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 Solberekke 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 Solberekke 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 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;