**The Mediation of Acculturation: Orchestrating School Leadership Development in England**

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## Abstract

Among western governments large-scale leadership development initiatives represent an increasingly deployed means of promoting the acculturation of school leaders to support educational reforms and ongoing improvement. England's sophisticated initiative centres on the National College for Leadership in Schools and Children's Services, a politically driven intervention to acculturate headteachers and other senior school staff into transformational and distributed leadership. It is linked in significant measure to government-driven reform, alongside continuous improvement efforts. Qualitative research whose focus included tracking the evolution of this initiative showed how moderate mediation, within broad structural and ideological limits, is integral to its implementation. The fostered leadership culture appeared to interact with recipients' existing organizational and wider professional cultures valuing a substantial degree of local autonomy, stimulating reinterpretation and adaptation. Yet mediation appeared ultimately to have supported the government's agenda through local adaptation of reforms and some independent innovation consistent with the reform thrust. Contemporary government policy is to promote innovation, but the continued retention of nationally set expectations, strong accountability measures, and heavy sanctions seem likely to limit its potential for promoting locally inspired educational improvement.

## Keywords

acculturation, leadership development, mediation, orchestration

## A National Approach to Developing School Leaders as Conduits for Reform?

Our purpose in this article is twofold. First, to understand large-scale school leadership development initiatives as a political tool for acculturation supporting politically desired

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educational reform and ongoing improvement, within which structurally delimited mediation is integral to their implementation. Second, to examine empirically how an acculturation effort may be significantly mediated, even in the most comprehensive and politically directed of government-driven school leadership development initiatives. The National College for School Leadership (NCSL), renamed from September 2009 the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (NCLSCS) to reflect an extension of its remit, has played a very prominent role in English leadership development provision for a decade. (For the sake of clarity, we will refer to the NCSL/NCLSCS as 'the National College'. This is the preferred shorthand of its staff, reflecting its nationwide status.)

The form of one-way acculturation we have in mind is a deliberate, sustained initiative aimed at encouraging others to assimilate (Berry, 1997) the desired beliefs, values, norms and even subliminal codes of behaviour (Firestone and Louis, 1999) of a culture being fostered. Such an acculturation effort is symptomatic of a governance 'project' seeking to reconstitute peoples and politics as governable entities (Newman, 2005a). Here, the National College's provision of leadership development opportunities may create a conduit for policymakers to promote the emergence of a school leadership culture which does not merely endorse government-driven reform. Leaders may proactively operate, in turn, as an extension of this conduit for government influence through their impact, in promoting reform, on the culture and practice of colleagues in their schools.

The 'National College-as-conduit-for-reform' thesis has long been asserted by its critics. Indicatively, Thrupp (2005: 18) claimed that 'the NCSL is ... being used as a conduit or relayer of New Labour policy into schools'. Yet his primary evidence base was restricted to his 'reading' of the public content on the National College website in November 2004. Our evidence suggests that this thesis may be overly-deterministic. For it belies the variable, never unlimited but ever-present 'power to mediate' (Brunetto, 2001) that is *integral*, not only to the workings of networked political elites (Reed, 2010) across the national level, but also to the implementation of centrally directed policy in contingent local settings. One key to a deeper understanding of acculturation as a political tool is to examine how far stakeholders across the policy agenda-setting and implementation chain use power to mediate the conduit for government influence on public service practice. Another is to examine what cultural allegiances drive such mediation as occurs.

Thus in the case of national school leadership development provision, elements of the ministerially fostered leadership culture inevitably interact with the existing organizational and professional cultures of both those responsible for creating and maintaining the conduit for acculturation and the target recipients, generating the likelihood of some degree of mediation: modifying or subverting the practices and beliefs they are being encouraged to adopt (Spours et al., 2007). Mediation entails some reinterpretation and adaptation of the advocated practices and beliefs to suit interests-at-hand, which may or may not also suit government interests.

The English experience of employing leadership development as a means of acculturation may have potential to inform policy and practice elsewhere. Evidence of considerable variation in national educational performance (OECD, 2007) has long fuelled concern among various western governments to promote leadership as a lever for improving educational performance. Arguably, nowhere have such government sponsored initiatives been more extensive, centralized and far-reaching (through face-to-face training and the use of information technology) than in England. The National College is one of relatively few *national* school leadership development centres. Others, as in Slovenia and Singapore, are much smaller. A recent OECD study of school leadership involving 22 education systems in 19 member countries across the world (Pont et al.,

2008a) offers comparative testimony to the National College's unique combination of mutually reinforcing features:

- a government-sponsored brief and annual accountability mechanisms;
- a high level of investment and the large scale of operation in the nationwide framing and commissioning of training;
- a career-long conceptualization of school leadership stages coupled with nationwide provision for training and other support opportunities targeting every career stage from 'middle', through 'aspiring', 'new', to 'experienced' and even 'national' leaders.

In his recent international overview of school leadership development, Bush (2008: 73) claimed that 'The establishment of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in 2000 is probably the most significant global initiative for leadership development.' He cited in support of this claim an OECD study of nine countries (CERI, 2001) showing that national means of support for school leadership elsewhere were not as well developed as the National College was fast becoming by that time. It has continued developing rapidly ever since.

Initially, the National College took responsibility for three leadership courses for secondary school leaders previously run by the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). It went on to provide programmes for various stages of secondary and primary school leadership, for leaders of 'Sure Start' Children's Centres, and now directors of children's services in local authorities (mirroring the nationwide drive towards multi-agency service provision). The National College also undertook initiatives on behalf of government, hosting the 'National Remodelling Team' as part of school workforce reform redefining work contracts and conditions, and working on succession planning to address a national shortage of headteachers. The National College's funding from the DfEE was already £27.8 million in 2001/2 (NCSL, 2003: 30), expanding fourfold by 2008/9 when its funding from what had become relabelled as the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) reached £110.6 million (NCSL, 2008a: 19).

