Constructions and Purposes of School Leadership in the UK

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Abstract

This article offers a comparative analysis and interpretation of leadership in the four UK education jurisdictions (Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland), informed by the articles in this special issue and by a project report, all outcomes of an initiative, the 'Comparative Review of Educational Leadership, Management and Administration in the United Kingdom', funded by the British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society. The article explores the constructions of leadership in the school systems of the four jurisdictions and the purposes those constructions are fulfilling concerning the governance of education. The comparative analysis identifies four purposes – relational, institutional-reform focused, masking and space-making. This typology of purposes is used to illuminate the different emphases across the jurisdictions. A relational purpose may be discerned more strongly in Wales and Scotland, a neo-liberal institutional-focused purpose more so in England, and relational and neo-liberal threads are intertwined in Northern Ireland in the context of legacies of community divisions. At the same time in all four jurisdictions, each of the purposes is given expression alongside, intermingling with or challenging neo-liberal threads of change and the dynamic between them helps shape the context in which leaders in the school systems create and practise leadership.

Key words: school leaders; school reform; school systems; educational leadership; education policy; governance

Introduction

This article offers a comparative analysis and interpretation of the four education jurisdictions in the UK (Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland), informed by the articles in this special issue and by the UK Review Report (Woods et al 2020) which are outcomes of a project, the 'Comparative Review of Educational Leadership, Management and Administration in the United Kingdom'. Further information on the project is given in the introductory article of this special issue. We have been part of the team organising and facilitating the UK Review project. Our intention in this article is to explore what might be learnt through this comparison about how leadership is conceived and articulated in education systems, as well as the different roles these conceptions and articulations may play in the governance of education.

Our focus is on the constructions of leadership in the school systems of the four jurisdictions. The article first explains our approach to conducting the comparative analysis and our formulation of the central question for the article. The conclusions of our jurisdictional analyses are then summarised. These conclusions form the basis of our comparison of the purposes that constructions of leadership in schooling are fulfilling for the governance of education in each jurisdiction. An interpretation of the divergences and similarities concerning these constructions is developed through a proposed typology of their purposes in relation to the governance of education. In the final section, conclusions of the comparative analysis are presented.

Our Approach to Conducting a Comparative Analysis

The purpose of this section is to explain how the work of comparing the jurisdictions was conducted. The analysis draws on two sources: the conceptual and jurisdictional keynote papers presented and discussed at the project conferences, the updated and revised versions of which are included in this special issue; and the UK Review Report (Woods et al 2020) which, based on a review of the conference material generated, provides an account of the issues and themes raised by participants. We bring to these issues and themes our interpretations in the process of developing a comparative perspective. Our analysis is not put forward as the definitive and only possible comparative view; rather, it is one perspective grounded in a systematic approach guided by the decisions we made on the concepts and theory to deploy.

A key step in the process was for us to meet in order to formulate a central question to frame the analysis. A number of editorial team members were conversant with Bacchi's (2012a) poststructuralist and social constructivist policy studies approach, as a way of conceptualising and understanding policy work (Archibald, 2019). Bacchi's *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach looks beyond the self-evident nature of problems, providing critical analysis of what the policy problem(s) is/are, in order to identify the assumptions and silences that discursive practices (re)produce. Further, Bacchi considers the role academic researchers play in knowledge production processes, along with their relationship to policymakers (Partridge, 2010). The work of Bacchi (2012b) was used to frame a question to guide the analysis, and to focus the critical thinking required to be brought to the analysis. Viewing the meaning of leadership as constructed through multiple policy and other texts, discourses and debates led us to the formulation of the central question for this article: '*What purpose is the construction of leadership fulfilling for the governance of education in each jurisdiction?*'. The predominant focus in the article is on the leadership constructions led by national governments and national agencies in the four countries and the purposes apparent in these, as well as the effects of these constructions, which may indicate hidden or unconscious purposes.

