PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION AND TEACHERS’ LEADERSHIP IN PRIVATE FURTHER EDUCATION

Dr. Sebastian U. Okafor
University of West London
sebastian.okafor@uwl.ac.uk; +44 2079231143

Abstract This small-scale study explores how teachers in FE define collaborative leadership, and how they perceive themselves as leaders, the collaborative leadership behaviour they use, and how principals foster and develop collaborative processes in those colleges. Data collected from in-depth interviews with teaching staff at three private FE institutions reveal that the meanings lecturers attached to CL vary. However, they all relate to the definitions in the literature reviewed. Collaborative leadership is defined in terms of ‘shared leadership’ (Lambert, 2002), ‘collaborative decision-making’ (Muijs and Harris, 2006), and trusting colleagues to deliver. Lecturers use some form of the CL behaviour identified as key competencies that educational literature supports, such as high levels of emotional intelligence (Goleman et al., 2002; Beatty, 2007). The majority of lecturers are positive about their own leadership competence. 83% see themselves as leaders in the sense of managing their classes, guiding and motivating students to complete their courses successfully. Findings also show that 33% of the participants see principals as transactional leaders and 17% as autocratic: ‘full of power’ and ‘supreme authority’. 33% perceived them as visionary leaders in the sense of ‘making money’ rather than facilitating an environment of learning. The failure to build trust was most often reported as a barrier to CL. The researcher recommends that principals and the proprietors make staff development and empowerment key to college improvement.

Keywords: collaborative leadership, shared leadership, teachers’ leadership, professional collaboration

1. Introduction

This study examines professional collaboration and leadership processes in three private Further Education (FE) institutions in Greater London, the U.K. Private colleges in FE operate in a competitive, international environment. Like any other profit-making business, they must offer the best possible value to attract new customers/students, thus, they must retain a focus on teaching and learning. However, their intellectual integrity and academic values, rather than financial gains should be their main motives. They may, therefore, act altruistically, doing something ‘right’ in a moral sense even though it is not in their best economic interests (The Open University, 2003 p. 20). Leadership and management are enacted through relationships among organisation members. How individuals are perceived by others will affect the scope to which they are seen as competent to lead, which in turn influences the extent of their self-belief as being competent and how they define their area of responsibility (The Open University, ibid. p. 20). Although, there is a vast amount of literature on school leadership (Bush and Glover, 2003), relatively little research has focused exclusively on collaborative
leadership and teacher leadership approaches in private FE in the U.K. On the basis of this background, the researcher poses the following research questions:

1. How do teachers in FE define collaborative leadership and how do they perceive themselves as leaders?
2. What kind of collaborative leadership behaviour do teachers use?
3. How do principals foster and develop collaborative processes in colleges?

In particular, the researcher aims to explore whether there is evidence of collaborative leadership in private FE institutions, to explore teacher beliefs about their own competence of leadership and to understand the expectations of educational leadership in the private school environment. This study was conducted in three small private colleges in Greater London where the researcher works/has worked as a part-time postgraduate lecturer in Business Management and as Project Manager, which involved working on-site with clients to prepare for and face UKBA and quality assurance inspectors. All the colleges are Business/Management Schools, named for this study as college A, B, and C respectively. All were established in the years 2008/2009; all are rated as ‘Highly Trusted Sponsors’ (HTS/Tier 4) by the U.K. Border Agency (UKBA); all are of small size, with fewer than 300 full-time students in total (although with a capacity for 500 students in total); employing fewer than 20 lecturers.

All the colleges are privately owned and managed by directors, supported by principals. College A and college C offer level 5 to 7 courses, college B offers level 4 to 7 courses. At college A and college B the majority of the teaching staffs are extended family members of the owners. Five out of the six participants are lecturers, while one has been a senior lecturer for one year. All participants have worked for less than 3 years in a particular college. 50% of the participants are in the age group below 30, 17% within 31 to 39, and another 33% within the age group of 40 to 49; 83% of the participants are male, and 17% are female. Although the researcher tried to convince the directors and principals that pseudonyms would be assigned in respect to all colleges and participants, and to ensure them that the researcher would adhere strictly to principles of anonymity and confidentiality none of them were willing to participate in this research project. The reason given was that there was so much going on behind closed doors regarding private colleges, following the UKBA’s radical reform of its procedure for licensing colleges of FE and HE institutions as ‘sponsors’ of tier 4 immigrants. It was planned to interview four lecturers at each college. However, some lecturers agreed first to take part in this research but later became reluctant to share their perception of the principals’ leadership effectiveness considering potential consequences in their relationship with the principal. Other lecturers, who previously agreed to take part, have left the colleges due to drops in student enrolment.

