
College Leadership: Evidence and Analysis So Far

A dominant picture of leadership in the English colleges which are variously referred to in different parts of the world as further education, technical education or community colleges has emerged through the literature to date. It has been argued that, since incorporation in 1993, principals and those in senior management positions have adopted a role which is invested with greater power than previously, distant from other staff. Focused on external relations and systems supporting activities other than teaching and learning (Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Shain, 1999; Simkins, 2000). Their style has been labelled as ‘boys’ own’ or ‘real men’ (Shain, 1999: 3), an approach seen as inimical to women in leadership roles. Their activity and values have been conceived of as managerialist (Randle and Brady, 1997) including ‘hard’ and ‘soft variants’ of managerialism (Shain, 1999) and ‘new’ managerialist (Gleeson, 2001). Though there have been one or two dissenting voices arguing for a more complex scrutiny (Simkins, 2000; Simkins and Lumby, 2002), overall, analysis has been somewhat hostile, depicting a first wave of oppressive and competition-driven leadership (managerialism) replaced by a second wave of ‘light touch’ managerialism, which merely replaced overt control of lecturers with subtle manipulation. Middle managers have not attracted the same degree of hostility. They have been seen as focusing largely on issues of teaching and learning and providing a vital bridge between lecturers and senior staff, and between programme area, department or faculty and external stakeholders (Briggs, 2001). Their response during this period has been analysed as both accepting and rejecting change, metamorphosing the implementation of some aspects of change to reflect their values and beliefs (Shain and Gleeson, 1999). The overall picture which emerges is one of leadership and management roles strongly differentiated by hierarchy, those at different levels not only undertaking different activities but impelled by different values.

This conclusion of research on leadership in colleges seems out of key with theories of leadership emerging in relation to schools, where an idea of leadership has gathered force which is not centred on discrete notions of the leadership choices and style of either senior or middle managers, but rather views leadership as the result of the way responsibilities and activities are distributed or dispersed across a wide range of people within each specific context. Spillane et al.’s work in schools leads them to suggest that ‘leadership is best understood as distributed practice, stretched over the school’s social and situational
contexts’ (Spillane et al., 2001: 23; author’s emphasis). They argue strongly, as have a number of other writers, that leadership is constructed by a conflation of activity, context and individual endeavour (Gronn, 2000; Lieberman and Miller, 1999; Moos and Dempster, 1998). The distribution of the different aspects of leadership through the different responsibilities and tasks undertaken by people could be seen as deliberately engineered by the principal and senior staff, or the result of negotiation, or evolving ad hoc through the march of day-to-day activity. The latter leads to a yet more fluid conception which theorizes ‘systemic’ leadership, that is, leadership which rather than being consciously distributed ‘flows throughout an organisation, spanning levels and flowing both up and down hierarchies’ (Ogawa and Bossert, 1997: 10). This is a view of leadership as ever-shifting and open to any member of an organization. Thus not only staff but also students can contribute to leadership.

The concept of systemic leadership is compelling, in that if leadership is concerned above all with long-term intangibles such as vision and culture, rather than short-term operational management and administration, we know that such embedded intangibles are not amenable to control by individuals. Vision is not created by formal statements and strategic planning weekends but, where achieved, is more likely constructed by the daily enactment of tasks and communication (Kenny, 1994; Staessens and Vandenberghhe, 1994). Similarly, the degree to which culture can be shaped is disputed, some believing it escapes all forms of control (Turner, 1990) and others asserting that it is, at the least, open to influence (Schein, 1997). While senior staff may have a considerable power to shape it, ultimately the culture of an organization is the result of the ongoing influence of all players.

