

Remodeling Headteachers in England: Is it the end of educational leadership?



Changes in teachers' work and the challenges facing teacher unions

Howard Stevenson, Guest Editor

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ABSTRACT: We examine the contemporary relationship between headship and leadership in England. This speaks to the current globalizing agenda promoting generic leadership within a modernizing agenda of restructuring and reculturing in public education. Thinking based on several research studies is used to stimulate perspectives on a range of complex tensions between: first, labeling and the realities of work; second, training/credentialing as a leader; third, public accountability and the professional ethic of distributed leadership; and, fourth, centralized reforms and the realities of context. We construct an argument that the labeling of Headteachers as managing directors, chief executives, and more recently as school leaders, combined with training and a requirement to implement reforms, is central to a form of modernization that is reworking professionalism as generic and business orientated. This current phase of reform is revealed as a centralized remodeling drive toward de-regulating qualified teacher status as a credential for school leaders. An educative ethic is identified as a counter-weight value-system providing evidence of lost stories and testimony to the relationship between professionalism, leadership as a pedagogic process, and learning.

KEYWORDS: Education reform; Headteachers; school leadership; remodeling educational professionalism.

Working with children in the delivery of public services is undergoing radical change with far reaching consequences in England. The shift in terminology from professional groups (e.g. teachers, social workers, doctors, police) towards organizational personnel (e.g. school workforce), and more recently towards the use of 'children's workforce' to encompass all adults who work with children, has huge implications not only for how various services, expertise and people inter-relate but also for the nature of public service, public training and credentialing of the educational professional. In this paper we present an appraisal of the remodeling policy and note these trends and implications for public service in general and the lives of children as learning citizens in particular.

We intend to undertake intellectual work and produce a think piece where we draw on extensive resources based on 45 years of research that we have done together (e.g. Gunter & Rayner, 2007; Thomas, Butt, Fielding, Gunter, Lance et al., 2004) and in other sites (e.g. Gunter 2001, 2007a, Rayner 1986, 2007). Our job in this paper is to problematise rather than provide off the shelf solutions. We intend to be productively critical where such thinking: "...does not take institutions and social and power relationships for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing" (Cox, 1981, p. 129). Hence we will present ideas as evidence of our thinking and scholarship based on long-term dialogue and meaning making. We see our job as opening up the neo-liberal project in education that has dominated policy for the past quarter of a century in England, and not only expose the problematics of and damage done by such policies, but also we intend to recapture the territory for educational purposes.

Modernizing Headteachers

The task of modernization is to break with the past in such a way as to enable hearts and minds to embrace a future vision (see Gunter & Butt, 2007). While the language can be radical, and is certainly seductive (e.g. improvement, personalized learning, effectiveness, student voice, new professionalism), it hides the vicious attack that has taken place on public service identities and practices. History shows that this tends to be done in a number of ways, not least through governments (sometimes headed up by charismatic individuals) who promote a better way combined with a panoply of legal requirements inclusive of rewards and sanctions. Examining the experiences of those who are the objects of modernizing shows that the adoption of new identities, work and language, tends to happen through a direct but expansive controlling of ordinary practice (Gunter, 2007b). One of the main ways this is being done is by the use of the term 'remodeling' to describe and motivate such changes: officially it is about securing a better work-life balance, but we want to reveal the trajectory that the gloss of a benign phrase covers up. This is achieved by an emphasis upon the validation of operational and technical knowledge to deliver nationally determined targets at the expense of experiential knowledge and practical wisdom of those who have the potential to set their own targets within a local context (Rayner, 2007).

Currently the modernization of publicly funded education is evident in a range of strategies regarding the position and work of the school Headteacher: first, the Head has been singled out as the most important person in a school, and while the pre-eminence of the Head is not new to English education (see Grace, 1995) s/he has been positioned as central to the delivery of national reforms locally (see DfES, 2004a); second, and linking to the first, the Head has been made responsible and accountable for delivery in ways that put the emphasis on technical organizational outcomes; third, the Head is trained and accredited as a transformational organizational leader by a publicly funded government agency, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL); and fourth, the Head is encouraged to extend and build commitment to modernization through working with national agencies such as the NCSL and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT).

