. Whilst it appears to be an improved form of leadership, in reality its role is one of reconciling teachers to neoliberal values and obscuring power structures. It seems to indicate a redistribution of power but in practice it uses two and three-dimensional power. Two-dimensional power relates to the way in which education policy and senior leaders shape what is acceptable and silences alternative perspectives in the distribution of tasks. Three-dimensional power relates to the way middle managers and teachers are socialised into the dominant neoliberal values, so that these values are viewed as in the interest of managers and teachers leading to individuals supervising themselves as if under 'an inspecting gaze' (Lumby 2013: 589). In this way, autonomy is granted but embedded within the official agenda such that middle managers and teachers are made more compliant with top-down diktats relating to funding, teaching and the market (Lumby 2013).

Similarly, Tseng (2015) argues that school headship in England has shifted away from modern professionalism based on participative administration and pedagogical headship towards 'performative professionalism' focused on performance indicators and accountability. The key objective, Tseng (2015) suggests is one of reculturing schools to meet the requirements of the market, with senior leaders viewed as entrepreneurial heroes. Within this context distributed leadership is encouraged as a 'political project' designed to usurp the wider benefits of education and democratic values in favour of the needs of the economy, through 'simultaneous empowerment and discipline'; that is, 'the dispersal of power enables and empowers actors but at the same time subjects them to new strategies of surveillance and control' (Newman 2004 in Tseng 2015: 491). More specifically, distributed leadership enables teachers to be 'empowered to govern themselves in approved ways' (Newman and Clarke, 2009, cited in Tseng 2015: 294). In this way schools are colonised with the values of neoliberalism, and truths about

effective schools are constructed within a framework of neoliberal power and knowledge. Tseng discusses how distributed leadership is shaped, not by local democracy, but by performance measures and targets, which are used by 'government at a distance' to normalize the values of neoliberalism and marketization through 'a twin process of automization plus responsibilization' (Tseng 2015: 494).

Similarly, whilst agreeing with the idea of a shift from leadership possessed by special individuals to a relational ontology, Bolden (2011) argues that a critical perspective in leadership research is required in the face of a literature which is largely normative and descriptive and to compensate for the disregard for both power relations and a critique of policy within distributed leadership.

Stoten (2015), in his research of sixth form colleges, also shows how contemporary leadership is more about compliance with Central Government than a more authentic leadership focus on teaching and learning. His research suggests that the introduction of distributed leadership equates to a dispersion of responsibility rather than democratic power, with this shaped by the neoliberal ideology of marketization, competition and managerialism and an emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness as the key means of judging organisational performance (Stoten, 2014). Significantly, distributed leadership is distorted by the education market, which directs senior leaders, as CEOs, to a focus on narrow-minded institutional interests (driven by targets and league tables) at the expense of local students, businesses and communities (Stoten, 2014). In this way leaders only have a minor role in shaping strategy, and a diminished capacity to consider issues of 'educational purpose, value, utopia, democracy, equity, and vision' (Dennis, 2016: 116) within a marketised and managerialist context which privileges the needs of the education market.

Analysis of the impact of distributed leadership in secondary schools above suggests that a shift from transactional to distributed leadership in FE would further inculcate the values of neoliberalism through a reculturing process in which autonomy is provided to meet the needs of marketization rather than the needs of students, businesses and the local community. In other words, distributed leadership would lead to a dispersion of responsibility given the current controlling policy and leadership context, predicated on neoliberal values, rather than a distribution of power. Indeed, the political context of FE, which involves far more centralisation than schools through funding formulae, target-setting and benchmarking, inspection regimes, accountability measures and managerialism, would likely lead to a form of distributed leadership where increased autonomy is embedded within an even more controlling performative culture.

A caveat to the above view is found in evidence of middle managers in FE subverting policy through principled dissent and impression management as covert activity for prioritising 'students and teachers over the systemic reporting structures and financial imperatives upon which colleges are built' (Page, 2015: 127). Such strategic compliance enables middle managers and lecturers to attend to the demands of performativity, whilst also creating the professional space required for staff to maintain educational values related to teaching and learning (Shain and Gleeson, 2010).