Morgan’s (1986) early description of leadership as a hologram created by the light shed from a number of sources to create a whole is a metaphor which moves thinking away from the concept of an heroic individual leader, but is by now too static. We have reached a conception of leadership where the shaping of the organization and its direction, the central task of leadership, is a product of deliberate and emergent intention by a host of internal and external players. It is also a product of the confines and pressures of the context and the situation, and as such, relates to regional and national policy and the local community; not a stable, but a shifting hologram. This growing conviction of leadership as fluid and constructed by multiple factors of people and context contrasts sharply with the analysis of leadership in further education colleges in the UK to date, which has concentrated largely on leadership in the upper hierarchy, generally linking leadership with government policies and resulting new public sector management, or with the assumed tight association with business and industry and its commercial culture. It has resulted in a fracture between our understanding of leadership among those working at senior and those working at middle levels, and a failure to view the leadership of colleges holistically. There is a need support those working in colleges by a richer debate on the nature of leadership in their sector, drawing on the range of research which may be relevant, including ideas of distributed and systemic leadership.

The existence in England of two types of colleges which are subject to the same policy and funding imperatives but are different along a number of dimensions offers the opportunity to move the debate on leadership in colleges beyond the habitual discussion of the direct and indirect impact of national policy and to explore, through a comparative analysis, the extent to which internal factors are also shaping the form of leadership.
The Research

The research on which this article draws focused on the two major categories of college in England. Research during 1999–2000 encompassed semi-structured interviews with principals, senior and middle managers with different roles in one in ten general further education colleges (GFECs) in all regions of England, and a survey by questionnaire of all GFECs. Its aim was to explore the enactment of manager’s roles and particularly their perspective on how this had changed since the incorporation of colleges in 1993 (Lumby, 2001). The second project spanned 2000–2 and included semi-structured interviews with principals, senior and middle managers, teachers and students in five case-study sixth form colleges (SFCs), and a survey by questionnaire of all SFCs in England and of GFECs in two regions. It was designed to investigate the development of both leadership/management and teaching and learning in SFCs since 1993 from the perspective of managers, teachers and students (Lumby et al., 2002).

The number of managers interviewed in the first project was larger than in the second. However, the use of a national questionnaire survey in both cases to build a general picture of practice allowed triangulation with the more in-depth responses from individual managers and thereby gave confidence in the picture which emerged from both the sixth form and general further education colleges interview data. In the earlier survey of GFECs, 184 responses were received, a 50 percent return; 88 (54%) of respondents were principals/chief executive or acting principal; of the remaining respondents 7 were vice principals. The remainder spanned a wide array of mostly second or third tier posts, with 37 responses giving titles that were the only example of such a designation. Respondents were asked about the changing context, such as changes in the student population, external pressures, the pressures for culture change and the way they were managing change. The more recent survey asked SFCs and GFECs about the changing context, and about the way their management was changing. A questionnaire was sent to all 105 sixth form colleges: 61 were returned (58%): 50 of the respondents were principals. The remainder were members of the senior management team (SMT). Sixty general further education colleges were surveyed in the North-West and South-East: 22 were returned (37%), 12 from the South-East, 10 from the North-West: 15 respondents were principals/chief executive or deputy/vice. Other respondents were members of the SMT. Though the focus of each project was different, the earlier one concerned with the evolving leadership and management in the sector and the more recent project incorporating issues of teaching and learning and also the way different types of institutions were working together, both projects generated a large quantity of data on management and leadership in the sector which can be analysed from a number of perspectives (Lumby, 2003).

The use of the word ‘manager’ reflects the language used in the colleges themselves. People rarely referred to leaders and often did not think of themselves as such, despite the fact that they appeared to be fulfilling a leadership role. In this article, ‘senior manager’ is used to indicate the principal and those who report directly to the principal. Discussion and definition of the term ‘middle manager’ could take up an entire article in itself, including as it does not only managers who have responsibility for a faculty or a programme or subject area, but also those who have responsibilities for student guidance and support or management areas such as estates, finance, etc. Reflecting the focus of the research on which it draws, ‘middle managers’ is used here to indicate heads of faculty, programme or subject.
Leadership Intentions

Certainly in intention, senior managers in both types of college support a style of leadership which is distributed. Commitment to shared responsibilities was articulated repeatedly by senior managers in both types of college. As one GFEC principal put it, 'It is not a single person's function to provide leadership' (Lumby, 2001: 14). There was a deliberate approach to distributing leadership but it varied in intention. All colleges had in their own estimation moved to a more 'wild' environment (Carlson, 1975) where they were much more driven by finance. Some GFEC principals saw the appropriate distribution of leadership as ensuring that the responsibility (and burden of pressure) to remain financially viable and for assuring quality was carried equally by managers at all levels. In such a system, the focus of staff at all levels was on financial survival and accountability. Other principals in GFECs, and particularly those in SFCs, saw the distribution of leadership differently. Rather than all shouldering similar pressures and responsibilities, staff were to be protected from concerns other than teaching and learning. In SFCs concern for finance was not seen as an important focus for departmental heads, for whom the major role was conceived as one of leading learning.

