

Cinderella and Other Stories ... An Exploration of Practitioners' Views on Bringing Further Education out of the Shadows

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Abstract

Further education (FE) has frequently been portrayed as «the Cinderella service» in relation to other phases; a «submerged space» operating below the surface and out of sight of mainstream educational policy in England. A contrasting view depicts a sector often considered a panacea for social concerns. FE is charged with supplying a skilled workforce and has been portrayed as a vehicle for enhancing economic development (DfEE 1998, Leitch 2006). Despite this it has repeatedly suffered funding cuts (Tickle 2014) alongside imposed political change. This research explores the stories of tutors and managers affected by managerial processes in English FE. The findings revealed the impact of corporatisation on leadership as well as on tutor and student agency and explored how professional collaboration enabled practitioners to challenge the prevailing systems-driven culture in ways which would help the sector step out of the shadows.

L'istruzione superiore (FE) è stata spesso considerata come «il servizio Cenerentola» in relazione ad altre fasi; uno «spazio sommerso» che opera sotto la superficie e fuori dalla prospettiva delle principali politiche d'istruzione in Inghilterra. Essa rappresenta una visione contrastante che raffigura un settore spesso considerato una panacea per le questioni sociali di vario genere. FE fornisce una forza lavoro qualificata che spesso rappresenta un veicolo per migliorare lo sviluppo economico (DfEE 1998, Leitch 2006). Nonostante ciò ha ripetutamente subito tagli di finanziamento dal governo (Tickle 2014) oltre che un cambiamento politico imposto. Questo progetto di ricerca esplora le storie di entrambi, tutor e manager, spesso vittima di stessi processi manageriali nel contesto dell'istruzione superiore. I risultati hanno rivelato l'impatto della corporatizzazione sulla leadership e sui tutor e studenti, ed hanno esaminato come la collaborazione professionale ha permesso ai professionisti di sfidare la cultura prevalente in modo da aiutare il settore ad uscire fuori dall'ombra.

Keywords: Agency; Professionalism; Neoliberalism; Social Justice; Collaboration.

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1. Background

Since further education colleges were taken out of Local Education Authorities' control as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) and expected to operate as independent institutions, there has been an increase in the use of discourse normally associated with private sector leadership and management. This efficiency drive, viewed by some as essential to reduce the wastage associated with public sector organisations, could also be viewed as part of an extended project by successive governments to control and regulate public spending. The result has been a highly managed funding methodology and an increase in a target driven, neoliberalist approach to education. Subsequently, the sector has been depicted as the ignored 'middle sibling' between compulsory and higher education, the 'Cinderella' of English education (Baker, 1989), the poor relation given limited funding and strategic direction (Lucas, 1996). But is this inevitable? And what challenges, if any, are thinkers and practitioners in post-compulsory education providing against this perceived neoliberal hegemony?

One significant outcome of the changes has been the ways in which academic roles within the sector have both expanded and constricted to create a situation in which teaching and learning have morphed into clearly defined products. For teachers this has led to increased value being placed on the craft of teaching and an emphasis on being recognised, by students and managers, as a *good* teacher. In addition, a prime expectation of teaching has become its ability to support students in achieving their intended aims, described as a 'pass the class' approach (Thompson & Wolstencroft 2012). Whilst these may be commendable aspirations, it seems they have usurped most other aspects of the role and, as a result have created a restricted professional identity in which teachers become 'deliverers' of learning and the passport to student achievement.

Once again, we are in a period of change within the sector and there are some signs that FE is no longer happy to accept the deficit image of the taken for granted Cinderella. Instead it has been likened to the story of the 12 Dancing Princesses, illustrating a more subversive, self-ruling collective determined to do what is deemed important (Daley, Orr & Petrie, 2015).

2. Methods

The research was carried out using focus groups from two diverse organisations within English the post compulsory education. Organisation A is a military training establishment whilst organisation B is a College of Further Education. The sample contained two managers and four tutors in organisation A, and in organisation B there were six tutors and one manager.

3. Literature Review

In this paper, the concept of neoliberalism is defined as one where organisations in the public sector are required to follow models or philosophies associated with the private sector, using the model of New Public Management (Collini, 2017) alongside practices outlined by Ball (2007). In this model, the emphasis is often on cost efficiencies, performance according to external benchmarks, a focus on employability, and a culture where colleges are expected to compete for students and funding.