The reach of the National College across the 21,000 or so state schools in England (DCSF, 2007) is equally impressive. All programmes include an element of Internet-based tuition, and the very extensive website is visited regularly by about three-quarters of England's headteachers (Bush, 2008: 82). Its 'talk2learn' online community has more than 120,000 members. Over 230,000 places have been taken up on various programmes, more than one-half of which are on those for 'middle' and 'aspiring' leaders. The National Professional Qualification for Headship programme, since 2004 a mandatory qualification for beginning headteachers, had over 28,000 graduates by the end of 2008 (NCSL, 2008b: 10)—more than the total number of headteacher posts.

That the National College retains a close formal relationship with central government is consistent with the 'National College-as-conduit-for-reform' thesis, though formal relationships rarely represent the whole political picture where power to mediate obtains. Government not only funds the National College's provision but also reviews its performance and updates its remit annually, via a letter from the secretary of state stipulating the next year's priorities. Its board of governors comprises about 10 headteachers and ex-officio representatives from the DCSF and the General Teaching Council for England. It is noteworthy that the successor Conservative and Liberal coalition government elected in 2010 has confirmed its continuing support for the National College, while tightening its grip (DfE 2010). As result of an 'arm's length bodies' review, the National College is to become an executive agency of the Department for Education, so more directly accountable to ministers.

The outcome of a government-commissioned review of the National College in 2004 indicates just how close this formal relationship with government has been for some years. Concern had surfaced inside government over the National College's operation (Barber, 2007). The National College was judged to be engaging in too many activities that did not add up to a concerted focus on developing leadership conducive to the implementation of reforms. Power to mediate had already been harnessed among National College staff. Ministers now saw the need to delimit their activities more tightly. The terms of reference for the review included 'to assess where and how its effectiveness could be improved in the future', reflecting a government presupposition that the National College could do better. The outcome was 'streamlining' (DfES, 2004a: 11) to focus on its impact and to move away from providing leadership development towards commissioning regional provision. The original chair of its governing council and chief executive were replaced. Focusing of the National College's impact resulted in it being measured in part against improvements in national examination results, the targets for which were agreed by the DCSF. The review also heralded the National College's resourcing being split between funds for its leadership development provision and organizational costs, and funds for government-specified initiatives. This resourcing arrangement enabled the government to direct a greater proportion of the National College's operation towards governmental priorities.

While there are other providers of leadership development, including private sector and university consultants and trainers, the National College and the regional providers it commissions to deliver its national programmes predominate. Given the relative longevity, scale and reach of the National College, it is well-positioned to acculturate school leaders across the country towards perceiving themselves as 'change agents' (Caldwell, 2003): proactive initiators and implementers of valued change. And given its close (and soon to be even closer) formal relationship with government, the National College is equally well positioned to develop school leaders as agents of change on behalf of government, leading the implementation of its educational reform agenda.

This positioning features strongly in the critical interpretation of Gunter and Forrester (2008), based on their 'reading' of policy texts and interviews with key players in government and consultants working with government from different backgrounds, including the private sector and school headship. They (2008: 146) sought to 'investigate the way knowledge production operates at a time of New Labour modernization of education, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the state, public policy and knowledge'. A starting point was to identify the 'school leadership policy network' contributing towards the development and enactment of government policy, and to examine the nature of this contribution. An alliance of 'policy entrepreneurs' contributing to this network includes school leaders invited by government in an advisory capacity to help broker the legitimacy of dominant government aspirations. The network frames the dominant modes of knowledge and understanding around which leadership development is built in formal provision. It also shapes the parameters of acceptable leadership conduct, thereby excluding resistant voices to the government's policy agenda. As a result of this theoretical approach their account is oriented towards understanding the coherence and mutual reinforcement among contributions from a diversity of key players. They were not looking for the possibility of significant mediation. Unsurprisingly, they did not report finding it.

Our study had a broader orientation. We sought to determine both the degree of coherence and of any dissonance, plus the extent of overt or covert contestation, among promoters of leadership development and the target recipients based at a different administrative system level. As will be reported, our evidence suggests that school leaders (none of those in our study advised government or acted as trainers) and National College staff and associated trainers deployed their power to

mediate, to a modest but significant degree, government ministers' intent in establishing this national body to develop school leaders as signed-up reformers. The more extended national level 'school leadership policy network' that includes the ministers, civil servants and consultants of government together with National College staff and its mostly self-employed trainers does not act wholly in concert. Our investigation also reached well beyond the 'school leadership policy network' to see how far and in what ways National College provision had impacted on target school leaders' perceptions of themselves as change agents in their institutions.

## An Imperative to Manipulate the Unmanipulable?

Politically endorsed efforts to acculturate school leaders through the provision of development opportunities have become internationally widespread (Pont et al., 2008a). They draw inspiration from the popular advocacy of 'culture management' (Wallace and Pocklington, 2002), the orchestrated development of a 'strong' organizational culture. The 'cultural turn' in management theory (Schein, 1985) triggering this interest in culture management originated in the US private sector (Peters and Waterman, 1982) and related consultancy in the 1980s. The aspiration of its advocates is neatly summed up in the slogan ' . . . a new law of business life: In Culture there is Strength' (Deal and Kennedy, 1982: 19). Culture management has been extensively taken up in education (Deal and Kennedy, 1983; Senge et al., 2000) within the broader governance project to reconstitute and govern social practices through cultural means (Bang, 2004; Newman, 2005a). The current educational orthodoxy of visionary, 'transformational' leadership (Leithwood et al., 1999), as promoted by the National College, is built on the assumption that culture can be manipulated in a desired direction. Staff with management responsibility are encouraged to identify themselves as leaders with a proactive role in generating cultural transformation (Newman, 2005b; O'Reilly and Reid, 2010).

