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Abstract

The imposition of the neo-liberal agenda in the school system is a difficult entity. It requires new systems of control. These are particularly important in relation to the development of a more decentralised system of schools. This article examines how to exercise control over a more decentralised education system, the requirements of new forms of management and regulation, which this article itemises into 5 categories. All of these are accompanied by a systematic ideological offensive to persuade teachers, parents, students, voters that these reforms are desirable and that there is no credible alternative. This article examines 3 of these categories, the management and leadership of schools, transformational leadership and distributed leadership and new forms of coordination in local systems. Also analysed are education governance networks, issues surrounding the new forms of educational governance and management, the resistance to change factors and an analysis of viable alternatives.

Keywords: Control systems, ideological offensive, transformational leadership, distributed leadership, educational governance

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Introduction

The imposition of the neo-liberal agenda in the school system is a difficult business. It requires new systems of control. These are particularly important in relation to the development of a more decentralised system of schools.

According to the European Commission, “The most decentralised systems are also the most flexible, the quickest to adapt and hence have the greatest propensity to develop new forms of partnership” (European Commission (2005) Teaching and Learning: towards the learning society; White Paper on education and training).

This poses a problem for the state: how to exercise control over a more decentralised system? It has required new forms of management and regulation, which can be categorised as follows:

- Market forces – element of parental choice
- Increased centralised control through prescribed curricula and teaching methods, performance targets, evaluation of performance through regular testing and inspections, and systems of rewards and incentives.
- The management and leadership of schools, providing new identities and new powers
- New forms of coordination in local systems, the changing role of local education authorities and the construction and management of new forms of groups of schools
- New forms of control of state schools by the private sector

All of these are accompanied by a systematic ideological offensive to persuade teachers, parents, students, voters that these reforms are desirable and that there is no credible alternative.

In this paper I am going to deal with the third, fourth and fifth forms of management and regulation.

1. The management and leadership of schools – transformational leadership and distributed leadership

One powerful mechanism to achieve the compliance of teachers is the ‘logic of practice’ which is generated by the ideological and material contexts within which they work, which tend to determine the horizons of what can be thought and said, and position teachers through a system of constraints and incentives in such a way that the activities that seem to be safest and most
productive to follow are those that conform to the dominant agenda (Jones et al 2008, pp130-1).

But a reliance only on compliance with this logic of practice to control teachers is too risky. More direct management is required, and this requires new agents and new methods of managing. The compliance of teachers is most effectively accomplished by securing their commitment, and this can be achieved through the exercise of 'transformational leadership'. The role of the transformational leader is 'to help others find and embrace new goals individually and collectively'. It’s about winning the hearts and minds of teachers; it’s about not just tasks to complete but ideas, values and emotions to be invested in.

This requires the construction of a new identity for school principals. In England a key role is played by the National College of School Leadership, which runs programmes designed to create, and qualify, this new model of management. We can contrast this with the situation in Germany, where the OECD notes the undeveloped status of school principals.

The identity of school leaders is still basically associated with class teaching. Principals tend to see themselves more as head teachers rather than as school managers and leaders. Teachers generally perceive the principal as “first among equals”, raised from the ranks and paid a bit more to coordinate the work of the school. As noted in an international review of school leaders

“‘There are still States in Germany, where school leaders are not prepared at all or only to a small extent before taking over leadership … in a school. The underlying assumption is that a good classroom teacher will automatically become a sufficiently good school leader’” (ICSEI, 2000).


