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Finding the glass slipper
The impact of leadership on
innovation in further education

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ABOUT FETL

The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

ABSTRACT

The rise of commercialisation within education (Courtney, 2015) has brought with it a number of systems and processes which have had a significant impact on how professional roles are enacted. In particular, the increased scrutiny of teacher activity has been viewed as leading to a reduction in professionalism (Ball, 2003; Ball et al., 2012). In further education, this has led to the development of a more defined, potentially formulaic and less autonomous approach to teaching (Avis, 2003). In addition, the codification of 'good' teaching and learning, embedded through teacher education, the Professional Standards (Education and Training Foundation, 2014) and bodies such as Ofsted, has provided very distinct guidelines to direct teachers' activities in the classroom.

This research forms part of a fellowship awarded by the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL). The aim was to explore how leadership within Further Education (FE) impacts on teaching and learning, specifically on the autonomy teachers have to construct their work in creative ways. The project investigated how professionals are constrained or empowered to develop methods which allow them to innovate rather than replicate in the classroom; ultimately creating an environment which inspires and challenges learners.

Semi-structured interviews with teachers, managers and leaders were used to explore factors that enabled and constrained innovation in the classroom. The findings outlined a range of similarities for all groups in relation to specific 'enablers' to creativity and some distinct differences in those factors considered to be constraints. One significant difference was the perceptions of teacher agency, which influenced attitudes to whether or not teachers were willing to move away from more prescriptive approaches in order to explore alternative methods. A stark contrast was found between the views of teachers and leaders in relation to the constraints, or the freedom to be found in the teaching role, suggesting miscommunication or misconception by one or both parties.

BACKGROUND

Picasso is often attributed with saying that 'all children are artists, the problem is staying an artist when you grow up'.[1] This sentiment aligns with Sir Ken Robinson's key message in the RSA Animate *Changing Education Paradigms* (RSA, 2010) in which compulsory education is defined as a system that has been modelled in the image of industrialisation, with roots firmly embedded in standardised practice. But what of the further education sector? This phase of English education is recognised for its diversity, its complexity and its ability to transform lives (Duckworth and Smith, 2018). Despite this, FE has experienced its own form of standardisation, a change process which is often linked to the incorporation of colleges, following the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 (Ball, 2003). Since then, FE has undergone a transformation in structure, funding and management, which has been associated with a range of metaphors, each illustrating a different facet of these changes. FE has been described, variously, as the 'Cinderella sector', due to its lack of funding (Baker, 1989), the 'Ugly Duckling', in reference to its position relative to other phases of education (Thompson and Hopkins, 2018) and the '12 Dancing Princesses' (Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015), a phrase intended to capture the 'subversive' activities of those who work in it.

One significant change has been the transmutation of the academic role into a clearly defined product, with increased value being attached to the craft of teaching and being identified as a 'good' teacher by whatever bodies have the power to award this title

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[1] https://www.pablopicasso.org/quotes.jsp

(Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2014). Teachers clearly recognise that 'good' is defined by a set of specific criteria, the adherence to which creates a much narrower definition of teaching, not always suited to the non-traditional learner. In addition, the introduction of standards-driven teacher education has led to what Hodkinson describes as a 'technicist' approach (1998) which removes the individual creativity that teachers may traditionally have brought to the role.

The rise of commercialisation brought with it many practices adopted from the private sector, advocated as efficiency measures. However, there is evidence to suggest that many practitioners find the plethora of systems and processes an encumbrance which impairs their ability to take ownership of their roles (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2018). As suggested by Ken Robinson (Ibid.), educating our children on a model of industrialisation has the potential to destroy creativity; it is perhaps inevitable that the same outcome is likely for our teachers. In any environment, the introduction of specific criteria carries with it perceived limitations and, while specificity is associated with structure and the ability to measure progress, it also provides constraints for variance and, more specifically, the divergent thinking often associated with creative approaches.

In the story of *Cinderella*, the glass slipper provides a symbol of hope and transformation and represents the protagonist's uniqueness as it only fits her. This report, *Finding the glass slipper*, depicts the search for another specific fit, in this case, seeking out 'enablers' and 'constraints' in relation to taking creative approaches to teaching within further education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Creativity in teaching and learning is not a new idea. The use of 'creative approaches' is recognised by Ofsted as a way of improving standards (2010) and widely publicised in their good practice reports. Ken Robinson has advocated the need for more creativity within schools and higher education (Robinson, 1999; Robinson, 2017), and reports such as *Success for All* (DfES, 2002) recognise the impact of teaching approaches on learning effectiveness. Even a simple search for 'creative teaching and learning' in the online library catalogue reveals over 260,000 hits, which suggests that this is an area of interest for many and an important consideration for the FE sector as a whole. The focus of this paper is the influence of leadership on innovation in the classroom; therefore, the literature will be centred around three key areas: leadership and culture; creativity and innovation; and the enablers and constraints which empower or disempower individuals within FE organisations.

