

Further Education Colleges and Leadership: checking the ethical pulse

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Introduction

Abstract

In this paper I check the ethical pulse of Further Education at the moment of its coming of age. Using a philosophical lens, I select and review post-2010 literature, to argue that FE colleges persist in a diminished form within a learning economy. In response to the managerial onslaught, the sector has adopted an ethics of survival, a necessary response to austerity and deregulation. Twenty-one years after incorporation, ethical fading has purged ethical desire from educational discourse while the endless banality of college life has corroded the language with which it might be possible to speak about educational purpose, value, utopia, democracy, equity and vision.

Introduction

In this paper, I explore three subjects that are too infrequently considered in direct relation to each other - Further Education, ethics and leadership. The line of argument I pursue is one that follows a somewhat circular logic. My analysis checks the ethical pulse of the sector at the moment of its 'coming of age'. Two decades after the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act freed Further Education Colleges (FE) from the democratic accountability of the Local Educational Authority (LEA) and instituted them as incorporated organisations is of relevance here but my analytical focus is FE in the global age of austerity. I contend that 21 years after incorporation - the ethical dimensions of FE have withered. The sector, its defining institutions and the professional identities of those who work within it, along with their intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships are unrecognisable – even to themselves (Ball, 2015). The managerial triumvirate of efficiency, effectiveness and economy altered the ontology of education. Or rather, the triumvirate acted as if it were possible by mere feat of policy pronouncement - to alter the ontology of education, assuming dominion over education, its institutions and the people



who work within them. Policy legislators acted as if the sector, consisting of entities without substance or form, would simply become something else.

Thus education, an inherently ethical undertaking bears the indelible markers of ethical corrosion. Its ethical dimensions are treated as negotiable strategic indulgences rather than integral to its ontology. This is the implied but largely understated argumentative thread that runs through much of the literature on FE. This argumentative thread is taken up here, elaborated upon and placed at the centre of my thesis. From this premise I mine a selected body of empirical literatures for their ethical import. My purpose is not to provide a comprehensive review of the key literatures on leadership in FE; such studies are available, (Schofield, Matthews, & Shaw, 2009). While I draw on seminal texts that have helped to shape my central refrain, my intentional focus is to offer a review of a literalist selection of “further education, leadership and ethics” texts published after 2010: the sixth stage of incorporation’s aftermath, characterised by ‘austerity and deregulation’ (Hodgson, Bailey and Lucas 2015). This phase follows a global crisis in capitalism – and the socialisation of the losses experienced by the banking industry, which in the UK has been followed by the election of two Conservative Governments, a 2010 Coalition and a 2015 majority. The populist sloganeering of New Labour has been replaced by a pledge to cut public expenditure. The depth of funding reductions has been dramatic; on current projection FE will experience an accumulated budget loss of 43% by 2018 (Keep, 2015). This 43% figure does not adequately convey the enormity of state withdrawal. Some aspects of FE have priority – apprentices and University Technical Colleges - meaning vast areas of the FE landscape will receive nugatory funding. The sector is in deep trouble and liable to remain so for some time. So apocalyptic is the funding crisis induced by Conservative fiscal policy that the Association of Colleges have suggested that after two terms of a Conservative Government– funded adult education will not exist (AoC, 2015). In more muted terms, Keep (2015) suggests the overall purpose of FE, its mission, governance structures and roles are all called into question.

Rather than coming of age, colleges persist in a financially and ethically diminished form within a learning economy. The ethical dimension of education have been subsumed, replaced by an ethics of

survival, ([Belgutay, 2015](#)). The preliminary findings of Mercer's (2015) study indicate that FE principals spend most of their time trying to ensure their college's financial viability. Within a learning economy, the principal's role is rightly recast as 'chief executive' rather than 'leader of learning'.

With predictable momentum, this move reduces education as public welfare to learning as a private activity which exclusively serves the needs of industry for workers pre-trained at public expense. The withdrawal of public funds from a learning economy is thus legitimated.

It is at this point – the point at which the very real possibility of the state's withdrawal from the funding of further and adult education – that the corrosive impact of the managerial triumvirate is most acutely felt. Not only does it shatter the illusion of further educational leaders ([Colley, 2012](#)), it deprives them of a language with which to speak about what really matters in further education: its precise purpose; the extent to which a personal educational gain contributes towards a collective social democratic good; the 'ought' question in education; and importantly, the question of hope. These are not matters that I address as such. They are rather considerations that I suggest are written into the ontology of education. A process then, which starts in 1992 with the subluxation of ethics, leads to a situation some twenty years later that demands answers to a series of questions which it is only possible to answer in the language of ethics, a language that has all but disappeared.