One key element in transformational leadership is distributed leadership. This means sharing leadership and management roles among teachers. There are two overlapping reasons for the rise to prominence of the notion of distributed leadership. One is that consultative and participative mechanisms and ‘team work’ can increase job satisfaction, promote greater commitment and therefore improve efficiency. Teachers are most effective when they are committed to the vision for the school, and participation is an effective means to secure their commitment. The other reason is to do with the sharing of knowledge. It is argued that the work process in schools has become much more complex and inter-dependent and the knowledge required to enable the school to run efficiently is dispersed throughout the institution, so heads are dependent on their teacher colleagues to ensure that the school functions effectively. While this model of leadership is most developed in England, the OECD notes its emergence in Italy.
However, autonomy introduces a deep innovative element. It sanctions that hierarchic logics are over - as they were characterised by the principles of authority and superordination - and affirms the logics of participation - characterised by equality and cooperation. The State “protection” traditionally applied by the Provveditorati agli Studi (local offices of the Ministry) to schools, is substituted by the legal status recognized to school networks, units or groups of institutes of adequate size. The bureaucratic control which complicated didactics is substituted by a service of assistance and advice in favour of the initiatives of school innovators. The headmaster (school manager) substitutes the authoritative and centralising model, with a diffused leadership; this new decision-making decentralised model aims at appreciating the teaching staff resources and at improving the school service quality. (Duthilleul et al (2003) Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers. Country Note: Italy. Paris: OECD) [p177]

The introduction of forms of participation within schools creates a contradiction because, in the British system, power remains with the head teacher – power over the curriculum, over the school budget, over the appointment and of staff, and over their work, and promotion, through annual performance management evaluations of teachers by the head. This has two consequences. The first is that ‘distributed leadership’ is always delegated, licensed, exercised on behalf of and revocable by, the headteacher. The second concerns its scope. The exercise of hierarchy over participation entails a separation between strategic power and operational power. While operational power can be delegated to the participants, strategic power (power to set the agenda and make the key decisions) is restricted to those in positions of authority. Distributed leadership tends to be confined to lower-level operational decision-making. Strategic decision-making about school policy is not distributed: there may be consultation but it remains the property of the head.

Distributed leadership, and claims for ‘democratic leadership’, can be seen as the translation into school management discourse of the idea, central to New Labour, that some concessions to participatory processes at the lower levels of a managerialist power structure represent popular democracy.

Distributed leadership within schools can also be situated in the wider context of changes in the workplace. The conception of the high commitment workplace based on dispersed, delegated authority is widespread in business management theory. The extent to which there is a paradigm shift from Fordism, Taylorism, and command and control management in reality as well as in rhetoric is a matter of debate in critical management and labour process theory. Horizontal forms of coordination supplement but are subordinate to the dominant vertical hierarchies.
To summarise: there is a shift from a hierarchical model of control to a system of hierarchy plus participation – to be precise, participation within hierarchy.

2. New forms of coordination in local systems

Until recently the coordination at the local level – the town, the county - in the school system in England was by the local council – the local education authority. The neo-liberal agenda has greatly reduced their powers, transferring some downwards to schools and some upwards to government. Their principal role now is supposed to be not providing services to schools but brokering them from the private sector. However, the decline of the role of local authorities has been accompanied by the emergence of new forms of coordination. Its rationale is spelled out in an OECD document of 2001:

“The creation and application of professional knowledge on the scale and in the time-frame demanded by ‘schooling for tomorrow’ makes demands at the individual and system levels. At the level of the individual teacher, there needs to be a psychological transition from working and learning alone with a belief that knowledge production belongs to others, to a radically different self-conception which, in conformity with interactive models, see the production of knowledge with colleagues as a natural part of a teachers’ professional work. At the system level ways have to be found to bring teachers together in such an activity”

(OECD (2001) Knowledge Management in the Learning Society; Paris: OECD, p71)

In short, schooling has to become more efficient. It has to shift from being a cottage industry to a multi-site interlinked system. This is a key theme in current education policy in England. What drives it is the recognition of the limits of centralised top-down reform, which is the model which has been dominant under New Labour. That model has run out of steam – the initial improvement in test scores has levelled off. Now schools need more freedom to improve. But individual school improvement is not enough, what is needed is whole system change and that means schools working together, not in isolation - horizontal links between schools, not just vertical links between schools and the central state.

The problem then is how are horizontal relations, relations of collaboration, to be controlled to ensure that they align with government agendas? What is the relationship between participation and hierarchy? There is a parallel here between the management of inter-school relations and the management of schools themselves. There is a spectrum of organisational forms emerging. At one extreme, hierarchical control is transparent. Schools are being linked together under common control. New governance structures are being
created. One form is federations of two or more schools run by an ‘executive head’. Often this is designed so that a high-performing school takes over, in effect, a low-performing school. Often the high-performing school sends some senior staff into the other school to manage it.