The adoption of such a strategy is not, as is often claimed, evidence based. Headteachers are an historical legacy, and research shows that there are different models within practice, and models constructed and popularized within particular contexts. In the postwar period the emphasis was on the professionalisation of the workforce, and on professional models of *primus inter pares*, whereas from the Thatcherite years onwards marked by the Education Reform Act (1988), the emphasis has been on the strong Headmaster who has been reworked into a chief executive role (see Grace, 1995; Hughes, 1985). The New Right and, more recently, New Labour, governments present a strong belief system in the normality and desirability of leadership, and assume that Headteachers as effective leaders are essential to successful schools (Gunter & Forrester, 2007). This underpinned the construction of a national training regime established by the Major government in the mid 1990s, and continued under Blair, with major investment by the latter in a National College to train Heads to lead in order to raise measured standards at particular key stages. This approach has initially drawn on school effectiveness and improvement research for validation and justification. More recently, a post hoc movement has seen the government commission research to provide an evidence base to further support the belief in a relationship between Headteachers and student outcomes (e.g. Bell & Bolam, 2003; Leithwood & Levin, 2005; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006).

It seems as if Headteachers are in a golden age where their role, work, and significance in the system of public

education has never been higher. However, there are issues of supply, and how to keep very expensively trained teachers working in the classroom, and more particularly, participating in a training regime that will take them through to Headship. Remodeling the school workforce has been designed as a reform intervention to secure recruitment and retention:

* Teachers have been given a form of 'new professionalism' through accountability and responsibility for delivering national standards and the national curriculum (DfEE, 1998).

* Teacher practice has been modernized through standardized curriculum, lesson plans, assessment, practice-based evidence audits and data analysis for performance tracking (DfEE, 1998).

* Teachers have been subsumed within a wider 'workforce' where there are meant to be more people without Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) working in a school than with it, and that this 'workforce' can take on the work that teachers previously did (DfES, 2002).

This reform has been labeled as freeing teachers to teach, where work they have traditionally done e.g. calling the register, covering lessons, pastoral care, and lesson preparation has been questioned and, if deemed to be necessary, handed over to other members of the workforce. Hence teachers have been helped by handing over work that as trained professionals they should not be doing (e.g. photocopying, letter writing, data inputting), but they have also had to handle some major changes that impact on the core identity of the professional teacher: first, the register can now be taken by a person without QTS and so the link between teacher and student in a pastoral role has been broken; second, teachers can plan lessons that those without QTS can deliver, and so a qualified 'supply' or 'substitute' teacher need not be employed, breaking the direct link between learning and teaching; third, teachers need not be heads of year or house, as this work can be done by those without QTS, and so the link between care and teaching is broken; and, fourth, teachers need not prepare lessons or design learning materials but can receive pre-packaged learning through national strategies and by downloading plans and learning resources, and so pedagogy is removed from classroom practice. All of this reflects the direct shaping and controlled remodeling of ordinary work-creating new roles, values, beliefs, identities, and ultimately professionalism.

Heads too are part of this remodeling exercise. They have had to lead it within their schools, and be remodeled themselves. England is now in a fourth 'unofficial' phase of remodeling, in which the reforms of the first three phases were about establishing the right of teachers and Heads to have time in the school day to do their work (see Butt & Gunter, 2007), where training and change processes were provided. This fourth phase is described as unofficial because it has not been formally announced, but rather simply taken for granted. It is regarded as a natural progression from what has happened to teachers and teaching, and it can be traced back to the requirements of site-based management from 1988 (Gunter, in press). Just as the legitimacy to teach and care for children based on QTS has been broken, so the legitimacy of the person ultimately responsible for the local delivery of learning outcomes is under question. The work of the person at the top has been framed in ways that are generic (anyone can do it), context neutral (anyone can do it without experience of having worked in a school), and organizational (anyone can run the school as an efficient and effective business organization because they have worked in another organization).