Yet the advocacy of culture management rests on a contested view of culture as both relatively conscious and reliably manipulable, rather than subliminal, ambiguous and unpredictable (Martin and Frost, 1996). Faith in culture management has been punctured by experience and research pointing to the mediation of acculturation efforts: behavioural codes, beliefs, values and norms turn out to be relatively unmanipulable. (Studies of UK schools include Moore et al. [2002], Farrell and Morris [2004], Hoyle and Wallace [2005], Bottery [2007] and MacBeath [2008].) For acculturation actually implies rather more than the headline endeavour of promoting allegiance to a new culture. Since target recipients will have been socialized already into an existing culture, this endeavour actually implies *replacing* one culture with another. It is not possible directly to shift beliefs, values, norms and codes in the way that mandate and sanction can secure behavioural compliance. Insofar as power is widely distributed (albeit hierarchically), the personal agency (Giddens, 1984) of target service professionals, or capacity to choose between courses of action, brings with it some power to mediate or adapt others' attempts to change one's practice and beliefs, according to one's extant cultural allegiances.

Further, even where an advocated culture does become established the evidence for its impact on the quality of service provision remains weak (Ashworth, 2009). It is still unclear whether a 'strong' organizational culture generates strong organizational performance or whether other features of strongly performing organizations may equally be interpreted as forging a 'strong' organizational culture (Wilderom et al., 2000).

Ironically, however, policymakers generally cannot afford to ignore the cultural implications of their education policies promoting reform and ongoing improvement. They face an imperative to

attempt acculturation because they depend for implementation on the minimal compliance at least and enthusiastic support at best of those who coordinate and provide education—school leaders, as their 'change agents', and teachers alike. Advocacy of leadership has thus emerged as a vehicle for acculturating those with and through whom reforms and related ongoing improvement efforts must be implemented and sustained. In recent years therefore, leadership development—typically through training and networking activities—has become a key acculturation mechanism for building school-level capacity to lead the implementation of reform.

Yet its introduction has inevitably taken place in the context of target leaders' and aspirants' existing organizational and wider professional culture. In England they have long been used to a relatively high degree of individual and organizational autonomy, though increasingly constrained by a quarter century of government-driven reforms. The government reform agenda has been built around a 'what works' philosophy, pursued through tight regulation to control the delivery, performance and accountability of public services. Powerful intermediaries have promoted a compliance culture among service providers, and endeavoured to extirpate practices and values that might subvert the reform movement. So such mediation as is stimulated is likely to be modest at most, tightly delimited by imposed accountability mechanisms, from regular external inspection to published league tables of students' results in national tests. Failure can lead to punitive sanctions, from external intervention designed to modify existing practices through to eventual school closure.

Accordingly, the remainder of this article falls into four sections. First, we summarize the theoretical focus and methods of our investigation. Second, we briefly indicate how the New Labour government, since coming to power in 1997, developed its approach to acculturating school leaders through their development as reformers. Our main focus is the National College, as the national leadership development body was known during the period of our fieldwork. We also show how conditions for very moderate mediation existed within the implementation of this acculturation effort across national education system levels. Third, our focus then shifts to further, still very modest, mediation as the acculturation effort interacted with existing institutional and professional cultures in secondary schools. Finally, we draw conclusions about the relative unmanageability of acculturation as a policy tool. We point to positive effects of its limited mediation for policymakers, who are now increasingly promoting local innovation for public service improvement.

## Researching School Leadership Development

The findings to be presented were gathered as part of a largely qualitative study of leadership development in the public services, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. We investigated how senior staff in English secondary schools, and also universities and healthcare organizations, seek and experience support for their development in their leadership role, particularly in relation to change. Special reference was made to national leadership development bodies for each service sector, examining how far senior staff were encouraged to—and did—perceive themselves as change agents: whether on behalf of government, other stakeholder groups, or both (O'Reilly and Reed, 2010).

The theoretical framework is represented diagrammatically in Figure 1. We employed three interrelated concepts to grasp the complexities of generating systemic change through developing leadership capacity to promote government-driven reform (Reed, 2002). Educational reforms were construed as part of a New Labour *political project* to transform the public services, coupled with a *discourse strategy* to shape thinking through persuasive language and written texts, and a loose configuration of *control technologies*—including the National College—means of translating
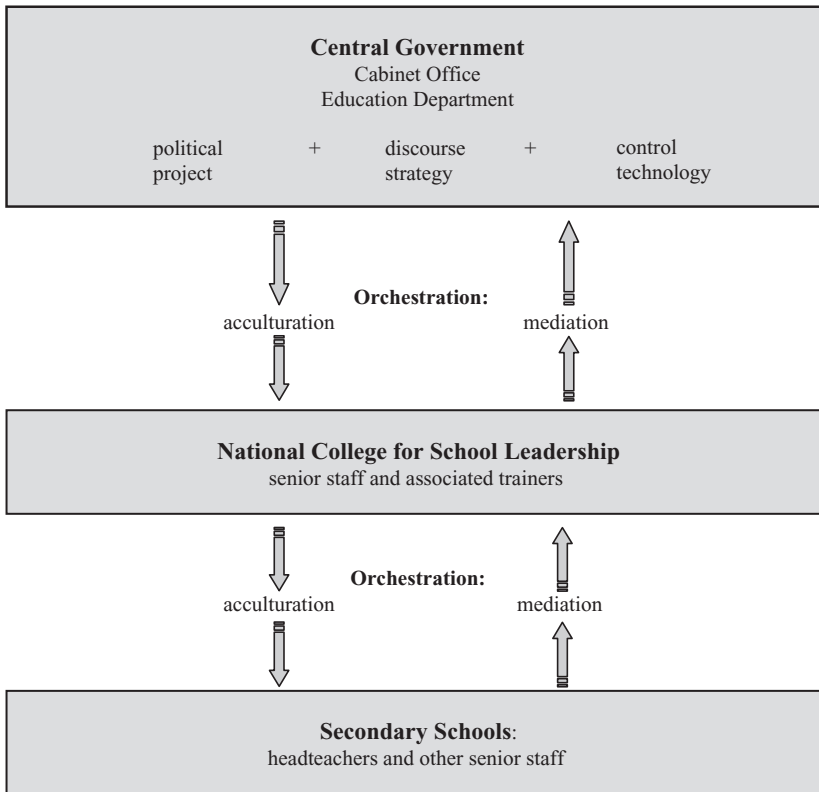
**Figure 1.** Contribution of NCSL's leadership development to educational reform as a change process