Strategic compliance, however, is at the margins of practice, and does not fundamentally challenge the irresistibility of managerialism in the FE sector, with middle managers having a limited capacity to resist senior manager commands within authoritarian organisational structures (Randle and Brady, 1997; Gleeson and Knight, 2008).

Dennis (2016), in a review of eleven post-2010 leadership papers on FE, summarises the controlling nature of the dominant professional-managerial paradigm underlying policy which, if maintained in the sector, would significantly limit distributed leadership as a means of dispersing power or facilitating local democracy. The evidence suggests a:

> desolate post-apocalyptic educational landscape peopled by educators beset by an 'emotionality of despair' (Allen, 2014). The landscape of hope – hope for the impossibility of emancipation, hope in the likelihood of fulfilling the ethical desire for equity, social justice, and democracy – is now laced with repression, commodification, audit, and managerialism (Dennis, 2016: 125)

This is supported by Mather *et al*., (2012) in research within two FE Colleges which identified organisational change management strategies being used to re-educate lecturers into an uncritical acceptance of managerialist norms and values. More specifically, research revealed senior managers introducing performative regimes as a means of replacing professional norms and values with managerialist behavioural norms. In this way, the juxtaposition of performativity and managerialism was used to create controlled standardisation in line with the dominant managerialist discourse informed by neo-liberal values. This re-education of lecturers was designed to separate task conception with task implementation, and to remove the locus of control from teaching staff by socialising them into a can-do managerialist culture (Mather *et al*., 2012: 535).

Such re-culturing of colleges by leaders through performativity regimes illustrates how distributed leadership could be used as a further means of inculcating managerialist behavioural norms, if embedded within the dominant professional-managerial paradigm rather than local collaboration, knowledge and democracy.

Embedded leadership and Eco-Leadership

Evidence from research on English secondary schools and FE suggest that the introduction of distributed leadership to FE would not enable improvements in provision for the needs of local communities and businesses whilst the sector remains embedded within the current dominant ideology of neoliberalism, marketization and managerialism. If distributed leadership is used merely as a means of allocating leadership tasks, in line with central funding and inspection diktats, the dysfunctional and unintended consequences discussed above are likely to continue.

A significant barrier to the effectiveness of the introduction of distributed leadership relates to leader conformity and compliance with funding and inspection diktats as a means of achieving external legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan, 2004). This includes normative legitimacy - the need to comply with the neoliberal values of the Conservative administration, evidenced through the achievement of targets and benchmarks. The second type of legitimacy is cognitive legitimacy – the need to conform to the belief systems of Ofsted in terms of assumed teaching and learning technologies (Washington, Boal and Davis, 2008). To meet the requirements of these outside agencies external supporting mechanisms, based on managerialist ideologies, have been introduced which:

> Serve to identify and construct the external version of an institutional leader – an individual who utilizes institutional supporting mechanisms, existing governance mechanisms and cognitive frameworks to alter power arrangements through explicit institutional strategies (Washington, Boal and Davis, 2008: 728).

Discussion of the application of distributed leadership within FE requires more regard for the wider political and governance context of such leadership. In other words, a broader framework than distributed leadership alone is required to understand how leadership decisions are shaped by (and are embedded within) education policy; we might call this Embedded Leadership

(drawing on an Economic Sociology view of leadership in FE). Unlike orthodox economics, which underlies current assumptions of transactional leadership in FE, Economic Sociology views economic phenomena (such as leadership of teaching and learning) as embedded within social, cultural and political contexts, an epistemology which enables a focus on the impact of policy and governance on leadership behaviour and, in turn, on norms and values, trust and networks within the individual FE College (Granovetter, 1985).

Embedded Leadership compensates for the apolitical nature of distributed leadership in recognising that the policy context in which leadership is situated shapes the nature of such leadership; in particular that the introduction of distributed leadership in FE would need to be embedded within a governance which encourages local decision-making, rather than conformity to distant government diktats, with this requiring a shift in the sector away from the current hierarchical and rational goal forms of governance towards open systems and self-governance (Newman, 2001). This would provide the local democracy required for a genuine dispersion of power (rather than just tasks).

