Putting Education Back into Leadership

HELEN GUNTER

ABSTRACT Leadership must always be suspect in a radical tradition, not because it is unnecessary or unimportant, but because it too readily re-enforces the status quo, even when it tries hard not to. Helen Gunter argues that leadership needs to re-engage with learning, not merely focus on performance, and that we need to have the courage to exercise judgement. Educational leadership is not just the must of delivering efficient and effective organisations, but is also about challenging the power structures and cultures that are inherited and can act as barriers to democratic development. It is about the central importance of re-engaging with the specifically 'public' nature of what education and schooling should be in a democratic society.

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The form of transformational leadership that currently permeates education in England has its origins in non-educational settings (Bennis and Nanus 1985, Burns 1978). This importation strengthens the role incumbent (headteacher, chief executive, vice chancellor) as the leader, to behave and demonstrate the attributes to inspire, to motivate, and to influence individuals. This model has permeated government education policy for the last 25 years, and has enabled the haphazard building of site based performance management from 1988 to be rationalised and sustained. What was presented as enabling the reform of the bureaucratic state through the decentralisation of decision-making regarding strategy, staffing and structures has become centralised managerialism based on new types of work (e.g. target setting), new appointments (e.g. marketing) and a reworking of power relationships (e.g. line management). The fabric of public institutions has been fragmented into units or organisations where 'relationships have tended to shift towards the contractual, competitive and calculative' (Clarke et al, 2001, p. 9). Policy texts and auditing systems put the responsibility on the headteacher as leader to deliver political goals through standards that are buttressed by control mechanisms such as quangos. As such

the headteacher becomes the leader of: first, *systems* or the installation and oversight of tasks and structures to enable the control and external accountability requirements; second, *consumers* by controlling the external environment of the school through the use of contract compliance; and, third, *performance* by controlling the embodied identities and approaches to work so that what is visible in tasks, behaviours, and interactions is about achieving the total integration of the school in the delivery of external policy agendas.

Currently the remodelling of the school workforce has reaffirmed the headteacher's legitimacy as this transformational leader:

> Our determination is to ensure that every Head is able to do more than run a stable school. Transformation requires leadership which:
> - Can frame a clear vision that engages the school community;
> - Can motivate and inspire;
> - Pursues change in a consistent and disciplined way; and
> - Understands and leads the professional business of teaching.
>
> To achieve their full potential, teachers need to work in a school that is creative, enabling and flexible. And the biggest influence is the Head. Every teacher is a leader in the classroom. Every Head must be a leader of these leaders. And the Head's greatest task is the motivation and deployment of their key resource: staff.
> (DfES, 2002, p. 26)

A headteacher now undergoes what Gronn (2003) has characterised as 'designer leadership' training and so is licensed to lead. In England a National College for School Leadership has been created by New Labour to design and deliver national programmes and lead research at an annual running cost of £111m. Value for money exigencies means that attention is on measuring the impact of the headteacher on student outcomes. For example, Leithwood & Levin (2004) have recently reviewed the literature and shown that while 'school leadership effects explain three to five percent variation in student achievement across schools' it is the case that these effects are difficult to detect because they are 'small (but significant)', and 'they are mostly indirect' (4). This realisation is in tune with how the heroic leader is being hybridised as distributed leadership. If there is a division of labour that mediates the impact of the headteacher, and realistically the charismatic leader needs others to help deliver government policy, then the gaze needs to fall upon the role of the middle leader, and the teacher as leader. Distribution is about line management delegation based on role definition, or to use a more seductive approach, it is about empowerment where the individual is licensed to make decisions but within the established structures and roles.

Educational purposes and the process of learning are conceptualised and realised as impact, and this has generated a policy demand to design impact studies (e.g. Leithwood & Levin, 2004). Impact is about the creation and sustaining of organisational arrangements in school to deliver and be accountable for externally constructed and assessed performance programmes.

