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TANYA FITZGERALD and HELEN M. GUNTER

Terms such as 'leader', 'manager', 'teacher' and 'student' prevail in most schools and, accordingly, school hierarchies are viewed as rational ways of organizing teachers and their work that institutionalize authority. We are deeply concerned that the term 'teacher leadership' has crept into educational vocabulary and there has not been sustained and robust debate either about the term or its use and misuse in schools. Although one of the positive aspects that this term signals is the possibility of more participation in schools, the enduring contradiction is that leadership remains hierarchical and connected with organizational purpose. More specifically, teacher leadership is a seductively functionalist way in which teacher commitment to neo-liberal reform has been secured.

Introduction

Leadership, both in its definition and practice, is seductively elusive. Terms such as leadership, leading and leader are used, often interchangeably, in such diverse fields as education, health, government, the not-for-profit sector or voluntary organizations, the legal profession, business, the military and across sporting codes to describe any act, historical or contemporary, that is heroic or which draws attention to a particular moment, idea or action. What cannot be discounted is that leadership can flourish in environments and situations that might operate outside legal frameworks; for example paramilitary groups, criminal networks or those organizations deemed to be 'terrorist'. Yet, in essence, leadership is portrayed as a purposeful, positive act or activity. In the public arena of the school 'good' leaders are canonized and 'poor' leaders demonized (Blackmore and Thomson 2004).

Descriptors such as leadership, leading and leader are not new phenomena—they are ubiquitous terms. That is, a variety of labels have been used to position those who are 'leaders' or who exercise 'leadership' in a position whereby their decisions and actions have an impact on those who are led (Gunter 2004). As such, the act of being a leader, leading and leadership are discursive terms that privilege the work of (some) individuals and, as Gronn (2003) commented, creates a form of binary between leader/follower. Further binaries that exist are leadership/management, superior/subordinate and, as this article highlights, powerful/powerless, although there is an orthodoxy of

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leadership that suggests that there is a structural relationship between those who lead and those who are led. This power differential is acutely played out in schools precisely because the very nature of their organization places some adults in hierarchical positions to others and all adults (whether teaching or non-teaching staff) in authoritative positions relative to students. This orthodoxy is reinforced by the ways in which leadership is shaped and determined by national policy agendas, irrespective of national context.

We are troubled by the apparent canonization of organizational leadership in schools and the eruption of a leadership industry to train and certify leaders, leading and leadership in schools (the National College for School Leadership in England is one such example). Equally, concern by policymakers that school leadership, pupil attainment, school improvement and school effectiveness are inextricably linked has prompted the promulgation of standards for leaders and normative training programmes for aspiring and current leaders in schools (Gunter 2001). Yet, fundamental questions about why schools are organized around the professional labour of adults have not surfaced. Although there has been a call for leadership practices to become more participative via distribution across the organization (see, for example, Spillane *et al*. 2004), schools remain mechanisms to organize teachers' labour, pupil participation and teaching and learning. Thus, the focus of this article is to provide a critical examination of normative assumptions about the division of labour in schools and ways in which leadership is constructed and organized. We argue that labels attached to the work of teachers and the codification of teachers' practices that are embedded in, for example, national standards in New Zealand and England deeply impacts on ways in which leadership is exercized in schools. Labels such as 'teacher', 'leader', 'manager' or 'administrator' are part of the commodification of teaching and learning processes, i.e. attaching labels to the particular work, authority and status of teachers is a discursive process that signals the role and identity of those adults within the bureaucracy of schools. And while there might be calls for more teachers to engage in leadership (Muijs and Harris 2003) or for leadership practices to be distributed (Lambert 2000), this tends to be about organizational requirements and reform implementation rather than teaching and learning. Notwithstanding this point, while leadership might be distributed within schools, we seriously question whether power has been similarly distributed. As we argue in this article, teacher leadership is firmly rooted in neo-liberal versions of the performing school (Gunter 2001). More importantly, this article rests on our intense disquiet about this new orthodoxy and our abiding concern that teacher leadership is illiberal in its conceptualization and purposes and presupposes an orthodoxy about who might lead and who might be led. Accordingly, the three central questions that we would like to pose are: firstly, why teacher leadership; secondly, why now; thirdly, is this a customized solution for teachers to deliver government policy?