3.1. Concepts of Teacher Agency

According to Biesta et al. (2014), teacher agency is seen as "an important dimension of teachers' professionalism" (2014, p. 625). What is problematic, according to these authors, is how such agency is theorised. The authors state that the use of «change» models (in particular) "tend to both underplay and misconstrue the role of teacher agency in educational change" (2014, p. 625). Building on the work of American pragmatist philosophy, Biesta et al. view agency as residing in what they refer to as an «actor-situation transaction» rather than in individuals per se – "[a]gency ... is not something people can have ... but is something that people do" [emphasis in the original] (2014, p. 626). Agency, in this sense, is part of the function people play rather than something inherent within them, Biesta et al. also draw on the

work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) in their discussion of a «chordal triad of agency» (2014, p. 626). It is the chordal triad that enables researchers and practitioners to understand the sense of agency within concrete situations such as teaching.

Priestley et al. (2012) also investigate teacher agency through the lens of specific concrete situations. They are critical of the current situation where “[t]eacher agency is often conceived as a slogan to support school-based reform” (2012, p. 195). Conversely, the authors also argue that agency is often rooted in ways that are ‘overly individualistic’ (2012, p. 195) and “conflated with the concept of autonomy as a form of freedom from constraints” (2012, p. 195). Priestley et al. are sympathetic to a notion of teacher agency as ‘a relational effect’ (2012, p. 196) – in such a view, agency no longer resides solely in the teacher as a property of her or him as an individual-as-such but consists of the capacity to act within certain educationally-specific situations. Citing the work of Biesta and Tedder (2007), the authors identify the importance of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) but state that the chordal triad of agency ‘requires a characterisation of the different temporal-relational contexts within which individual act’ (Biesta & Tedder 2007, p. 137).

3.2. Dual Professionalism and Identity in FE

Agency and identity often act in tandem. In English Further Education, the concept of dual professionalism has been identified as an integral aspect of teacher identity within the sector. A typical definition of dual professionalism is “teachers and trainers who combine occupational and pedagogical expertise, and are trusted and given the time to develop partnerships and curricula with employers” (CAVTL 2013, p. 15). However, this balancing of identities between ‘vocational specialist’ and ‘FE teacher’ can create tensions as well as providing genuine benefits. Robson et al. provide complex evidence relating to the connection between vocational expertise, teaching and the working environments within colleges. Their findings depicted FE teachers as “identifying themselves as ‘professionals,’ concerned to induct trainees into a world of practices and values they themselves esteem” (2006, p. 191), the tendency towards competency-based qualifications in English further education also led some FE teachers to adopt an approach to professionalism as a form of resistance “to a narrow conception of ‘training for work’ that does not encompass theoretical learning as well as technical and practical skills” (2006, p. 191). Such conceptions of further education as narrowly preparing students for work at the expense of other qualities and skills could be seen as a reflection of the neoliberal culture that has percolated into post incorporation Further Education (Simmons 2006).

The tendency to emphasise the practical and pragmatic in English further education is also identified by Orr and Simmons (2010). The authors carried out research on teachers undertaking teacher education in FE and state: “the perception that learning to teach in FE is about learning to get by in difficult circumstances. However, while expediency is emphasised over flair, the pedagogy and profession of FE teaching cannot develop” (2010, p. 18). This can create a neoliberal perspective of ‘getting by’ and ‘teaching to the test’ to ensure organisations maintain funding levels, meet benchmarks and hit performance indicators. As noted above, Robson et al. have suggested some resistance to this tendency (in terms of teacher identity and a sense of vocational professionalism).

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) make a strong case between agency and identity. Using the work of Wenger (1998), they speak of identity as having five essential characteristics involving experience of self, community involvement and membership, a «learning trajectory», the ability to manage different forms of identity, and involvement in the local and wider world (2009, p. 180) and make a clear connection between agency and what they call “psychological constructs” of self-efficacy and self-concept (2009, p. 183). This is particularly pertinent in relation to further education is when discussing teacher identity as having “multiple dimensions, some stable and some unstable” (2009, p. 183) - FE teachers, through the concept of dual professionalism, inevitably move and change between these multiple identities.