Leadership and culture

According to Bush (2008), the leadership and management of education was significantly influenced by the Education Reform Act 1988, which encouraged the adoption of a pragmatic and bureaucratic approach. Subsequently, the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 had a similar impact within further education, through the incorporation of colleges in 1993. This, alongside the adoption of models from the commercial sector, creates an understanding of educational leadership which is heavily influenced by non-educational frameworks, and, it is argued, produces an inadequate basis for grounded theories of education management (ibid.). As stated by Glatter (1999), this has led to the growth of technical-rational methods, which are problematic not only

because of the assumptions on which they are predicated, but also because an objectively measured approach is not necessarily suited to a context in which many outcomes are not easily measurable. The drive towards commercialisation perhaps accounts for the sector's increased capacity in relation to measuring quantitative outcomes, such as student achievement, but results in greater difficulty in demonstrating impact on individuals, in particular the transformative elements of participating in FE opportunities (Duckworth and Smith, 2018).

According to Bush (2003), there are eight categories of leadership that relate to specific models of management. If shown on a continuum between formal and informal approaches, they might look like Figure 1 (see p15).

Additionally, there is a model specifically related to the leadership of learning and teaching referred to as instructional. This has its focus on activities which directly impact on students, so would have clear goals in relation to managing curriculum and strategies for teaching and learning. It should also have a focus on professional development for teachers (Southworth, 2002). Similarly, Harris and Muijs (2003) recognise that instructional leadership, referred to as teacher leadership, is centred on the development of teaching and learning and has its foundations in general collaboration. This requires a form of agency whereby teachers are empowered to lead improvements that may have a direct impact on teaching and learning and, in practice, can be seen in the recent rise in research activity among FE professionals, supported by networks such as the Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN).

The value of models may be considered limited in relation to leadership, and is certainly questioned from a management perspective where there is some scepticism around theory being applied to something that is primarily viewed as a practical skill. Likewise, leadership could be seen as something that has more in common with personal traits than with the embodiment of particular theories, and perhaps the multitude of theoretical perspectives available do little to dilute this view. This is clearly articulated by Bolman and Deal who use the term 'conceptual pluralism' to illustrate the potential confusion caused by an array of theoretical options which they describe as: '…a jangling discord of multiple voices' (1997: 11).

Bush (2008) suggests that leadership has three characteristics: influence, values and vision, and makes the distinction that influence is not the same as authority, which he sees as residing within formal positions.

Leadership, therefore, could be seen as independent of position within formal hierarchies.

In relation to values, Greenfield claims that leaders are expected to base their actions on clear personal and professional values which may lie beyond rationality and that '... a technical or narrowly-scientific rationality asks only what means best foster and end' (1991: 208). It could be assumed, by use of the word 'personal', that, in Greenfield's view, values are something established by leaders themselves, rather than being imposed by external bodies. In the current FE climate, this might raise questions about how much agency leaders have to formulate their own values, unless they happen to be in line with those of the government and bodies such as Ofsted. Similarly, the development of a clear vision may be blurred by such factors, particularly when there is a danger that a bad Ofsted report has significant consequences for individual leaders. This very real threat may well help to shape a vision focused on external rather than internal requirements.

According to Bottery (2012), to move forwards it may be necessary to develop a more complex view of reality which avoids over-simplifying cause and effect relationships. It is suggested that two assumptions have underpinned education management in recent years: the first is the perception that we need to control and monitor the workforce by defining and measuring quality and the second is that punishment of non-compliance will help raise educational standards.

This view, although proposed in relation to compulsory education, also rings true for further education and illustrates notions of efficiency measures that do not take intervening variables into account. Bottery (ibid.) also contends that a control-and-punishment regime is inclined to lead to people feeling distrusted, a finding which was evident in Thompson and Wolstencroft's study based on all phases of English education (2018).

The leader's role may be viewed as complex, given the multitude of considerations that must be juggled to satisfy the requirements of numerous others, but, according to Schein, the answer is a little more straightforward: 'the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture' (in Buscher and Harris, 1999: 306). In a society that values innovation and an economy that promotes competition, the need to create a culture which not only allows but inspires creativity is just as fundamental in education as it is in business.

Creativity and innovation

Creativity is a powerful term, often associated with a 'special few' who have the ability to produce great works of art. However, according to Robinson (2017), this is a misconception. If we take creativity in its broadest context then it should include the day-to-day activities carried out in any workplace and also recognise the creative capacities of every individual. Robinson stresses that in order to progress as a society we need to 'think differently about our talents and abilities [and] run schools, companies and communities differently' (Robinson, 2017: 5). This view is reinforced by Edwards (2001) who suggests that through current systems of education we may be missing the most important aspects of creativity by focusing on the scientific and treating the arts as 'enrichment', thereby neglecting many valuable human capabilities which have the potential to lead change. These include perception, intuition and imagination. Samples puts forward the view that society has a strong focus on rationality and asserts that 'The metaphoric mind is a maverick. It is as wild and unruly as a child. It follows us doggedly and plagues us with its presence as we wander the contrived corridors of rationality', and, making reference to Einstein, he states that by ignoring that which is not considered rational, we may be limiting our potential: 'Einstein called the intuitive or metaphoric mind a sacred gift. He added that the rational mind was a faithful servant. It is paradoxical that in the context of modern life we have begun to worship the servant and defile the divine' (1976: 26).