A construction of leadership creates a social character which constitutes the idea of what a leader is. Such a social character is described by Western (2013: 152-153), following MacIntyre (1985), as a specific archetype embodying a certain discourse, which is defined by a set of expectations and values, priorities, capabilities and relations to others imputed as typical of that character. Constructions of leadership can be seen as part of the governance narratives which Ozga (2021) highlights as ways of mobilising values and attempting to create coherence in governing and common spaces of meaning. If system change, as suggested by discursive institutionalism (Anderson and Chang 2019), involves frameworks of meaning that, in specific institutional contexts, animate, shape and are interpreted within the everyday work of leaders, the construction of leadership is part of that ongoing process of forging frameworks of meaning. In this process, the influences and meanings of certain concepts are pervasive and particularly significant, acting as powerful 'directors of attention', orientating deliberation and attentiveness in certain ways (Miettinen 2013). Examples of such concepts are 'collaboration', 'innovation' and 'autonomy', which arose in the UK Review conferences (Woods et al 2020). Also contributing to any construction of leadership are the institutional and social contexts in which that character of leader is envisaged as being situated. For example, rules and

regulations for seeking school funding may be designed to be competitive, collaborative or bureaucratic (or a mixture); leaders' relationships may be seen as more communal (embedded in a collegial community of professional educators for example) or more contractual (relating to others as managers of a workforce).

Reflecting this understanding of constructions of leadership, our analysis is informed by an appreciation of the interplay of structure and agency as articulated by Archer's (1995) theory of analytical dualism. In relation to structure, we see the constructions of leadership as a part of how the structures of the systems are being constituted. These are dynamic structures, continually in the process of being constituted. There are three aspects to structure which frame agency (Archer 2003, Woods 2016):

- institutional (the framework of roles, resource allocations, formal authority relations and boundaries formed by organisations, committees, departments, work groups and the like)
- cultural (the 'bank' or 'library' of ideas, values, knowledge and beliefs that are common, shared reference points across the system or in a part of the system)
- social (the patterns and climate of social relationships).

These aspects of structure resonate with the constituent parts of practice architectures (Wilkinson & Kemmis 2015) which help in illuminating how constructions of leadership frame thinking and acting that create practices of leading. The concept of practice architectures is a way of describing the process that is occurring as structures, through the structure-agency dialectic, become a part of living practices. The architectures comprise three sets of arrangements that shape, enable and constrain the conduct, meaning and relations of practices of leading: material-economic (resources, such as physical spaces and funding allocations), cultural-discursive (words and ideas) and social-political (relational resources, such as feelings of solidarity, and power relationships) (Kemmis et al 2014, Wilkinson & Kemmis 2015)[1].

Informed by the keynote papers presented at the conferences and our writing of the UK Review Report (Woods et al 2020), we formulated six orientating ideas or concepts to constitute a framework that could structure the jurisdictional analyses[2]. These analyses are our interpretation of the views and perceptions presented in the UK Review Report, informed also by our reading of the keynote papers presented at the conferences. This analytical process was intended to assist us in establishing what we understand to be:

- the constructions of leadership in each jurisdiction
- each jurisdiction's main governance aims for education
- the purposes that the constructions of leadership in each jurisdiction are fulfilling for the governance of education.

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[1] The practice architectures do not map perfectly onto the division between institutional, cultural and social structures. For example, social-political arrangements, which have much in common with social structures, include 'organizational functions, rules and roles' (Kemmis et al 2014: 32), which are aspects of institutional structures in analytical dualism. Still, there is sufficient correspondence to make use of the idea of practice architectures as a bridge between structure and agency in analytical dualism.

[2] These six orientating ideas were the structural design of the system, governance narratives, directors of attention, complexity, divisions, and absences. Limitations of space preclude our going into detail about these here.

The Jurisdictions

The conclusions of our jurisdictional analyses are summarised in this section and inform our exploration of the central question in the section which follows, 'Comparison of the jurisdictional analyses'. These jurisdictional conclusions offer a view of how, in each jurisdiction, leadership is being constructed and their purposes in the context of the predominant governance aims.

Scotland

Educational leadership is being constructed in Scotland as a practice that infuses all levels of schools and the system and exercises autonomy on the basis of a strong sense of professional knowledge and purpose. It is taking place in a context where prominent governance aims include professionalisation and the building of a nation that seeks to reduce poverty-related inequality, sustain shared public values and develop educational change through collaborative policy development. We suggest that in this context, how educational leadership is being constructed by central government agencies is fulfilling a key purpose of avoiding and/or ameliorating disagreement, tensions and challenges inherent in trying to achieve such governance aims. Articulations about educational leadership provide a unifying and widely endorsed policy focus, through which all teachers are positioned as effecting agency and practice in schools. This inclusive framing has helped maintain consensus among political and professional stakeholders, through a well-established policy community which includes local government and professional associations negotiating at the macro and meso levels of the system.