Responsibility for the quality of learning was differently interpreted in the two types of college. In many GFECs department heads were expected to monitor all aspects of activity and to ensure they were of an appropriate standard. GFEC senior managers expected department heads to undertake a real rather than token responsibility for the work of staff in their area, holding staff to account by monitoring teaching plans and observing teaching. In SFCs, such a role was not universal by any means. SFC heads of department were not so much holding staff accountable as supporting them. One head of faculty described the extent of his responsibility as he saw it:

We have lesson observation so my responsibility is to go in a number of times each year and watch... but in terms of judging the level or whether the teaching style or strategy is right, I don’t know that I’m really much in a position to say that.

The contrast here may amount to no more than the well-documented difference in perception of the middle manager role from the perspective of senior and middle managers (Briggs, 2001). However, the data suggest that the differences in perception on the appropriate distribution of management and leadership do not fall neatly into a consistent view from particular levels of management. Equally, there appears to be a distinctive difference between the leadership and management of sixth form colleges and that of GFECs, notwithstanding the differences within each (Lumby, 2003). These differences in the way responsibilities are located both within institutions and between types of institution raise a number of interesting questions. First, is the location of responsibility, for example, for finance and for teaching quality, really an issue of leadership distribution or delegation of management tasks? Is leadership, essentially concerned with vision, culture and long-term development, something quite different? Second, how far do these espoused theories, the intentions of managers at all levels, translate into practice of what they do, their theory-in-action (Argyris and Schon, 1974)? Finally, are there factors at work internally or externally which might account for the differences in the ways leadership or management is constructed?
Distribution or Delegation? Leadership or Management?

The first question concerns understanding the relationship between delegation of management tasks and leadership distribution. Spillane et al. (2001) and Gronn (2000) suggest that it is in the analysis of activity that leadership can be discerned, that leadership does not exist in some Platonic abstract form but is created through the daily exercise of roles in both macro and micro tasks. Thus the location of tasks can simultaneously reflect management delegation, a division of responsibilities between individuals or teams, and also a sharing of mutual responsibility that creates a distribution of leadership. The choice of what tasks to prioritize, whether decided by the individual or resulting from negotiation with others (or even dictat from others), in effect shapes a culture, for example in creating a focus on learning or finance as being the central concern. Tasks are of course metamorphosed by those who carry them out. They may wholeheartedly endorse the explicit or implicit goal(s) or they may attempt to subvert them. Consequently, leadership is created partly by the conscious delegation or ad hoc dispersal of responsibility for tasks, and partly by the way in which the resulting activities are executed. Therefore the activities in synergy, conflict or dialectic constitute both the daily administration and management of the organization and simultaneously construct a composite leadership and culture. Daily activity is not divided between administration, management and leadership but is simultaneously all three.

