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Tropes and tall tales: Leadership in the neoliberalised world of English academies

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Abstract

Tropes and tales of heroic leadership are a common feature of media analyses and discussions of education. In the UK, for example, we see this phenomenon in reports of the so-called ‘superheads’, who are parachuted in to ‘turn around’ what are deemed to be ‘failing’ schools and more latterly, in cases of schools that are forced into academisation and taken into an Academy Trust to be ‘managed’ towards improved performance. These instances reflect a cult of leadership and embody a widespread faith in the potential of ‘transformational’ or ‘visionary’ leaders to redeem our institutions and our society. In other words, the discourses surrounding leadership speak to our deeply cherished, if potentially conflicting, desires for knowledge, power, purpose, security, freedom and a better world. At the same time, however, a growing body of literature questions the existence of leadership as a phenomenon (Lakowski, Eacott, & Evers, 2016; Samier, 2016), insisting on its imaginary and rhetorical, rather than ‘real’, status. Against this background, the current chapter is based on an analysis of interviews conducted with the senior leadership of a medium-sized multi-academy trust (MAT) comprising a group of schools that have been forced by Government to join an academy as a result of being judged as poorly performing through inspection processes. The academy trust at the centre of this chapter explicitly seeks to offer a rounded form of education to those from backgrounds traditionally excluded from such circles. The MAT thus advocates a strong social justice agenda, seeking to attract schools judged to be problematic in terms of performance, typically located in areas of socio-economic deprivation, the tensions between this agenda and the competitive logics underpinning government policy notwithstanding. Our analysis is based on interviews with three members of the trust leadership and explores the imaginary constructions of leadership identity generated by participants during the interviews. In particular, we highlight how the hierarchical, competitive symbolic regime of the current neoliberal education policy context inevitably intrudes into these leadership identities. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the implications of these insights for leadership studies and practices, as well as for educational policy at a time of neoliberal intensification.

Introduction

The recent popularity of ‘strongmen’ national leaders¹, such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Viktor Orban, Rodrigo Duterte, Recep Erdogan and Mohammed bin Salman and, at least among their many supporters, could be seen as particularly high-profile examples of a tendency to valorise the power of leadership. At the same time, however, work questioning the existence of leadership argues for leadership’s imaginary, mythical and rhetorical, rather than ‘real’, status. In Eacott’s words, “‘leadership’ is a myth generated by, and sustaining of, the managerialist project... through its seductive agentic rhetoric, that of individual will and choice, not to mention the aspiration for something ‘better’, when positioned in opposition to the technicist, alienating and emotionless administration of the bureaucracy, ‘leadership’ has become

¹ <http://time.com/5264170/the-strongmen-era-is-here-heres-what-it-means-for-you/>

the dominant ideology of educational leadership, management and administration” (2016, p. 159). Alvesson and Spicer are similarly critical of what they refer to as ‘the leadership delusion’, noting how leaders “are often willing victims of the leadership industry that specialises in selling seductive images to managers and other leader-wannabes” and suggesting that “most ideas produced by the leadership industries rely on flawed reasoning and psuedo-science” (2016, p. 103). Davis, meanwhile, picks up the theme of tension and conflict, arguing that far from being solely about clarity of purpose, vision and purpose being leveraged for the greater good, “leadership is beset with contradictions and moral ambiguity” (2018, p. 91).

These critical perspectives are important and we shall illustrate and build on them though our discussion of the findings from ongoing ethnographic work conducted with educational leaders (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015 to date). But it is also important to recognise how, as Eacott suggests above, notions of leadership tap into our aspiration for something ‘better’; how the discourses surrounding leadership speak to our deeply cherished, if potentially conflicting, desires for knowledge, power, purpose, certainty, security and freedom; and how discourses of leadership seek to respond to our understandable yearning for a different world. In this chapter, we have chosen to explore three interviews with senior leaders within a multi-academy trust (MAT) in England. The ways in which these leaders strive to articulate their educational vision for the trust and to identify the key elements of their own leadership philosophy proves interesting in exemplifying the confusions, contradictions and challenges faced for educational leaders in presenting their perspectives on their educational direction and future aspirations. Thus, we highlight how some of the shortcomings of wider leadership discourses haunt the interview transcripts; but we also highlight how the individuals concerned are nonetheless striving to bring about change and improvement in a context that is saturated with discourses that celebrate the importance and transformational potential of leadership.