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1996), creativity can be defined as 'any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain or that transforms an existing domain into a new one' (1996: 28). This has a focus on the

outcome of creativity but does nothing to illuminate the actual process. Formulating a theory about how human creativity transpires, Koestler's classic work (1964) put forward the term 'bisociation', which refers to the combination of an object or idea from two fields that are not normally considered to be related. This idea is brought into the teaching and learning context by Beadle (2011), who advocates the connection of disparate ideas in order to come up with new approaches. He provides an example of this with his approach to teaching punctuation through a series of Kung Fu moves.

Robinson believes that there are three key aspects of creativity: imagination, which brings to mind things that are not currently part of our experience; creativity, described as the process through with we develop original ideas; and innovation, through which we put new ideas into practice (Robinson 2017). For trainee teachers, creativity is defined as:

- thinking outside the box;
- doing things differently;
- problem-solving;
- taking risks;
- alternative approaches;
- Artistic, using music, drawing, painting;
- opening up minds;
- exploring (Eastwood et al., 2009: 2).

It is clear from the range of ideas presented that producing a definitive description of the meaning of creativity is not simple, particularly if we recognise the importance of individual perceptions. Within the amorphous world of further education, creativity may (or may not) be defined in clear terms but what is likely to be defined is what is (and is not) viewed as creative within a given setting. This suggests that in order to be creative, something must also be recognised as such and raises questions about who has the power to attach the 'creative' label to a given activity and whether or not those 'in power' are suitably qualified to make such judgements.

Enablers and constraints

It is perhaps inevitable that the production of more specific guidelines about how education institutions will be judged provides a narrower definition of teaching, of learning and of good practice in either domain. The creation of a powerful inspection regime, in conjunction with the production of standards, form control mechanisms which require increased quality assurance processes to monitor compliance against these standards. But who says the standards are right? And even if they are, for how long? Coffield argues that the current system of inspection, while having some merit, is overall 'unreliable, invalid and at times unjust' (2017: 69). The purpose here is not to diminish the value of standards themselves, or the benefits of measuring progress against them, but to recognise that in order to evolve we must create the space for innovation and change.

Politis (2010) considers the conditions which provide the basis for creativity in the workplace and points to the following factors as 'enablers' for creative approaches:

- Employees should have a shared commitment to their work.
- They should be provided with adequate resources with which to do the work.
- Work should be intellectually challenging.
- Employees should have a high level of autonomy over how they carry out their work.
- Supervisors should encourage employees to take risks.

Davis et al. outline a range of similar factors that enable creativity and conclude that within education, collaborative, flexible working should be facilitated for both learners and educators. They stress the importance of collaboration and 'liberating innovative relationships' (2012: 179), seeing creativity as a collective action which can be progressed through activities such as brainstorming, consultation or group work (ibid.). However, they also emphasise the significance of flexible hierarchies and informal structures that develop within social spaces, that is, those not necessarily enabled through enforced team-working. The relevance of relationship in general is stressed, in particular the constitution of

hierarchy and power within organisations, suggesting that more creative approaches are likely to occur in settings where staff are able to challenge traditional methods without fear of sanction.

In contrast, Sternberg and Kaufman have written that 'constraints do not necessarily harm creative potential – indeed they are built into the construct of creativity itself' (2010: 481). Likewise, McIntyre (2012) claims that creative individuals may also be provided with possibilities as a result of the structural factors they encounter in the form of constraints, exploring the notion that freedom to be creative may be less to do with the absence of constraints per se and more to do with how we work within them.

In Kotlyar and Karakowsky's view (2007), conflict can play a central role in how creatively teams make decisions. They propose that there are two types of conflict within teams, referred to as 'cognitive conflict', when individuals introduce deviant ideas which result in more in-depth discussion, and 'affective conflict', where interaction may be based on personal incompatibility. In their view, cognitive conflict provides the basis for in-depth discussion and higher levels of analysis, leading to more effective decision-making, whereas affective conflict can foster cynicism and distrust. This suggests that creative team combinations may be better organised along mutual compatibilities and interests rather than job roles.

The literature outlines both the complexities of further education and the impact that contextual factors have on the way teachers construct their work. There is a consistent message that while a framework may be useful, flexibility in structures, processes and thinking are requirements for enhanced creativity. What seems most important is that cultures allow for flexible approaches and that processes are fluid enough to transform constraints from the barriers that contain current practice, to the bridges that lead to what might be.

FORMAL ⟷ INFORMAL

Managerial	Transactional	Participative/ interpersonal	Transformational	Moral	Post-modern	Contingency
hierarchical, focus on pursing objectives.	decisions based on bargaining.	collegiate, shared decision-making.	gain commitment of followers, shared values/ common interests.	structure formalised through rituals and symbols, shared norms.	organisations created by individuals who are central.	limited clarity in objectives and fluid policy-making.