Constructions around the term leadership (rather than alternative terms such as management or administration) circumvent potential conflict, transcending discussion of who holds power within hierarchical school organisations or national governance arrangements. As such, it could be interpreted as an aspect of new-managerialism, providing subtle mechanisms for workforce reform. In Scotland, we see this through 'reprofessionalising' the teaching profession and engaging all teachers in school improvement efforts. This is not to deny that such constructions of leadership can have diffused and empowering practices which are, arguably, facilitating change in parts of the system. They may work towards aspects of governance rhetoric by, for example, enhancing educational opportunities for disadvantaged students. But studying the outcomes of the UK Review discussions around Scotland reminds us that many working in the system do not take powerful directors of attention - such as 'partnership' and 'collaboration' - at face value. They have to make sense of ideas of leadership that serve both political and educational purposes. Such sense making is, of course, open to interpretation in practice.

Wales

In its forward-looking National Mission Action Plan (Welsh Government, 2017), the Welsh Government introduced radical changes to the school curriculum underpinned by transformational reforms to initial teacher education and professional learning. The leadership narrative of government has moved from performative to co-constructive and there is now a strong emphasis on collaborative processes to achieve coherent and consistent implementation on a national scale.

The purpose of making these changes is clearly set out in the National Mission document, and the intended co-constructive approach to implementing the national agenda suggests, at least from the language of policy, a coherent "commitment to improvement 'visible at all levels in the education system'" (Welsh Government, 2017, p8) with a common purpose. The development of strong and visionary leadership at regional and local levels is a stated aim but, as with any centrally-instigated change, local implementation requires visionary leaders (often challenging, ideological and value-driven themselves) to accede to all elements of a national mission. Also, an emphasis on high professional trust requires confidence that school leaders, classroom teachers and other education professionals are knowledgeable about and prepared to conform with the principles and practicalities of change.

According to Reynolds and Mckimm (2021), there has been a 'historic reluctance to embrace "educational leadership" as one of the solutions to its apparent problems in the education sector', although the development of a new National Academy for Education Leadership could go some way to ensuring consistency of message, but it will take time for its influence to permeate even the majority of schools. By including higher education and the inspection service as Tier 2 bodies in the Action Plan, and by focusing on building the future through co-construction, potentially critical voices are brought on-side, which should give energy and shape to national targets. At local level, the use of a 'Schools as Learning Organisations' model seeks to emulate success elsewhere, by enhancing professional learning through interconnectivity and through building cultures of critical inquiry. But complex local and regional barriers exist, with a danger that collaboration will be contrived at regional and institutional levels. At this micro level, the need to reduce within-school variation (Reynolds and Mckimm, 2021) needs to be a key priority. A mood of 'cautious optimism' could be said to exist, and the wish for education professionals in Wales to succeed in meeting the four 'enabling objectives' of the National Mission is evident; but the fragility of translating national objectives to local implementation is always apparent.

England

The governance aims of central government focus on structural reform and associated narratives. Underpinning the design of policy in England has been the aim of marketising the state education system to enable competition between schools to drive up standards and increase productivity in return for public funding. In addition, the idea of the system being self-improving has influenced policy, with the fostering of autonomy being an important espoused outcome, particularly for schools that converted to academy status. Dominant constructions of leadership serve this structural focus. One of the key leadership constructions is of school leaders as managers of businesses that are funded by the state and as leaders of measurable learning who are heavily accountable for school improvement. At the same time, there are discourses and advocacy of leaders as collaborative agents advancing excellence in the system generally, including opportunities for some to act as system leaders.

In many ways, the governance aims are in tension. The complex threads in governance shape and constrain the autonomy of leaders – encompassing, for example, pressures to focus hard on the survival of their own school, encouragement to act as collaborative system leaders and

professional motivations to exercise principled autonomy with a collective moral purpose. The construction of leadership is therefore problematic. Fragmentation and incoherence in the structural design of the system, in particular concerning its middle tier, are issues of concern. The creation of schools encouraged to become more independent in their disposition has problematised the construct of a middle tier and the relationship between national governance and local governance. This problem is exacerbated when the tendency from national governance to exercise leverage through regulation bumps against desire at the level of local governance for the 'power' that autonomy, independence and entrepreneurialism implies. There is therefore an uncomfortable synergy between the agency of leadership within the system and the governance of the whole system, where individual school leaders and local governance find the purpose of national government to neoliberalise the system is privileged over their local context.