political aspiration and discursive intent into practice. The National College was conceived to operate as a control technology mainly through culture management, attempting to mould participants' organizational and professional cultures. Intermediaries *orchestrate* (Wallace, 2007; Wallace and Schneller, 2008) the change process across system-administrative levels: brokering its cultural acceptance and implementation or acting as independent change agents for their sector. They include senior staff in secondary schools, who contribute to steering the brokering process and mediate change as it interacts with existing discursive frameworks and institutionalized practices reflecting their existing organizational and professional cultures.

A combined *cultural and political perspective* on interaction (Wallace, 2000) conceptualized how uses of power to acculturate senior staff through leadership development may be mediated by their responsive uses of power according to their cultural allegiances. This perspective builds on the insight that stakeholders' cultural allegiances shape their uses of power, where power is conceived as 'transformative capacity' (Giddens, 1984) to realize interests through authority or influence (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980), expressed synergistically or conflictually, depending on the degree to which interests coincide (Brock et al., 1999; Clegg, 1989; Pettigrew and McNulty, 1995). Culture is conceived according to the 'fragmented' (Martin and Frost, 1996) or 'ambiguous' (Hoyle and Wallace, 2003) frame, where beliefs and values expressed within and between subcultures may be chronically characterized by contradiction (especially between

**Table 1.** Documentary sources for critical discourse analysis

| Documentary sources (1997–2008) | Number of documents coded |
|---|---|
| Government documents | 11 |
| Government education department documents | 15 |
| Government documents addressed to NCSL | 6 |
| NCSL documents | 18 |
| Secondary school professional association and other stakeholder documents | 6 |
| **Total** | **56** |

allegiance to reform or professional autonomy), confusion and dissent (Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 2004; Watson, 2002).

A qualitative, mixed methodology approach generated data through critical discourse analysis (CDA) and 60–90-minute, semi-structured, confidential interviews (Kvale, 1996; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002), carried out between May 2007 and July 2008. The government's acculturation endeavour and its mediation at national administrative levels was explored primarily through systematic critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) of documentary sources listed in Table 1, covering the period between the accession of the New Labour government in 1997 and 2008.

It was backed by interviews with government civil servants, politicians, professional association representatives, National College senior staff and trainers. The mediation of this acculturation effort at school level was investigated primarily through initial interviews with secondary school leaders and aspirants, just under half of whom were re-interviewed a year later. Since the research examined external provision of leadership development, criteria for selection of the schools interview sample included representation from up to five staff in the most senior management posts. Such staff were thus eligible in principle to take up National College provision. In each school interviews were conducted with the headteacher, any deputy or assistant headteachers and colleagues with other senior responsibilities such as the head of sixth form. The programme of interviews is outlined in Table 2.

Qualitative data analysis informed by the approach of Huberman and Miles (2002) entailed transcribing interviews, coding and analysing them using computer software, developing matrices to display comparative findings, and scanning the dataset to explore emergent themes and the contextual richness of particular settings. The study had several limitations. We were not in a position to resolve whether our informants used discourses 'bilingually' (Hoyle and Wallace, 2008) without commitment, to comply with perceived expectations. Nor were we able to ascertain whether the claims of senior school staff about mediating reforms matched their observable practice. However, we were able to triangulate the claims of headteachers with those of their senior colleagues. These accounts very largely corroborated each other.

## Acculturation and its Mediation across National Levels

Our evidence indicated that leadership development in general, and the National College as a control technology in particular, constituted a government policy tool for achieving improved educational outcomes directed in significant measure towards government's instrumental reform goals. The need to develop public service leadership capacity was viewed by a government politician implicitly in terms of generating change agency for the government's political project of reform

**Table 2.** Interviews conducted in 2007-08

| | Timing of round, number of interviews | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| | | Autumn | Spring– | Summer– |
| | Summer | 2007–Spring | Summer | Autumn |
| Type of interviewee | 2007 | 2008 | 2008 | 2008 |
| Secondary school headteacher | 5 | | | 1 |
| Secondary school deputy heads and other senior staff | 20 | | | 10 |
| NCSL senior staff | | 3 | | |
| NCSL-associated trainer | | 7 | | |
| Representative of professional and stakeholder associations concerned with schools | | 4 | | |
| Politician previously responsible for school education | | | 1 | |
| Civil servant from central government education department | | | 2 | |
| Civil servant from central government Cabinet Office | | | 3 | |
| Total (56 interviews with 45 informants) | 25 | 14 | 6 | 11 |

According to this source, public service leaders have 'sold their soul, so that if they really want to be in that arena then they have to play by the rules and the rules are that … when the policy has been decided it's their job to inspirationally implement it'. A civil servant was explicit about the National College's role: 'The Leadership College and leadership development is about helping people to effectively introduce change, government's policies for change.' Yet for neither informant was this the whole story. They perceived there to be scope—not so overtly fostered—for leaders also to initiate independent change, as long as government-desired outcomes were achieved. The politician commented: 'If it's clear what they're judged by, so if the judgement is about clear outcome measures, then I have never had any problem with that.' The civil servant highlighted the importance of engaging with community concerns:

> [As a headteacher,] to be successful you depend upon parents, local businesses, all sorts of people. A school can't, I think, be successful behind high walls. In order to achieve that kind of positive support and involvement you've actually got to kind of be a leader in that community.