Ethics: an educational silence

Despite a substantial body of work surrounding the philosophy of education, ethics has remained within the disciplinary province of the philosopher. Further education and leadership – has not developed a sustained field of ethical enquiry attended by a substantive and enclosed body of theoretical reflection, a connected scholarly history with its own interpretive problems, distinct concepts and hotly contested succession of turns and 'isms'. On-going conversation between the ethicist and the educationist has not shaped everyday scholarship in further education and leadership. When philosophers talk about ethics, they too frequently talk amongst themselves. [Stumpf et al.](#)

[\(2012\)](#) emphasises this point by advocating for ethics as a part of the preparation programme for community college leaders.

Sociology has likewise offered little scope to enable the ethical exploration of FE and leadership. It is possible to locate within Sociology's architecture - Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu - what might be curated to form a sociology of morality. The first Handbook of this kind – was curated as recently as 2010 by [Hitlin and Vaisey \(2010\)](#). Both Durkheim and Weber allow ethics (qua ethos) a central role in explaining social and economic phenomenon, but subsume moral philosophy into an empirically grounded science of 'moral facts' or moral action as indistinguishable from social life. Both treated the distinct study of ethics as unnecessary, undesirable and in any case impossible. The moral and the social were already thoroughly entwined, leaving no conceptual space to explore ethics ([Laidlaw, 2002](#))

Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and doxa have been widely used by educationists – yet he offers few conceptual tools that enable a specific focus (rather than a sideways glance) on ethics. Critical sociologists have viewed ethics, morality and values with suspicion. Derivatives of economic structures they are to be unmasked rather than provided with the legitimacy of enquiry (Pellandini-Simányi, 2014). Within this strain of thought ethics, morality and values have no independent analytical valence – they are merely mechanism for achieving and maintaining ascendancy within a hotly contested field of struggle for power and domination (Sayer, 2004).

While the study of ethics has been enclosed by philosophy, subsumed by sociology, the relationship between further education leadership and ethics has been dominated by scholarship in business studies. Indeed, according to Bell (1991) the concept of 'leadership' is borrowed from the world of business and brought into sharp relief by the 2008 crisis of capitalism which exposed widespread corporate malfeasance, unethical and inadequate practice coupled by corruption on a breath-taking scale ([Lui, 2015](#)). What the above discussion points to is a lacuna surrounding the connections between ethics, leadership and further education. In this paper I draw out how these issues intersect. That this

precise ethical framing is necessary illustrates the extent to which these interconnections have been enclosed, subsumed or dominated within other apparently more pressing concerns.

An ethical pulse check

In this paper I explore ethics and leadership in FE. I select and read a body of post-2010 literature for their ethical import, bringing their ethical dimensions to the fore. The texts were selected using three search engines: Google scholar, Academic Search Premier and Education Research Complete.

Searching for titles or key words that included the three terms Further Education, ethics and leadership yielded no responses. Once 'ethics' was excluded from the title or key words and replaced with 'values' a greater number of texts were returned. The year 2010 was selected as a significant point of departure. The age of austerity and deregulation – is my defining backdrop. A total of 13 texts were ultimately selected for review. What emerges here is not an attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of literatures on FE, ethics and / or leadership. My literalist framing of the literature has excluded several canonical writers who - with broader parameters would have been included. Taking up Collinson's (2014) advice, I have refused the binary between leadership and management, viewing leadership as too diffuse and all-inclusive ([Alvesson and Spicer, 2012](#)) to be discretely addressed. Leadership is accepted as an aspect of management.

My focus is almost exclusively FE, with the proviso that the distinction between Further and Higher Education is tentative. FE and its international, institutional counterparts do not all work within identical parameters. There is a neat overlap between FE, Training and Further Education (TAFE) in Australia and New Zealand, but Community Colleges in the States incorporate both FE and HE. Indeed, FE in the UK now includes University Centres who offer both undergraduate and postgraduate courses (accredited by a university). Further Education in the UK is a vast, amorphous sector; its contexts are multiple and diverse; its boundaries porous.

A summary of the texts selected for review, their country of origin, the key issues they are concerned with and their global connectedness is detailed below in *table i*.