Northern Ireland

A key leadership construction by educational policy-makers at the macro-level in Northern Ireland is of leaders at the micro and meso-level as pragmatic actors un-bounded by the social and political divisions that characterize NI society. Hence, leadership is fashioned in managerialist terms; as a professional practice where the focus is on financial management, accountability, improving outcomes and pedagogical excellence (Donnelly et al, 2021). The aims of educational governance chime with these 'common sense' managerialist objectives, yet the macro-political tier is inevitably suffused with tensions motivated by differences in identity and ideology.

Conference discussions suggested that ongoing political disagreements which led to a breakdown in government were framed by educational leaders at the meso and micro tier as irrelevant to the pursuit of everyday educational objectives. Friction around identity was framed as outdated, perceived to inhibit leadership agency and militate against system wide improvement (Gallagher, 2021). Yet, and paradoxically, educational leadership at the micro and middle tier is, unavoidably, shaped by identity related issues (Donnelly et al, 2021). That this was not openly acknowledged by participants is possibly reflective of socio-cultural norms which frame the discussion of conflict-related issues as taboo, especially in mixed religious company (Donnelly, 2006). It may also, however, be legitimated by the permeation of neo-liberalist values. This has led professional classes to disaffiliate from traditional identity categories which have become (ostensibly at least) less pertinent for a 'consumption class' that is more likely to be motivated by personal wealth and social status (Murtagh, 2011:1122). Moreover, neo-liberalism has generally prompted a 'solution focused approach' to educational leadership which as Thrupp and Wilmott (2003: 4) argue, leads to a common sense approach to schools that 'feed[s] into a kind of uncritical policy science' that overlooks historic and structural inequities. Understanding whose purposes are constructing educational leadership is obscured by tensions between political actors who are ideologically driven and motivated by identity related issues and educational professionals who are concerned with finding common sense solutions to immediate educational issues.

Comparison of the jurisdiction analyses

The intention of this section is to compare the individual jurisdictional analyses and develop an interpretation of the divergences and similarities concerning the constructions of educational leadership. To do this, the section discusses and compares the constructions of leadership and proposes a typology of their purposes in relation to the governance of education in each jurisdiction.

Constructions of leadership

Constructions of leadership advance policy aims, in so far as they advocate and mobilise efforts and resources in ways that embody and achieve the change sought by those aims. If institutional change is an 'agency-driven process' (Anderson and Chang 2019: 91), such constructions are a key part of shaping, though not determining, that agency.

Neo-liberalism is a dominant governance narrative, but with differing manifestations internationally (Wilkins, 2019). In a similar vein, constructions of leadership in the UK jurisdictions display neo-liberal dimensions situated alongside or intermingling with other kinds of constructions. That is, if we understand neo-liberalism as a many-sided phenomenon which takes a multiplicity of forms, rather than a singular entity, some of its ideas and manifestations are important threads in the constructions of leadership. The threads in the jurisdictions spool out from different aspects of the many-sided phenomenon of neo-liberalism.

The construction, emanating from national policy, of school leaders as managers of state-funded businesses has long been evident in England, but there are also constructions from national policy which seek to give the leader a collaborative, system-orientated character (Woods et al, this issue). England is arguably less 'solidaristic' and more 'individualistic' than Wales or Scotland, as suggested in Glatter (2021). However, the pictures of the latter jurisdictions contain nuances of neo-liberalism shaped by their contexts as well as collaborative and community-orientated constructions. In contrast to the competitiveness fostered by neo-liberal systems, school leaders in Wales are envisaged as participants in a process of change that is co-constructed and collaborative. Compared with England, this characterising of leadership as collaborative seems more strongly projected and felt in the views from the Wales jurisdiction in the UK Review, with for example sharing knowledge and experience with other schools an important lever of school improvement (Woods et al 2020, Harris and Jones, 2021). However, leadership is also constructed nationally in Wales as strong and visionary, which is resonant with aspects of neo-liberalism that shift responsibility towards local actors, yet frame that responsibility within rules and regulations set by central government (Wilkins 2019: 513), and that value leadership as integral to 'intensifications of management forms' (Hanlen 2018: 311). In Scotland, leadership is constructed nationally as a diffused and empowering practice with co-operation and collaboration forming keynotes of its reforms, part of a nationally shared commitment to public education that proclaims to enhance educational opportunities for disadvantaged students (Forde and Torrance, 2021). However, that aspect of neo-liberalism that gives a dominant position to economic imperatives is also apparent, resulting in what critics describe as 'speaking social democratic and acting neo-liberal' (Ozga, 2021).

