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LEADING THE LEADERS: EXPLORING PERSPECTIVES ON THE PREPARATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL LEADERS

Abstract

Dealing with the legacy of the discourses of neo-liberalism and new managerialism on the current framing of leadership discourse provides the background to this paper. Increasingly there are strong indications at policy level that the intention of recommendations are very closely aligned to the neo-liberal worldview evidenced by the uncritical acceptance of neo liberal infused language among many key stakeholders. This paper calls for leadership development programmes that will provide for critically informed and engaged leaders who can position themselves as key mediators and evaluators of these reductive policy proposals. To this end it is necessary to make leadership and what constitutes leadership practice more explicit and to cease conflating it with management so that the knowledge and understanding of leadership within the domain of education can develop fully. This process creates an imperative for a greater engagement with the theoretical fields and disciplines linked to education within leadership preparation and development programmes with more encouragement for leaders to continue to masters and doctoral levels so as to build capacity within the leadership community to mobilise the rich and diverse knowledge-base underpinning education to critique and challenge.

Keywords: leadership development, critical pedagogy, foundation disciplines in education, neo-liberal perspectives, person centered imperatives for school leadership.

Introduction

Leadership appears to have gone viral. It seems as if the whole world in almost every domain of activity is talking about models of good leadership, lack of leadership or the need for leadership. Biographies and autobiographies of successful leaders are filling bookshelves on many highstreets. With such diverse interest in the idea of leadership it is becoming difficult for those involved in scholarship and research in the field to secure the conceptual basis underpinning leadership discourse. The preparation and development of leaders is also attracting the attention of a number of education and training experts and providers with

programmes ranging from “one off seminars” on issues such as motivating and managing staff to diploma and degree courses dealing with a range of leadership and management topics. In the area of education, the focus on school leadership as a way of ensuring the successful delivery of policy reform in schools in both national [Department of Education and Skills 2011] and international contexts, and at European level in particular [Mac Ruairc 2010; Pont *et al.* 2008a, 2008b] is gathering momentum, adding to the diversity of interest in the field. Central to much of the work on school leadership is a focus on leadership preparation and development. However, what constitutes this domain and what is viewed as appropriate or desirable content is often highly contested in practice. Echoing what is happening in the broader leadership field, the preparation and development of school leaders exhibits considerable variation in content and form. Even the idea of leadership development as a title is not universally accepted or used, with many jurisdictions preferring the more limited idea of leadership training. Consequently, some programmes focus almost entirely on developing the skill set of leaders to carry out the functions of a leader in an efficient way (LDS programmes, Ireland, <http://www.pdst.ie/lds>) others such as the National College of School Leadership in England can be viewed as an attempt on the part of government to shape the content and nature of school leadership training. This type of “designer leadership” [Gronn 2003] ensures that leadership training can be controlled so that practice and activity in schools can continue to serve government priorities and imperatives well [Thrupp 2005].

The paper will address a number of challenges that prevail in many contexts with respect to school leadership. The impact of neo-liberalism and new managerialism on the current framing of leadership discourse is well rehearsed in scholarship [Day 2003; Thrupp and Willmot 2003; Lynch 2005; Bates 2006; Fitzgerald 2008; Sugrue and Solbrekke 2011]. The legacy of these discourses now needs to be examined. The manner in which they are increasingly functioning in a hegemonic/doxic fashion is an issue that will require considerable surveillance and resistance in the future. A case in point is the recent drive for/towards school autonomy. The notion of autonomy within an increasingly constrained accountability framework is contributing to a very specific workplace reality for school leaders. Leaders and teachers are caught between the two powerful and sometimes contradictory forces of autonomy and accountability [Sugrue and Solbrekke 2011]. Critics of the manner in which autonomy is being packaged question point to a process of blame dispersal, where the state increasingly distances itself from the outcome of education and blames the school (Apple among others). More recently the economic downturn in many countries has increased the legitimacy for the already well established predominance of economic imperatives and and the increasing economisation of education policy [Lingard 2010]. Both trajectories are continually marginalising perspectives that focus on the person orientated, developmental, holistic and formative work of schools (Fielding, Woods, Wrigley, Tompson). The culture of performativity which is almost universally accompanied by overt models of surveillance of attainment has also been widely critiqued in the literature. The practice of teaching to the test [Anagnostopoulos 2005;