The primacy of plans, targets, value added scores, benchmarking, data analysis, and evaluation means that the purposes of education are defined by efficiency, effectiveness, economy and excellence indicators, where units of analysis (e.g. 5 or more A*-C grades) are constructed as measures. Learning is defined as the acquisition of particular knowledge, skills and behaviours measured at prescribed times in the academic year and the life of the student. The student must demonstrate that they have had valued added to their scores, and the role incumbent (headteacher, teacher, teaching assistant) must prove a causal connection between their practice and the adding of that value. The approach taken is one were everything that we need to know can be known through the production of evidence, and once we know what we need to know then we can deliver that knowing. Furthermore, remodelling of the school workforce means that teacher professionality is being reconstructed around what they do outside of the classroom to plan, prepare and assess learning, and how they work with others (e.g. teaching assistants, clerical staff, the bursar) in the securing of evidence (Gunter and Rayner, forthcoming). This contingency form of leadership rests upon an unresolved contradiction. On the one hand the leader must provide a vision of the future of teaching and learning in school in such a way that there is sameness (standards and standardisation, put colloquially as 'singing from the same hymn sheet'). At the same time the leader must use this visioning process to challenge the individual (adult or child) to change what they do and how they do it in order to conform. The individual has to succumb to an emotional 'hearts and minds' experience and so follow the leader.

It seems that students and teachers are being positioned with a policy tyranny where it is very difficult to envisage rival public practices taking place, and at most all that can be reasonably expected is a form of strategic compliance. Arendt's study of the Eichmann trial (1977) helps us to gain perspective on how such oppression works. She argues that his actions were not based on an ideology as such but on a 'deficit of thought' or what she labelled his 'banality':

> The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected to his inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the world and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such. (Arendt, 1977, pp. 287-288)

Therefore evil came from a man who it seems 'never realised what he was doing' (Baehr, 2000, p. xxvi). Once this is understood and accepted then the impact of power structures on human beings can begin to be unpicked and so the question is whether those doing and receiving banality can exercise agency to think and do otherwise. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* afforded Arendt (1951) the opportunity to diagnose totalitarianism and while she recognised that such a regime could be defeated from external forces such as the use of military action

to end the Third Reich in Germany, she struggled with the possibility that internal conditions could enable change. While she showed optimism about human capacity to do the unpredictable, and in order to have some hope we would want humans to demonstrate this in their political action, it was change within the Soviet Union following the death of Stalin that led her to argue that regimes can be internally transformed:

> Without action, without the capacity to start something new and thus articulate the new beginning that comes into the world with the birth of each human being, the life of man, spent between birth and death, would indeed be doomed beyond salvation. (Arendt, 2000a, p. 181).

What is core to Arendt's work is an attempt to understand political life, and she had experienced attempts to eclipse such activity and sought to return some dignity to the purposes and practice of the political.

What is helpful in this analysis is that research in English schools shows that those in receipt of the preferred model of leadership practice can and do exercise some agency (Gunter, 2005). To paraphrase Ozga (2005) while transformational school leadership is 'travelling' policy to and within England, there is 'embedded' policy 'where global agendas come up against existing priorities and practices' (p. 208), and so the realistic tensions in every day practice is enabling spaces to be protected or opened up for a more authentic and challenging form of education and learning to be put back into leadership theory and practice. This means that educational purposes need to be conceptualised in such as way as to begin with learning and put learners at the centre of it. It means that educational purposes are social and socialising, hence learners participate in the formation and delivery of the curriculum, and that assessment is about achievement in relation to that learning.

Within the field there is a tradition of leadership as a social practice that is inclusive of all, and is integrated within teaching and learning. Students and teachers are leaders of their own and others' learning both inside and outside the organisation. For example, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as 'the gap between a child's actual performance and the level achievable with the help of an adult or a competent peer' (Ryle, 1999, p. 412). This shifts attention away from the provision of resources to support learning to how learning is socially, culturally and historically mediated. It seems that what is central to learning is strangeness or the capacity to handle the uncertain and to formulate ways through potentially contradictory situations and information. For example, cognitive conflict is rooted in problem posing, and by thinking about thinking the learner can produce affirming and new insights into how and why they know. The consequences are that all role incumbents must teach and that professional purposes are located in teacher – learner identities and connections. Gone are the 'barren models of followership' based on 'learned helplessness', where we attribute knowledge and status to supposedly superior others (Gronn, 1996, pp. 11-12). Instead the opportunity

exists to reveal the challenge of intellectual work that 'must always be subversive of authority in its own domain' (Connell, 1983, p. 250) and so it is about respecting experiential knowledge, questioning existing practice, and having the courage to exercise judgement.