The research context

As noted above, this paper draws on an ethonographic program of research that seeks to understand dominant discourses and practices of leadership in education (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015 to date), at various levels of responsibility, including ‘senior’, ‘middle’ and ‘junior’ leaders, against a background of shifting understandings of the nature and purposes of education and its relationship to the individual and to society in England and beyond. Specifically, the study has been unfolding against the background of the consolidation and extension of neoliberal agendas for policy and practice in education. It is important to note, however, that neoliberal economic,

social and political agendas do not comprise a unified whole and are often governed by multiple and sometimes conflicting logics (Cahill & Konings, 2017; Davies, 2017). In the English educational context, for instance, conflict is reflected in the tensions between centralising tendencies embodied in the prescriptive direction of developments in curriculum and assessment that contrast with the decentralising thrust of policy and practice in relation to school governance. Here local government provision has been increasingly replaced by a system in which schools are run by non-government – and democratically unaccountable – MATs that are owned and managed by private interests. This was a movement that began with the Blair new Labour government, but which has been taken to new levels by the subsequent Coalition and Conservative governments.

The academy trust at the centre of this chapter explicitly seeks to offer a broad education comprising academic and non-academic elements to children from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, in which schools were deemed through inspection to be struggling, as part of an explicit social justice agenda. ‘Failing’ schools are required to academise and in this case schools had actively chosen to align with this particular MAT because of its stated social justice aims. The MAT also seeks to foster a sense of community, with the leaders drawing on the metaphor of a ‘family’ to characterise the ethos they seek to engender within each school and across schools (though it is worth recalling that families can be sites of hatred and oppression as well as love and support). At the same time, the trust is operating in a wider education policy context that is driven by logics of instrumentalism, competition and atomisation, and that pits individuals and institutions against one another in ruthless fashion in relation to narrowly conceived ‘standards’ and against the backdrop of a punitive accountability model.

The tensions between the assumptions and logics underpinning government policy in education and other domains of life – not least the supreme value it places on individualism – and the Trust’s educational agenda, poses challenges for the latter’s leadership and these tensions and challenges are key to the analysis in our chapter. We take it as axiomatic that individual subjectivity is determined to some degree by hegemonic ideologies and that the socio-symbolic order is a significant constituent of the individual psyche (Hollander, 2010). However, this is not the same as simply reading off subjectivity from dominant discourse and practices. Rather, we see subjectivity as a site of conflict and struggle. In this regard, we find Lacanian poststructural psychoanalytic theory to be a helpful heuristic (Howarth, 2013; Lacan, 1977, 1981). In particular, our analysis draws on a reading of the human psyche as a phenomenon comprising unconscious,

as well as conscious, thoughts, feelings and desires. Within this reading, a key source of growth and development arises when we loosen the grip of the conscious mind, with its emphasis on rationality, control and intention, and allow unconscious thoughts, feelings and desires – factors that may be influencing our actions without our realisation *or*, conversely, that we are suppressing – to arise to conscious awareness and thus become available for analysis and reflection.

Our reading also sees the human subject as dispersed between the three registers of the psyche. These registers comprise the imaginary (the realm of images and gestalts), the symbolic (the realm of regulatory systems including law and language) and the real (the traumatic ‘excess’ that eludes capture in the imaginary of symbolic registers). These concepts enable us to highlight the imaginary constructions of leadership identity generated by participants during the interviews and examine how these can provide insights into the power, but also the ‘stupidity’ of leadership, comprising as it does “persuasive ideas that are often based on little more than pseudo-science, or research guided by ideology” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016, p. 104). Such stupidity is enabled and amplified in the symbolic regime of the current neoliberal education policy context, with its relentless reliance on such empty signifiers as ‘standards’ and ‘accountability’, or its rhetoric of empowerment and autonomy that is undermined by the punitive use of audit and inspection. We also focus on the ambiguities, omissions, slips, false starts, tangential detours and other rhetorical features that indicate failures in this imaginary process of identity construction, as well as moments of disavowal and denial, representing points of short circuit when unconscious desire disrupts conscious identity constructions. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the implications of these insights for leadership studies and practices, as well as for educational policy at a time of neoliberal intensification.

