

Leadership Development and Leadership Activity within the 'Cinderella' Sector: the perceptions of Further Education college principals (0252)

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Context of the Study and Relationship to Previous Research and Literature

The UK Further Education (FE) sector is far more extensive than many people realise. In 2013/14, the sector employed 139,000 Full-time equivalent staff, including 79,000 teachers (Association of Colleges, 2013). It educated/trained three million people. Moreover, of the 1.3 million 16-18 year olds in education/training, nearly two thirds attended an FE college, as opposed to a state-maintained school or academy. Research by KPMG in 2009 concluded that many college principals have as much responsibility as chief executives running multi-million pound businesses (KPMG, 2009).

Yet, in spite of its significant size and vital contribution to local economies, FE is often referred to as the "Cinderella" sector (Randle and Brady, 1997) because, in comparison to compulsory schooling and Higher Education (HE), it is under-resourced, under-valued and under-researched. Government funding is lower as are staff salaries. Likewise, there are fewer professional development opportunities for both teachers and leaders, and a dearth of empirical research. A small number of studies have investigated leadership within FE (Briggs, 2001; 2007; Collinson and Collinson, 2009; Elliott, 1996; Frearson, 2002; Gleeson, 2001; Gleeson and Knights, 2008; Lambert, 2013; Leader, 2006; Loots and Ross, 2004; Lumby, 1997a, 1997b; Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000; Sale, 2003) but, to the best of our knowledge, only one (Muijs et al., 2006) has looked in detail at FE leadership development. Our paper seeks to ameliorate this deficiency by addressing the following research questions:

- What types of leadership development have FE principals experienced, prior to appointment and once in post?
- What types of leadership development do FE principals consider to be most effective in terms of organisational performance?
- To what extent are FE principals able to devote sufficient time to the things they deem most important?

The research draws upon the leadership development typologies offered by Frearson (2002) and Muijs et al. (2006). Frearson (2002) distinguishes between:

- learning through experience;
- job shadowing;
- secondments/placements with other organizations;
- visits/exchanges;

- planned project work;
- working with paper-based training materials at own pace;
- working with computer-based training materials at own pace;
- distance learning over a network;
- one-day seminar or workshop in-house in own organization;
- one-day seminar or workshop away from the organization;
- short courses;
- long-term, part-time courses; and
- sabbaticals.

Muijs et al. (2006) group these thirteen activities into three over-arching categories, namely, course-based CPD, individual CPD and experiential CPD. Course-based CPD comprises traditional courses, seminar and INSET programmes; individual CPD comprises individualized activities such as online distance learning; experiential CPD comprises work-based learning with the support of other practitioners, such as mentoring and coaching. Using multi-level modelling of 1,511 survey responses, Muijs et al. (2006:103) found that 'experiential leadership development appears to be related to transformational leadership, course-based leadership development to distributive leadership and individual-based leadership development to transactional leadership'. The study being reported at SRHE sought to discover if the conclusions reached by Muijs et al. (2006) still hold true, given how much more fragmented the FE landscape has become in the intervening period. It also sought to update Muijs et al.'s original typology by incorporating some newer forms of CPD that rely on emerging technologies (e.g. social media).

Methodology Adopted

Data collection was confined to FE colleges in England since a different legislative framework pertains to other parts of the UK and the small numbers involved compromise anonymity. All 341 principals were sent a personalised email inviting them to take an on-line survey. This contained questions about the different types of leadership development they had experienced and how effective they considered them to be. Textboxes were included for additional comments. Respondents were also presented with 20 leadership activities ranging from 'communicating a strong vision' to 'taking tough decisions'. They were asked to gauge how much time they spent on each activity and how important they thought it was to the performance of their organisation.

Principals were emailed twice, in November 2014 and February 2015. 35 surveys were completed, representing a 10% response rate, which is typical for this type of on-line survey. 20 interviews were also conducted. Originally, we had intended to sample according to college type, Ofsted (government) inspection rating for leadership, institutional size and geographical location. However, when only 20 principals volunteered, we decided to interview all of them. The interviews were semi-structured, face-to-face wherever possible, and lasted about an hour.

Preliminary Results

The survey results have been fully analysed whilst the interview transcripts are still being coded. Preliminary findings indicate that, prior to appointment, 'networking with senior FE leaders' and 'reading journal articles' were the two most popular PD activities. Once in post, 'learning through experience' was also highly rated, being the second most popular PD activity (after 'networking with senior FE leaders') and the one thought to be the most effective in terms of institutional performance. FE principals spend most of their time trying to 'ensure their college's financial viability'. This is hardly surprising given that the Coalition government's first FE strategy paper promised to 'reduce the ruinous fiscal deficit ... [and] ... radically reform the system we inherited' (BIS, 2010:3). FE principals also spend a considerable amount of time 'using data to make decisions' and 'reporting to the governing body'. Generally, there is a good match between the things principals devote the most time to and the things they deem most important.

Implications

The preliminary findings suggest that informal/experiential learning is more highly valued than formal courses. This accords with much of the literature from compulsory schooling and HE. However, many interviewees noted that a degree of structure is needed in order to maximize the quantity and quality of this type of learning. Accordingly, they suggested that aspiring and newly-appointed principals should be provided with mentoring and networking opportunities. This might be organised by professional associations (such as the Association of Colleges or the 147 Group) or by a geographical cluster of local colleges (in areas where stiff competition between colleges does not preclude such collaboration).

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