However, such scope was severely delimited by the government equation of effective leadership with measured outcomes. In the words of the civil servant: 'I've never yet been in a school which was badly led which was providing decent standards.' Modest ambiguity over the purpose of leadership development though, at the heart of government, created conditions for equally modest mediation: the aim to develop leaders as reformers coexisted with some recognition that leaders' change agency legitimately encompassed more. Ministerial equivocation thus created some scope for the latter to

deploy their authority as school leaders according to their values as educators within their professional culture in pursuing agendas that were tangential, but not inimical, to the reform agenda.

The government's discourse strategy, as expressed in its documentation, gave primacy to leadership development as a means of building capacity for implementing reforms, as where:

> From September 2000, heads will have responsibility for implementing the new performance management and pay system proposed in this Green Paper. These new arrangements will need to be reflected in heads' contracts and in the performance management policy of the governing body. To help heads and governors we will provide model policies and, through the leadership programmes and the Standards Fund, ensure training is available to every school. (DfEE, 1998: 22–23)

The ultimate dependence of government on school leaders and others, and so the urgency of developing them, was explicitly acknowledged:

> We can only implement our policies successfully with an able and motivated workforce of leaders, teachers, trainers, advisers and support staff, working with learners of all ages. We need to recruit and retain the best people, and we must invest in their development and career paths and reward them for the work they do. (DfES, 2002: 16)

Other statements linked leadership and its development through the National College explicitly to the government's reform goals. An early example (NCSL, 2001) is:

> In England, the government is sustaining its commitment to education as a means to securing prosperity and social well-being. The White Paper of September 2001 sets out a demanding agenda for schools, including:
>
> - building on the literacy and numeracy gains at Key Stage 2
> - raising standards at Key Stage 3
> - a more diverse curriculum with more vocational routes for older secondary pupils
> - more opportunities for specialist and faith schools
> - more support for teachers
> - more autonomy for successful schools
> - more choice in the supply of services
> - intervention to tackle failure
>
> The College will help school leaders to find their way through this agenda. We believe that confident and empowered leaders will use it to create a unique educational vision for their school. The College will be a source of support, challenge and refreshment for leaders in their quest to renew and recreate their school.

In other instances, government discourse extended to specific reforms. This more recent example concerns the promotion of multi-agency working between children's services:

> In all areas, I look to the College to ensure that the leadership required to deliver ECM [Every Child Matters] and workforce development is developed through all College current and future programmes. Furthermore, I look to the College to equip current and future school leaders with the confidence to lead both the ECM and Standards agenda in order that they are seen as complementary, and not competing, demands on their time. (DfES, 2007: 5)

The National College's role as a control technology is implied in the DfES response to the recommendations of the National College review mentioned earlier. The government expectation is reinforced that the National College should acculturate school leaders towards operating as change agents for the next phase of reform:

> Streamlining the NCSL's efforts to increasing its impact, through greater role clarity, outcome focus, goal clarity and efficiency. The role should focus on three main functions: commissioning, 'strategic initiatives' and policy development . . . Building the culture to support the next phase of development. (DfES, 2004b: 2)

Yet government direction of the National College was far from simply directive. An education department civil servant inferred a need to balance setting expectations and assessing progress with delegating operational responsibility:

> We try increasingly to operate a system that is properly delegated . . . set out a clear set of expectations, to give the College the resources it needs, to monitor and discuss its progress over time, and to evaluate its performance—which is done on a fairly routine and detailed way by the Department.

There was conscious receptivity to input from the National College and procedures to ensure it happened. The National College's provision for school 'business managers' had, for example, originated with its staff and been negotiated through these channels. The civil service concern to avoid micromanagement of the National College's operation generated a further degree of ambiguity over the limits of government direction, empowering staff to use significant room to manoeuvre over the detailed content of provision inside the bounds of the remit.

## Orchestration of Leadership Development within the National College

The discourse of National College documents suggests some mediation of government expectations, implying a close but not wholly subordinate relationship with government. Rather than representing leadership development and the role of the National College as being to mobilize support for the achievement of government aims as such, they present these aims as being more generically *for the schools sector* which the National College is conceived as 'supporting'. That said, National College descriptions of education closely follow government discourse, suggesting that mediation is modest at most: 'In working towards our goal, we are seeking to improve the quality and effectiveness of the leadership of all schools, and in doing so, ensure that all pupils achieve ever higher standards' (NCSL, 2003: 4); 'school leaders contributing to a self-improving education system' (NCSL, 2008c: 17); and 'Effective school leadership is at the heart of improved performance in schools' (NCSL, 2008d: 4). 'Standards', 'performance' and 'self-improving systems' are all foci of reforms serving the government's aims of contributing to the 'knowledge-based economy'.

The interviews with National College-associated trainers commissioned to offer its programmes regionally suggested that their scope for mediation was small. Delimitation was tight: National College materials and assessment arrangements were standardized, and assessment was both regionally and nationally moderated. The National College trained, assessed and updated 'lead facilitators' from each of the providers for the NPQH programme. Through a cascade 'training trainers' model, the lead facilitator was responsible for training other facilitators working for the regional provider and for regional quality assurance processes. One National College-associated

trainer pointed to the constraints on trainers' power to act according to their cultural values as professional educators, claiming that within face-to-face training activities they had only a 'ten percent opportunity' for putting their individual stamp on the prescribed materials and mode of delivery. However, signs were reported of some easing in respect of NPQH:

> We've had diktats down from National College saying, this has to change, this is what needs to be included in this programme, and we respond. I feel now that actually that is shifting, that we have a little bit more flexibility to amend things, as long as we don't amend the frame, and to meet the needs of the candidates as we see them when we're working with them.

Here the modest expansion of trainers' authority to express their cultural values as educators was still strongly delimited by the requirement of conforming to the framing of the programme. Some, at least, were unwilling partners who felt pressured into minimal compliance rather than being acculturated as willing conduits for government-driven reform.