The conclusion from the literature is a complex one. Much of the evidence (Biesta et al., 2014; Priestley et al., 2012) suggests that teacher agency is a transaction between personal capacities and concrete educational environments. However, the climate in FE since 2008 (the advent of cuts in public funding) have created instability and uncertainty within college environments. This challenge, alongside the balancing act of dual professionalism noted by Robson et al. (2006) and Orr and Simmons (2010), has led to teacher agency and identity as problematic within FE institutions. On a more positive note, such

changes also encourage opportunities around ‘submerged space’ for innovation alluded to in the paper’s introduction.

4. Findings

4.1. Corporatisation and Culture

Although the FE landscape has evolved since the changes implemented as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), the drivers of efficiency, effectiveness and economy hold steadfast as pillars of practice. It has been argued that this has transformed the ontology of education and potentially created an ‘ethical corrosion’ in which the dimension of education has been dominated by the ethics of survival (Dennis, 2016).

Continued reductions in funding have resulted in declines in the numbers of academic staff employed in the sector and recent figures suggest that between 2010 and 2014 the adult learning funding budget was cut by 35% (Tickle, 2014). This appears to be experienced by respondents as a constricting status quo in which job insecurity was omnipresent and processes and rules are the wheels which drive change, or promote stagnation:

People are frightened of losing their jobs so they are conforming to the rules ... when you are stressed you revert to a situation where you stick to the rules or a process ... so you just keep ticking the boxes.

and:

The fact of the matter is challenging is a lot of effort and when you are already really fatigued, that challenge seems like an impossible task.

In both organisations, there was recognition that the processes underpinning the organisation’s activities were founded on economic principles which reduced the freedom of tutors and students alike. The influence of statistics was readily acknowledged, alongside a healthy cynicism about a ‘management by numbers’ approach:

My best student is straight distinctions for everything, has attendance of 60+% and everyone else can look at these statistics and go «ohh that’s pretty awful.. what’s being done to punish this one?» but they are literally outperforming in every other thing they do.

In this instance, the apparent academic success of the student was superseded by the need to achieve a given category of success in the form of attendance data. In a similar vein, the expectation for students to demonstrate progress through completion or moving to the next level was also used as an indicator of success, something which the tutors in this study found difficult to reconcile.

Some of them come just for the social side and don’t necessarily want to achieve ... they show their commitment with 100% attendance but their submissions are non-existent and this will come back to the personal tutor with the manager saying, “what is being done about this student?”. It needs to be accepted that some students will just not achieve.

Whilst many of these processes were viewed derisively, there were also some genuine concerns about the impact of management and administrative processes on professional practice. In one example respondents described the potential impact of this in an organisation where teaching was focussed on training future colleagues:

The management work in their own little silos where they know they have got to get a certain number of people through so that’s what they are concerned with...and that person who we thought should have failed... you could end up working with them... so we should probably take that view and get rid of them because otherwise we are putting them into this trade group.

Similar worries were highlighted in relation to organisation driven approaches to ‘good practice’; interpreted by respondents as a constraint:

I want more freedom and more trust that I know what I am doing. I feel like there is a very narrow view of what teaching is ...

4.2. Tutor and Student Agency

The notion of the teacher as an active agent denotes a group of professionals with the ability to make choices about their practice. In this sense agency is seen as a form of personal power in which teachers take individual control of decisions related to teaching. (Biesta, 2012) This was not evidenced in the responses from participants, who in contrast, voiced frustration at increased (and increasing) management intervention and the resulting homogeneity of practice.

There has to be a genuine passion for teaching. There has to be a genuine desire to make a change to see students and think they are not numbers and they are not just sheep... and thinking that «I want these people to become something»...

But you have to be able to see that you can make that change ... I don't think you can do this on an individual basis... other people in other positions throughout this building might try but they are not going to succeed either.

These responses have much in common with other literature which describes feelings of being ‘disenfranchised’ by managerialist practice. (Ainley & Bailey, 1997; Robson 1998) Added to this frustration was the growing awareness that current approaches also had a significant influence on students’ agency, evidenced by the prevalence of additional mandatory qualifications such as functional skills, as well as measures which had been put in place to judge students on a range of additional factors. The data also suggested the growing trend to manage students’ approaches to their studies in order to evidence ever-increasing success rates.

