Democratic Agency and Neo-Liberal Responsibilisation: Leadership in Academy Schools

Abstract

Purpose: To explore how much democratic agency Academy Leaders have in practice in the field of education to work democratically in the public interest with those within their own academies and others within wider educational networks, and from this understanding inform the United Kingdom government’s education reform agenda.

Design: This qualitative research involves semi-structured interviews with 10 Academy Leaders who are directly involved in leadership in academies.

Findings: At a conjuncture that is characterised by uncertainty and precariousness, Academy Leaders take up different positions on a spectrum of possible positions in the field of education in response to what is interpreted as the United Kingdom’s neo-liberal education reform agenda. The findings highlight that Academy Leaders who have a high commitment to neo-liberal responsibilisation of self feel they have agency to input into the government’s education reform agenda but Academy Leaders who oppose neo-liberalism, show a low commitment to neo-liberal responsibilisation of self and instead show a high commitment to democracy or public values, feel that they are given very little, if any, democratic agency.

Contribution: This thesis makes a contribution to the existing body of knowledge in education by building on the work of Gunter (Gunter, 2001, Woods et al., 2007, Gunter et al., 2008, Gunter, 2011, Gunter, 2016) and Courtney (2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c and 2017), and using Bourdieu’s thinking tools to analyse Academy leaders' habitus and the agency that they feel they have in practice in the field of education, to create new understanding of the emerging issues of democratic agency and neo-liberal responsibilisation of self, as discussed by Keddie (2015,2018), from the perspective of Academy Leaders at a particular conjuncture in the formation of academy schools in England. It does this by encouraging Academy Leaders to articulate how they respond to the United Kingdom government’s education reform agenda and the way that they carry out their work and analyses this in terms of: types of response to change and the extent to which Academy Leaders have a Commitment to Democracy or Public Values and/or a Commitment to Responsibilisation of self.
Democratic Leadership, also known as Participative Leadership, is where individuals who would typically be considered unequal by hierarchal standards have shared power in making decisions. Democratic leaders emphasize collaboration and the free-flow of ideas. While these leaders do allow shared participation in decision-making, they often decide who is a part of the group or committee tasked with making decisions. Responsibility is shared among all members of staff with the leader present to offer guidance and keep discussions balanced and controlled. Participative leadership instills mutual respect for an educated citizenry. The tenets of liberal education are the basis for an educated citizenry—in this or any other climate. This is true not because through liberal education we offer answers, but because we are so good at asking questions, at holding competing ideas, and wrestling with complex conditions like the situation in which we presently find our country. On the one hand, we value civil liberties; on the other hand, we recognize the need for heightened national security. Embedding Democratic Engagement in School Leadership: comprehensive schooling structures in an academised system. This article describes how a gaping democratic deficit has emerged in the English schools system as both local authorities and school governing bodies have been degraded by academisation. In arguing that a comprehensive school can only be more. Empowered Participatory Governance? A case study inquiry into a Co-operative academy model. A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration of the Teesside University, School of Social Sciences, Business and Law. Andrew Mark Allen, March 2017.