Changing schools and changing labels

The 1988 *Education Reform Act* (England and Wales) and *Tomorrow's Schools: The Reform of Education Administration in New Zealand* (Government

of New Zealand, 1989) were the two policy documents that promoted the reform of schools across England and New Zealand, respectively. With one stroke of the legislative pen schools were required to become self-managing organizations and were expected to be fiscally efficient and effective. In addition, schools were directly responsible to their communities and accountable to the state. This level of devolution stimulated the formal establishment of systems such as inspection, performance management and quality assurance processes as a direct way to determine whether schools were acting in the 'right' way (this is a deliberate use of this term; see Apple 2001). Although leadership was situated as a means to 'help others find and embrace new goals individually and collectively' (Hallinger and Heck 2003: 229).

Over the past two decades commentators have written extensively on the pace, rhetoric and theoretical underpinnings of these reforms (see, for example, Thrupp 2001, Robertson and Dale 2002, Codd 2005) and the increasing accountability of schools for teacher performance and student outcomes (Fitzgerald *et al*. 2003). One of the intended consequences of the introduction of site-based management was that the headteacher (England) or the principal (New Zealand) became the public face of the school and, as the de facto Chief Executive Officer (CEO), was directly accountable to the state and its agencies for the effectiveness and efficiency of the school. Schools as organizations were therefore subject to scrutiny by the omnipresent market (Apple 2001) and were aligned with the tenets of good business practice. That is, schools were required to be fiscally efficient, meet outcomes and targets, implement quality assurances processes, devise operational and strategic plans, make judgements about their employees' performance, respond to client demands, market their services and produce global citizens whose skills and abilities would contribute to the global marketplace. Moreover, emphasis on labels such as 'manager' or 'chief executive' was assigned to the particular work of some teachers. The accompanying hierarchy placed some teachers in an authoritative role over others and all teachers in a powerful position in relation to students. It would seem, therefore, that the legislative pen, in its first phase, simultaneously contributed to the modernization of schools and the modernization of teachers and their work.

We are not suggesting that the hierarchical reorganization of schools is either a new or deceptively modern occurrence. However, what this reform agenda cemented was a division between those who managed and led schools and those who did not. This was achieved in several ways that stimulated the promotion and acceptance of labels such as 'leader' and 'leadership'. For example, the term 'principal/head' was used to denote the person who was positioned at the apex of the school hierarchy—the CEO, to co-opt the reform discourse. From this point in the hierarchy a vertical and horizontal division of labour established a senior and middle leader layer. Management tasks and activities (such as budgets, resources, assessment and reporting, appraisal) as well as leadership (of a team of teachers and the curriculum) were the domain of these middle leaders. Classroom teachers were located at the base of this structure and that was visibly represented in organizational charts. Furthermore, adults, as educational professionals, were situated in a hierarchy that naturally afforded them a superior positioning to students. In this way leadership was structured and constructed as a rational approach to

ways in which teachers and their labour were organized. Students remain an enduring absence. While some current research models have turned this on its side with the principal on the left, the teachers in the middle and included students on the right hand side (see Leithwood and Levin 2005), the arrows flow from left to right, with students positioned as the recipients of elite adult practice. This repackages them as an absent presence.

This labelling of leadership is particularly evident in the standards that have been promulgated in both England and New Zealand. These standards identify and prescribe what leaders should do and how leadership should be enacted (see, for example, Teacher Training Agency 1998, Ministry of Education 1999, Department for Education and Skills 2004). In both countries these standards specify the professional knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes considered integral to leadership at the various levels. This codification of teacher practices has, accordingly, introduced a skill hierarchy between teachers (classified as 'beginning', 'classroom' and 'experienced'), 'unit holders' (teachers with additional leadership and management responsibilities) and senior leaders (deputy principals and principals) (Ministry of Education 1999), i.e. these standards differentiate between those whose roles involve formal leadership or management responsibilities and those who teach. The reference point is the transformational headteacher/principal and so teachers and their work are defined from this basis, where the origins and type of leadership they exercise is causally linked to the organizational apex (Leithwood 2003, Leithwood et al. 1999, 2003).