The aim of building a collaborative character to leadership is to the fore in Northern Ireland policy-making too, as a way of addressing the legacies of conflict, through the introduction of shared education based on cross-community collaboration, as well as improving standards. Together with this, there is a managerialist construction of leadership. The managerialist construction has a claimed universal character - framing individuals as consumers and driving key leadership imperatives of rationalisation and financial control that are professed to be common sense priorities everywhere - which is in contrast to local identities and affiliations that have acted to divide educators and educational institutions (Donnelly et al, 2021). These identity categories, arguably, are declining in relevance, but they have not gone away, as provision for different religious denominations remains a fundamental part of the system's institutional and cultural structure.

So, as well as threads of neo-liberalism, we can see aspects of what has been termed an influential 'discourse of openness' (Woods 2019: 157) in the constructions of leadership being forged in the four jurisdictions. This 'openness' discourse promotes collaboration, co-construction, free-flowing communication and trust between organisations, and innovation that yields organisation - and system-wide benefits. The elements of this 'openness' can be deployed as a part of neo-liberal change; but they may also challenge or mitigate neo-liberalism - for example where co-construction genuinely brings in a range of stakeholders and nurtures shared and more collaborative and democratic forms of leadership.

Adding to this mix, is the degree to which constructions of leadership are shaped by value-based rationalities that counter instrumentalisation (Hotho and Pollard 2007, Woods 2011: 81). Value-based rationalities ground action in enduring and felt commitments to specific reference points that give meaning, such as a worldview, identity, culture, territory or defined ethical principles. For example, the valuing of the nation and of public education as an integral part of a wider Scottish democratic tradition gives a substantive focus within the construction of leadership in Scotland (Forde and Torrance, 2021); particular religious and cultural identities persist as important threads in constructions of leadership - in almost all of Northern Ireland's schools (Donnelly et al, 2021) and in the faith-based sectors in England (Glatter, 2021). What substantive reference points are deemed worthy of value and ethically justifiable, or to be recognised in education provision within a plural and democratic society, depends on the framework of meaning of those who seek to consider the place of those reference points in education, and on the agency certain actors have and can exert in the jurisdiction's system.

There are dissonances and tensions in the mix of constructions. For example, there are institutional structures that embed measures by which schools and groups of schools are compared, with consequences for resource allocation and reputation. These create material-economic arrangements that incentivise leading practices that focus intensely on the survival of leaders' own schools. Such leading practices often do not align with collaborative, cultural-discursive arrangements espousing professional values favouring principled autonomy, with a collective moral purpose (Woods et al, 2021). In Northern Ireland, the cultural-discursive arrangements in which leadership practice occurs are carriers of tensions. The locally constituted manifestations of these arrangements may embrace the words and ideas of human rights designed to frame leadership in the language of universal values; but they also

incorporate local words and ideas, grounded in divided communities, that give competing interpretations of erstwhile universal human rights (Donnelly et al, 2021).

Purposes of leadership constructions

We now consider the purposes of the leadership constructions in relation to governance aims. As explained, our predominant focus is the leadership constructions led by national governments and national agencies; hence, our concern here is to illuminate the purposes – some explicit, some hidden or unconscious – of those national governments and national agencies and the strength of their influence. The intention is not to classify the purpose(s) of each jurisdiction into one classification distinct from the others. Rather, the way the purposes are theorised is intended to help in comparing and understanding the different emphases in each jurisdiction. We set out four types of purpose which we suggest are discernible in the jurisdictions.