Figure 1. Simple continuum of leadership approaches (adapted from Bush, 2003).

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative approach based around semi-structured, individual interviews was adopted for this project. This allowed some generalisation of responses based on the framework of interview questions, but also provided participants with the opportunity to discuss issues they considered important. Interviews were carried out between January 2018 and May 2018.

In order to gain the perspectives of practitioners within different roles, interviews were held with leaders, managers and teachers. This also provided the opportunity to compare responses between each of the groups and discover any similarities and differences in perspectives. The sample consisted of 13 teachers, four managers and nine leaders from a range of organisations, including FE colleges, land-based colleges, a university technical college, and prison education. In order to provide anonymity to participants, transcripts were coded using pseudonyms. A summary outlining demographic data related to the sample has been included in *Appendix 1*.

The initial data were presented to teacher and manager focus groups in order to validate the emerging themes. Feedback from the focus groups was used to structure the overall findings.

A final stage of the research was the presentation of the findings to a team of leadership experts at Coventry University. This was done to gain alternative perspectives to inform the recommendations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this research is to compare the viewpoints of teachers, managers and leaders within further education in relation to factors that enable or constrain creativity in the classroom. The interview data has been analysed separately for each of the groups so that specific findings can be highlighted. This data are compared in the conclusion to establish any similarities and differences.

TEACHERS

For all of the respondents, the most significant influence on how they conducted their work came from their immediate line manager. When asked which factors empowered them in their roles, all participants mentioned one or more relating to how managers created a sense of empowerment or constraint. These included: 'relationships based on trust', 'freedom to run courses as they wished' or, more generally, 'a line manager who was considered to be supportive'. These findings have some similarities to other literature (Harris and Muijs, 2003; Politis, 2010; Davis et al., 2012) and highlight the importance of the teacher's agency to construct their work in innovative ways. In one example, such agency was achieved, not necessarily through 'legitimate' consent from a line manager, but by virtue of location and not working at the main college site:

> *I think the organisational policies, I tend to work underneath if that makes sense, so I get away with some of them. (Mike)*

Similar responses were provided by teachers who taught more specialised subjects, as outlined by Bob and Lydia:

> *There's nobody else here who does [teaches] that so I do at present have quite a lot of autonomy (Bob).*

> *I am largely free to do what I want so long as I stay within the subject specification. (Lydia)*

In terms of constraints, the responses were more varied and detailed. The most significant constraint, which made up 70 per cent of responses was the impact of 'laborious, time-consuming or tick-box processes', viewed by many of the participants as being indicative of a lack of trust:

> *Bureaucracy occurs when trust goes out of the window. I think you see that in a lot of organisations – at some point there is a breakdown in trust because it is difficult for a big organisation like a college to have a handle on what's going on in every classroom and Ofsted will come and go 'what are you doing about it?' (Pete)*

> *One of the biggest problems is accountability… producing these reports to justify yourself with numbers and statistics. (Harry)*

Other constraints included 'lack of funding in the sector' and a 'focus on assessment'. Responses related to funding were offered as generic statements, and no respondents actually specified how extra funding would be helpful. Reference to assessment was two-fold and was offered in relation to the importance placed on learner outcomes rather than learning itself, similar to the notion of an exam factory (Coffield et al., 2011), as well as the perception of a culture which encouraged less rigorous assessment practice:

> *We have a habit of passing everybody which is a big constraint because it means that people can put in very little effort and still get a pass grade which is very frustrating for me as a lecturer. Nobody fails here (Lydia).*

Less significant statistically, although still mentioned in 20 per cent of responses, were the constraints imposed by the hierarchy in relation to 'organisation culture' and 'timetabling', which, in the majority of responses, were explicitly linked to overall workload rather than specific details about individual timetables. In 30 per cent% of the interviews, respondents made reference to fears in relation to job security. This was clearly evident when discussing whether or not they would be prepared to 'take a risk' in the classroom:

Fear unfortunately is a big factor, particularly if you take an institution like ours which has gone through a bad Ofsted, the fear is everywhere in the building and everyone is waiting for somebody to come in… the leadership is changing its mind all the time and not particularly clear about what the expectations are… often it does feel that things go in and out of vogue in terms of their importance, so you'll find that British values are really important one minute then that's 'yeah, do it, but not so important' then you refocus on maths and English and then 'oh no, we are focussing on this…'

The overall power of Ofsted was prominent in most of the tutors' interviews, as was the need to conform to what the organisation deemed 'good practice'. In most cases, one informed the other, with teaching quality usually being monitored on the basis of Ofsted practices but, as suggested by Greatbatch and Tate (2018), with limited evidence of how these practices improve quality or learners' outcomes. This, in turn, provided the basis for tutors to adopt a 'safe' stance by taking a more pragmatic and less idealistic approach to the job. Pete was particularly mindful of what he perceived as constant surveillance of teacher practice, which he likened 'to being in a fishbowl'. Furthermore, he felt that this had a significant impact on whether or not teachers were able to take more creative approaches:

I know this from talking to colleagues, on the amount of experimentation that you are willing to engage in…. If you feel like someone can come in at any point you are less likely to take those risks in the classroom to do things that might not work because you are always on the watch out.