Theory in Action

The second question concerns how far the theory in action matches conceptions of the role of leadership. The commitment to a distributed form of leadership was repeatedly articulated by senior managers. Previous research suggests this aim has not been achieved. Horsfall (2001) asked college focus groups about their perception of the team leader’s role. The results highlighted ‘differing views about the potential for leadership to be exercised by all members of staff’ (p. 9). The picture that emerged was one where middle and first line managers saw themselves as often distracted from a focus on teaching and learning by administrative and system maintenance tasks and were insufficiently empowered to change matters. In this case, daily administration appeared to them no more than that and did not seem to the players to constitute leadership. Briggs’s (2001) findings indicated that the middle managers she interviewed felt there was ‘a lack of role definition and an unwillingness on the part of senior managers to empower by delegating authority’ (p. 321). In both analyses, the middle managers do not feel as if they are part of a distributed leadership system, but rather their power to make decisions and even to shape the use of their own time is circumscribed by the demands of those higher in the hierarchy. Briggs’s work is specifically in general further education colleges. Horsfall does not specify the nature of his focus groups, but the picture which emerges replicates the issues for middle managers in GFECs indicated in a range of literature (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Randle and Brady, 1997). Though the intention of senior managers was to divide responsibilities and tasks, thereby providing opportunities for distributed leadership, the resulting daily activity seemed to offer opportunities to embody their beliefs and values to some, but to others were no more than an experience of running as fast as possible in order to stand still.
The data for the GFECs and SFCs in question here appear to offer a more complex picture. There was something of a divide in the experience of GFECs and SFCs. Far more GFEC middle managers were caught up in fire-fighting activity which did not embody their values. The SFC heads of department interviewed were certainly aware of a range of changes and pressures. They worked with growing class sizes and workload and sometimes inadequate accommodation. Some regretted the loss of a previously tighter staff community: 'The staffroom used to be vibrant. It used to be a learning ground.' They also felt the need to be more accountable more 'business like', but the interpretation of the latter differed considerably from that used in the interviews in GFECs. Accountability in SFCs was seen as focusing ever more strongly on retaining students and raising levels of achievement. Heads of department focused on teaching and learning very strongly, not in terms of the implementation of monitoring or quality systems, but more in line with professional values of supporting each other to maintain an ethos at the heart of which were the needs and learning of the individual. There was a similarity in the concerns and approaches expressed by teachers and by heads of department. All were primarily focused on teaching and learning. There was criticism of external systems imposed by national policy or the funding system, but little criticism of senior management or structure or the hierarchy. This did not appear to be reluctance on the part of interviewees to express criticism. Rather they tended to interpret all questions on their experience in terms of teaching and learning. That was their central preoccupation. The retention of a focus on teaching and learning was not accidental. SFC senior staff made clear their intention to ensure middle managers were protected from distractions such as concern with finance.

The previous paragraph argued that leadership is constructed through the vehicle of daily activity, both in the choice of priorities and in the way it is carried out. What middle managers particularly in GFECs may be experiencing is not, as they interpret it, a lack of opportunity to exercise leadership, but being constrained into a leadership which is inimical to them. If the exigencies of their role in effect demands they focus on, for example the recruitment of students, the financial viability of courses, the administration of paperwork in relation to quality and accountability systems, all this contributes to the ongoing shaping of vision and culture which are the central aspects of leadership, but it is a leadership which is focused on issues other than teaching and learning. It may be not that middle managers have no involvement in leadership, but that they are constrained into involvement in a leadership which has a different focus and values to those they would wish to promote.

The arrangement of management tasks for senior and middle managers is different in GFECs and SFCs. In GFECs, the stretching of management tasks over senior and middle management appears to have resulted in leadership where neither middle managers nor senior managers appear to be focused on learning. Rather than this being interpreted as meaning, as much of the previous literature has suggested, that senior managers lead and middle managers administer, there is a distributed leadership where all are involved in the construction of a form of leadership which has pushed learning to the periphery. In SFCs, the tasks are divided by level, with middle managers in practice focused on teaching and learning and senior managers more closely involved with financial and systems management. The form of distributed leadership is created through delegation of tasks where, despite the fact that senior managers spend much of their time on finance and systems, the leadership as a whole is focused on learning. The argument logically suggests that, counter to much of the theory related to site-based management, whereby devolution of
control and responsibility for resources empowers staff and improves learning (Bullock and Thomas, 1997; Caldwell and Spinks, 1992), the leadership experience of SFCs seems to show that the traditional hierarchical division in management responsibility results in a greater focus on leadership for learning. Thus the formal delegation of tasks or their informal distribution can create a positive leadership for learning or result in a negative leadership focused away from learning.

Factors Influencing Leadership Forms

If the distribution of leadership in GFECs appears to be constructing a form of leadership in which learning is not central, this is contrary to the stated intentions of those interviewed. The theory of distributed leadership recognizes that leadership results not only from intended but also from emergent and from situational factors. If this is the case and leadership is partly constructed by context, then differences between SFCs and GFECs may in part account for why, despite the intentions of players, leadership is different in the two types of institution. Differences include the nature of the student population, the curriculum, the size of institutions, the intensity of competition with other providers and staff stability. Each of these or any combination may be influencing leadership.