Theoretical and methodological orientation

Leadership studies in education, like the fields of leadership and public administration more widely (Harmon & McSwite, 2011; McSwite, 1997), has been at best inconsistent and spasmodic in its attention to underlying questions of ontology and epistemology (Eacott, 2015; Eacott & Evers, 2018). All-too-often in policy and practice, an assumed, yet unarticulated, common-sense ontology of a world populated by rational, autonomous and intentional actors – in other words an ontology that privileges agency – is combined with a market-theory that sees individuals and institutions as being at the mercy of social and economic forces – in other words an ontology that privileges structure – with little or no explicit recognition of the tensions between these two perspectives. The privileging of agency is evident in media and policy discourses of heroic

leaders while the privileging of structure is reflected in calls for schools and education to respond to the inexorable forces of globalization.

As noted above, our analysis in this chapter embraces an ontological perspective that draws on poststructural psychoanalytic theory (Howarth, 2013; Lacan, 1977, 1981) and in particular, the Lacanian distinction between the registers of the imaginary, symbolic and real. As these concepts may not be familiar to some readers, we will offer a brief explanation. The register of the real is an elusive and traumatic realm. Critically, the real is not the same thing as ‘reality’, whatever we understand this to be, since any perspective on, or understanding of, reality requires representation in some shape or form via our imaginary and symbolic resources. It is worth noting here that Lacan resisted providing neat, concise definitions of all his concepts but this is particularly apt in the case of the real, which might be conceived as a traumatic void that resists any and all attempts at static formalism (Eyers, 2012). The real reminds us of the inevitable limitations and inadequacies of all our attempts at knowing, naming and controlling our world and our lives – though, of course, this insight does not relieve or absolve us of the responsibility to exercise critical judgment and strive to bring about improvements within our spheres of influence.

In contrast to the unknowability of the real, the imaginary comprises imagistic gestalts through which we render ourselves, others and the world knowable and familiar. However, because it privileges coherence over complexity, the imaginary has a tendency to overlay the cohesion and consistency of experience and overlook the tensions, contradictions and dislocations that characterise psychosocial reality. Indeed, the totalizing and objectifying imaginary is only interested in difference insofar as difference provides a mirror for the self-same (Brennan, 1993), as constancy is privileged over complexity. Like the Freudian notion of the ego that it builds on, and like the heroic visions of leadership one finds in policy and media accounts of education, Lacan’s imaginary register strives after clarity, certainty, coherence and control. As such, the imaginary is inextricably linked to fantasy – deeply seductive, but ultimately illusory. Specifically, fantasy seduces us into a nice tidy view of a world in which we can control all of the variables, whereas social reality is never quite like that but always more a complex mess that we can only muddle through (Lindblom, 1959, 1979).

The symbolic, by contrast, is the realm of differentiation and regulation and is essentially a linguistic order. Like the signifier, the symbolic relies on difference, whereby any entity or

identity is necessarily defined in terms of something else that 'it' is not and that is 'other' to it. This results in the deferral of any final meaning and reflects the lack of any ultimate grounding underpinning what we take to be social reality. Hence, in contrast to the relatively enduring images in the imaginary, the symbolic is characterised by what Eagleton describes as a ceaseless alternation between absence and presence. Seen from this perspective, leadership is essentially empty, 'lacking' any essence and perpetually condemned to being defined in terms of something else. In previous times, the so-called big Other of the social order (God, society, the system, the government) provided the anchor necessary to stabilise meanings. However, in our postmodern era, characterised by scepticism with regard to grand narratives, cynicism in the face of fake news, and the supersession of concrete by virtual realities, a corresponding loss of faith in the big Other has brought about a decline in 'symbolic efficiency' (Žižek, 1999, pp. 322-334). This renders us increasingly susceptible to the injunctions, diagnoses and predictions of self-appointed experts who feed our (imaginary-fuelled) need to believe (Dean, 2006). This is not to dismiss the potential value of leaders when viewed as a sort of *primus inter pares* or leadership when conceived as a crystallization of common affects (Mouffe, 2018, p. 70). Indeed, postmodern uncertainty need not be a debilitating experience; for whereas the imaginary subjugates us to seductive but illusory fantasies of heroic leadership, recognition of the fundamentally empty and symbolically lacking nature of leadership has the potential to liberate us from the need to live up to impossible ideals, thereby freeing us to attend to the unconscious desires we harbour in ourselves and inspire in others (Driver, 2013).