Say for example you are aiming for 90% success on the course, you hit 90 ... right next year is a target of 91 or 92. There is always going to be a point where you reach that cap and it's just not going to be feasible. You have to understand that not every student will achieve. There have been some attitudes in the past where a student has got, for example, 9 assignments overdue and it is still expected that they will complete at the end of the academic year.

Both tutors and managers in this sample acknowledged that failure was not considered an option and that this choice had even been removed from the students. Several examples were cited whereby students who chose to ‘opt out’ of courses were subjected to a range of processes aimed at encouraging them to stay on programme.

If we are going to transition young people into adults - at some point adults make their own choices and are responsible for themselves..... we are saying like «I know you are 19 and you are trying to quit but it is more convenient for me if you stay ... here's the seven things you have got to do... thanks for agreeing to that...I'll see you next week.»

and:

In theory, you can fail this course but if you say you have quit your agency in quitting is not respected you will be kept on and will be constantly contacted ...

These findings contradict views that teachers and indeed students are able to be agents of change with an independent ability to act (Priestley et al., 2012), instead they illustrate a scenario whereby close controls had been implemented by the all-powerful data machine which drives the sector's strategic planning, policies and processes.

4.3. Leadership style

Resistance to the changes imposed by the corporatisation of Further Education have been well documented (Ainley & Bailey, 1997; Shain & Gleeson, 1999) and the data presented in this paper illustrates continued tensions. As a result, teachers have expressed feelings of being dominated by control mechanisms and managers by the need to produce statistical evidence of achievement. In addition, the added fear of the judgement of external parties is apparent: “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, 2012). A significant result of such fears is the evolution of a risk-averse culture.

According to the participants in this study, the overall managerial culture is reinforced by the recruitment of managers who appear to replicate, rather than evaluate the espoused values of the organisation:

The [organisation] is terrible for it because the [organisation] doesn't like superheroes or people who fight back ... if you fight back.. you won't get promoted... if you don't get promoted ... the people in the managerial positions are the 'yes men.'

This suggests an evolving culture reinforcing current norms of practice by removing opportunities for questions or dissent. The ready acceptance of a number of practices which emphasise the surveillance of teaching activity, such as graded lesson observations linked to performance management provides a further example of this. There was also clear acknowledgement that it was not acceptable to question management diktats (referred to here as 'legislation') as doing so would present a threat to the individual:

The forms and documents they sent out last week ... I nearly said legislation then...suggest some tutors are not doing a good job and my response was
(...) ... which I didn't say and that's why I'm still here.

And further recognition that it was not 'sensible' to raise too many questions. The accepted approach being to acquiesce, even if demands were considered 'impossible':

We have to accept the way things are done to the extent which we shouldn't challenge every decision ... If we see a situation for example 'we've got so and so targets to hit which are impossible' it is first accepting that it's impossible then always believing that there is the opportunity to prove that impossible wrong ...

Several of the participants referred to management approaches which worked on the premise of dividing teams in order to influence activity.

As a department ... you are taken individually to meet with management to discuss how much marking you have done, how you have done it and under which circumstances ... do you guys remember that ...? literally we were split up ...

Similarly, this approach was adopted when concerns were investigated:

That's the response you get ... «well you're doing OK ... somebody is doing it wrong ... but it's not any of you guys».

Overall there was a sense of management teams who were somewhat detached from the day to day paraphernalia of teaching, leading to a slightly distorted perspective of the associated challenges. In both organisations, the senior managers did not teach as part of their day to day activities and as a result were viewed as being 'out of touch.' This observation suggested a situation which allowed them to see the 'big picture' but not reconcile this with the detail required to have a genuine understanding of classroom practice:

I don't understand why they think that the big picture and the small picture are incompatible ... you can see both ... here are the statistics... and here are the situations that make up these statistics.

And:

It's a bit like having advice on your career and your love life from your grandparents ... cos everything they know that was relevant was relevant like 40 years ago.

4.4. And they lived happily ever after ...

The evidence presented here illustrates a picture of college life which has been dominated by the values of a market driven economy, leaving little room to question the purpose of the sector. As outlined by Dennis, any professional evaluation and critique of purpose has been relegated to the bottom of a long list of evaluative activities including performance data and reporting processes, referred to as: "...the endless banality of college life ..." (Dennis, 2016, p.127).

