CEPaLS 09

Knowledge production and leadership as a globalised business.

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Overview

This paper was originally given to the British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society Annual Conference, in July 2011. This written paper contains extracts from my 2012 book *Leadership and the Reform of Education* (Policy Press).

Abstract

Between 1997 and 2010 successive New Labour governments sought to modernise public services in England, where the emphasis was based on investment in return for quality and accountability. This paper will focus on the discourses of public sector reforms, with a particular emphasis on the politics of knowledge production as a globalised business. Specifically I will draw on data and analysis from two ESRC funded studies: first, the Knowledge Production in Educational Leadership Project (RES-000-23-1192), and second, the Distributed Leadership and the social practices of school organisation in England Project (RES-000-22-3610). The approach I intend to take is to examine the politics of knowledge production with a specific focus on how New Labour invested in the leadership of schools as a means of delivering reform. By this I mean examining the knowledge base (the research evidence, the theories), the approach to knowing (the means by which ideas and evidence are generated), and the knowers (the people who are regarded as trusted researchers and opinion formers). Essentially I intend examining the relationship between the state, public policy and knowledge: and so in examining education policy I will present an analysis of the types of knowledge, knowing and knowers who have been involved in policy design and implementation. This will be set within a global and globalising context through an analysis of travelling theories, gurus, and projects.

Introduction

In this paper I examine the politics of knowledge production. By this I mean examining policy texts

and outputs by asking questions about the processes by which the knowledge used to frame the

policy has been generated and used. For example, the following are gobbets about leadership

taken from New Labour texts:

> "The quality of the head often makes the difference between the success or failure of a school" (DfEE 1997, p46)

> "The £19 billion is a substantial commitment on our part to do what we can… investment for reform, for change and for pursuit of higher standards and excellence… to bring this about there is no group of people more important than headteachers (Blair 1998 unpaged).

> "You can recognize a good school by the quality of its head and I believe good headteachers and good leadership are essential in the drive to raise standards in schools" (Blunkett 1998 unpaged).

"So this is a good time to be debating the future of school leadership. There is consensus on its importance. There is consensus on its key elements. There is… consensus that school leadership in England is getting better, fast". (Miliband 2003, unpaged).

"Excellent leaders create excellent schools. Secondary schools need strong leaders at all levels, enabling them to provide a rich and diverse curriculum taught by professionals committed to success for every learner" (Clarke 2004, p25).

"Good leadership is at the heart of every good school. A strong headteacher, backed by an able leadership team and governing body, is vital for success' (DfES 2005, p99).

"In excellent schools the teachers receive continuous training and professional development to update their skills and expertise, and there is always strong leadership from headteachers with the autonomy to lead their schools" (Brown 2007, p 10)

"… strong leadership sets the tone for the whole community. It creates the ethos that makes clear exactly what a school stands for and what it's trying to achieve" (Kelly 2005, unpaged).

"Strong and visionary world class leadership is essential if the UK is to sustain its competitive performance. The price of failure will be high" (Johnson 2003, unpaged).

When the authors and speakers of these statements wrote and voiced them, they did so with confidence and certainty. No evidence base is given, no references, and it almost seems as if a belief system is being promoted in prayer like fashion. So the questions that interest me surround the relationship between such statements and the knowledge base that provides evidence to support them. What is the knowledge base? What approach to knowing has been used? Who are the knowers who produce the evidence? I intend examining these questions by drawing on two projects: first, the Knowledge Production in Educational Leadership (KPEL) Project (RES-000-23-1192), and second, the Distributed Leadership and the social practices of school organisation in England (SPSO) Project (RES-000-22-3610). Both projects are concerned with knowledge production and the field of educational leadership, and in particular I intend to draw mainly on the KPEL project.