Since the key criteria for achieving HTS by the UKBA includes ‘leadership and management’, this study investigates the perception and identifies whether CL is
practised at private FE institution by interviewing those directly involved, i.e. the teaching staff. The findings could help lecturers in FE institutions to reflect on their own qualities as leaders; such reflection may help improve their leadership style to get more positive student evaluations. This is essential for the survival of private FE and HE providers. Also, the investigation offers the researcher a chance to reflect on past practice, and he might reveal new ideas on effective teaching and school leadership. In qualitative research, the role and degree of closeness between the researcher and the participant have implications regarding bias within a research project (Denscombe, 2007). Thus, it is necessary to declare the researcher-participant relationship in this project. The researcher has worked with one of the colleges as a consultant, providing strategic advice and direction to the proprietor in connection with securing government approval and university accreditations and successfully guided the client to pass the ISI quality assurance review. The researcher also worked in one college as part-time lecturer and currently works as a part-time lecturer in the other college. Consequently, he is in a certain way familiar with these colleges and therefore is an ‘insider’ but will maintain analytical distance (Lincoln, 2002).

2. Theoretical Review and Context: Leadership

Leadership has evolved over time and has taken different forms. The need for the most effective use of human resources has resulted in researchers on leadership focusing attention on distributed leadership (The Open University, 2003, p. 23) and how leaders transform organisations. By the use of more collaborative and distributive approaches to foster teacher engagement in institutional development, the sources of leadership are broadened (Hallinger and Heck, 2010). During the last two decades, literature points to the importance of collaborative leadership which implies a shared notion of power and authority. Avolio et al. (2009) observed that shared leadership replaces hierarchical structures. Yukl (2006, p.4) says that ‘important decisions about what to do and how to do it are made through the use of an interactive process involving many different people who influence each other’. While authoritarian leadership may have an initial impact, it appears that more participative approaches are ultimately necessary for sustained improvement (Mulford and Silins, 2003).

The complex environment principals face today calls for change in leadership in the direction of a ‘school improvement leadership’ directed towards growth in student learning (Hallinger and Heck, 2010). Muijs and Harris’s (2006) study on teacher leadership in the UK reveals that teacher leadership empowers teachers, and ‘through this empowerment and the spreading of good practice and initiative generated by teachers’, they contribute to school improvement (p. 1). Thus, lecturers in private FE institutions could be change agents working towards school improvements. Mulford and Silins (2003), surveying teachers and pupils
(quantitative surveys to investigate the concept of schools as learning organisations), find evidence that distributed leadership contributes indirectly to student achievement because ‘it influences the way teachers organise and conduct their instructions, their interaction with students, and the challenges and expectations teacher place on their pupils’ (p. 183). Linking leadership with organisational learning and student outcomes gives it predictive validity.

Falk’s (2003) research in 12 case study sites on effective leadership, with particular reference to the role of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in the Australian context, considers leadership as an enabling process. This theory suggests that leadership can permeate every level of the organisation; all members of schools and their communities can lead and so affect the performance of the organisation. Leadership should concern a situation rather than the characteristics of a single person. According to Falk, ‘Effective leadership is found to occur where there is a relationship between internal organisation roles and responsibilities, the external environment … as well as attributes of the individual leader’ (p.272). Leithwood et al. (2003) describe two types of teacher leadership: (a) Formal teacher leaders in regard to titles and job descriptions and (b) Informal teacher leaders ‘by sharing their expertise, by volunteering for new projects and by bringing new ideas to the school’ (p.104). However, in the U.K. teacher leadership is not yet well developed (Muijs and Harris, 2006).

‘Building capacity for school improvement requires paying careful attention to how collaborative processes in schools are fostered and develop’ (Muijs and Harris 2006, p. 1). However, it is only more recently that teachers have realised that they are not only responsible for student learning but also for their own learning, as well as for the learning of colleagues (Lambert, 2002). When leaders inspire and empower colleagues, they are activating their higher-level needs (Maslow, 1954), that is, fulfilling their needs for esteem and self-actualisation. Harris and Chapman (2002) in their commentary state that ‘if schools are to become better at providing learning for students then they must also become better at providing opportunities for teachers to innovate, develop, and learn together’ (p.7). It is important to recognise the terms often associated with collaborative leadership because ‘how we define leadership influences how people will participate’ (Lambert, 2002, p. 38).