The linkage between leadership, leadership development and educational reform was variously expressed in documentation and interviews across the national education system levels. In government and National College documentation and interviews leadership was articulated as being developed largely in terms of an assumed (rather than specified) 'public good': to implement reforms, the educational improvements sought through them, and ongoing improvement efforts. All three National College senior staff we interviewed, and two associated trainers, implied that the National College supported change agency for reform. Four informants couched change agency in terms of a focus on improving children's outcomes, the rest primarily in terms of supporting particular initiatives. But the major locus of the National College's mediation of government expectations lay in the *content* of its provision. Far from overt resistance, mediation apparently rested on unspoken uses of authority to loosen the governmental coupling between reform and leadership development. Attention was clearly paid to the implications of reforms for leaders. Yet the content of training was reported to be mainly *generic*, with participants being left to decide whether and how to apply generic concepts and practical tools to particular reforms and other changes. As one senior National College official put it:

> I don't think there are too many headteachers that say that their role is actually just about managing the change process on behalf of the government … the most effective headteachers that I speak to are passionate about wanting the best for their youngsters, and sometimes they find the government agenda almost an irrelevance to that, or potentially worse, you know, working against it … The challenge for the College is to work through that by providing opportunities that are generic enough to enable people to respond to their own circumstances as they see fit.

While not overtly challenging government expectations, a key member of what Gunter and Forrester (2008) term the 'school leadership policy network' was using power to mediate by perforating the government-envisaged conduit for reform: using authority to dissipate the reform thrust by legitimating modest empowerment of school leaders to express their professional culture as educators in their local settings. This view was broadly corroborated by the four-fifths of our secondary school informants who had experienced one or more forms of training or other support from the National College. Half perceived its provision as promoting change agency in general. But only a fifth perceived the National College as directly pursuing the government's agenda, one headteacher who had attended a National College conference the previous year commenting:

> You do have a sense they send a minister down who will talk to you, and last year it was about sniffing out potential headteachers. And so ... there was a clear government agenda: 'Oh God, we've got a crisis in recruitment of headteachers, how are we going to solve it? We want the current heads to help us solve this problem.'

Four-fifths of informants who had experienced National College provision did not perceive its role to be an attempt to bring them on-side as reformers, but they did value the opportunity to discuss reforms. In the words of one deputy head:

> Part of it is about keeping people updated on new ideas and new reforms that are coming through and people need to ... obviously if you're in education and you're in a leadership team you need ... to know about what's going on really. So I think a lot of the training is about keeping us informed ... But also making sure that we're up to date with what's going on in other institutions, in the borough or in the country for example. Making sure we're all kind of working towards a common focus.

The linkage with reforms was never exclusive, and included fostering local initiatives to follow independent change agendas consistent with the reform thrust. It reflected the evolution of the government's political project through other control technologies from a powerfully top-down target and accountability regime (Barber, 2007) towards one of 'earned autonomy' embodying more 'personalized' education provision through collaboration between schools and other service organizations with greater involvement of parents (Strategy Unit, 2008). One civil servant spoke of how the thrust of public service reforms had gradually shifted

> ... from effectively a top-down model of reform that says we're going to do 'national literacy strategy' ... or whatever it might be, and here's a delivery chain and a system for implementation ... Over the course of the second term [of government office] we were shifting it so it was less top-down and more what Blair [then Prime Minister] would call a self-sustaining, self-improving system ... when we come to leadership development, obviously that becomes absolutely critical if you devolve power and responsibility. Say your job is: respond to the customers. Then clearly the quality of leadership is probably the single most important aspect of whether that public service is going to succeed or fail.

While a degree of local independence was encouraged early during New Labour office (DfEE 1998), the delimiting framework of accountability mechanisms was subsequently moderated to become more 'light touch'. An example is the 'new relationship with schools', including self-evaluation forms and shorter inspections (DfES 2004b). One senior teacher portrayed how a school-based innovation was nevertheless framed by the wider government promotion of 'personalization':

> The science department put their resources online, and said to the kids: 'It's up to you whether you do this or not, but you can do it at home if you want.' Within a day all of the boys who didn't do any homework, they were the first ones to get the work in. Now, that isn't government policy. It's an extension of the idea of personalizing learning. It's one of the ... myriad of possible branches, and if we decide to run with that and grow it then that is entirely up to us, and that's really exciting. So, it's within the spirit of the government policy, but it's very much bits of it devolved out to the school, and nobody will be asking us to, you know, to be accountable for that. Well, I suppose Ofsted [the Office for Standards in Education responsible for school inspection] will, but I'm sure they'd see it as a positive.

While there was modest mediation within the National College, it was no more than that. No informant spoke of ignoring reforms, overt resistance, or pursuing agendas inimical to the reform thrust. If not all National College staff and trainers had been fully acculturated as willing conduits for reform, they were largely compliant nevertheless.

## Secondary School Leaders' Mediation of Acculturation—within Limits

Our secondary school informants unanimously identified with being a visionary or 'transformational' leader. Over one-third also emphasized how leadership was distributed, and two-thirds implied that other key players must be involved, largely in terms of developing colleagues to take-on change agendas. One headteacher described how staff support was nurtured for a vision embodying the acculturation of all in the school:

> I think in terms of articulating our direction of travel as an organization—in that you make the direction of travel that we're moving in to, make our vision more of a reality—really clear. So, like up on the board there, we scribbled up a year ago what will make stuff work for students, that is, safe boundaries, good relationships and empowered learning, all within a culture of hope.

The government's discourse strategy promoting leadership seems to have made a significant impact on schools. Certainly, over the decade of New Labour government, the dominant managerial discourse has shifted dramatically (O'Reilly and Reed, 2010): the concern with management for control has become overlaid by visionary leadership for transformation. As one government politician put the distinction:

> You can manage processes, and you can even manage projects, but that doesn't mean that you're a leader of men and women, that you're a leader of cutting edge change, that you're a leader who can inspire. A good manager can encourage and oversee, and monitor efficiency in process, and I'm fully in favour of that, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they've got those cutting edge leadership skills.