The research literature consistently points to the conclusion that teachers as leaders are central to the quality of teaching and learning that occurs in schools, but such studies begin and end with organizational matters (see, for example, Bennett 1999, Brown et al. 2000, Lambert 2000, Harris 2004, Visscher and Witziers 2004). We would want to ask whether it is possible for such teacher leadership (Lambert 2003, Pounder 2006) or distributed practices (Spillane et al. 2004) to occur in a policy climate that affords authority and responsibility for leadership and management to those labelled according to an established hierarchy. Recently these calls for the distribution (or delegation) of leadership across schools have been amplified, thereby increasing the number of adults who engage in leadership tasks and activities. Terms such as middle leadership, teacher leadership, distributed leadership, shared leadership or even 'total leadership' (Leithwood et al. 2006) are highly seductive and point to the suggestion that those who are identified and labelled as 'leaders' might occupy a rung on the organizational hierarchy. Of concern is that this is simply a modernized way to seduce teachers to take on additional tasks and responsibilities without the commensurate increase in their salary or time allowance. This point is rarely debated in the leadership literature, possibly because to say this is deeply heretical.

Illustrative of these concerns is the English context, where remodelling of the school workforce means that there are more adults in school who are not qualified teachers but who will lead and determine the teacher's work. Quietly, and without debate, the New Labour government have removed the requirement for a headteacher to be a qualified teacher, and PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) have advised the government that the 'chief executive' role could be undertaken by anyone from the private or public sector who

has generic leadership skills (see Butt and Gunter 2007). Hence, teachers (whether in the organizational middle or not) will be leading on behalf of non-teachers, and they will be fewer in number than non-teachers. While the composition and deployment of the workforce is changing rapidly, it is worrying that within the teacher leadership literature there is an absence of policy critique regarding the context in which teachers are being asked to lead. Our analysis would suggest that this research and theorizing have been located in three specific ways. In the first instance the literature is geographically bound to the USA (see, for example, the work of Spillane, Lambert, York-Barr and Duke, Leithwood and others). Second, this literature resides within one specific epistemic community: school improvement (see for example the work of Harris, Mujis and others). Third, the literatures draw on functional approaches to change, where the rationale behind leadership is to make the system work better and show your commitment by accepting this new identity, and the narratives through which leadership is talked about tend to be about technical delivery combined with people-friendly behaviours (Raffo and Gunter 2008). In these particular ways, therefore, 'teacher leadership' is an orthodoxy that has been sustained and nurtured by its proponents. Linked then with hierarchy structure, power and authority, teacher leadership is, we would suggest, a management strategy and not a radical alternative.

Teacher leadership is not a radical new agenda; it merely cements authority and hierarchy whereby 'leaders' monitor teachers and their work to ensure a set of predetermined standards are met (Fitzgerald *et al*. 2003, Fitzgerald and Gunter 2006). Performance management systems and the control of teachers' work by the codification of practices and standards have reinforced the bureaucratic nature of schools and schooling that does not easily stimulate leadership across and within schools. As Codd (2005) suggested, teachers' work is highly defined and structured and, as managed professionals, their professional autonomy is increasingly threatened. A question that therefore surfaces is—to what extent does the standardization of leadership create a climate of managed leadership and managed leaders? This question also resonates with the work of Gronn (2003), who cogently argued that training programmes and the codification of leadership produces a form of 'designer leadership', i.e. all leaders acting, thinking and working in similar ways. Are teacher leaders no more than 'new' knowledge worker with the capacity and capability to deliver organisational objectives (Hartley 2007)? Or, indeed, is there a 'danger' for headteachers/principals that teachers might take advantage of the opportunities presented to them as teacher leaders to challenge and resist the dominant policy agenda (Hatcher 2005)? This is an area of research worthy of serious investigation.