Overall, Lacan's theorisation of the human subject suggests that, far from being the rational, intentional, autonomous actor assumed in media and policy discussions of leadership, the mind of the leader, like that of any of us, is cut off from not only the real but from itself. The imaginary (ego) offers only simplified and reductive versions of the self and reality, while the symbolic register (which shapes the imaginary), configured by the endless play of signifiers that represent the discourse of the Other (and its postmodern, post-truth substitutes), renders us vulnerable to the reassuring certainties and proclaimed injunctions that serve to relieve us of the need to decide for ourselves in contexts where the choices and options are seemingly unlimited.

Methodologically, this means that in analysing interviews with leaders, we are not searching for the essence of their beliefs about leadership as possible keys to the deep-truths of this thing called 'leadership'. Indeed, a poststructuralist awareness of the inevitable gap between the signifier and the signified, between the word and the world, leads one to the conclusion that – in

a sense, if not in essence – the signifier is ‘stupid’ and that analysis (whether of individuals ‘on the couch’, or of discourse) is an attempt to make sense of the collective “stupid of signifiers” (Nobus & Quinn, 2005, p. 136). This sense is lent additional support by a psychoanalytic awareness of the role of the unconscious in language, undermining further the idea that discourse represents the inner truth of a rational, autonomous actor. Indeed, Lacan describes the human condition as being “an animal at the mercy of language” (2002, p. 525), highlighting how we find it difficult to convey full meanings and understandings through a language that already precedes our existence and always exceeds our conscious control.

Instead of a search for truth, our focus is therefore on the ambiguities, avoidances, tangential deviations, misconstructions and lacunae, as well as moments of disavowal and denial, that foreground our participants’ attempts to identify themselves with particular signifiers of leadership. For us, such moments highlight the ultimately elusive nature of leadership, functioning as points of short circuit when lack surfaces and when unconscious desire disrupts conscious identity constructions (Driver, 2013, p. 411). We focus on the semi-structured interviews conducted with the MAT senior leaders as they formulate the educational agenda for the schools within the Trust and develop an ethos to which, one might suppose, schools joining them would be attracted. Senior leaders were asked about the philosophy and vision underpinning the trust’s structures and practices. Given that the leaders voiced the same discourses, and were to a quite remarkable degree, ‘on message’, we have chosen not to attribute the quotations in what follows to any of the senior leaders but instead treat them as one single leadership voice. This is a device moreover, intended to help anonymise and protect the respondents. In addition, we have removed specific terms that are linked to this particular Trust that may make it identifiable. Finally, we note that the research received ethical approval and was conducted in line with the British Educational Research Association’s (BERA) ethical guidelines.

Tropes and tales

One of the challenges posed by this body of data, despite the small number of interviewees, is the sheer volume of text. Just three participants each generated between 6,000 and 8,000 words of transcribed data, with their – as opposed to the interviewer’s – words comprising the lion’s share of each transcript. The participants also spoke about a large number of different topics at considerable length, often jumping from one to the next in a somewhat breathless manner. Given that we are also drawing on interviews with other leaders as well, this means that it is not feasible, were it even desirable, to attempt to capture and represent all the themes present in the interviews. Instead, our focus is on the tensions that (inevitably) surface as the leaders attempt to

articulate a social justice agenda in the context of a competitive and individualistic policy environment.

'Everything beyond a school being an exam factory'

Schools in England have been criticised in recent years as being little more than 'exam factories', offering an increasingly narrow curriculum and producing credentialed but not critically educated students (Coffield & Williamson, 2011; Kulz, 2017). Countering this reductive and instrumental thrust in English schools, the leaders, when asked to articulate the vision underlying the establishment of the trust, emphasised their wish to offer students a "rich education" that went beyond a narrow focus on exam results and that incorporated a focus on the wider curriculum "and not just around the traditional things of English, [and] Maths". The term 'rich' here is intended to mean broad and diverse; but there is also a linguistic connection to material wealth, underscored in the emphasis placed on "giving the twenty thousand pound education to the child whose family doesn't even earn that because that's the great inequality of this society". In other words, "what we wanted to do was to give the poorest children the same experiences as the most affluent get". Here we see the projection of a heroic and emancipatory imaginary identity on the part of the trust leadership, unconsciously positioning themselves as contemporary 'Robin Hoods' as they work to restore social justice in the unequal world of neoliberalised England. We also see, the unconsciously financialised terms in which this identity is constructed, how "the virtual world of symbols structures empirical reality, permeates all aspects of daily life, and burrows deep into the psyche" (Finkelde, 2017, p. 151).