A deputy head's account typifies how this discursive shift had been internalized among school leaders also, implicitly giving leadership primacy over management:

> Our leadership team ... you can very easily pick up who are basically, as I would see it, performing very much a managerial role. And then you can see the people there who have got: 'Oh yeah, let's, let's do that. I'm going to go and talk to somebody and see if I can find something out.' Or 'Why don't we try this?' ... That, in terms of what I do, has changed.

Another deputy head pointed to the ambiguity embodied in government promotion of particular reforms, which school leaders were implicitly expected to implement, alongside the encouragement to adopt a more selective, mediatory stance:

> What are the government trying to achieve? They're trying to close the attainment gap ... between boys and girls, and virtually everything which is coming out through 20/20 vision, the personalization agenda is, I think, designed to develop boys' learning ... There's a tension between some of the things they say and some of the things that they do. So, I think they say that they're trying to encourage collaboration, or collegiate activities and those sorts of things, through the 14 to 19 agenda, and obviously diplomas is all part of that agenda. But at the same time there's this sort of tension saying: 'Well, develop your institution in the way that you see fit, therefore, that is, take on board whatever it is that kind of fits your agenda.'

## Secondary School Leaders as Change Agents

The National College has played its part in promoting both transformational leadership and less individualistic notions, especially 'distributed' and 'collaborative' leadership, connoting a shared systemic culture that underpins the collective endeavour to achieve transformational goals. By way of illustration, the description of one leadership development programme (NCSL, 2008c: 6) claims that it will:

- ensure a strong vision where stakeholder buy-in is created;
- build a team culture to drive forward change in your school;
- build expectations and encourage innovative ideas for future learning;
- outline the importance of technology and its potential to empower and change learning;
- provide tools to review and engage others in the transformation of your learning environment.

Accounts of the systemically distributed nature of leadership include:

It is becoming less and less helpful to equate leadership solely with individuals, or as being solely institutionally bound. Today public services and many other organizations are characterized by their interconnectedness, need for collaboration and resources of networked knowledge. For sustainable transformation and improvement, leadership must become a collective quality of the system. (NCSL, 2005: 7)

However, while secondary school leaders associated their leadership with change agency, they saw themselves as neither simply government agents nor solely the agents of other stakeholders. Rather, being a leader legitimated the use of their authority in the role moderately to mediate government expectations, in line with their existing cultural allegiances as professional educators with deep understanding of what would work in their organization. A deputy head noted how being a change agent did not just mean faithful implementation of government-driven reforms:

It makes it sound as if all the change is done to us but … schools have more autonomy and authority than they had previously, so it's also being selective about change and looking at change from within where there's a desire for certain changes. So it's not just about us being change agents and—I don't know—sort of governmental puppets and imposing what they say … It's being a filter and picking up what's good for this particular organization.

Those who had experienced leadership development provision implied that its cultural impact was largely to reinforce their existing culture, augmenting it through raising their awareness rather than overlaying it through acculturation. Indicatively, the impact of the NPQH programme was perceived by one deputy head in terms of:

… a sort of conscious reflection on my leadership style, and on working in a team in order to get the best out of the team. So, it was that opportunity to stop, to reflect, to criticize myself, and to think, yeah, actually, by acting in this way, then I'm not necessarily doing the best thing to achieve my objectives … that sort of self-reflection I think—more than anything else—I've picked up from the NPQH.

As leaders, they perceived themselves as empowered to retain considerable jurisdiction over their organizational response to reforms or other change pressures: certainly over how a change was implemented, occasionally over whether to implement it. They exercised judgement over

when to comply, and when creatively to interpret external demands. Their jurisdiction also extended to initiating change, reinforced by the government encouragement, at the time, of greater public service innovation (DIUS, 2008). In orchestrating educational change in their organizations, they claimed to be mediating the government attempt to acculturate them as leaders of reform. A deputy head reflected:

> A good leadership group is able to take on those things which . . . you have to take on those things which you're asked to do, or driven to do. But then to be able to say no or yes—whatever—to the opportunities that present themselves, and make it work for you. And it isn't necessarily jumping on every bandwagon that happens to pass by.

Mediatory room for manoeuvre for one headteacher was expressed in terms of scope over how government expectations for educational outcomes were achieved:

> They've [government ministers] got expectations of us. And I think what they're trying to do is to hold their nerve and say: 'Right, here's what we want. We'll allow you a lot of freedom as to how you get there, provided you get there.' But their default position is panic: 'We're not getting there, we'd better tell them how to do it!' . . . Provided you're getting your outcomes you can justify that. The moment you start not getting your outcomes then that bit kicks in much more . . . There's a kind of tension going on there . . . between the government-driven agenda and what your outcomes are within the school, and it's a balancing act all the time.

Yet it is notable that they conceived their response in terms more of *adapting* reforms for their organizational setting than of ignoring them. The national accountability mechanisms demonstrably delimit both the extent of their mediation and the range of their innovation. A government target about limiting the exclusion of disruptive students from school was a case in point, as one assistant head described:

> I have to look at targets such as exclusions, because I deal with the exclusions of students. That obviously is government policy. It's all about inclusion now, and that involves working with lots of outside agencies . . . I have to deal with the frustration of staff who want a naughty boy kicked out of school instantly . . . I try to limit our exclusions because . . . there is pressure on schools, and within the Local Authority [district], not to exclude at the drop of a hat.

Scope for 'earned autonomy' was, by government design, dependent on schools achieving the measured outcomes required. Delimitation was radically tighter where schools did not measure up. A reform affecting one of our research sites left little realistic scope for a mediatory approach. The organization was identified as a 'National Challenge school' (DCSF, 2008) because examination results were below government benchmark minimum standards. A 'National Challenge action plan' was to be submitted to the government, in conjunction with the local authority responsible for 'support and challenge', showing how the benchmark targets would be reached within three years. The headteacher observed: 'There is six week monitoring . . . and at any point they deem that we are making unsatisfactory progress against our action plan to achieve these targets they can intervene by removing our governing body, removing me, or changing the status of this school to an Academy.' This reform relied on surveillance and punitive sanction to secure behavioural compliance, not acculturation towards endorsing it.