Collaboration has received considerable attention. It is often used interchangeably with ‘shared leadership’ (Lambert, 2002), ‘democratic leadership’ (Harris and Chapman, 2002) and ‘collegial leadership’ (Prakash Singh et al., 2007). Bennet et al. (2003) acknowledge that distributed leadership is an ‘emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise’ (p. 3), although it ‘does not necessarily imply democratic leadership or equality’ (The Open University, 2005 p. 24). Hallinger and Heck (2010) consider distributed leadership a form of collaborative decision-making. Similarly, Muijs and Harris (2006) claim shared decision-making is a component of distributed leadership. All
these terms reflect a similar concern for broadening the sources of educational leadership (Hallinger and Heck, 2010). Teacher leadership is characterised by a form of shared leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively (Muijs and Harris, 2003). The important point emerging from the literature is that teacher leaders are expert teachers spending the majority of their time in the classroom who additionally take on differing leadership roles (Beatty, 2007). For the purpose of this study, collaborative leadership will refer to a concept which operates on the basis of shared power. By that is meant a process of inspiring lecturers to bring together their ideas, obtaining value from their differences, and trusting colleagues to deliver even if they operate in a different way. For collaborative leaders, EI emerges as a key competency. Beatty (2007) notes that emotions cannot be ignored especially when an organisation is attempting to change or undergo a renewal process. Goleman et al. (2002) suggest a positive relationship between EI and leadership effectiveness. Current literature indicates that the strategies that leaders use to collaborate with colleagues are usually built on ‘trust’ and ‘value’ (Harris and Chapman, 2002). Bryk and Schneider (2002) find that trust has an impressive effect on school improvement.

3. Data Collection Methods and Analysis

The researcher’s approach for the study emerges from two theoretical frameworks. One is that collaborative leadership (including teacher leadership) may be more effective than the traditional concept of leadership. Several studies present evidence that teacher leaders promote collaboration within and across schools that lead to school development and effectiveness because it improves schools’ decision-making processes (Beattie, 2002; Muijs and Harris, 2006). Sergiovanni (2007) explains in his book ‘Building Community in Schools’ why a sense of community is vital for school success. He distinguishes between the ‘power over’ (traditional concept concerned with control and hierarchy) and the ‘power to’, which supports empowerment. He argues that ‘when directed and enriched by purposing and fuelled by empowerment, teachers and others respond with increased motivation and commitment to work with surprising ability’ (p. 75). The second is that emotional intelligence may impact leadership behaviour through the enhancement of self-awareness and affiliation and thereby may have a direct effect over leadership effectiveness. Goleman et al.’s research revealed that high levels of EI ‘create climates in which information sharing, trust, healthy risk-taking, and learning flourish’ (Goleman et al., 2001, p. 44). They further remark: ‘leadership resides not solely in the individual at top but in every person at the entry level who in one way or the other acts as a leader’ (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 140). A research study among teachers in the U.K. supports the positive effect of EI on leadership (Hay/McBer, 2000).
The research paradigm explains the approach that is to be adapted by the researcher in order to fulfil the research objectives. Scientific research can be conducted with the help of either of the following two paradigms: (1) Hermeneutics or (2) Positivism (The Open University 2003, pp. 59-60). Hermeneutics, also termed qualitative research, is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live (ibid, p. 60). On the other hand, positivism (ibid., p. 59), also terms quantitative research, is often being regarded as purely scientific, justifiable, and precise and based on facts often reflected in exact figures. Hermeneutics strategy is applied in this research since it analyses the text related to collaborative leadership practices of three different private colleges in Greater London. In this research, a qualitative study is done by collecting data from three different privately owned colleges. A research approach provides logic, or a set of procedures for answering research questions, particularly ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions (Blaikie, 2010). Qualitative and quantitative research are two widely-used research approaches practised by researchers. Qualitative research is typically enacted in natural settings and draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study (Morse, 1994). It focuses on the context, is emergent and evolving and is fundamentally interpretive (Nagy, 2006).

This research is of a qualitative nature since it analyses in detail the importance of collaborative leadership by collecting detailed information regarding the leadership practices of three private FE colleges in Greater London. There are several types of research design. In order to find solutions to the research questions, a case study design is used in this paper. ‘Case study implies that the research is located in a particular context and is concerned with the identification of specificities’ (The Open University 2005, p. 8). It can be used to explore, explain and describe.