At the other end of the spectrum of collaboration between schools are networks. This is a key theme in current ‘official’ discourse in education in England. The largest initiative has been Networked Learning Communities, established in 2002 and involving over 1000 schools in 134 networks. There is a new emerging type of local network: groups of schools and colleges linked to provide vocational education.

Again, it is part of the global neo-liberal agenda, as demonstrated by the 2003 OECD publication Networks of Innovation: Towards New Models for Managing Schools and Systems. The word ‘management’ is significant. The question for networks is the relationship between the vertical and the horizontal. On the one hand, for teachers networks for collaboration across schools sounds like an attractive alternative to top-down prescription. On the other hand, for government the problem is how to ensure that networks align with their objectives. Teachers cannot be trusted to implement and develop, on their own, government policy. This issue is addressed in the OECD book as follows.

“As a form of peer exchange networks are more or less hierarchy-free institutions and do not depend on traditional top-down administration. Nevertheless, they need to be understood as requiring both relatively stable structures as well as some form of organisational leadership to function effectively. In that sense, any existing network assumes some form of administrative and managerial substructure that initiates the actual networking process, formulates principles and guidelines for membership, recruits members, creates a communication infrastructure, and facilitates the ongoing exchange among the members”.


The OECD speaks of the need for networks to have some form of organisational leadership and administrative and managerial substructure, but these clearly open the door to hierarchical forms of control over networks. That form of control has been given a name in England: ‘system leadership’. And that requires new agents: system leaders. These are mainly intended to be head teachers who play a role in leading cross-school networks. What is happening here is the creation of a new professional managerial identity in the school system. Networks and system leadership can best be understood as a reconfiguring of state power, attempting to create new vehicles for the implementation of policy under the control of a reliable new technocratic management cadre.
The new role of the private sector in the management and governance of state schools

The UK government has promoted a new type of school – Academies. Academies are state secondary schools which are handed over to private organisations or individuals to run. Their ostensible aim is to improve standards of attainment in socially disadvantaged areas. These ‘sponsors’ are multimillionaire businessmen, or private companies, or religious organisations. The sponsors cannot make a profit, which is not their motivation; in fact they are supposed to make a donation of 3 million euros. In return, the sponsors gain control of the school, through the transfer to them of ownership of the land and premises and through being able to appoint a majority of the governing body, with the remaining capital costs, and the running costs, met by the government. Academies are set up under private school legislation, outside the normal state system, which gives them greater autonomy over the curriculum than other state schools. It also means that they are not bound by national agreements on the pay and conditions of teachers, or indeed to recognise teachers unions at all. The government has said that it is committed to Academies because an external sponsor brings not only a financial endowment but also vision, commitment, and a record of success from outside the state school system.

The government intends that 400 such schools should be established. The aspect of Academies that I want to focus on is this: many of the sponsors of Academies want to run not just one Academy but a federation or chain of Academies – perhaps half a dozen, or 10 or 20 schools. They would market themselves as a ‘brand’. While operational power would lie with the governing body of each Academy, strategic power lies at a higher level of the hierarchy, with the board of directors of the sponsoring organisation.

Only 400 Academies are planned at present but there is another similar model of schools with sponsors, called Trust schools, which are a sort of ‘Academy-lite’, and the aim here is that all, or the majority of schools, would become Trusts. And again Trusts are encouraged to form federations or chains. So what is emerging is a new landscape of schooling, with the old system of individual schools organised into local government-run education authorities being replaced by a system in which local authorities have a reduced role and are being replaced in many ways by a range of new organisational forms ranging from networks to federations.
3. Governance networks

The emergence of these new organisational forms means we need new elements, new concepts, in our analysis of neo-liberal education. I have referred to networks in the school system as a mode of state power. But they are just one example of a much wider phenomenon. It was presciently diagnosed by Nicos Poulantzas (1978) in State, Power, and Socialism. He speaks of ‘State governance power networks’ (p60). He says that

“The doors of the old control sites are ‘opening’ to give way to a new type of statism: that of more flexible networks and circuits spread throughout the social fabric” (p.186).