Overall, the majority of the school leaders we interviewed claimed some modest power to mediate, orchestrating change by negotiating the tension between responding to reform imperatives and retaining significant scope for local adaptation. But their reported mediatory activity was framed by their enduring commitment as educators, which impacted far more fundamentally on their change agency as leaders than any leadership development experience, from the National College or elsewhere. It seems that our school leaders had harnessed their power to mediate the government's acculturation effort by holding hard to their professional culture as educators, and continuing to use their authority to express these educational values as far as they perceived was feasible.

## Systemic Reform, Systemic Mediation, Systemic Improvement?

These results suggest several conclusions about the extent and limits of the contribution that leadership development may play in educational improvement efforts. First, they reinforce findings from other research in schools (Wallace and Pocklington, 2002: Hoyle and Wallace, 2005) that culture is not reliably manipulable. Culture management through leadership development has limited impact, even in this case of unusually heavy and sustained government investment in national provision. The National College constitutes a relatively weak control technology for the systemic acculturation of school leaders as change agents for the government's political project of public service reform. Those we interviewed who had experienced National College provision apparently retained allegiance to their organizational and wider professional culture, adopting a contingent stance towards government reforms rather than turning into change agents on behalf of government. Their response was reportedly shaped by the degree of fit they perceived between the changed practices implied by any reform and what they were trying to achieve in their local circumstances. To the extent that the fit was imperfect, they claimed that as leaders they sought to adapt the reform, harnessing it as far as possible towards their educational improvement goals. We noted earlier that this study was not designed to triangulate these informants' claims about their practice. But their accounts minimally portrayed their aspirations to be contingent responders, implying that they subscribed to cultural values which were not automatically aligned with those underpinning reforms. That said, the National College did appear to have contributed to their more diffuse acculturation as change agents, willing to address reforms within their wider improvement agendas, but not to eschew or challenge them.

Second, the government's wider discourse strategy, incorporating the National College as one means of promulgating leadership discourse and practice for nearly a decade, had made a significant impact (alongside other discursive sources including the national media and education press). We saw how all our secondary school informants, whether or not they had experienced National College provision, had assimilated this discourse: leadership was the accepted term in which they couched their reported practice in orchestrating change for educational improvement. So while the acculturation attempt via the National College may not have created a cadre of ardent reformers, its extensive reach had helped to change the discursive landscape: out with the 'management for control' of the past (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005; O'Reilly and Reed, 2010), in with 'leadership for transformation'.

Third, our results portray how a limited degree of systemic mediation was indeed integral to the implementation of the government attempt to mobilize reform through leadership development. Documentary and interview sources revealed some looseness in the link between leadership development and reform across national levels: between government education department expectations and the largely generic content of National College provision, and small but possibly increasing

scope for mediation by associated trainers. Greater scope was reported by our secondary school informants. Yet their power to mediate through adapting (rather than ignoring) reforms was nevertheless delimited by the imperative to demonstrate compliance under the relevant accountability mechanisms.

Those National College senior staff and trainers who acknowledged this tension saw their support role in mediatory terms, implicitly encouraging school leaders to exercise their power to mediate judiciously. A key was to seek a balance between faithful response and adaptation of reforms that would enable them to pursue improvement according to their educational values while avoiding a negative evaluation when held to account. As our 'National Challenge' school exemplified, such an evaluation could precipitate a powerful technology of control to enforce compliance, where mediation remained only an option at the risk of organizational suicide.

Thus the deployment of the power to mediate, though significant, remained moderate. Winning the hearts and minds of school leaders through their acculturation as reformers is a 'soft' policy lever. While mediation may have mildly diluted its impact as envisaged by ministers, the 'hard' policy levers—performance measurement through target-setting and league tables of test results, accountability through regular inspection and sanctions for failure to come up to scratch—were powerful enough to guarantee a high degree of behavioural compliance in the absence of universal endorsement.

Fourth, by contrast the government focus on and school leaders' resultant identification with leadership may turn out to have the longer-term ironic unintended consequence of *fostering* the mediation of both the acculturation effort and the education reforms it was designed in significant part to support. Such an impact is consistent with long-established knowledge about the endemic role of mediation within public policy implementation (Hill and Hupe, 2008; Odden, 1991). Raising school leaders' awareness of their potential for change agency may be acculturating them towards full deployment of their power to mediate according to their educational values: by adapting reforms to their situations while also pursuing independent change agendas. The advent of explicit government support for the promotion of greater public service innovation (DIUS, 2008) seems likely to reinforce the proclivity to mediate.

Such mediation, speculatively, still serves government education reform interests. Adapting reforms can render them more viable in contingent local circumstances (Bang, 2004; Bottery, 2007). Independent change agendas congruent with the education reform thrust can augment it, now with a degree of government blessing. The New Labour government's recent formulation of its political project, discursively represented by the slogan 'Innovation Nation', could in principle foster systemic improvement. If it becomes reflected in future leadership development provision under the present coalition government this new thrust might empower school leaders to alter the balance of the tension they face as change agents. Potentially, provision could become less concerned with leadership development that promotes change agency for the judicious (and so modest) mediation of reforms, more concerned with change agency for judicious innovation to bring about local educational improvement. But the scope for altering the balance of this tension will surely remain very limited while government expectations, instrumental accountability mechanisms and sanctions remain unchanged: any innovation you like as long as your students achieve government-set standards—or else!

Other countries, such as Finland, may offer lessons for UK government policy (OECD, 2007; Pont et al., 2008b). There, with less central direction of educational reform and less emphasis on national provision of leadership development, but with more scope for local innovation, educational achievement is considerably higher. Of the many technologies of control to which different

governments are turning in their quest for educational improvement, leadership development for acculturating school leaders towards reform clearly offers no panacea.

## Acknowledgements

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