a. *Relational:* This type encompasses constructions of leadership that display a relational purpose concerned with bringing actors together in the system and creating feelings of trust and cohesion that enable collaborative working (even in the context of competitive relationships). Such constructions seek to create social-political arrangements in which there are feelings of community and belonging and of social integration (Lockwood 1964) that form resources for collaborative practices of leadership. The focus and aims of this relational purpose differ in some ways between the jurisdictions. Relational purpose is integral to the constructions of leadership in Wales and Scotland, where the avowed governance aims are to forge systems that co-operate and learn across school and local governance boundaries. For Northern Ireland, the collaborative construction is conceived as contributing to the key governance aim of improving intergroup relations, whilst respecting traditional identities and educational provision for these. In England, a relational purpose is one of the purposes apparent in the new groupings and institutional arrangements like multi-academy trusts (MATs), in which leadership has a role similar to network governance, providing 'an important glue in networks that bring together corporate and other actors' (Lingard & Sellar 2013: 275).

Success in each jurisdiction's relational purpose helps to enhance social integration, reducing potential antagonism and conflict between social actors. This is a reactive strategy where it is combatting pressures that erode integration - such as the effects of competitive institutional structures in England and Northern Ireland, or the deep-seated cultural and social divides in Northern Ireland. But it may also be a strategy contributing to building a transformed system that radically improves opportunities for learning, in which collaborative and co-constructive ways of working are pervasive and supported by institutional arrangements (Gallagher, 2021).

b. *Institutional-reform focused:* With this, there is a predominant focus on reforming the institutional structures of education. In England, there appears to be significant emphasis placed on such an institutional-reform focused purpose – specifically, structural reform creating a system that is both avowedly competitive and collaborative. This purpose is strongly driven by the central government in England. Leadership in line with this purpose is constructed to deal with uncertainties, choice and opportunities in the system and to embrace the intention of creating a self-improving system that incorporates system leadership (Glatter, 2021; Woods et al, this issue; Woods & Simkins 2014). Amongst the demands placed on system leaders is the challenge of

creating structural alignment between tiers where there is structural dysfunction (Glatter, 2021). A purpose of the construction of leadership in this context is to create cultural-discursive arrangements, such as the language of system leadership, and institutional innovations, as with the roles of National Leader of Education, in order to make reformed institutional structures work.

Perceptions in other jurisdictions suggest a tendency to greater alignment between institutional structures on the one hand and cultural and social structures on the other. However, constructions of leadership in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are also serving institutional reform, if not the same kind or degree as seen in England. For example, the reforms in Scotland and Wales designed to create alignment between the centre (central government, national agencies and bodies), local government and schools are equally indicative of a more direct, centralist approach, requiring leadership to take its direction ultimately from the policy aims emanating from the centre (Forde and Torrance, 2021; Connolly et al, 2018). So there is a similarity with England, in that the institutional-reform focused purpose has its prime source in central government. It is possible to discern Scottish reforms as subtly reprofessionalising teachers and leaders towards becoming implementers of priorities determined centrally - as local actors with autonomy to carry out responsibilities framed by rules and regulations determined by central government.

c. *Masking*. This is where the aim is to shift attention and concern away from some aspect of the education system that is problematic for policy-makers. It is evident to different degrees in the four jurisdictions. In Northern Ireland, the managerialist construction of leadership carries the promise of overlaying tensions embedded in local identities and affiliations that historically separate educators and educational institutions. In practice, this could end up leaving untouched those material-economic, cultural-discursive and social-political arrangements that are legacies of conflict and continue to influence everyday practices of leadership. There is an avoidance of taboo subjects related to conflict and this is ingrained in the culture; but it is reinforced and possibly legitimised by neo-liberal/managerial approaches to education because this encourages leaders to focus on the school and immediate problems rather than seeing the current and historical political situation as relevant to policy. Policy-making is deemed to be a sanitised process rather than a partisan, messy and inherently political one (Donnelly et al, 2021).

In relation to Scotland, we suggest that one of the purposes of how educational leadership is being constructed is to ameliorate (potential) disagreement, tensions and challenges between key policy actors, through the rhetoric of 'an empowered system', collaboration and structural alignment (Forde & Torrance, 2021). This construction of leadership helps to maintain consensus among political and professional stakeholders by enabling issues of potential conflict and power to be downplayed. The words and ideas used in this construction of leadership support the creation of cultural-discursive arrangements that avoid power differences in the social-political arrangements, whilst continuing to shape leadership practices. In some parts of the cultural-discursive landscape, the lack of articulation of leadership specifications is significant, as with the professional standards (Torrance 2018, Torrance & Forde 2017).