Another factor in this reluctance to take risks concerns the unstable economic environment in which most FE colleges operate, generating what Silverman refers to as a 'compliance culture' (2008). The participants also provided evidence of Shain and Gleeson's (1999) 'strategic compliance' when they had the advantage of working in a satellite location or in a more specialised subject area.

Undoubtedly, processes which rely heavily on teacher surveillance, such as lesson observations and walk-throughs, appear to be creating a perception that teaching must follow a set of rigid criteria and is narrowly defined. However, the exceptions to this perception came from the teachers who felt they were able to 'fly under the radar' as a result of their location or specialism. In these cases, the teachers seemed to welcome opportunities to try new things and were keen for senior managers to acknowledge these efforts. Paul is one example of this. He works at a satellite location, which he described as a 'work family':

> *I was really disappointed when they took away the grading system because I love chasing a grade, absolutely love it... because we all want to chase a grade one... of course you do, you want to be the best.*

But...

> *We don't ever really get a pat on the back. A little bit more recognition... we are fantastic here... we are really good at the job and the data speaks for itself and I sometimes wish that was picked up on.*

MANAGERS

For managers the most significant factor in how their work was constructed was the influence of their own line managers. For 75% of respondents, 'not being micro-managed' and subsequently being able to organise their own time was important. In a similar vein, Managers appreciated being consulted about decisions. One significant difference within this group was acknowledgement of the importance of training and development opportunities, representing a divergence from previous studies which highlighted the prevalence of systems' training alongside the lack of management training (Briggs, 2001; Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013).

In common with tutors, managers felt constrained by systems and paperwork but for them this constraint mostly related to the need to report on data frequently, a process which was described as 'spinning plates'. In one case, a manager was expected to produce Excel reports twice a day, while, for others, the process was a weekly event. In all cases, managers took a pragmatic approach to this requirement but were also somewhat cynical about it:

> *We had spreadsheets with money, this course attracts this amount of money… it was all tied to money, which you can understand to a certain degree because you can't have a course that's flagging and costing a fortune but there are ways of doing it that I believe could be better. Not done in such a harsh dogmatic way.*

Compliance to systems and processes was a strong feature in the interviews with managers, who took a similar view to tutors in relation to its impact:

> *In a nutshell, I think that creativity is stifled by compliance, no doubt about it but it is trying to find that happy medium and I haven't found it yet…*

Respondents voiced difficulties in gaining compliance from all team members: 'There are a number of times when we have tried to apply a level of compliance… you know… this is the policy and we get the inevitable reply "that don't work for us" *[sic]*'. They were also acutely aware of the need to demonstrate this to senior management in order to avoid unpleasant consequences, as Abby stated:

> *That would come up in meetings where people would be named and shamed if things weren't going the way that they wanted them to go… there were a lot of people there so if you were named and shamed, my goodness me, you did feel like a very naughty school child. Not pleasant, not pleasant.*

LEADERS

For leaders, the most significant enabler was a sense of agency in relation to decision-making and 100 per cent of participants acknowledged having some form of agency in their role. Given their positions in the hierarchy, this is not surprising. However, for 22 per cent of the participants, agency was expressed in more personal terms, citing the importance of internal agency, rather than that which accompanied their designation within the organisation. In this way, it was similar to Bandura's description of self-efficacy (Bandura 1977), suggesting that leaders had the self-belief to take actions they considered appropriate, sometimes despite alternative guidance:

> *Internally I would say that's significant [agency]. If we are looking at genuinely the autonomy in the system then I would say it's not very much because in a way regulatory agencies tell us exactly what they want to offer, how many hours, how, what level... and in terms of the inspectorate they decide what good looks like so there's actually very little freedom in the system to enable any college to do something that's brilliant. (Adil)*

Although agency was generally seen in a positive light, one leader was mindful that enhanced freedom was not always in the best interests of the organisation:

> *I feel that principals probably have more power and agency than similar roles in education... perhaps even too much. When you see colleges wholesale change their strategy that seemed to be driven by a principal rather than an incorporation and I think that can be dangerous if it is too much linked to a person's own ambitions. (James)*

All other responses relating to enablers were cited by individuals, and included: access to useful, time-relevant training; a sense of community in the location; and the ability to be adaptive in leadership style. One leader, the principal of a successful college, referred to government policy and incorporation as enabling progress and at the same college another leader quoted Ofsted as an empowering factor, although this reference related to having 'passed' Ofsted, rather than the inspection process itself.

In common with respondents in other categories, leaders were also able to cite more constraints than enablers within their roles. Of these, the most significant constraint cited was changes in policy and the associated lack of stability, referred to as 'the constant churn of new initiatives'. This made up 66 per cent of responses. The second most common category was insufficient funding (55 per cent) and leaders also found the data-led audit culture and emphasis on being judged to be a constraint (33 per cent).