Specifically, it could be argued that unconsciously lurking within the expression, "a rich education", and masked further by the more polite, less vulgar term, 'affluent', is the very-English conflation of wealth and value involving the idolization of the rich – as 'wealth creators' and entrepreneurs – and the corollary demonization of the poor – as feckless and irresponsible (Jones, 2011). The pervasive power of such attitudes may explain the leaders' money-related metaphor in making a seemingly offhand reference to "our experience of, you know, making silk purses out of pigs' ears a million times"; it may also help explain their unconscious distancing of themselves from those they are educating when they described themselves as "knowing how to give it [a rich education] to those people". There is an uncomfortable ambivalence of the position of the trust's leaders, as working-class people who have 'made it', and are now to all intents and purposes middle-class subjects seeking to improve the lot of the less-advantaged. This ambivalence can be read into a number of remarks such as, "we are modelling entitlement

here, not sitting on it”. This ambivalence can also be seen in some of the (understandably) defensive comments in response to suggestions by the interviewer that the trust leadership might be perceived as middle-class ‘do-gooders’: “we are not missionaries and we are not patronising”; “we’re not a predator and we’re not expansionist, all we want is to make a difference in the communities where we work and in the system”. One of the things these exchanges highlight is the invidious position of anyone trying to improve the lot of individuals in an unjust and unequal system, who thereby open themselves to the charge of not attacking the root causes of the injustice they seek to challenge. In this sense, “the unthinkable status of radical change represents *the* great victory of late capitalist ideology” (McGowan, 2013, p. 212).

This social mobility agenda was something that the leaders continually emphasised and it was based on experiences of growing up in working class communities and of working in a range of socioeconomic contexts. One of the ways in which they framed this was by using ‘gap’ talk: “what we are trying to do is to close social gaps because we had to struggle to get into that gap”. Again, ambivalent social attitudes are betrayed by the signifier, as ‘gap’, as symbol of social and economic inequality, mutates from something to be eliminated into something to be inhabited. Elsewhere social mobility was described in meritocratic terms as a matter of “the child developing their kind of talents and giving them opportunities and the pathways to see where they fit in the world”. The discourse of education as the grand pathway to social and economic opportunity is hegemonic in Britain today (Reay, 2017); yet talk of the notion of ‘fitting’ as the trust leadership puts it here – of finding one’s place – betrays how the discourses of social mobility and meritocracy are all-too-often ciphers for ongoing social and economic stratification (Littler, 2018), comprising part of a process whereby “the public recodes eugenics as meritocracy – only the educationally fittest, that is, those most able to personally recreate, can succeed” (Westall & Gardiner, 2015, p. 63). To clarify again, our point, of course, is not to suggest that today’s educational leaders are covert eugenicists, far from it; rather, it is that discourses based in notions of meritocracy (with a eugenicist genealogy) speak through them and inhabit their words, as they continue to inhabit much education policy rhetoric in England today despite the appearance offered by seemingly progressive rhetoric of policy makers (Gillborn, 2018).

In addition to their familiarity with working class contexts and experiences, the leaders also had personal experience of teaching and leading in more privileged settings. “I know what rich children expect and get and the difference between what those poor children get and what rich children get is breadth and richness and there’s been a Gradgrindian paucity in the state system

here for the last twenty five years where you'll get English and Maths and that's all we'll do". The narrowness of provision in state schools in contrast to the broader curriculum offered in independent schools was seen by the leaders as the reason for the prominence of independently educated people in the establishment: "disproportionate numbers of our famous stars in the media, our England rugby players for men, and all our other sports and the rest of it, and our people on the news and you know, whatever, they're not all, but a significant number of them are from the independent sector". Wanting to ensure that all children, and not just the offspring of the privileged, receive a broad and rounded education and gain access to a full range of social and economic opportunities is, of course, commendable. At times, however, for the trust leaders this flowed over into an extolling of the virtues of the independent school sector, as somewhere, for instance, where "every child is known and developed and encouraged and there are lots of opportunities for children to find out who they are". Aside from questions as to how true this statement is, and notwithstanding the laudability of the trust's aspirations to value each and every child, it also reflects a highly idealistic and potentially somewhat naïve vision. Presumably an awareness of being rich and privileged isn't what the leaders have in mind here in relation to finding out who one is. They are seemingly misrecognising the role of 'the great inequality of our society' in not only producing, but also securing and protecting the advantages that 'rich' children enjoy. It also overlooks the nature of education as a positional, rather than merely an inherent, good, and the role of social and cultural capital, beyond the nature of the curriculum and the quality of experiences within the school, in producing the socioeconomic. Seen from this perspective, offering so-called social mobility to working-class children might be seen as a form of 'cruel optimism', by inviting them to form optimistic attachments to the very same power structures that have historically and systematically oppressed them and their communities (Reay, 2017, p. 102).