McNeil 2000; Zigo 2001; Lam and Bordignon 2001; Mac Ruairc 2009, 2011], or in some cases teaching the test [Mac Ruairc 2012] has a negative impact on the quality of school curricula. The wash back impact on the curriculum regularly results in a more strongly framed, strongly classified curriculum [Bernstein 1991] which in the case of the UK has produced what has been described as an improvised curriculum [Alexander 2009]. The avoidance of risk taking and innovative practice [Williams & Ryan 2000] and the negative impact this has in schools succeeding in connecting curricula and teaching to the realities of students' cultures, backgrounds and economic conditions [McNeil 2000] is very regrettable. This outcome in itself provides a very strong argument for changing the direction of school attainment surveillance by arguing for a greater focus on the nurturing of authentic learning cultures in classrooms. All of these issues create contexts that limit the scope and creativity of the work of school leaders and their teams.

There are strong indications at policy level in particular that the intention of recommendations are very closely aligned to the neo-liberal worldview. While the impact of testing on children's experience of school is being challenged in some contexts, the role education plays as part of a comparative and competitive market driven area of growth is firmly embedded in the discourse. The intended and unintended consequences of international comparative testing in the form of testing PIRLS, TIMS and most especially PISA is very significant. There is further evidence of uncritical acceptance of neo liberal infused language among many key stakeholders. The recent report of European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) *Report on school leadership and governance (2012)* is an example of how doxic this perspective has become among some influential stakeholders.

Leadership preparation and development: policy drivers

Two recent publications the OCED report on Improving School Leadership [Pont *et al.* 2008a; 2008b] and the Comenius Framework of Reference Report [Mlaker *et al.* 2011] provides further evidence of the doxa of neoliberalism. Both publications contain very specific implications for the nature of leadership development programmes into the future. Both of these reports are indicative of an increasing level of interest at EU level in the area of school leadership. In addition to these, a number of comparative reports on how different countries are selecting, recruiting and developing school leaders are now published or in train and increasingly commonalities are emerging with respect to the focus of these reports and the manner in which they are delimiting discourse as it relates to leadership policy formation indicating very clear links to the perspective outlined above. The OECD conducted its study of school leadership with a view to providing policy makers with information and analysis that will help them "formulate and implement school leadership policies leading to better education" [Pont *et al.* 2008a: 14]. This work comprised two interrelated strands; the first, entitled the analytical strand, involved the 22 countries and the findings of this phase,

identify “policy levers and a range of policy options to help governments improve school leadership... and build sustainable leadership for the future” [Pont *et al.* 2008a: 1]. The second strand, published in volume two, focused on a more detailed examination of what was considered to be “innovative practice in school leadership” [Pont *et al.* 2008b: 15] in five case studies countries. In a similar way to other work in the globalizing and internationalizing of leadership development [Dimmock 2003] the main purpose of this part of the study was to explore “new models of school organization and management that distribute leadership roles in innovative ways” [Pont *et al.* 2008b: 15] and to identify “promising programmes and practices to prepare and develop school leaders” [Pont *et al.* 2008b: 15] both of which were identified as central to the research by the OECD team [Pont *et al.* 2008b: 15]. Neither of the two volumes indicated any commitment to contributing to a more equal, just or inclusive school system. Neither showed any commitment to the broader educative functions of schools (for a more extensive critique of this report see: Mac Ruairc 2012 and Mac Ruairc 2009). Both volumes take an extraordinarily benign view on the impact of new managerialism, conflating the contribution of this type of perspective with an increase in standards.

The model proposed, to shape leadership preparation and development programmes, is limited to the dissemination of a “what works” approach to leadership development. Little account is taken of the problematic nature of the use of this transferrable epistemological [Gunter 2006] approach to school leadership where there is considerable research that points to the contextualised and differentiated [Gunter 2006] nature of the work of school leadership and school leadership improvement [Leithwood and Hallinger 2004]. The idea that different national and local contexts are “the product of unique and dynamically changing sets of circumstances – political, economic, social, cultural historical, professional and technical– in that country” [Bolam 2003: 74] is not considered. The view of leadership as a form of practice that takes account of “the moral, epistemological, sociological and discursive dimensions of practice” [Riehl 2000] is entirely absent from the discussion. In a similar way there is no sense of the need for leadership to comprise “a concern for suffering and oppression, a commitment to empowerment and transformation, an aggressive advocacy on behalf of students and a critical stance towards leadership and authority” [Riehl 2000: 70]. This focus on the critical leadership domain is a vital component in quest for equity [Grace 1997] because it enables a genuine engagement with the overall context of schooling, the historical basis of the field [Gunter 2006] and the workings of the power structures that delimit education systems.