> *For me, education is a ridiculously messy human pursuit and I marvel at how the government tries to control it and make it manageable. I think we're trying to monetize something that's messy and immeasurable. That's obviously very tricky.*
>
> *So in a funny sort of way I see my role in objective terms as trying to make the best education that I can with the money that I have... trying to be honourable which is often very tricky because it's often about numbers, money and all that stuff.* (Derek)

Subsequently, the need to respond to external judgements appeared to have a significant influence on leadership styles. In all the interviews, leaders referred to personal traits when discussing their leadership style and the most consistent 'style' noted was the need to be adaptive as a result of the frequent changes within the sector:

> *I like to think my model of leadership is adaptive to the situation. Leaders have two characteristics... one... the ability to gather the people around them that are able to deliver what they want to deliver and the second one is an ability to adapt their leadership for that environment.* (Trevor)

This was articulated very clearly by Derek who explained the need to take a more pragmatic approach to leadership by referring to Bateson's work on systems and patterns (1972):

> *I don't really trust models... you start to think well, what's underneath the model... where's the pattern that connects, it's like Bateson. So, I'm always trying to... get to the nub of it... if I can see an issue that can be resolved I just want to understand the issue first and then if there is a model that fits it then yeah, great but generally there isn't and my approach is to just go 'well let's just figure out what's going on here'... so I'd be surprised if I don't fall into some leadership category but I think that if there's one that flits around to find the right answer, then it's that one... a butterfly one...*

In contrast to the other groups, leaders also made reference to the constraints brought about by other members of staff, including 'getting buy-in from staff' and 'getting staff to think differently' (33 per cent). In addition, there was a range of other factors which leaders considered to be important in terms of enabling or constraining innovative teaching and learning. These included: staff being passive and not challenging; rushing to fix problems rather than looking for a range of solutions; and lack of research used to forge improvements. Two of the principals interviewed articulated a desire for staff to question current practice and said they actively encouraged teachers to approach the senior management team with ideas about how things could be improved.

> *I often get asked things like 'wouldn't it be a good idea if teachers had a period off where they could all meet'... my view is... if that's a good idea why is it not happening? I can't make that happen, the only people who can make it happen is you [teachers] because you do the timetables so just sit down and agree it. There seems to be almost a feeling that people can't do things when they can...*

However, leaders were also aware of the reasons why staff might be reluctant to challenge and several cited forms of teacher surveillance, linked to performance management, such as lesson observations and 'walk-throughs' as being a potential block. At the same time as acknowledging

the possible negative impact of these approaches, there was a general reluctance to implement changes without evidence that such change might also bring a positive impact. The colleges which had opted to amend processes, for example by removing the grading or performance management components in relation to lesson observations, did state their reasons for doing so were based on current research (Edgington 2013; O'Leary, 2014; Thompson and Wolstencroft 2014).

There was also some recognition of the impact of teachers' workload:

> *I see the current workload in further education as being at the upper human limit… I genuinely believe it's beyond what's possible for somebody to do a really sparking job and if we are serious as a country around getting teachers to do the best for the next generation then we need to reduce the workload both in terms of the number of contact hours and the amount of expectation from them… the teacher now has got a safeguarding duty… and… you name it… if it moves it is the teacher's responsibility… and it can't be right.* (Adil)

In a similar vein, Derek was acutely aware of the impact of working context:

> *So there's a contextual control… but I'd like all of the teachers to feel that they own that classroom to the largest extent but I know that they don't… I think we work our tutors quite hard. I want to change that, I want their terms and conditions to be better and I think those things are the things that are holding it away from being quite amazing.*
>
> *I think that the way I'm approaching this is to do with releasing some of that control, I'd like people to teach less to give them time to be more innovative but I know that there's a danger there because they might not use that time… If we can find a way to make sure that they don't throw it away it would be really nice to see that time put into being innovative.* (Derek)

An important finding was the contrast between teachers' beliefs as to their own agency and how leaders viewed this. For some leaders, their impact on what happened in the classroom was considered to be minimal and it was the teachers they saw as being in control of that

environment, despite the policies they may have set out to ensure some type of conformity:

> *I think it is difficult to influence what actually happens in the classroom because you have got a multitude of individuals… So we have policy… in terms of what we expect in the classroom… but we can't force people to adopt it.* *(Jane)*

> *The people who have the most agency are the lecturers. After my 32 years in the sector what I'm aware of is that those personal relationships have a greater impact on the success of the learner outcome than probably a dozen decisions that I make in this office.* *(Trevor)*

There was also some awareness of factors which influenced teachers' views of their own agency and several leaders acknowledged the impact of internal policies and processes, particularly when these were linked with aspects of performance management.