In the introduction we made reference to the familiar metaphor of Cinderella to describe the sector, a tale which depicts an impoverished protagonist, kept in check by an evil stepmother and two ugly stepsisters. The data presented goes some way to reinforcing this image in portraying a group of professionals who feel disempowered and somewhat disengaged from their professional identity. Yet, there is further evidence to suggest that this is not the whole story and that perhaps, as stated by Petrie (2015) Cinderella is no longer a suitable metaphor as it does not represent the power of the collective. Instead, it is suggested that the story of the 12 Dancing Princesses is more representative. This illustrates "the possibility of subversion, of autonomy in teaching and learning and a collective rather than individualist notion of professionalism; even within repressive contexts." (Ibid, p. 5) But, how can our fairytale move towards this happier ending?

In this study, both tutors and managers voiced concern at the strict processes which have come to guide college life but on an individual basis did not feel able to challenge the current regime. However, as a collective they raised questions about the overall purpose of further education and recognised the importance of its wider role:

There is plenty of evidence to support the fact that teaching in post compulsory education does have a lot of staff who are doing an amazing sociological job helping young people to move into adult life.

Alongside recognition of the tension between process and purpose:

When a line manager is breathing down our necks saying «I want some outcomes here, I want some results, I want some statistics» there's that sort of gap, that tension between government requirement and a really good system.

In the case of the two colleges involved in this study, managers above first line management level did not get involved in teaching activity. This was not viewed positively by respondents who felt that it created a distance between classroom and 'boardroom' activity and diluted managers' understanding of day to day issues and concerns. A suggested way forward was to increase management participation through closer involvement in classroom activity:

I personally think more involvement ... and whether that's in observations or communications ... team meetings that are actually effective ...

And to ensure that managers had current and relevant information to allow them to make the best strategic decisions for the organisation:

People on the front line, they will have their radios ... in war if you think about it the people who are experiencing what's going on can basically explain «this is the path that we have got to take» and if that's not taking place ... they keep on making the same mistakes.

As it was, managers were unable to see activity on a day to day basis and were limited to making decisions based on the data they received. As a result, the focus on numerical targets was the key motivating force and qualitative data appeared to be largely ignored. According to respondents, this might be addressed by increasing the power of overall teams in decision making:

It's their responsibility to work with the team to find out ... how do we make this happen in the best possible way? I think there is that collective understanding that has to be there ... it isn't one person with the infinite knowledge, it's the whole team.

It was also felt that tutors should take more ownership by operating as a collective, particularly when there was disagreement with management decision-making.

To change this you have to decide as a team how you are going to do it so whatever they are saying you stick to your guns and say «this is how we are going to do it ... » if you stick to it they are not going to get rid of the whole team. But what they do is they divide you and say ... you ... you ... you... If you're not doing it I'm getting rid of you. So as a team you have to decide this is how we want to run the course, this is what we are going to stick to ... and you've got to roll it out and do it for a whole year or two years and if we're right, we're right and if we're wrong then we will do it your way.

5. Final Thoughts

The conclusions drawn from the literature and the data tell the story of a sector which has become compliant in assuming the role of the underdog; the badly treated servant making do with limited resources in a system which holds the promise of better things. As a result, staff have become confused about their roles, isolated by their managers and inhibited by a diminished sense of agency. Conversely there is a hint of rebellion in which both tutors and managers are beginning to question the limitations of the current regime and, more specifically, the overall purpose of the sector as a vehicle for empowerment. Despite the challenges they face, FE staff are driven by professional values which champion student care and educational achievement and have begun to articulate the desire to defy inane processes and regain the control of teaching through collective efforts. This situation, coupled with the apparent increasing trend for managers to become removed from day to day classroom practice, has the potential to create an increasingly dangerous scenario.

At the risk of mixing metaphors ... that reminds us of another story. In 1912, the Titanic set sail from Southampton in calm waters. Above deck the wealthy and privileged enjoyed the trappings of a luxury liner whilst below-deck a fire raged in the coal bunkers. The ship's owner, focused on the overall aim of reaching New York on time, ignored the warnings from below deck and urged the crew to sail at full speed towards their destination; sadly, this turned out to be the north Atlantic, rather than New York. The FE ship has been on fire for many years and yet we continue to ignore the growing flames which envelop her. As outlined by one of the participants in this study ... *don't ignore the small picture whilst focussing on the big* it's small pictures that enable us to chart a course beyond these submerged spaces.

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