The current Conservative administration's policy of localism could provide the necessary context for a shift towards open-systems and self-governance, to facilitate a more effective distributed leadership (i.e. dispersion of power) but only if such localism enables colleges in collaboration with local stakeholders to make decisions based on local need. This is unlikely given the values of the Conservative administration of neoliberalism and marketization which emphasise centralised funding and inspection targets, at the expense of local business and community needs:

> The overall impression that comes across from reading the government's (2015) guidance...is that the fundamental balance of power between the central and the local is not intended to change to any great extent. The power relationships embedded in

> the process remain firmly within the traditional top-down mould, whereby ministers and central government make the key decision and set the overall parameters within which action can occur – in this case overall spending levels and the process model for undertaking Area Reviews (Keep, 2015: 3)

Indeed, the research of Elliott (2015b) on FE leadership suggests that the first stage of localism in Further Education of mergers and rationalisation has limited the ability of leadership to meet the needs of local communities and businesses as the individual FE College is now operating in a real education market rather than a quasi (or near) market, where commercial success is emphasised at the expense of collaborative partnerships and community needs:

> There is no sign that merger activity in FE is slowing in the FE sector, quite the reverse … From the evidence of this study, commercial success in a marketised FE landscape can carry a high cost of reduced community engagement, fewer educational opportunities and severing of formerly collaborative partnership arrangements… we fear for the future of the sector as an engine of widening participation and educational opportunity (Elliott, 2015b: 34)

For distributed leadership to be effective in institutionalising practices based on conjoint agency, a much more democratic form of localism will be required which genuinely empowers both colleges and their stakeholders: students, lecturers, businesses and local communities, through decentralisation and local decision-making. Such embedded leadership (i.e. distributed leadership embedded within a local governance which facilitates dispersed power to key stakeholders) is similar to what is described as the Eco-Leadership discourse in the leadership literature (Western, 2013).

Eco-Leadership may be described as a network of distributed leadership based on an environmental metaphor, which challenges modernity's heroic leadership and myth of central control, linearity and production lines. It replaces the market with a network society in which social relations are transformed within internal ecosystems linked to external ones, with the focus on human values beyond the instrumental. Within this context colleges would be part of

the fabric of the wider community, and allowed to challenge existing power relations to uncover which 'discourses are privileged and which are marginalised' (Western, 2013: 257). Leaders, at each level within a college, would shift away from the current neoliberal philosophy of competition and transactional relationships to the principles of mutuality, reciprocal relationships and fraternal relations. In this way, the modernist hegemony in FE is replaced with interdependence at the local level, and heroic leadership replaced with distributed. The eco-leader, within this context is:

> A generative leader who creates organizational spaces for leadership to flourish. Eco-leaders think spatially and connectedly; these leaders think like organisational architects, connecting people and creating networks using processes and technology… Eco-leaders are passionate about ethics, humanizing the workplace, developing sustainable business models, engaging with local communities and protecting the natural environment (Western, 2013: 275).

Such Eco-Leadership involves a shift from transactional to distributed leadership within FE Colleges embedded, not within a neoliberal agenda, but within a more democratic local governance. Such democratic local governance is supported by a number of researchers in the FE sector (Coffield *et al.,* 2008; Coffield and Williamson, 2011; Hodgson and Spours, 2015). Hodgson and Spours (2015), for instance, envisage 'a more democratically accountable regional and local landscape that is part of a wider rebalancing of policy and governance relationships between national and local power and policymaking' (Hodgson and Spours, 2015: 199). The objective of this model would be to shift the sector away from the current marketised model, and enable colleges to more effectively respond to regional lifelong learning ecosystems. Within this context leadership would be about accountability to learners, local communities, local businesses and other local education providers, and to regional and national professional associations, with this requiring a more collaborative and economically connected local learning system.

In this way the introduction of Eco-Leadership (distributed leadership embedded within more democratic local decision-making) shifts the embedded nature of leadership away from the NPM paradigm (i.e. market incentives, policy levers, targets and performance indicators) (Hendrikx and Van Gestel, 2016) which requires constant change in the sector, an over-emphasis on college competition at the expense of local collaboration and to unethical and inequitable education outcomes (Hodgson and Spours, 2015).