> *There is always that blame culture in education as well… if your results are bad chances are you might lose your job so it's quite dangerous being experimental.* *(James)*

Although several leaders stated that they had no direct influence on classroom practice, most articulated an awareness of the connections between leadership, culture and what happens in classrooms, thereby recognising an indirect impact. None of the Leaders interviewed had clear ideas about how they might create an environment in which teachers could be more innovative but most were assured of the significance of the teaching role in providing innovative and inspiring classroom practice:

> *I genuinely believe that the only people who make a difference are the teachers. Everyone else in the system needs to align their work towards making the teacher feel good about what it is they are doing with their learners because they impact those learners for life.* *(Adil)*

CONCLUSIONS

Leadership and culture

The findings highlight some of the complexity of the FE leader's role and the difficulties associated with meeting the demands of a number of external bodies. In order to counteract this, leaders have assumed a range of 'adaptive' approaches, which are underpinned by pragmatism and may also serve to envelop their individual visions about the education experience they want to offer.

All the leaders involved in this research recognised the importance of the FE sector in providing opportunities for a diverse range of learners as well as the potential this offer has to transform lives. They were also mindful of the financial and regulatory limitations placed upon them and the impact this has on generating a culture that values the pragmatic over the idealistic. This is perceived by managers as data and compliance-driven and by teachers as bureaucratic and restrictive.

The findings also revealed exceptions to these perspectives within the 'micro-cultures' that seemed to be present in specialised subject areas or satellite locations. In these cases, teachers expressed feelings of empowerment and support.

Creativity and innovation

The focus on pragmatism is referred to by all three groups of respondents. A particular feature of the manager and teacher interviews was the influence of standardisation encountered through the introduction of college-wide processes, in particular those relating to what the college deemed 'good practice' in teaching and assessment.

Although seen by leaders as forms of guidance, such processes appear to be interpreted by managers and teachers as edicts to be obeyed and as such become significant barriers to trying more creative strategies in the classroom. This rationalised approach is supported in the literature as a substantial factor in limiting potential (Samples, 1976).

Managers and teachers who did express feelings of empowerment to take control of the learning environment also acknowledged positive line-management relationships which they felt were based on trust. The opposite is true of those who felt compelled to 'tick boxes' in relation to how they carried out their roles. For teachers, the fear associated with not being seen to comply was apparent in many of the interviews and for managers the drive to gain compliance was also prominent. According to the literature, the ability to be creative may be reliant upon opportunities to progress ideas collaboratively and through the development of 'liberating innovative relationships' (Davis et al., 2012:179). The data suggest that this is unlikely to happen in environments where compliance is viewed as a priority.

Enablers and constraints

The data revealed corresponding perceptions of 'enablers' to creativity but quite disparate views on what constituted constraints. For all three groups, factors considered to be enabling were consistent with the literature and referred to the removal of barriers to creativity, alongside the construction of 'space' for creative thought. However, perceived constraints varied according to the interview groups.

For teachers, the main limitations on their practice were presented in the form of processes, viewed as management diktats. This was coupled with a perception that they were not trusted to do the job. Several teachers also referred to funding as a constraint but did not specify how more funding would enable them to be more creative; this point is potentially a reflection on increased teaching workloads.

For managers, the requirement to produce regular progress reports presented a significant constraint, particularly in the cases where reports were required frequently. Managers also felt constrained by the need to gain compliance from their teams.

For leaders, constraints came in the form of external pressures and responding to new initiatives as well as insufficient funding. Leaders also articulated constraints presented by other staff in terms of getting 'buy-in' from staff and a general reticence in challenging current practice and thinking differently.

The importance of agency

One significant theme, which is present in the literature and the interview data, is the importance of agency, more specifically what this means in relation to how teachers carry out their roles. In many of the teacher interviews, the term agency was defined as the ability to act autonomously, and whether teachers felt they did or did not have agency was very much dependent upon their working context. Those teachers who felt they had agency, also articulated strong relationships with line managers and worked in specialist subject areas or at campuses which were removed from the main college sites. Where teachers felt they did not have agency, they expressed feelings of being constrained by the processes which they felt introduced conformist approaches to teaching. Such processes were viewed as regulatory, rather than advisory. Agency appears to be understood by the teachers in this study as something which resides in an 'actor-situation transaction' (Biesta et al., 2015), and, therefore, was not something that teachers possessed but was linked to their specific work environments.

Teachers' perceptions of their own agency also seemed to contrast with leaders' perceptions. In the leaders' views, the group with the most agency, and therefore the most opportunity to innovate, were the teachers. This finding suggests that within one of these groups there is a misconception, not only about what constitutes agency but also about who has it.