The discourse that is being generated around this is not new but is a re-blending and re-branding of ideas into a national policy that is to be implemented by technical operatives as a form of delivery. What seems to be happening is that the primacy of the Headteacher cannot be abandoned overnight, too much is at stake, but the role of the Headteacher can be remodeled in ways that break the dependency on the person with QTS. This is happening in three types of documentation: first, in strategy documents, such as the Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners (DfES, 2004b), there is a growing emphasis on the generic leader rather than Headteacher leadership:

Over the next five years we will continue to give priority to developing effective leadership at every point in the system-from the small primary school to the DfES. We shall support and encourage the development of the existing cadre of senior managers and the earlier identification and development of future leaders. We will encourage thinking about how organisations develop effective leadership teams. We shall ensure that successful leaders continue to be rewarded for their success and weak leadership is identified and tackled swiftly (DfES, 2004b, chap. 9, para. 38).

Second, in official research documents designed to impact on training, such as Seven Strong Claims About Successful School Leadership (Leithwood, et al., 2006). Here the Headteacher is only mentioned twelve times, and in two of the claims (2, 3) is not mentioned at all. In referring directly to the Headteacher the approach is about both function, such as impact measures on student scores and succession planning, and personal matters such as traits

and how Headteachers enact practice. Increased concerns about an emphasis on the heroic lone leader are handled by advocacy of a form of distributed leadership labeled as "total leadership" (p. 12) where the diversity of the workforce is such that the person or persons with QTS are just one part of the whole. The Headteacher, together with teachers, who possess pedagogic knowledge, who know about and implement theories of child development and learning theories, is missing. This in turn points to the importance of praxis as a missing link in the contemporary engineering of a new education professional and the unfolding re-modeling of the school leader in England (see Rayner, 2007).

Third, in commissioned research documents used to advise ministers and hence impact on policy, such as the DfES-PricewaterhouseCoopers (DfES/PwC) (2007) Independent Study into School Leadership, the role of the Headteacher moves into a complete remodeling phase. The approach being taken to forms of leadership distribution are top down, but at the same time meet the requirement to respond to the need to be diverse through labels such as 'total' and 'team,' means that the hierarchy of a person in a top job remains but the way is opened for the Headteacher as a leading professional to be one of a number of experts. The report speculates that there is a chief executive role that is necessary both to deliver the requirements of site-based management, and to strategically lead the organization, traditionally known as a school but increasingly to ideally become known as a "community campus," offering a range of extended services on site and across sites through federations. The report goes on to conclude that the person with QTS will need to be a bolt-on addition to the senior leadership team:

...given the evidence about the changing demands on school leaders, it is our view that, where a school (or group of schools) has decided to separate out the Chief Operating Officer role from the professional leadership role then there should be no barrier to an individual without qualified teacher status taking on that leadership role, even where it is constituted as a 'Chief Executive' position to which the professional leadership reports. Such individuals could well have long-standing experience of working in a school environment or in a wider children's services or voluntary sector setting, but they could also be from other backgrounds that provide relevant skills. In such circumstances it will be crucial that there is also a senior qualified teaching post on the senior leadership team to provide professional leadership and act as head of teaching and learning (p. 109).

Given that Headteachers have found the administrative burdens of site-based management to be off putting and distracting from teaching and learning, and that with the remodeling of teaching and learning as a delivery function near completion, the idea that those with QTS should have a monopoly over the top job is now left open to question. The argument is being framed around a combination of the emerging realities of a diversified workforce combined with arguments that Heads don't want to do chief executive work anyway and so someone else needs to be appointed. The separation of leading professional from chief executive, and the elevation of the latter over the former, is essential in what Bobbitt (2002) identifies as the "market state" where competition and choice will require business entrepreneurialism based on trade, commissioning, contracts, and performance. The purpose of the service (health, education, welfare, security) is less important than the generic leadership of it.

Recapturing Educational Leadership

So far we have argued that the patterns of policy decisions, research projects and strategizing within the current modernization project could mean the end of educational leadership. What we mean is that the work of those with QTS is defined, labeled, measured and rewarded in ways that has little to do with education, hence making QTS obsolete. Contemporary histories show that Headteachers in the English education system and their work has shifted more towards organizational efficiencies and systemic transformation through local leadership of reform implementation (Gunter, 2007b). The labels of management in the 1970s, and leadership from the 1990s, have been given to that work and have become popular. There is little actual research evidence on the relationship between professional practice and what it is called, and the control over that labeling has been in the hands of policymakers who have used 'leader,' 'leading,' and 'leadership' to shift identities in ways that fit the modernization project (Gunter, 2004). The emphasis has been on moving work around from local authorities to schools from 1988, and from QTS people to non-QTS people from 2003. Such reforms did not begin with the nature of the professional, their practice and their work, but with political actors external to schools (e.g. private consultancies, civil servants) making decisions about what someone with QTS should not be doing, rather than working with the QTS professional on developing a defensible model of practice.