'You don't get executed on day one of term six'

The English school system has been criticised recently by none other than the head of the government's inspection service, the Office for Standards in Education, or Ofsted, for an overly narrow focus on data and exam results², the consequences of which have included schools 'off-rolling' students whose anticipated poor results are likely to be detrimental to the school's profile. The trust leaders have sought to counter this trend by requiring their schools to collect a wider range of data and information than is often the case in schools. As they put it, "it's no

² <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jan/16/ofsted-to-reform-school-inspections-in-bid-to-tackle-off-rolling>

good saying we believe in...[a broad approach]...and then taking pupil progress data all the time; it would totally undermine what we say we believe in. So we collect information about numbers of clubs, free activities, student voice, what's different in the school because of what students have asked for, as well as that progress data". Despite this broad approach, the trust leaders highlighted the need to maintain a focus on standards and improvement at all times: "it's turning the school improvement wheel, because the minute you neglect that, you know, you can have forty orchestras and your literacy has gone down the toilet". School standards and improvement are addressed collectively and continuously, with "lots of conversations with the heads, lots of discussion, lots of interaction, lots of contact, both one to one, in smaller groups, and then in the whole group". Nonetheless, the buck does stop somewhere and schools that "haven't moved as quickly as we would want them to... those schools have got twenty week plans". If progress is still not evidence, despite the implementation of these school improvement plans, then it would be time to "look them in the eye and say it's not good enough". As a general policy schools are expected to reach Ofsted's 'good' standard within a year and a half of joining the trust and failure on the part of head teachers to achieve this would mean a fairly serious review of the head's status was instigated. This was justified in terms of the fact that it was not reasonable "for one person to take ten times longer than another... there's rivalry, there's not competition, but it needs to be fair and it needs to be perceived to be fair". The question of understating what this finessing of the distinction between 'competition' and 'rivalry' might hide or reveal, the trust's approach is considerably less brutal than the ruthless practices reported in many multi academy trusts³ in a system where 'evidence', 'data' and 'performance' are all-important. Nonetheless the violence of the wider system, itself a response to the relentlessness of policy maker's requirements for continuous quality improvement, did seep into the trust's leadership discourse, for instance in the offhand comment included above out how, as a head teacher, "you don't get executed on day one of term six" if you don't meet the targets for school improvement. There was, as we have noted, a great deal of supportive discussion and collaboration around targets and expectations but a slipped-in term like 'executed' also suggests an awareness of the possibilities for exercising more Draconian forms of management at times.

"You must measure your success, correlated to your invisibility"

As well as exploring the vision of the leadership for the trust's vision and its work, the interviews also sought to understand the trust leaders' understanding of, and attitudes towards, leadership as a concept and a practice. On this topic, there was considerable use of the 'family' as a

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/24/disappeared-headteacher-sacked-academy-dismissal>

metaphor for a non-hierarchical, collaborative community. “It’s a family of schools, that was the foundation and the vision, we wanted a family of schools”. A family suggests a small to medium sized organisation and the leaders were aware the need to be “not too big so we all knew each other, but big enough to be viable in terms of the capacity to help each other”. Part of this non-hierarchical approach was a clear effort to downplay the centrality and visibility of leaders: as one of them put it, “the heart and soul of the school is the key thing, not the leader of the moment”. On the other hand, it is worth noting the transience and vulnerability of any leaders’ position, unconsciously implied in the phrase, ‘leader of the moment’; and as we noted above, the top leaders retained final authority when ‘difficult’ decisions needed to be made. The difficult balance between authority and invisibility that senior leadership are required to strike was also reflected in the comment that “an executive head needs to impart wisdom, help people make difficult decisions, move big things on, you know, work damned hard, but not be the tip of the triangle, not the pointy hierarchy”. Part of this challenge was a consequence of there being no set of formulas to follow, meaning that leaders needed to rely on their own philosophy and values: “It’s quite intellectually demanding to belong to this family, more so than one that says ‘here’s a five thousand word rule-book, follow it and forget your own philosophy’, so there are as many ways to do it as there are leaders”. In a similar vein, another leader spoke of the need “not to impose when you empower new leaders”. There was also an awareness that the development of leadership and leadership philosophy was a long-term project: “I think leadership here is at its early stages; it’s about coaching and supporting people to do it”.