No more Fairytales... At the stroke of midnight, Cinderella's coach turns into a pumpkin and the animals return to their original form, but the glass slipper remains intact. Not only is the glass slipper a symbol of hope and transformation it also represents stability. Perhaps finding a glass slipper, or two, may be useful in helping guide the way to positive

change but the potential for change is also something that already exists within every FE college. Stability, hope and the promise of transformation are provided by the teachers who have a desire to make a difference, by the managers who support them to do so and by the leaders who show the way through the regulatory tangle.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this research and offered in the knowledge that their implementation may provide solutions when other contextual factors are taken into account. As outlined by Bateson (1972), there are patterns in all things and 'A "bit" of information is definable as a difference which makes a difference' (Bateson, 1972:315). This suggests that we might not be seeking a single thing in order to enact change, but that a single thing could make a difference within a given context; in turn that context and the people within it will influence the impact of the action. Some suggestions for change are:

Put teachers back in control of the classroom. Although this may be the view of most leaders, this message is not clear for teaching staff and it needs to be communicated effectively so that all parties are aware of *real* and *imagined* boundaries in relation to decisions taken about teaching and learning. Teachers need to gain clarity in relation to their agency within the classroom and be assured that they can experiment with teaching strategies without fear of reprisal. This is a message that can be embedded through professional development activities, through quality assurance processes such as lesson observations and in guidance documentation related to teaching and learning.

Mistrust into trust. The development of a culture of trust is essential if teachers are to feel comfortable 'taking risks' in classroom practice. There are many ways in which trust could be developed and full exploration is beyond the scope of these recommendations; however, initial suggestions include: the provision of praise (when due), clear and open communication (including listening), the provision of honest

feedback (without creating job insecurity), consistent management approaches, developing a shared vision and values.

Using research/external guidance effectively. Undoubtedly, research has been used to inform teaching and learning; one of the problems appears to be that it has been 'swallowed whole'. Much of the guidance provided to teachers about classroom practice is informed by research, government guidelines or bodies such as Ofsted, and has been accepted almost unquestioningly. The development of a *thinking approach* to the use of research would encourage leaders, managers and teachers to analyse it in relation to their own organisations and select or adapt appropriately. This could be achieved through the implementation of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) for particular areas, which explore research in open discussion forums and extend it through research activity where this is appropriate (or even where it is just interesting).

Investigate the power of 'micro cultures'. This research highlighted some areas of practice which were more successful in terms of classroom innovation; namely, the 'micro cultures' present within specialist subject areas or satellite locations. The scope of this project did not allow for further investigation of the specific reasons why such 'micro cultures' were successful but this would be a useful area for further research and is something which could easily be investigated within organisations.

Create a 'learning space'. The concept of learning spaces can be interpreted in two ways: first, as a physical space which is removed from the usual work environment; second, as the recognition that space in the work timetable provides time to think; in effect, the creation of 'headspace'. What is important is that a learning space is also a safe place to explore ideas and questions without fear of reprisal.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The overall aim of this project was to investigate factors which empowered or constrained FE teachers in relation to innovation within teaching and learning. The hope was that specific 'enablers' and 'constraints' would be discovered and that these might provide a basis from which to adapt practice. The reality was that this hope was simplistic. While some specifics have been discovered, these are both context- and perception-bound. Therefore, any adjustments must be made in relation to context and taking into account the influence of individual perception. The 'specifics', if there are any, relate to whole-organisation influences and, as such, cannot simply be addressed within the classroom. Change therefore is not the responsibility of the few; it is in the hands of many and to be effective needs to be approached from this perspective.

APPENDIX 1

Teachers (13)

Code name	Type of organisation	Geographic location	Age category*	Time in post
Adam	FE college	Bedfordshire	49–55	4 years
Bob	FE college	Nottinghamshire	32–40	2 years
Wayne	FE college	Nottinghamshire	41–48	7 years
Richard	FE college	Leicestershire	55–65	Less than a year
Lydia	Land-based college	Leicestershire	27–31	Less than a year
Mike	FE college	Northamptonshire	32–40	3 years
Harry	Land-based college	Leicestershire	55–65	10 years
Pete	FE college	Northamptonshire	19–26	2 years
Sue	FE college	Bedfordshire	41–48	4 years
Peter	Land-based college	Bedfordshire	41–48	4 years
Adeeb	FE college	Leicestershire	55–65	Less than a year
Janice	FE college	Bedfordshire	41–48	3 years
Lucy	Prison education	Bedfordshire	27–31	2 years

Managers (4)

Code name	Type of organisation	Geographic location	Age category*	Time in post
Anne	Private training provider	Hertfordshire	41–48	1 year
Terry	FE college	Northamptonshire	49–55	1 year
Abby	FE college	Bedfordshire	55–65	1 year
George	UTC	Coventry	41–48	1 year

Leaders (9)

Code name	Type of organisation	Geographic location	Age category*	Time in post
Kate	Land-based college	Bedfordshire	41–48	Less than a year
Derek	FE college	Nottinghamshire	49–55	15 years
Dawn	FE college	Nottinghamshire	55–65	2 years
Jane	FE college	Bedfordshire	32–40	2 years
James	FE college	Bedfordshire	55–65	20 years
Neil	FE college	Nottinghamshire	32–40	2 years
Rick	FE college	Nottinghamshire	41–48	2 years
Trevor	FE college	Bedfordshire	49–55	3 years
Adil	FE college	Bedfordshire	49–55	8 years

*Age categories were based on Erikson's psychosocial age groups as follows:

Young adult (19–40):19–26, 27–31, 32–40

Middle Adulthood (40–65): 41–48, 49–55, 55–65

Maturity: over 65

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