New Labour and the leadership of schools

School effectiveness and improvement (SESI) were key to New Labour education policy strategy between 1997 and 2010, and knowledge was generated at the intersection of a number of fields of activity: first, economic practice focusing on capital accumulation where business required that schools produce a work-ready workforce; second, political activity focusing on the implementation

of mandate to govern and the production of evidence to demonstrate claims for re-election; third, media activity securing the accountability of those who work within public services and the political activity that regulates provision; fourth, professional activity focusing on delivering educational provision, and handling rapid reforms; and fifth, research activity in higher education and private consultancies focusing on the generation of project and delivery contracts. Such activity takes place within a global and globalising setting, with policy ideas that "travel" the globe and are read and engaged with through and within "embedded" contexts (Ozga 2005). Hence in this paper I give recognition to globalisation but also agree with Rizvi and Lingard (2010) that:

> "...public policy in education is still largely made by national governments, but that the nature of the state is now rapidly changing. The state now represents a site increasingly influenced not only by transnational institutions, but also by global ideologies that constantly seek to steer the social imaginaries of policy actors everywhere, but in ways that are mediated by national traditions and local politics" (pxii).

The global ideology of markets in education, promoted by influential texts such as Bobbit (2002) and read by New Labour policymakers (Tomlinson 2005), circulated the globe. Leaders, leading and leadership of the school as a business organisation was a neoliberal project and it enabled markets to penetrate public services in regard to purposes, structures, cultures and practices. So business models of leadership regarding transformation and distribution became popular, as a means of controlling the education workforce and erradicating the educational and social welfare nature of public education. In England this played out through the interplay between a range of interests which had the potential to create a complex educational terrain, but it was simplified through the adoption and use of SESI with its focus on leadership and having the right leader in place. This approach spoke to those interested in economic performance because it built on the Thatcherite construction of the school as a business, the purposes of schools were directly linked to economic productivity. It spoke to politicians by generating data to prove policy legitimacy. The media could read the data and outcomes in ways that enabled them to both support and/or condemn the government of the day, particularly in relation to test scores and league tables either in England or internationally. The profession were given a language, training, and a set of processes that generated a modern and upbeat approach, and that enabled them to demonstrate a productive response to central regulation. Finally, researchers in higher education and private

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companies could generate projects and income streams that met political requirements to be onside with policy changes.

This activity with competing interests could focus on the leader, leading and leadership as a means of securing their goals and in ways that showed convergence: no one could reasonably reject the idea that an organisation needed strong and effective leadership. Indeed this was a belief system that was never challenged, particularly since all had been to school and so knew what mattered, and a number of influential people either in or outside of government had had professional roles in schools or the wider education system. New Labour communicated their beliefs and knowledge claims through a leadership of schools strategy, where the person to be known as leader, the skills and processes to be followed known as leading, and the power relationship with others in the organisation known as leadership were developed as the means through which national reforms could be delivered locally. This was a centrally designed and regulated form of leadership where policy strategy was held by the London government, with headteachers left with tactical options about efficient and effective implementation. Notably, the role of the single 'transformational' leader dominated policy statements and interventions in professional identity and practice. Distributed leadership, as hybridised delegation, enabled a totalising reform strategy where all could be responsible and accountable for standards. While the language of education was used, the form of school leadership was not necessarily educational: children and teachers were presented as the objects that leaders and leadership impacts upon, and the effective leader could be appointed from the public, private or voluntary sectors.

The knowledge production processes that enabled this to happen were global and globalising: first, the use of research and evidence from globalised settings with key texts that were used as reference points e.g. Sammons et al. (1995) present eleven factors for effective schools in ways that impacted on New Labour (see Barber 1996) and could travel (see Barber et al. 2011); second, the use of researchers in higher education (e.g. Caldwell, Fullan) and in business (e.g. PwC, MacKay) who developed leadership products that could be engaged with productively in

embedded settings; third, the creation of policy networks that sought recognition and distinction through global impact (e.g. International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement); fourth, the creation of public institutions that sought global recognition and set out to impact globally (e.g. National College in England); and, the development of professional cultures and practices that generated educational professionals who in a local setting popularised and developed global leadership ideas (e.g. Clark 1998, Stubbs, 2003).

Illustrative of this is the text *Seven Strong Claims About Successful Leadership* (Leithwood et al. 2006a) which was crucial to moving forward in regard to Sammons et al's (1995) rank ordering of professional leadership as the first in the eleven factors or effective schools:

1. "School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.
2. Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices.
3. The ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work.
4. School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions.
5. School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.
6. Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others.
7. A small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness" (Leithwood et al. 2006 p3).