The openness in these comments is a refreshing contrast to much leadership rhetoric that reduces leadership to a series of strategies, such as imparting a vision, setting targets and making people accountable – such strategies may be important in particular contexts but they are not the essence of leadership, if such a thing can be said to exist at all. On the other hand, the leaders’ comments could also be said to reflect the vagueness that characterises a lot of leadership talk, as people strive, unsuccessfully, to pin down this ultimately illusory phenomenon. However, we would not see this as necessarily being a weakness; instead, as noted earlier in the chapter, it is when we recognise the fundamentally empty and symbolically lacking nature of leadership that we open ourselves up to the potential for liberation from the requirement to live up to impossible leadership ideals. We thereby free ourselves to attend to the unconscious desires we harbour in ourselves and inspire in others and to use these as prompts for developing insights into ourselves and those we work with in relation to the enterprises that matter to us as educators. Our hope is that some of the, at times uncomfortable, analysis we have shared in this

chapter, in relation to the trust's educational vision and its views of leadership, illustrates what such critical attending might look like.

Conclusion: Traversing the fantasies arising from our symbolic subordination

As we stated in the introduction to this chapter, our intention is not to hold the senior leadership of the trust in question to unrealistic standards of judgment or critique, and we have no doubts with regard to their sincere passion and commitment. Like all schools in England, they are working in the context of a system that pits individuals and institutions against one another and that micro-manages curriculum, pedagogy and assessment through heavy-handed prescription and punitive audit. In this context, what we have strived to convey in this chapter is how, despite their good intentions, the trust leaders' identities, as manifested in their discourse during our interviews, are inevitably entangled with, and to a degree structured by, the complex and contradictory discourses circulating in education policy and practice in neoliberalised England. In particular we have highlighted how seeking to replicate elite forms of education for the socioeconomically disadvantaged overlooks the complex, myriad and often unspoken ways in which social and cultural capital works to ensure its own ongoing advantage, while risking the cruel optimism of fomenting attachment to the very systemic structures and societal practices that are responsible for the students' oppression and subordination.

Our overall conclusion in relation to this entanglement is not to recommend that the leadership adopt a radically different course of action; such a recommendation would be the height of hubris, echoing the false expertise that we have critiqued in our discussion of leadership. Instead, our suggestions are at once more modest and more demanding. In a move akin to conducting a Foucauldian 'ontology of the self' (Foucault, 1985, 1997a, 1997b), as well as a Lacanian 'traversal of the fantasy' (Lacan, 1992), we suggest a process of critical reflection on, and distancing from, the mode in which, as subjects, we are *inscribed* and *conscripted* into dominant discourses and practices: "the subject simultaneously and necessarily grasps the genealogy of her disciplining as the condition for the new definition and manner in which she is responsible for her own being" (Finkelde, 2017, p. 217). This is something that might be conducted not only by adults and leaders but also by teachers and students. Such work involves an ongoing individual and collective process of questioning the substance and the mode of our attachments to hegemonic ideologies. Akin to the practice of radical negativity as a response to the sedimented practices and structures of positivity that no longer question their own basis (Clarke & Phelan, 2017), this practice of traversing the fantasies that we all harbour in response to our subordination to

hegemonic discourses, exceeds conscious rationality and intentionality. But is is nonetheless powerful for this, representing as it does, “a subversive potential for which the subject himself cannot bring to bear sufficient propositional knowledge and sometimes possibliy only an absurd-symptomatic insistence and desire” (Finkelde, 2017, p. 218). In this sense, traversing our fanatasies is, like the view of leadership we and the trust leaders have advocated, something for which there are no blueprints or formulas but something that is all the more worth striving for.

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