The European Commission’s White Paper on governance defines the term governance as follows:

"Rules, processes and behaviour that affect the way in which powers are exercised particularly as regards openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence". (European Commission 2001, p8).

Bob Jessop takes up the theme in his book ‘The future of the capitalist state’ (Jessop 2002). He discusses the rise of what he calls ‘heterarchy’ - horizontal self organisation among mutually interdependent actors as a form of governance. Jessop explains the attraction of network forms – heterarchy – for government as the result of recognition of the limits both of state command action and of market competition. It implies that important new problems have emerged that cannot be managed or resolved readily, if at all, through top-down state planning or market-mediated anarchy. This has promoted a shift in the institutional centre of gravity (or institutional attractor) around which policymakers choose among possible modes of coordination. (Jessop; 2002, p229). So heterarchy doesn’t replace either state direction or the market, it provides the state with an additional form of management and control:

“… the state’s increasing interest in heterarchy's potential for enhancing its capacity to secure political objectives by sharing power with forces beyond it and/or delegating responsibilities for specific objectives to partnerships (or other heterarchic arrangements)” (Jessop 2002, p237)

In Britain this development accelerated under the Blair government. In 2001 Janet Newman noted that the New Labour approach had produced a reconfiguring of state power: ‘the dispersal of state power across new sites of action, augmented by new strategies and technologies’ (Newman 2001, p168). The term ‘governance networks’ also features in the field of public administration.
“Governance networks are associated with new systems for public policy deliberation, decision and implementation. Governance networks are often associated with new hybrid organizational forms that play a major role in shaping and delivering public policy to citizens and communities”

(Klijn and Skelcher 2007, pp. 587-8)

From a pluralist perspective networks enhance participation in the policy process. And here is a connection with distributed leadership in schools. But

“The contrasting view is that networks are centres of power and privilege […] This critique of the pluralist position emphasizes the strong managerial character of governance networks”

(Klijn and Skelcher 2007, p588).

Klijn and Skelcher distinguish three types of networks, of which one, the ‘agency’, corresponds to those being promoted in the school system: This is a network, and associated organization, created specifically in response to a national government mandate. Its role is to be the delivery arm for a national policy initiative that requires inter-organizational cooperation at the local level.

Summary of issues in new forms of management and governance

- New managerial identities – transformational leaders, system leaders, Academy sponsors
- Hierarchy + participation
- Distributed leadership – pseudo-democratic – positional power and strategic decision-making remains with the head
- Networks – pseudo-democratic – strategic decision-making remains with the system leader
- Replacement of elements of local democracy by bureaucratic control
- Academies: not accountable to elected local councils, not accountable to parents – governing body is almost all appointed by sponsors
- chains of Academies becoming in effect non-elected surrogate local authorities
- Networks – government-sponsored technocratic management cadre replacing elected local government
Conclusion

Distributed leadership can offer a more congenial management regime than an authoritarian one, but teachers are aware of the dominance of the head's management power. Networks can take many different forms, ranging from bureaucratic to democratic. It remains to be seen whether the project of creating sufficient system leaders succeeds, whether network forms are capable of resolving the crisis of ‘performativity’, or whether teachers are able to use networks to help develop more progressive and emancipatory conceptions of education. Academies are intended to improve standards of attainment in poor working class areas. The evidence so far is that overall they are no more effective than ordinary schools in similar areas. Some academies have raised test scores significantly, but only by changing their intake to admit more pupils from middle-class backgrounds and by entering them for easier exams.

So far there is little evidence of distributed leadership and networks being used for more progressive and emancipatory purposes. There are many local campaigns against Academies and a national umbrella organisation, supported by the teachers unions, but in almost all cases they have been unable to prevent Academies being opened. There is little discussion on the left about more democratic forms of decision-making at school and local authority levels.

References

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