In an alternative remodeling suggested here, educational leadership would be located in an educational institution, be about educational issues, and be intrinsically educational. Consequently, leadership would be uncoupled from structural and cultural requirements where it is automatically associated with role and hierarchy, where some elite people know best and build commitment to followership. And the link between children producing data to prove that elite adults are performing in preferred ways would be broken. We need to put leadership back in its place as a benign term for the exercise of power in ways that are relational and communal (Foster, 1989). Leadership should be re-presented as an actual distributed property (Gronn, 2002) within these relationships, where practice is not automatically assumed to be causally linked to a role incumbent's vision and direction. We have never fully realized educational leadership but we argue that it is a worthwhile working intention. How might we do this?

At most we can open up a dialogue about this through this paper. We take inspiration from Apple (2006) who argues that we have to play the neo-liberals and marketers at their own game. They have been very successful in controlling the discourse and getting their point of view across. What parent would object to a more efficient school or to the provision of joined up local services on one site, or the opportunity to learn with their children within extended provision? However, as Apple argues we need to both counter the arguments and handle the realities of having to work within this context. We cannot stay on the side line saying that QTS matters, if we don't follow this up with what this means for local choices. If a governing body cannot appoint someone with QTS because applications are non-existent or not of the right standard, then we can hardly blame them if they follow the DfES/PwC line of argument.

The first thing we need to do is to read and analyze the documentation, challenge the arguments, and present alternative interpretations and strategies. For example, there is a growing literature that challenges the official model of leadership as developed and promoted by New Labour and its agencies (see Barker, 2006; Currie, Boyett, & Suhomlinova, 2005; Hatcher, 2005; Hartley, 2004; O'Shaughnessy, 2007; Smith, 2002). Barker (2006) helps to open up where the dialogue might begin: "The government's choice of test and examination scores as the only valid measure of student outcomes, and a research emphasis on large-scale quantitative studies to confirm that leadership improves results, have conditioned the available evidence of improvement to the point where it seems as if the transformational agenda may be unjustified" (p. 39). There are a range of studies from different epistemic and political positions, and so the opportunity exists to make, in Apple's terms, "counterhegemonic alliances" (2006, p. 36) so that those who can think and research heretically can produce new understandings together.

There are two things that we would put onto this emerging agenda. First, as researchers we have a commitment to scholarship, and in Bourdieu's (2003) terms, with commitment. Hence as Gunter and Fitzgerald (in press) have argued there is a need for those in universities to adopt the role of public intellectual and to interrogate the literature in ways that accept the pluralism of knowledge claims. As field watchers have shown there remains a narrowness of epistemic groups who do the intellectual work for the modernization project and hence legitimize it (Gunter, 1997; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003), and hence enable particular knowledge claims to be regarded as the truth. The field needs to be designing projects that show the validity of other knowledge claims and use these to develop new understandings of the realities of practice. Connected to this is the need to not only challenge through academic papers but also through everyday media. The failure of the DfES to use the commissioned evidence base regarding the piloting of remodeling has largely gone unmentioned upon, and the tensions between the call for evidence informed policy and practice with the realities of national policymaking need to be pointed out and used in critical analysis (Gunter, Rayner, Thomas, Fielding, Butt et al., 2005). The arguments put forward in the DfES/PwC (2007) report can be challenged, not least the argument that because Head's work is more chief executive and that they don't want to do that sort of work, that this means others need and should be brought in. Perhaps a starting point should be to examine the purposes of Headteachers and their educational work, and whether there is a need for a single person or team, who ever they are, to be in a top role. Headteachers are a historical accident and have become middle managers in a regulatory regime. Why don't we challenge the leader centric nature of English society and begin from the bottom up and ask how work can be coordinated and shared in ways that are productive? (see Davies, 1995). Why don't we construct more productive arguments? For example, if the police, doctors, and social workers are delivering public services on an integrated community campus then they are in a pedagogic relationship with children and so need to have a form of QTS. Hence the diverse workforce does not demand that those with QTS be stripped of their role but instead more of the children's workforce needs such knowledge and skills.