The more recent report on school leadership development (2011) focuses specifically on “improving the preparation and training of effective school leaders and disseminating a better understanding of the role of school leaders” [Mlaker 2011: 7]. The report included perspectives from schools of education, in-service training institutes, schools, ministries of education and NGO’s [Mlaker 2011: 7]. The overall purpose was to develop a framework of reference for school leadership. It followed a similar development pathway to the OECD report discussed above; phase one consisted of compiling and collating country background re-

ports into a European synopsis while the second phase identified core elements of school leadership qualifications by explicating a series of domains and components which in the view of the participating partners should constitute a leadership development framework. This proposed framework extends previous work by Leithwood and Riehl [2005] outlining five domains considered to capture the different dimensions of leadership practice. These domains were subdivided into components that provided greater detail in relation to the content of each domain. Finally each of the components were linked to modules, a number of which are included in the report by way of exemplars. These module exemplars are intended not only capture aspects of what different countries are doing with respect to leadership development but also facilitate the sharing of good practice.

When the detail in this report is viewed from the perspective of developing leaders to deliver a more broadly based, holistic and inclusive type of school system the framework falls considerably short of what is required. On a positive note there is specific reference to aligning the core purpose of schooling with “ethical, educational, political and cultural values [to] include procedures that guarantee fairness justice and democracy” [Mlaker *et al.* 2011: 12]. One of the domains also focuses on the personal development and growth of the school leader. Both of these signal a departure from the language and intention of the OECD report. However, this broader perspective is not developed to any great extent in the document. The overall thrust of the language of the document strongly resonates with the neoliberal discourse of outputs, effectiveness, an over emphasis on management activity rather than the more complex domain of leadership and “the creation of a corporate identity” for each school [Mlaker *et al.* 2011: 10]. The final section in the report provides a selection of module descriptors from leadership preparation and development programmes in a range of countries. These are intended to illustrate “example[s] of good practis[c]e in the areas of leadership and leadership development...that could inform practitioners and policy makers” [Mlaker *et al.* 2011: 102]. When these are examined a very worrying picture emerges for those who believe in the transformative power of education to work towards a more equitable society. The attention paid to this core, arguably prime, function of schooling is scant. It is mentioned explicitly in only one of the modules included in the publication. However, in this case it is included in a module comprising 7 x 1.5 hour sessions covering the following areas: the school as an organization, the self-evaluating school, school culture, inclusion, leading the change process, strategic planning, leading in context. The scope of this module indicates a lack of awareness of the complexity of what needs to be explored when focusing on themes such as equality and inclusion. The incidences of references to other cognate concepts in the entire document are included to illustrate the marginal nature of the focus on these key issues in the formation of leaders; social justice (0), equality (0), justice (2), equity (2), democracy (2) [in the same sentence on the same page], social class (0), gender (0), race (0), ethnicity (0). Essentially what has been reported and to some extent recommended is a leadership development programme that does not need to deal with any of the aforementioned areas. Failure to deal with these core dimensions of school life in the preparation and ongoing

development of leaders is very problematic. There is growing evidence that homogenous forms of schooling are failing to deliver appropriate levels of education to diverse student groups including lower socio-economic groups, ethnically diverse groups [Riehl 2000; Riley 2009]. These groups are increasingly claiming their own forms of subjectivity and are beginning to strongly resist being treated as a social variable by policy makers [Wrigley 2008], where the impact of these social variables are controlled for in statistical studies, particularly in school effectiveness research where the noise of this diversity has to be silenced in order for the “real findings” to emerge. The socially constructed nature of difference on a whole range of variables will require leadership that is responsive, sociologically informed and above all critical of the competing discourses. There is a considerable body of scholarship that is now focused on the need for school leadership to engage in a critique of current models of schooling and address the gaping need for a leadership that is focused on the key issues of equity and social justice through the building and strengthening of a democratic community in schools. The avoidance of dealing with the core purposes of schooling points to a significant lacuna in policy in this area. The lack of an explicit focus in all work with leaders on issues such as the formation of children and young people, difference and diversity, the holistic development of individuals, the person centered nature of schools and ironically one of the findings of the OECD report itself [Pont *et al.* 2008a] the reason why many leaders/ teachers enter the profession in the first place, i.e. the desire to make a difference [Pont *et al.* 2008a]. Perhaps if more acknowledgement was given to the personal rewards and positive outcomes for all as a result of investing time and energy in the broad, holistic development of children and young people and if the discourse that repeatedly marginalizes this defining dimension of school leadership could be altered then the serious crisis in recruitment in many countries as detailed by the OECD and several others [Pont *et al.* 2008a; Bolhofer 2011] might be ameliorated.