The researcher placed the study within the context of three private further education colleges, and how professional collaboration and leadership is practised by exploring the perception of lecturers in their college settings. The findings indicate that meanings attached to CL vary. However, the definitions given by the participants, all relate to definitions reviewed in the literature. CL was defined in terms of trust, shared vision, participation and collegiality (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Lambert, 2002; Harris and Chapman, 2002; Muijs and Harris, 2006; Prakash Singh et al., 2007). The majority of the lecturers are positive about their own leadership competence. Participants argue that they guide and motivate students to complete their courses successfully, and that they also recommend good practice to the management during staff meetings. However, the perception these lecturers have of themselves as leaders is somehow narrowed to being leaders in the sense of leading their students, in part because they are not much involved in meetings and decision-making. Lecturers clearly expressed the advantages they see working collaboratively for the principals, the students and themselves. However, they see
lack of building trust, autocratic style and hierarchy as the major barriers to CL. The participants believe that CL is most useful when colleagues have a genuine shared vision and trust each other. They trust each other, which has an impressive effect on school improvement (Bryk and Schneider, 2002), although, they trust each other more than they trust those whom they see in power and authority roles.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Principals must remember that trust is built over time. They should commit themselves to being trustworthy team leaders, taking many small steps towards a culture of trust, collaborating with the team members instead of leading top-down. The respect will follow and the college will be set up for change and improvement. The participants use collaborative leadership behaviour to increase their efficiency in teaching and learning to lighten the burden they carry and to improve students’ achievement. Participants’ collaborative leadership practice is demonstrated through effective information sharing and supportive colleagues. They also utilise professional networks, seek and value one another’s ideas. It can be concluded that in this way they improve their teaching styles and develop their professional knowledge. Evidence of the effectiveness of CL as the result of networks, not individuals, within an educational institution can be found in educational research projects (e.g. Falk, 2003; Beattie, 2002). Lecturers show higher motivation and commitment to involving themselves in collaboration processes. Despite that, they are aware and mention times when CL is less useful. Lecturers note that CL does not always lead to effective decision-making but can hinder or delay decisions where stakeholders do not easily reach consensus. Lecturers claim that they treat everyone with respect, acknowledge differences in culture by analysing the feelings of students and colleagues before acting. It can be concluded that these lecturers use some of the CL behaviour that the relevant literature supports, such as high levels of EI (Goleman et al., 2001, Beatty, 2007). Lecturers can achieve their success through professional learning communities, cross-curricular planning meetings, curriculum alignment processes and special interest groups. The collaborative leaders must use their ideas, strategies, manpower and resources to implement and build successful collaborative relationships. Lecturer should continuously reflect on their professional knowledge and practice. The power of improvement for colleges lies in the collegial efforts of the lecturers and their professionalism. Although many lecturers develop their leadership knowledge through experience and mentoring, the author of this paper recommends that lecturers pursue more formal training.

The National College of School Leadership (NCSL) recommends a system which challenges educational institutions, principals, lecturers and other stakeholders to accept greater responsibility for decision-making and to subscribe to distributed, participative styles of leadership (NCSL, 2001, in Gold et al., 2003). The principals at college A and college B have not really developed collaborative processes in their
colleges; as mentioned earlier, their behaviour is more that of family leadership. Collaboration implies a situation of trust, whereby inclusiveness is a feature of the culture. This must include, for example, meetings scheduled regularly at times and places where all stakeholders can participate. However, inclusiveness is not featured because part-time lecturers and those lecturers who are not family members do not take part. From the way in which the participants perceive their principal at college C, it can be concluded that the principal has made some commitment to the collaboration process. Furthermore, there seems to be a sound basis for improvement and development.

Principals might fear losing control when sharing power. In fact, the opposite happens: CL helps them to maintain control of a healthier business as evidenced by research (Gold et al., 2003). Effective and efficient schools (identified by the government’s Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspections are led by principals who develop their institutions as professional learning communities by themselves undertaking continuing professional development (Gold et al., 2003), as well as encouraging and enabling others to do the same. As well as in the public sector, collaboration can assist the principal in private FE colleges in focusing the overall direction of his/her organisation, enabling lecturers and other stakeholders in such institutions to become more confident in leadership. Principals should overcome their fears and become proactive, to avoid decisions being made on their behalf (e.g. losing HTS status, closure of the college). They should use the current crisis in the private FE sector as a chance to change to a collaborative culture. Principals who genuinely value collaboration must be prepared to make a commitment of time and energy to implement processes which require communication at all levels. Also, relevant information must be available for stakeholders to participate in decision-making.

References