Eco-Leadership would instead involve a local governance in FE more in line with the NPG (New Public Governance) model (Osborne, 2010), in which the government acts as the facilitator of local planning and collaboration, and intervenes to address power inequalities in the creation of a pluralist state (Hendrikx and Van Gestel, 2016). This is the view of Hodgson and Spours who argue:

> There needs to be a more facilitative national policy framework that sets national standards, priorities and objectives, but encourages a climate of longer-term planning, area-wide funding and jointly owned performance measures related to progression and learner destinations. Alongside its quality assurance role, the inspectorate should be promoting collaborative practices that support effective and exciting area-based provision, closer working arrangements between education providers and employers and professional learning through subject and sectoral communities of practice coming together to discuss curriculum development and to improve teaching, learning and assessment (Hodgson and Spours, 2015: 9).

Within this NPG/local ecology policy context, distributed leadership would be used to encourage lecturers to act as partners in co-creating effective teaching and learning strategies, with practice aligned, not with the performativity agenda of new managerialism, but with the needs of local stakeholders. Integral to this would be the freeing of lecturers from the oppressive standardization of teaching and learning practice (NPM), with practice instead embedded within network processes at the local level (NPG). More specifically local

stakeholders (combined with research on teaching and learning) would inform the nature of the curriculum and guide reflective practice within professional learning communities, so that the needs of local businesses, the wider community and disadvantaged adults may be addressed (Hendrikx and Van Gestel, 2016).

Conclusion

An Embedded Leadership perspective (based on an Economic Sociology epistemology) conceives distributed leadership as flawed due to its lack of theory relating to the impact of education policy and governance on the distribution of leadership (and power). Such a perspective leads to the conclusion that an alternative to the normative perspectives of heroic and distributed leadership is required: that college (distributed) leadership should be situated within a change in governance which facilitates local decision-making and a dispersion of power, rather than conformity to neoliberal values. This requires a shift in the sector away from the current hierarchical and rational goal forms of governance (and NPM) towards open systems and self-governance (Newman 2001) to enable distributed leadership to contribute to a more democratic society in which local community and business needs are emphasised rather than distant funding and inspection diktats.

Such a change in leadership is in line with Eco-Leadership in which leadership, at each level within colleges would shift away from a neoliberal philosophy and transactional leadership to the principles of mutuality and reciprocity. Colleges, in collaborating rather than competing with other local education institutions, would no longer operate as unethical pseudo businesses competing in a quasi-market, but be part of the fabric of the local community within a network society (Western 2013) and a governance more in line with NPG than NPM. This more collaborative and economically connected local learning system would provide more

accountability to learners, local communities and local businesses, as it would shift the focus of colleges (and leaders) away from central control to local educational, business and community needs (Hodgson and Spours, 2015). It would also facilitate a more authentic and inclusive distributed leadership, involving emergent leadership, spontaneous collaboration, and institutionalised practices based on conjoint agency.

The Conservative administration's policy of localism could provide the necessary context for Eco-Leadership in the FE sector. A further shift in governance, however, will be required for a more democratic and distributed leadership in the sector. More particularly, a greater regard for local knowledge and the contributions of local stakeholders is needed from the Department for Education (DfE), and more flexible accountability arrangements which encourage strategy at the local level (Keep, 2016: 8). These new forms of governance and accountability arrangements, this article argues, should also have a broader remit than skills for employability at the local level, to include a concern for needs-based equity for adults and the wider benefits of education.

An effective policy of localism (and Eco-Leadership) will also require a significant shift away from funding and monitoring systems, driven by marketization, managerialism, 'targets and terror' (Keep 2016: 4). If a national supply-led approach to skills (Keep, 2016) is simply replicated at the local level through skill targets, Eco-Leadership, in terms of local democracy and the network society, will be limited and distributed leadership reduced to a tool for dispersing responsibility at the local level rather than power for the benefit of local employers, disadvantaged adults and the wider community.

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