

Neoliberalism and the reinvention of leadership identities in higher education

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Introduction

The changes occurring in the higher education sector are well documented. Bolden, Petrov and Gosling (2009) discuss the increasing often conflicting demands being placed upon institutions. As they are required to contribute to their country's global competitiveness (Garcia, 2009; and Tomlinson, 2008), educate increasing numbers of students, attend to the needs of businesses and professions (Crowther and Savage, 2008) and produce world leading research.

Arguably underpinning such changes are neoliberal ideals regarding the supremacy of market forces which will operate to determine resource allocation and improve performance (Grey and Mitev, 1995; and Morley, 2001). Ball describes neoliberalism as "'in here' as well as 'out there'" (2012, p18). In so doing he points to both the external economic and political drivers which contribute to the reformation of higher education and the pervasiveness of neoliberalism into our thoughts, practices and identities.

The "in here" changes Ball (2012) argues includes the reinvention of individuals as resources who require continuous performance monitoring and productivity auditing. He uses the term performativity to describe how individuals become responsible both for their own performance and that of others. These changes alter the way people talk, think, and act in their relationships (Ball, 2003).

In this paper, consideration is given to leadership identities constructed through discourse and in particular to the ways in which neoliberalism is "in here" (Ball, 2012). How it has pervaded the thoughts, practices and identities of Principal Lecturers. To explore which subject positions are considered as unproblematic and natural and how this compares to alternative subject positions.

In this exploration leadership is considered not to reside in a person, but to be constructed discursively (Haake, 2009). This shifts the focus from the individual to their context, moving beyond consideration of the ability of context to alter leadership effectiveness as in contingency approaches to leadership (Parry and Bryman, 2006) to consider context as essential to the creation of leadership practices (Middlehurst, Goreham and Woodfield, 2009).

The discourse of academic leadership does not merely describe or reflect social reality but it creates it. Creating the conditions for determining what can be thought and practiced (Danahar, Schirato, and Webb, 2000). As such, I am suggesting that leadership identities are shaped through discourse (Haake, 2009). The identities that are constructed, nurtured and resisted are not infinite in number but limited and

constrained by power relations, which operate through discourse (Foucault, 1982; Oksala 1998). Within the discourse of academic leadership therefore are various subject positions, which reflect different leader identities (Haake, 2009).

Methods

The findings presented here are drawn from an investigation into the perceptions and experiences of leadership in higher education at a particular university. Principal Lecturers were chosen as the group of interest because leadership is an express purpose and function of their role.

The research was designed to enable common and competing experiences and perceptions of leadership to be explored. Three focus groups were conducted, involving 9 Principal Lecturers, 3 males and 6 females, representing each of the university's faculties. The participants were then interviewed individually at a later date. At the beginning of this process their length of service as a Principal Lecturer ranged from 5 months to 8 years. Each focus group and interview was recorded and transcribed. The focus groups lasted one hour and the interviews between 45 and 70 minutes.

Leader identities

A range of descriptions of leadership arose, which offer complementary and competing subject positions. These accounts included examples of individual leadership, co-leadership and leadership teams, which occurred through both formal positional roles and processes and informal relationships. The presence of such diversity in leadership practice suggests that the simplistic idea that continues to dominate, of the solo leader fails to reflect the lived experiences of those in higher education. Gronn (2009) suggests that we use the term hybrid to capture the multiple and complex combinations of leadership practice. My data implies that such an approach is necessary.

The leader identities expressed in the focus groups and interviews drew on numerous discursive interventions identified by Ball (2003) as policy technologies of educational reform; management, performance, appraiser, accountability. The notion that people require continuous performance monitoring was expressed through frequent discussion of their role in staff performance, appraisal and accountability and a desire for greater authority in order to manage these issues.

The neoliberal ideals regarding efficiency, organisation, managing time and performance, were prevalent in talk. There was unanimous agreement that their leadership roles were significantly time consuming. For some this was often expressed as a personal fault, an inability "to just put things down". Others drew on the idea of efficiency to describe colleagues who they felt just didn't understand how to cope. Not coping with the demands of the job was positioned as a personal problem, a deficiency in an individuals' management and organisation skills or a lack

of understanding of the job. Echoing the dominant leadership research agenda, in which success/failure is considered to be equated with individuals' leadership qualities (Jones, 2011).

The impacts of neo-liberalism "in here" were suggested in two further ways, firstly, the ontological insecurity facing many of the participants (Ball, 2012) and secondly, through their feelings of being stuck in the middle, between management and academic staff. The literature talks about those in more senior roles, such as heads of departments (Bryman and Lilley, 2009), experiencing the same issue. Is neoliberalism pushing responsibilities downwards?

Conclusion

This paper is intended to contribute to the debate on academic leadership identities and the changes occurring within UK higher education. It is my view that neoliberal ideals are pervading the thoughts, relationships and identities of individuals within higher education, in a way which is considered natural and desirable. What it means to be a leader and engage in leadership in higher education is being influenced and framed by notions which often remain unconsidered and unchallenged. The academic community has a responsibility to recognise its role in this construction.

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