York-Barr and Duke (2004) identified that much of the work on teacher leadership is descriptive, rather than explanatory, and our reading of their analysis shows that students are assumed to be the potential beneficiaries of such leadership. It seems to us that much of the work on leadership presents students as the objects upon which elite adults (usually the headteacher/ principal) have an impact. Here the outcomes (examination results) become data to be used to prove that those adults are performing to the approved standard. Our challenge to this orthodoxy is that being a leader, leading and

leadership need to be disconnected from purely functional approaches and be put in their proper place. Our analysis would suggest that there is research and theorizing which will enable the field to do this. First, the literature is available from a range of geographical locations (see, for example, Bates, Blackmore, Codd, Hatcher, Lingard, Ozga, Smyth, Thomson, Thrupp and others). Second, there is a range of literature located in pluralistic knowledge claims about professional purposes and practices which come under the broad area of critical policy studies (see, for example, the work of Blackmore, Smyth and others). Third, this literature recognizes the gains that can be made by functional interventions, but is concerned to be socially critical, with the aim to both problematize this and provide evidence and thinking about alternative ways of approaching teacher purposes and practices. Here the rationales are about working against social injustice and for social justice, and the narratives surrounding leadership are about how it is a relational and communal concept where all can be a leader, do leading and benefit from leadership and that the exercise of power is shared (Foster 1989). This is within the literature but is often missing from analyses of teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is, therefore, about activism as policy-makers and not policy-takers (Ozga 2000, Smyth 2001, Sachs 2003), and so professional identity is constructed around agency. Here teachers are in control of their work with an agenda to not only work for the children in their immediate care but also as having a wider social justice imperative.

The challenge for headteachers/principals is to view leadership as more than the possession of power and authority based on hierarchical status and refocus attention on teachers who lead learning in productive and pedagogic ways (Lingard *et al*. 2003, Starratt 2003, Thomson and Gunter 2006). For this to transpire a systematic and systemic effort by schools to create the necessary conditions and context (Frost *et al*. 2000) that stimulate the leadership of learning by teachers is required. Starratt (2003) argued for a refocusing from leadership of the organization and its structure, roles, responsibilities and tasks to the leadership of learning. In this way the gaze shifts from the context of leadership to its core intention, productive leadership practices that support the development of productive pedagogies that enable learning to occur.

This is complementary to work on student voice and how children need not only to be listened to but also to be actively involved (Fielding 2006, Gunter and Thomson 2007). There is an interesting opportunity opening up here regarding how connections are made between research and conceptualizations about adults and children. Certainly, a work by Smyth (2006) in which he argued that trust by children in schools is being 'severely corroded' and that there is a need for 'courageous forms of leadership that fearlessly promote the importance of student ownership and student voice in respect of learning' is crucial (p. 282). What Smyth proposed is vital and we can only repair the damage (Smyth 2003, 2004) by beginning with the realities of practice and conceptualizing a way of being and doing in schools that allows teachers and young people to 'speak back regarding what they consider to be important and valuable about their learning' (Smyth 2006: 282).

We are left at this point with an intense disquiet. For almost two decades schools in New Zealand and England, although not exclusively or uniformly,

have experienced the impact of managerialism as a means of delivering modernization that has served to change the nature of schools (as organizations) and teachers (as professionals). An antidote that is prescribed to remedy the 'problem' of the impact of widespread and systemic reform is located in the rhetoric of teacher leadership, i.e. leadership by teachers is stipulated as the means to build capacity within teachers to sustain change and cope with increasing demands (Lambert 2000). It is an argument that is based on narrow functional scholarship and does not take account of research that is socially critical or projects that aim to build pedagogic relationships between teachers and their students.