The Student Population

In general terms, SFC students are likely to have a higher level of attainment on entry. Statistical comparisons are not easy, given the changes in the form of collecting data over the years since 1993, but in 1997/8, at the commencement of the research on which this article is based, there were a number of differences between SFC and GFEC. In terms of prior attainment, 70.8 percent of 16 to 18 year olds entering SFCs on Further Education Funding Council funded, full-time, full-year courses had 5 or more GCSE passes at A*-C. The figure for GFECs is 25 percent. Recent detailed data on the socioeconomic background of GFEC/SFC students is lacking. However the indication in Keys et al. (1998) that SFC students are more likely to come from middle-class backgrounds (51% had parents in professional/managerial/technical occupations compared to 28% in GFECs) is supported by more recent data on eligibility for widening participation units: 23.4 percent of students on full-time, full-year courses at SFCs are eligible for widening participation units compared to 31.5 percent of GFECs (LSC, 2001). Despite widening participation efforts in SFCs it would seem that GFEC students are still more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Davies, 2002).

Thrupp (1998) argues that the organization and management of schools is strongly influenced by the socioeconomic (SES) level of intake. Thrupp’s argument is that, in schools with a low SES intake, the energy required for implementing even the most basic administrative or management tasks is difficult to sustain because all actions must be negotiated with a student body which may be resistant to the middle-class values and practice embedded in processes such as the collection of fees, participation in activities, completion of work. If Thrupp is correct, it is likely that the organization and leadership of SFCs and GFECs will be in part constrained and constructed by the nature of the student body.

In schools, the notion that the nature of the intake will influence management has been entertained as a viable hypothesis, though the need for further research is recognized. In colleges, the nature of the student body has been largely ignored as a factor shaping leadership and management but may account for a much larger element in the forms of leadership
and management than has been acknowledged. Certainly the data from the case-study sixth form colleges indicates that students were a strong force driving culture change (Lumby, 2003; Lumby & Briggs et al., 2002) and as such were part of a systemic system of leadership, that is, leadership which reflected a flow of activity and influence from staff and students and escaped the bounds of the conscious intentions of any individual or more limited group. However, the hypothesis that the level of SES intake determines leadership would be much strengthened if the SES composition seemed to relate consistently to the nature of leadership in GFECs and SFCs. The data did not show such consistency. Two of the SFC case-study colleges had low SES intakes and yet the experience of the middle managers, their focus on teaching and learning, their solidarity with senior management were as strong as that of the middle managers in SFCs with higher SES intakes.

The Competitive Environment

SFCs generally experienced competition less acutely than GFECs. For example, 73 percent of GFECs felt the funding methodology caused pressure to compete; 68 percent felt the need to increase income was causing pressure to compete. The figures for SFCs were 33 and 23 percent respectively. If less attention is diverted onto activities to compete, this may be one reason why SFCs found it possible to retain a focus on teaching and learning. However, one of the case-study SFCs was in a highly competitive environment, yet its managers evidenced a similar set of values and practice to SFC staff functioning in much more secure contexts and with a more advantaged student body. The assumption that SFCs can focus on teaching and learning because they have more secure and privileged markets was not wholly supported by the evidence.

Stability of Institution

GFECs are structurally much less stable than SFCs. They have restructured repeatedly. The survey results indicated that 14 percent of sixth form colleges had not restructured at all since 1993, and 46 percent only once. In contrast, 40 percent of FE colleges had restructured three or more times. Staff were also less stable, with the use of agency, part-time and paraprofessional staff much more in evidence in GFECs (FEDA, 1995; Jones, 2000). Staff in SFCs at all levels were clear that the extent to which they could exercise leadership in a particular direction was influenced by the support or restraint of staff and student culture. Where staff retained a critical mass of those who had held their post for a considerable time and were not wrong-footed and made anxious by changing structures, redundancies and large numbers of incoming new staff, their combined predilections would significantly influence the process of change. The extent to which the profile of the student body changed or remained the same acted as a similar accelerator or inhibitor for the speed of change. Therefore, the leadership of change was related to the ongoing stability or instability of staff and their culture.