Second, there is a need to support the emerging work on alternative theories of transformation based upon an understanding of knowledge and learning (see Rayner, 2007) and evidence about the realities of radical development in schools. There is much that we could talk about but within the space we have we would suggest the need to rework leadership in ways that truly do put children at the centre of learning. If every child does matter in reality then we would want to see children as learners put at the centre of policy development. There is also an argument for conceptualizing an inclusive form of leadership (Rayner, 2007), where learning about educational leadership can respect experiential knowledge about what works as well as access other strategies. There is a range of scholarly work on this matter: examples of conceptualizations of leadership that begin with students and their interests (e.g. Starratt, 2003; Smyth, 2006); student involvement in research and the professional development of teachers (e.g. Fielding, 2006; Gunter & Thomson, 2007); work in school improvement (e.g. Rudduck, 2006) and/or involvement in school evaluation (e.g. MacBeath, 2000). Smyth (2006) has edited a special edition of the *International Journal of Leadership in Education* where contributors respond to his arguments that "we need spaces of leadership from which young people can speak back regarding what they consider to be important and valuable about their learning" (p. 282). Developing such projects, bringing them to the attention of policymakers and the public at large is essential. Beginning with a focus that does not assume the normality of an elite adult in charge could be daunting but also exciting. It means a shift from the normative goodness and essential truths of leadership as a fabricated set of traits and measurable behaviors, with a shift into the realpolitik of working with students, parents, and communities in ways that are here and now.

Ongoing Conversations...

Remodeling is a term being used to embrace technical changes to the type of work that needs to be done, where it needs to be done and who by. It requires structural and cultural change. We have identified that such remodeling is wider and deeper than the work-life balance of the individual teacher, and enabling the deregulation of public sector services through the reworking and denial of professionalism and expertise. Our argument is that educational leadership matters, but as Rayner (2007) argues, it is easy to lose a grip on the complexity of the learning journey with children because of the demands to prove instant success. Furthermore, the intrinsic satisfaction of education professionals in working with a range of children matters. It is the diversity of children's emerging identities, and all their potential and the barriers to realizing that potential that is core to public services. The satisfaction of knowing and making a difference is often a teacher's first and final motivation. This is where educational leadership is located, it is vital and necessary, but it is often difficult to witness, measure and evaluate.

We feel optimistic that while educational leadership is under threat, it is not yet dead. Largely because the modernization project does not wipe away the past, and instead waves of reform layer over each other, inter-relate and produce new opportunities. Hence there are contradictions in the system that lead to tensions regarding the nature of work and who should do it and why. How this is playing out on the ground is difficult to see, as officially the three formal phases are complete. However, what remodeling has done is generated the possibility for schools to realize the potential of site-based management from 1988, not least how the growth in a wider support staff that was in evidence and seen as important before that date (see Edmonds, 1968) has been given prominence. The challenge is how to do this within a performative regulatory state which developed in the 1990s and eclipsed much of the optimism of 1988. The question we want to ask is: what type of an education system do we want? And, within this do we wish to continue to have a publicly funded education system, because the ongoing outcome of remodeling of the children's workforce within restructured local provision of services, is whether this will remain compulsory and/or free at the point of delivery? The differentiation in the system where strong interest groups can dominate educational provision (e.g. Christian Churches) and private wealth (e.g. Academy Schools) could develop a form of remodeling that is less about the workforce and more about the types of schools and the purposes of schooling. It is the logical outcome of a choice and diversity strategy. These are important matters, much remains unsaid, and it is territory that can be frightening for academics that depend on income from official sources. There is much to be gained by thinking differently about research, and the nature of scholarship and debate. Ladson-Billings (2006) alerts the research community that they should not have waited until the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina to realize that research needs to be in the public interest. What we would like to suggest is that we need to ask: what is the public, and whose interests are being served by remodeling which is leading to the slow but sure eradication of QTS in educational leadership and provision.

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