Ref	Focus, Context and Scope
Avis, J. (2010)	Global trends in forms of Governance in FE drawing on the experience of Australia, the USA and New Zealand.
Elliot, G.(2015)	Explores beliefs, values and theories that form basis of FE leadership decision making in the UK
Iszatt-White, M. (2010)	Explores the nature and accomplishment of strategic leadership in UK FE as an ongoing, processual activity
Jameson, J. (2012)	Low status of FE in UK allows it to be treated as a site of experimentation for techniques associated with performativity and surveillance.
Mulcahy, D. & Perillo, S. (2011)	Examines the significance of socio-materiality for management and leadership in vocational education in Australia
Page, D. (2011)	Highlights resistant behaviour among managers in the UK as they struggle to meet demands of corporation, colleagues and students. Resistance as ethical.
Pinnington, A. (2011)	Focuses on leadership development but also identifies persistence of ethical commitment in public sector organizations. Scotland with global implications.
Simons, T. & Harris, R.(2014)	Explores VET organizational leaders perceptions of the conflict between professional and managerial values in Australia
Smith, R.(2014)	Provides a genealogical account of a post-incorporation FE college: arguing that a social justice ethos impedes corporate values.
Stoten, D.(2014)	Explores how FE colleges respond to uncertainty with reference to leadership practice, core values and organizational characteristics
Stumpf et al (2012)	Explores preparedness of Community College principals in USA to manage the ethical challenges that define their role
Thompson, C. & Wolstencroft, P. (2013)	Explores conflict in professional and managerial values in the UK and their impact on career choices
Wilson, K. & Cox, E. (2012)	Discourse Analysis of Community College leaders in the States. Reframes power and ethics as connected to gender and the capacity to contribute.

Table i

An ethical reading in the key of critical sociology

Avis ([2010](#)) does not strictly fit the terms of reference adopted for this literature review (he does not present empirical research on the enactment of leadership) but his problematization of the ‘governance turn’ ([Ball, 2009](#)) in social policy allows a way in to the issues I wish to explore. Coalition policy has emphasised localism, networks and democracy coupled with holistic approaches to learners and their well being all of which signal a welcome softening of New Labour’s managerialism and their overuse of targets ([Hodgson and Spours, 2012](#)). Avis ([2010](#)) problematizes the discursive shift away from neoliberalism and performativity as prefigurative of a democratic professionalism based on local accountability. My ethical reading of his paper is driven by a very different set of concerns.

Governance though not the same as leadership, does suggest a possible form that leadership might take. That is governance signals leadership in its least heroic most collective form. Thus, Avis’s ([2010](#))

discussion of governance allows a particular questioning of leadership: What and how is FE leadership constituted? In Avis's ([2010](#)) paper it is collectively embodied, inter-subjective and imbued with both liberatory potential and repressive limitation. This dialectic forms is a refrain that echoes throughout the literature explored.

Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics

'Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes.'

([Foucault and Rabinow, 1997](#)) p xxvii

This formulation of freedom and ethics is the first working premise of Foucault's attempt to untangle the relations between the subject and truth. Referenced here it connects the ways in which FE policy and the practices associated with college leadership to their ethical dimensions. A sector which is tightly constrained is a sector that would seem not to have the ontological starting point for ethical practice. A point which [Stumpf et al. \(2012\)](#) also makes in his research paper. Morality exists insofar as we are able to choose. Freedom to choose is its ontological pre-condition. Foucault's ([1997](#)) fourfold ethics provides a valuable way of analysing how college leaders navigate an inherently ethical undertaking within the context of a policy orientation premised on a managerial triumvirate. It allows a consideration of 'how', in the thirteen research papers reviewed, the 'ethical substance' of the leader is formed. The constitution of leadership or leadership behaviour is subject to critique; as are the standards or codes through which their behaviour is evaluated, their 'mode of subjection'; the terms of reference that frames their 'self-forming activity' – enacted mental or physical rituals, including the forms of self-discipline used to maintain the required standards are made explicit; and finally, in Foucault's ethical fourfold: it is possible to consider telos, the sort of leadership aspired to; the ultimate purpose or goal of leadership ([Gillies, 2013](#))p29. These considerations are not used here as criterial template to structure my ethical reading; they are rather an analytical resource, a loose generative admixture of interrogative prompts.

The premise that I work from is one that views ethical considerations as providing an important point of critique. Kant's ethical question, 'What ought I to do?' is here connected to his utopian question, 'For what might I hope?' ([Biesta, 2006](#)) Inscribed within policy (and policy critique) is a desired future. In checking the ethical pulse, I foreground these ethical dimensions.