Conclusion

Teacher leadership is not an entirely new concept, as Silva *et al.* (2000) have shown. We have presented a challenge to the current discourse around the construction of teacher leadership and so challenge the primacy given in the improvement and effectiveness literature to organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Our approach is to connect everyday events to the bigger picture and so develop perspectives that challenge the normality of leadership in leader-centric cultures in Western style democracies. The evidence base is ideas, argument, and disciplinary knowledge where we have engaged in conceptually informed practice (Gunter 2001). For example, Hartley (2007) argued that what is distributed to and within schools is a matter of tactical implementation: how to convince people to do something different and how to make sure that new practices deliver national standards, and so what remains outside the teacher's involvement, are matters of strategy. Hence, the purposes of schools and schooling are determined elsewhere, by central government, by the World Bank, by a private consultancy firm, where the message is codified and transmitted to teachers. One consequence of this is that schools are becoming places where research for understanding is becoming more difficult to do. Performance regimes mean that schools, headteachers and teachers treat all external visitors as having a measurement and inspectoral role where they have to perform and have learned to talk in ways that do not compromise them. Being a functional teacher leader means being on message. Actually, researching teacher and student practice as it is and might become is increasingly difficult, as schools become places for the generation of functional data rather than spaces for the generation of democratic opportunities.

The extent to which teachers are able to exercise a degree of agency with regard to the leadership of learning will be affected by how they position themselves and the schools' roles in this positioning. Working for a more socially just public education will require a reconceptualization of the role of teachers and the consequent redevelopment of school structures and processes to accommodate this in ways that will challenge the perceptions of students, community, teachers, principals/headteachers, government and their agencies regarding the norms that have come to exist through neo-liberal reform. While schools can be created as dialogic communities (Mitchell and Sackney 2000) and teachers and students can be repositioned

as leaders of learning, this remains something to be worked for. New rationales around inclusion and narratives around participation are starting points for such practice in schools and classrooms (see Thomson and Gunter 2006).

While teacher leadership is being constructed in ways that present a professionalizing agenda around identity and satisfaction through what is done outside the classroom, there is work that establishes a more productive conceptualization that begins with teaching and learning and has a socially just intention. For example, Lingard *et al.* (2003) examined links between leadership and learning in Queensland (Australia) schools and described leadership practices that directly link with and support improved outcomes for students as productive leadership. Productive leadership, therefore, does not rest solely with an individual but is dispersed across the school community. Starratt (2003) argued for a shift in focus from leadership of the organizations to a focus on the leadership of learning. Both of these approaches point to links between learning, learners and leadership. Placing learners and learning at the centre of analysis has the potential to offer a new perspective on leadership, leading, learning and learners.

Our own work is located in this terrain, where we have worked with teachers and students in a range of projects which show how unsatisfactory functionalism is for learning and for how people want to live together, and how other approaches can be fruitful, fulfilling and can begin to link learning to lived lives (see, for example, Gunter 2005, Fitzgerald and Gunter 2006, Thomson and Gunter 2006). However, we have found that, despite attempts to show that teacher leadership has moved away from formal organizational structures to an emphasis on 'the exercise of leadership by teachers regardless of position or designation' (Frost and Harris 2003: 482), what remains problematic is that some teachers remain labelled as 'leaders' or are afforded a 'leadership' task and function and, accordingly, remain trapped in discourses either because of an abiding willingness to name or label or, more significantly, because there has been no systematic questioning of why these labels were constructed and applied in the first instance. Deeply problematic is the continued insistence that the capacity to influence and act is vested in an individual and shackled with hierarchical practices, labels and privilege.

Although schools share the same structures, organization and core goals, attendance at school by teachers as a place of work and by students as a place of learning is experienced differently. We have highlighted the interplay between leadership in schools and the potential for teachers to interrupt a managerialist, functionalist and modernizing agenda in order to refocus leadership on learning. Indeed, if teachers do teaching then why don't we keep that language and resist the trend for modernization by relabelling. One of the central challenges for schools in the twenty-first century is to uncouple themselves from the bureaucracy resulting from the *Education Reform Act* (1988) and *Tomorrow's Schools* (Government of New Zealand 1989) that re-emphasized and arguably institutionalized the bureaucracy of leadership. This, therefore, raises a number of critical questions. First, how might schools respond to the challenge to obliterate hierarchies that organize teachers and their work? Secondly, how can leadership and learning become and remain simultaneously connected (Gunter and Fitzgerald 2006). Third,

how can the leadership of learning be central to the core pedagogic practices of schools? Finally, how can schools be reorganized so as to place learning at the centre of all activities in ways that are socially just?

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