Notably, these claims give recognition that the classroom and relationships between teachers and students is more important, but then the focus is on school leaders and leadership as necessarily requiring attention and investment. The authors have drawn on functional literatures, mainly from non-UK sources, and have enabled the shift from role titles (e.g. headteacher, deputy headteacher, head of faculty, curriculum co-ordinator) towards generic leader, leading and leadership in ways that marginalise the requirement to have educational knowledge, and under workforce remodelling make organisational leadership open to anyone who can demonstrate leadership credentials.

Explaining global and globalising knowledge production

The dominance of SESI leadership products during the New Labour governments from 1997-2010 can be explained through a conceptualisation of the policy process. *Institutionalised governance* is the space where public institutions controlled policy ideas and agenda setting by working with and generating a leadership industry. Trusted knowledge workers (e.g. Barber, Hopkins) were contracted by New Labour to advise on and deliver policy outcomes, and these people were and became global leadership gurus who travelled and promoted their ideas. Popular texts amongst ministers (e.g. Bobbitt 2002) spoke against the nation state and argued for global markets. So ministers and civil servants controlled the agenda, but relied upon and encouraged private interests to come into government to advise and undertake contracts. Knowledge workers determined through books, articles, conversations, keynote lectures, hot seat sessions (in meetings, phone calls, emails, online, conference papers and talks) what is known about leadership, what needs to be known and who the trusted knowers are. Time was invested, outcomes delivered, products designed, narratives emplotted, and schools imagined. They were both hands off through thinking and strategizing, and hands on through providing answers for politicians to seemingly intractable problems and by working with practitioners on how to make the necessary changes. What enabled people from different organisations to come together to support policy was the emergence of a New Labour *habitus* or *disposition* to think and practice in complementary ways, combined with a *doxa* of self evident leadership truths that spoke to those who staked their professional practice as *capital* in the *field* (Bourdieu 2000).

There was a *logic of practice* within which knowledge producers in companies, schools, think tanks, and universities at home and abroad located themselves within *regimes of practice* as structured positions in the *field*. A study of the New Labour Policy Regime (NLPR) shows that those who positioned themselves there (ministers, civil servants, advisers, private consultants, researchers and some headteachers) sought to dominate but were dominated by the demands of the market and the role of the private sector in educational provision. Headteachers were officially positioned in NPLR but in reality only a few were comfortable there, heads tended to focus on

teaching and learning, and were critical of speedy reforms that did not engage with professional values and context. Consequently, New Labour were increasingly frustrated as policy was interpreted and mediated differently in local contexts, and our work on the SPSO project has produced school portraits that show a range of responses to distributed leadership as official good practice that was promoted and developed by the National College. Indeed, the Policy Research Regime (PRR) was (and is) a preferred location for researchers and some headteachers with a focus on scholarly critical analysis of policy and the identification of alternative approaches to reform. In this part of the terrain leadership does not feature except as a focus for critical analysis, and in particular through revealing and developing alternative ways in which schools and the curriculum can be organised.

Conclusion

So in returning to the extracts in the introduction, I would argue that written and oral texts can be so definitive about the superiority and necessity of leadership for school improvement and effectiveness because it was a belief that has been globally constructed and circulated, and embellished by research projects and theories. England became a laboratory where much of this work took place, and where international leadership gurus flocked to do business and impact on professional practice. The local school had to be seen to take this on and many accepted the common sense appeal generated within leader centric western democracies, and it enabled schools to establish a distinctive approach in the global market place of learning products, tests and reputations. Specifically the leadership of schools enabled the standards agenda to be constructed and operationalised: there was someone locally who was given the responsibility and who could be accountable for success and failure – the former bringing higher salaries, fame and honours, and the latter bringing early retirement or unemployment. However, research from the KPEL and SPSO projects show that the reality of this for schools was varied, with some adopting the official leadership approach, while others were ambivalent and others were oppositional.

Acknowledgements

If you wish to reference this paper:

Gunter, H.M. (2020) *CEPaLS 09:* Knowledge production and leadership as a globalised business. Paper presented to the BELMAS conference, July 2011. Manchester: The Manchester Institute of Education.

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