REVIEW: The Principal

Power and Professionalism in FE

Prism: Casting New Light on Learning, Theory and Practice
http://prism-journal.blackburn.ac.uk/
ISSN 2514-5347
Vol. 2 (2): pp. 92-95

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Daley, M., Orr, K. and Petrie, J. (2017). The Principal: Power and Professionalism in FE. London: UCL Institute of Education Press. ISBN: 9781858568447

Since the incorporation of Further Education in 1992, there have been numerous, far-reaching critiques regarding both Further Education power structures and how senior leaders can exist fruitfully, both economically and morally, in ever-shifting sands. A relatively recent example can be found in *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses*, Daley, Orr and Petrie's (2015) prequel to *The Principal: Power and Professionalism in FE*. The prequel presents a collection of case studies and professional development proposals for teachers, managers and senior leaders that celebrated critical pedagogies, creativity, and independence as subversive strategies in the context of precarity.

Funding for Further Education in England was cut by more than a third between 2010 and 2018 (Belfield, Sibieta, & Farquharson, 2018) and yet, while the minority government halted further cuts in 2017, the final wave of Area Based Reviews (aimed at cutting the overall number of FE Colleges and leaving those which remained more resilient), the introduction of the Teaching and Further Education Act (setting out key governmental priorities such as T-

Levels), and the creation of The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (to provide oversight of college-based technical education as well as of apprenticeships) are examples of why this publication is valuable. In support, consider the persistent, panoptical pressure for continuous improvement and the context of ongoing uncertainty (Offord, 2018) and internal debate (Robertson, 2019) about how to achieve such improvement. This publication is well timed in offering a conciliatory and contemporary examination of the effectiveness of leadership, agency, and professionalism in Further Education today.

Machiavelli's *The Prince* is the metaphorical hook upon which expansionism, leadership and austerity are examined. Machiavelli wrote his 'little book' in 1513 following political exile and he intended it as a guide to remaining in, or seizing control of, power. The preface contains an introductory letter from Machiavelli to Lorenzo de' Medici explaining his qualification in proposing how to rule effectively. The contributors to this publication - made up of current or former Further Education teachers, trade unionists, policy advisors, researchers and students - utilise Machiavelli's position 'at the foot of the mountain' (Machiavelli & Parks, 2009, p. 3) to provide a rigorous interrogation of the current state of strategic and leadership practices in Further Education, with much focus on the manner by which senior leaders exercise influence, power and control over their 'fiefdoms'. Taken as a whole, the contributors offer their own treatise on how to regain a level of control amidst the ceaseless reorganisation of Further Education.

Part I utilises *The Prince* as the basis to raise critical questions about power and the role of the principal in Further Education, offering leadership advice for current or aspiring principals, and drawing from Machiavelli to critique policy and practice. In Chapter 1, Smith provides a contemporary account of the state of Further Education, offering a potentially tragic outcome, whilst Carol Azumah's 'letter from exile' (Daley, Orr, & Petrie, 2017, p. 3) in Chapter 3 is an example of the integration and relevance of *The Prince* within the wider aims of the book. Page's defence of the principal in Chapter 4 provides a degree of shelter for those charged with the survival of a college, proposing that autocracy and managerialism are, perhaps, examples of necessary 'malcontents' in a time of scant resources and fierce competition.

Part II explores the power dynamics in post-compulsory education, with the shared histories of Australia, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland providing a foundation

for global perspectives on Further Education. In Chapter 6, Jones provides an account of Further Education in Wales drawing from his experiences of trade unionism and evidencing the loss of trust in governance structures. Moodie's case study of Australian technical and further education in Chapter 9 is a discourse on privatisation and 'for-profit' control.

Part III of the publication invites colleagues to consider how they experience Further Education and how, in turn, their professionalism is supported or hindered by current practices in the sector. In Chapter 10, Husband questions the place of innovation within Colleges, whilst Kholsa applies his experience of teaching to highlight the importance of teachers feeling valued in Chapter 13.

Part IV provides an opportunity for contributors to explore transformative and experimental pedagogies and strategies, those that can be located deep within already well-established practices. In Chapter 16, Hammond reflects on his experience of navigating, creatively, claustrophobic procedural systems, employing the tactics of the 'dérive' and détournement. Shukie, in Chapter 17, argues for a new order of learning, using distributed teaching and learning strategies and Community Open Online Course (COOCs) as emancipatory and subversive educational frameworks.

Overall, the publication constructs a form of educational activism: a positive, critical and far-reaching protest and call to action - to managers, leaders and teachers - to critique and manipulate, positively, Further Education from the inside. The commonality amongst the contributors is the recognition of the organisational, economic and cultural challenges, yet they propose eloquently, with precision and, like Machiavelli himself, with no small measure of humour, an exploration of spaces where teachers and managers can execute control, influence and creativity as a response.

I have worked for the same Further Education College for almost 20 years, starting in 2000 at a time of increased, then sustained, government focus on the value of Further Education, manifest most notably in forensic scrutiny of student retention and achievement rates as indicators of value for money and, whilst less explicit, societal impact. More recently, the necessary pursuit of continuous improvement (for example, in attrition levels and achievement rates) is cemented as a fundamental and defining measure of success that leads Colleges along the path of (at least) financial survival. In this vein, and with protest, the book

offers a score of ethical, professional and cultural challenges to those invested in Further Education and will be of interest, and indeed use, to those who seek to contribute to alternative, creative, dynamic, and ethical futures.

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