Putting the student and their learning at the centre of the purposes of education and learning opens the field to a whole range of resources. For example, Starratt (2003) argues that the student has to be more active in their learning and less dependent on 'the teacher's *bag of tricks*' to organise learning so that they '*get it*' (p. 160). In this way the student is not the audience to a lesson where they react as followers to the action of the adult, and this parallels the arguments regarding how adults should not automatically be led by a so-called superior adult. Creating an approach to leadership that encompasses students and teachers in a school can be developed through Starratt's (2003, pp. 137-138) analysis of the 'moral way of being'. He goes on to argue that there are 'three qualities of a fully human person': first, *autonomy* where the person has a sense of 'owning oneself' not in isolation but having responsibility; second, *connectedness* where we are networked with others and accept the responsibilities that this brings; and third, *transcendence* is about purposes where we 'turn our life toward someone or something greater than or beyond ourselves'. Such a position is helpful in how the field grapples with issues such as student and adult behaviour, the relationship between teaching and learning, and how work is examined and deployed within a division of labour. One way which is both obvious and inspiring is to put the student at the centre of educational purposes, and link this with the work and lives of adults.

Work is taking place with students in schools regarding their practice as researchers and developers of the curriculum and the processes of learning (e.g. Fielding, 2001; Lingard et al, 2003; Noddings, 2003; Smyth, 2001; Thomson & Gunter, 2005). The argument embedded within this approach is that educational leadership is a social practice and is less about the *must* of being a leader and more *about* the meaning and activity of doing leading and experiencing leadership. Foster (1989) argues, leadership is 'a shared and communal concept' (p. 57):

> Leadership, then, is not a function of position but rather represents a conjunction of ideas where leadership is transferred between leaders and followers, each only a temporary designation. Indeed, history will identify an individual as the leader, but in reality the job is one in which various members of the community contribute. Leaders and followers become interchangeable (p. 49).

So educational leadership is concerned less with controlling relationships through team processes and is more about how the agent is connected with others in their own and other's learning. Hence it is inclusive of all, and integrated within, not just contingent upon, teaching and learning. While there are formal organisational leaders who have a role and a job description they are not the only leaders. Students are leaders of their own and others' learning,

teachers are leaders of learning both inside and outside the organisation. The school is a public space where democratic structures and cultures, and the necessary practices associated with this, can be developed and used. Hence educational leadership is not just the must of delivering efficient and effective organisations but is about challenging the power structures and cultures that are inherited and can act as barriers to democratic development.

Learning and using that learning through association is compelling because it enables an acknowledgement of the embodied nature of much professional knowledge and the evidence people have about experiences and how the reality of change happens. In *The Human Condition* Arendt (2000a) examines labour, work and action. Labour is necessary to produce the goods humans need to survive, and this consumption means that they are 'the least durable of tangible things' (p. 171). Work produces goods that are more resilient and hence stabilise the social. Humans produce and their product can outlast the process that produced it and the objective for which it was produced. Humans therefore live amongst and with each other, and action with others requires the presentation and understanding of who we as the social are. For Arendt action is political and is public. Politics is a space, it is where we describe ourselves, where we discuss and where the new can be initiated. The 'common world' is what 'we enter when we are born and what we leave when we die. It transcends our life-span into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it', and what matters is the public and what we decide we want to 'save from the natural ruin of time' (Arendt, 2000b, pp. 202-203). We are helped in this process by institutions as a legitimising, durable, and stabilising framework through which the initiative and accommodation of the plural person can happen. Schools are public institutions that are being privatised through both funding arrangements and the model of organisational leadership that equates role with measurable productively only. Bringing education back into leadership would reorientate purposes and practice around the opportunities for the processes of learning within the public domain.

Correspondence

Professor Helen Gunter, School of Education, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, United Kingdom (helen.gunter@manchester.ac.uk).

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