Size

Size also appeared to be influencing leadership. For example, managers interviewed in the larger GFECs felt more dependent on paper-based and online systems for communication because of the number of staff and students and because of the need to work in relation to several sites. In SFCs, the smaller student body meant tight relationships between staff and students and between staff could be retained and was a contributory factor in creating the ethos which seemed to shape leadership and management practice.
Cohesiveness of the Curriculum

The much narrower range of programmes in SFCs, largely level III programmes, allowed a unity of purpose which the much wider diversity of courses in GFECs, often offered in dispersed locations, would not allow. It would appear that there may be a relationship between the breadth of learning programmes on offer and the ability of the organization to construct a cohesive culture and therefore a cohesive leadership.

There was evidence in the data that each of these factors did influence leadership, but none of them did so singly and decisively. A striking finding was that SFCs appeared to hold in common a characteristic leadership focused on the individual and learning, despite the fact that their student profile, size, competitive position and curriculum might be considerably different. Nevertheless, despite the differences between SFCs, the narrower parameters and stability of the internal characteristics, the size, more stable staff, range of curriculum and students, together constituted a context which supported a systemic leadership, that is a leadership which flowed from all including students, and a distributed leadership, reflecting choices about the distribution of tasks and responsibilities, which was focused on the individual learner and on learning.

Distributed and Systemic Leadership

Each of the factors discussed, student profile, competitive environment, staff stability, size, curriculum range, appears to contribute towards the shaping of the form of leadership in SFCs and to differentiate it from that of GFECs. Consequently, research which focuses largely on the impact of government policy and its effect on particular levels of management seems to miss a large element of the situational features which do not just influence leadership but, as Spillane et al. (2001) and Gronn (2000) argue, are part of its very nature. The new public sector policies stretching back into the end of the 1980s may have resulted in a number of pressures which have directly or indirectly reshaped the leadership of colleges, but this is only one component of the story. The part played by students and by staff in a systemic leadership which is enacted in the ongoing culture, changing directions and embedded and manipulated by the day-to-day tasks and activities, is a complex tale. More research is needed on the detail of daily interactions and the understandings brought to bear by all of the players, including students, before the intricate and shifting story of leadership can be unravelled.

Research on leadership in colleges to date has tended to deal with a two-dimensional oil painting when what is needed is analysis of a three-dimensional moving hologram. Similarly, to develop leadership and management in colleges, training programmes which focus purely on the individual's discrete contribution to long-term direction and change will be too simplistic. To develop leadership in colleges, the individual must be removed from the centre and replaced with an engagement with how the whole community creates leadership.

How then can leadership in colleges be understood? So much of the thrust of government policy in relation to both the school and college sectors has conceptualized leadership as something that an individual does—most significantly the principal—and as a process over which he or she has control. This view stretches back and links to a vision of leadership as old as humanity. However, in the 21st century, it may be that we need to understand leadership differently, not as something enacted by an individual or small group, but rather as the volition of an organization, and as such, outside the gift of any
single individual or small group. Leadership is not the same as management delegation or culture or vision but it both subsumes and is created through all three. It is not the gift of an individual, but created by the community, and as such offers opportunities for many to contribute. The capacity of staff and students to do so rests on the context in which they work. More research is needed on how factors such as curriculum breadth, institution size, student profile and internal delegation contribute to a holistic leadership for learning or prevent it. Such work may hopefully empower a wider range of people by removing the overemphasis on the individual and placing responsibility with the community for creating its own volition. This article has argued not only that leadership is a community exercise, but also that it is only partly voluntary. As in the case of GFEC middle managers, any individual may be implicated in the holistic leadership of an institution over which they may have considerable or only minimal influence. Leaders will always retain the power of choice of acting to move things in a particular direction; equally they need to recognize that, though such choice contributes to the leadership of the institution, the latter will always grow beyond the individual and groups to reflect a conflation of the activity and aspirations of the whole college community.

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References

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