Reflecting on the relevance of masking to understanding Wales and England suggests the possibility of differing emphases there. In Wales, as compared with Scotland, the tenor of views expressed through the UK Review tended to be less critical. In response to ministerial approaches

to transforming the Welsh system from one of high performativity to one that is more collaborative and with greater professionality, the Welsh response appeared to take this as a sincere attempt to build on models promoted in the OECD reviews (OECD, 2014; OECD, 2017) and mirroring cultures such as those found in Finland. Hence the stance communicated through the UK Review was one of cautious optimism.

In England, the fragmentation in the system (Glatter, 2021, Woods et al 2020) creates evident conflicts in agency within a system where there is no apparent attempt to forge a consensus. Hence, for example, there are different conceptions of the kind of education system that system leaders are helping to create. Arguably, there is a greater honesty in England about the diversity of constructions of leadership than in the other jurisdictions; although some would also argue that the claim of neo-liberalism to universal applicability based on asserted taken-for-granted assumptions serves to divert attention away from fundamental substantive issues of educational purpose and values.

d. *Space-making*. This refers to leadership constructions acting as a way of generating spaces for thinking and action that allow creativity and local change, contributing to wider system change. Part of the attraction of leadership as a concept in narratives of change is that it is open to different kinds and emphases of meaning. It has the advantage of the 'conceptual fuzziness' associated with other influential concepts such as innovation that allows them to organise and facilitate communication across disciplines and between social groups (Miettinen 2013: 89). These benefits of leadership can be seen as helping to facilitate a governance aim in Wales of promoting creative spaces for policy development and implementation through 'co-construction' and institutional innovation such as Wales' new regional tier, where the challenge is to maintain alignment with the principles of a national mission (Woods et al 2020).

Ambiguity and scope for space-making offer a way of tackling the tensions of institutional reform at a practical, everyday level. The openness and indeterminacy of leadership can encourage creative spaces for pro-active agency, through a shifting of responsibility to the local level - the responsibilisation identified in critical literature on neo-liberalism (e.g. Rose 1999) and discussed by Forde and Torrance (2021) in the context of Scotland. The 'messy actualities' of neo-liberalism (Wilkins 2019: 519) require creative interpretation at various levels of the system. In Northern Ireland, the interpretive spaces that school leaders occupy are invidious and replete with tensions as they balance interests in a divided society, a wish to offer opportunities to explore cross-group tolerance, respect and citizenship, and the demands of neo-liberalism that press for rationalisation, budgetary constraint and a narrowed curriculum focus on academic performance (Donnelly et al, 2021). In theory, the curriculum in Northern Ireland is broadly based and flexible, but it is this flexibility that means that school leaders tend to respond to the more obvious pressures of performance in high status subjects, with opportunities to address the history of divisions in society often lost. Scotland's institutional reforms can be seen as requiring new spaces of agency - to move beyond, without engaging in public discord, the cosy relationship between the EIS (the biggest professional organisation/teaching union without whose endorsement implementation of major policy change is inconceivable), the Scottish Government, Education Scotland (the curriculum development and inspection agency) and the General Teaching Council of Scotland (GTCS) (the regulating body).

Creative spaces of interpretation also open up possibilities for adapting neo-liberal threads of change - through an 'adaptive rationality' that manages neo-liberal demands whilst taking initiatives that achieve other, value-based ends (Woods 2011: 80) and enables 'partial congruence' of multiple constructions (Wilkins 2019: 519). In England (Woods et al 2020) there was evidence of school leaders making space within the 'autonomy' agenda to create local structures of leadership and accountability that re-interpret the neo-liberal regime and enable co-operation and collaboration across 'families of schools'. This echoes findings in Greany and Higham's (2018: 62) study for example, which found 'new spaces for collaboration' that some schools and groupings such as Training School Alliances were able to use, at the same time as extensions in competitive relations were evident in the system. Use of such spaces acts, at least to some degree, as an antidote to the negative effects of market ideology and competition, thus ameliorating the privileged purposes of national government. In England there are examples of academy leaders finding ways of forging a leadership identity that explicitly rejects academisation as an opportunity for individualistic ambition and 'empire' building (Spicksley 2020: 6), and of local authority leaders who make progress in supporting partnerships between schools and community governance whilst recognising the challenges of competition and system fragmentation (Greany 2020).