Challenging times

It is clear that the dominance of one perspective in policy development at EU level as well as in many national policy contexts both within and outside Europe is creating one dominant view of what school leadership will be like in the future. However, some research and scholarship based on practice in the field is highlighting different models of practice on the ground. Conference presentations on leadership [AERA 2011, 2012] recount details of school leaders who are focusing on the broader, more democratic, inclusive and holistic models of schooling. These leaders are most often working in areas of high poverty/social deprivation. The evidence from their work suggests that their strategies and the values and vision that inform their practice is having a very positive impact on the students in their schools. The outcomes far exceed those that produce success on high stakes accountability frameworks. While success in these highly visible

measure of attainment is important it is not the only purpose of school experience. A recent edited publication by Wrigley [Wrigley *et al.* 2012] provides clear evidence of models of school leadership that are bound broadly by the constraints of neoliberal regimes but extend far beyond its limitations by basing their leadership practice on the broader imperatives for education informing the critique in this paper. In this collection and elsewhere we see evidence of a commitment to a broader curriculum, producing enriched models of schooling and framed within a much greater range of learning experiences. The task of leadership is to engage with and lead a process of curriculum enrichment and enhancement by authentically engaging with students, their learning contexts and their communities. These leadership practices are dispersed and democratic and there is evidence of significant depth in terms of the penetration of leadership activity in the school. In many ways, these leaders are working as organic intellectuals [Gramsci 1971] or leading as critical pedagogues as envisaged by Friere. This evidence indicates the considerable potential that leadership has to make a difference in a way that supports the formation and development of students across a number of domains. The main issue here, however, is that these stories emerge on the margins almost in spite of rather than a result of the broad system that is in place. The evidence points to both ordinary and extraordinary works of heroism, exposure to personal and professional negative outcomes and a whole host of systemic and structural challenges to overcome while in pursuit of the vision. What is evident when these stories are considered in the context of the type of school leaders being shaped by current policy perspectives is that the leaders in these exceptional cases require support in doing this work and producing these type of outcomes. It is the view of this author that if current policy imperatives for leadership preparation and development prevail or continue to dominate, the heroic work of these school leaders will always be positioned at the margins of practice. The narrowly defined, reductive and controlling forms of leadership that are often focused on delivering managerialist, national standards [Thrupp 2005] with leaders who are taught to focus on managerial and formulaic models of practice will not produce transformative outcome in communities that require enriched models of education most. In this way, it could be argued that these communities are additionally disadvantaged by current policy trends because the dominant discourse is negating the models of leadership that are proven to work best in these communities. Indeed it can be stated that there isn't any school or community, irrespective of the socio-economic classification of the community or the access social groups have to seek and pay for compensatory packages to supplement formal schooling, that deserves the type of school experience articulated in the OECD report critiqued above. There should not be any school that would be led by someone whose preparation and formation was based solely on the narrowly defined range of competencies outlined in the policy documents explored here. What are required are models of leadership development for all leaders that make working towards enriched models of schooling for students and their communities the norm not the exception. This requires a commitment to a form of leadership preparation and development that creates critically informed

and engaged leaders so that when policy and change are being developed, leaders can position themselves as key mediators and evaluators of these proposals. To this end, it is necessary to make leadership and what constitutes leadership practice more explicit and to cease conflating it with management so that the knowledge and understanding of leadership within the domain of education can develop fully. This process creates an imperative for a greater engagement with the theoretical fields and disciplines linked to education within leadership preparation and development programmes with more encouragement for leaders to continue to masters and doctoral levels so as to build capacity within the leadership community to mobilize the rich and diverse knowledge-base underpinning education to critique and challenge. The potential here to reshape the school system is considerable. In this type of scenario, authentic and meaningful leadership can happen but the location of control shifts towards the school, the school leader and the broader professional community of leaders and teachers. Now we are moving towards a degree of autonomy that has the potential to obviate narrow accountability measures. Is this a step too far for the neo-capitalist world? Maybe the intention to focus on narrowly based, managerially focused leadership development programmes is a tool of the powerful to silence the critical?

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