There is a danger that space-making and 'fuzziness' may take the form of 'policy fudge' which helps policy-makers to avoid 'challenging conversations at policy level' (Torrance and Murphy 2017: 39) and to mask the kind of problems highlighted under masking. The idea that there is policy fudge or inertia as a consequence of a lack of political consensus (whether or not there is a government) is a running theme in Northern Ireland ('The place with no government', 2019). There are many different ways that the idea of autonomy, which is a significant component of the cultural-discursive arrangements for the practice of leadership in England, can be constructed, experienced and constrained (Glatter 2021, Woods et al 2021); yet conversations between policy-makers and practitioners that try to get to grips with the realities of leadership autonomy are not apparent. One of the questions we would suggest relates to this, concerns assumptions about what is most important in driving greater educational progress. That is, should the predominant driving force be reforms emanating from the centre, or should equal or more weight be given to the everyday, local relationships that nurture teacher learning? Arguably, the starting point for understanding and developing leadership and autonomy should be the latter, through grounding autonomous leadership for improving learning in a thorough understanding of the material-economic, cultural-discursive and social-political arrangements that frame leading practices locally.

Conclusions

This article, based on an analysis of the published outcomes of the UK Review project, has explored the constructions of leadership in each of the four jurisdictions of the UK. It has theorised the purposes of those constructions for education governance, with the aim of illuminating the different emphases across the jurisdictions. The purposes identified were:

- *relational*: concerned with bringing actors together in the system and creating feelings of trust and cohesion that enable collaborative working

- *institutional-reform focused*: where a predominant focus is on reforming the institutional structures of education
- *masking*: where the aim is to shift attention and concern away from some aspect of the education system that is problematic for policy-makers
- *space-making*: acting as a way of generating spaces for thinking and action that allow creativity and local change, contributing to wider system change

In different ways these purposes support, sit alongside, intermingle with or challenge the neo-liberal threads of change that are present in all four jurisdictions. A relational purpose may be felt more strongly in Wales and Scotland, with the neo-liberal institutional-focused purpose felt more so in England. In Northern Ireland, relational and neo-liberal threads are intertwined in the context of legacies of community divisions. In all four jurisdictions, the practice of leadership is to some degree an act of creating space for making sense of, interpreting and determining actions that relate to these purposes.

Much literature on leadership and policy gives critical attention to purposes aligned to neo-liberalism and the strength of these in fashioning education. What conclusion, however, might we suggest tentatively from our analysis about the strength of constructions of leadership focused on relational purposes? Future directions highlighted in the UK Review Report (Woods et al 2020) included a widespread desire amongst delegates from all four jurisdictions for shared, collaboratively created strategies, which resonates strongly with constructions of leadership that are imbued with a relational purpose. Realising a desire for collaboration can be obstructed by policy imperatives that, as we have noted in some jurisdictions particularly, cultivate competition and a focus on the survival and positioning of one's own school. We suggest, however, that the expressed desire for shared, collaboratively created strategies is indicative of an enduring professional orientation towards space-making for creative interpretations, which entails the giving and forging of trust, enabling innovation geared to the local contexts where the true value of education is created. Such localised creativity involves valuing 'mediation' in which public service professionals temper and interpret centralised imperatives by developing what they 'regard as good practices according to their existing professional values in their contingent circumstances' (Wallace et al 2007: 88).

A question that immediately arises is what broader purpose these leadership constructions should serve. The future directions in the UK Review Report highlighted delegates' concern about continued restrictions on funding which impacts on provision for pupils, including the most vulnerable, and the need to address inequalities at societal, as well as school levels, and to include missing voices at all levels. The larger purpose that we see these concerns pointing towards, is an expansive social justice agenda which works for the enhancement of voice, respect and educational development for all and the reduction of material and economic inequalities (Woods and Roberts 2018); and which is thus wider and more ambitious than social justice discourses focused on 'data-driven practices of equity' (Lingard et al 2014: 712). It is, arguably, a strategic aspiration that has seeds for growth identified in the leadership landscapes across all the jurisdictions. It also requires coherent conceptualisation of services beyond education at national and local levels (health, social services, legal and financial) and consideration of the alignment of policy across all of these areas in each. This would

strengthen constructions of leadership within the public sector, particularly for school leaders who are leading education as the universal service for young people in all four jurisdictions.

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