An ethical critique is writ large within Avis's ([2010](#)) analysis. He maps the contradictions, tensions and disturbances experienced by FE leaders - echoing a refrain that runs throughout the literatures: How do college leaders 'live compliantly in harmonisation' (by accepting their current circumstances) or how do they 'live historically' ([Seddon, 2008](#)) p157 (connect their personal troubles to structural inequities and work to bring about change). More importantly, what are the lines of disturbance which enable one mode of subjectivation to become transformed into the other. The paper makes no direct reference to the 1992 Act of Incorporation. This is not his concern. But the tensions he evokes originate from the moment when institutions that were once part of a democratically elected LEA became incorporated as self-facilitating business enterprises.

1992: a strange silence

This moment in 1992 resonates throughout further literatures. Of the 13 research papers reviewed, nine are UK based, three of which make explicit reference to 1992. Four of the 13 research papers selected for review focused on the role and identity of the college principal – as a leader of learning or chief executive. Research undertaken in Australia or USA have no context for this moment, yet - two of the four papers which focus on - role and identity - are from Australia suggesting that the tension implied by the 'leadership turn' is connected to a global neoliberal project with translocal manifestations. This paper then is written from and privileges a particular context: the UK with an analysis that is argued as having international implications. The ethical space these research papers work within is one premised on defining ethical substance and telos: the identity and purpose of college leadership. This ethical space has been referred to as the Transnational Leadership Project (TLP), a conjunction which includes several interdependent strands: policy prescriptions, best practice

templates, meta-analyses, effectiveness studies, scholarly output focusing on teaching and learning as simplistic causal correlations, and a cultural professional deficit. Despite the independence of incorporation – identifying problems, setting the agenda and developing college strategy are located beyond the scope of the college-leader ([Thomson et al., 2013](#)) p, *xi - xii*.

Understanding these moves assumes the resources of the global research imagination ([Kenway and Fahey, 2008](#)), an imagination which, emerging from a situated cosmopolitan, is both particular and universal, anchored in one world while fully identified with other worlds (Ong cited in Kenway and Fahey, 2008) p35. There are important distinctions in how this tension surrounding the college principal as a Leader of Learning or Chief Executive is played out. [Simons and Harris \(2014\)](#) offer an empirical exploration of the potential subsumption of *educational* leadership when contrasted with *business* leadership, emphasising the extent to which leaders are required to negotiate an appropriate balance between the two. They conclude that the tension between educational and business leadership imperatives are overstated. It is possible, they argue, to develop an integrated understanding of *educational* leadership that extends beyond its sole and exclusive concern with the pedagogic. This reconciliatory stitching together of incommensurate discourses has been conceptualised as ‘strategic compliance’ in the UK ([Shain and Gleeson, 2010](#)). Strategic compliers adhere to the demands of performativity in order to create sufficient institutional space to defend traditional educational values. This constant negotiation ensures both compliance *and* exhaustion. It is not the starting point I wish to assume. It also acknowledges the translocal nature of my discussion. While 1992 impacts only on the UK – the commensurability of educational and business imperatives has a transnational echo.

It may seem surprising that an act passed more than two decades ago still attracts analytical attention. Smith’s ([2014](#)) paper offers a clue about why this might be. He contextualises his study of Coppleton College (his anonymised research site) with a reflexive account of his own situatedness. Smith worked at the College during the upheaval of the 1990s as a lecturer and union official, years later returning as a university teacher educator to observe his students teach. The return is something of a milestone for

Smith as the culture of the college is so altered that the last remaining union activist has recently left his employment after disciplinary action. What at first I have presented as an echo that resounds more widely than one might have anticipated on closer analysis might be viewed as a strange silence. Smith (2014) explains that the assurances of anonymity offered to research participants were keenly felt for this particular study as many existing and former staff recounted the prevalence of confidentiality clauses as part of severance agreements imposed after disciplinary action. If Copleton College is taken as a case-in-point for the sector, it is possible that there may be many more narratives yet to emerge that re-story the moment when FE was 'released' from its democratic accountability. Using Burawoy's extended case study (Burawoy, 1998), Smith offers a genealogical enquiry into the first five years of post-incorporation. His study illustrates the primary thesis I wish to elaborate upon in this paper. Namely that 1992 instituted an approach to college leadership that subsumes public service commitments beneath a business ethos. The style of leadership it allowed was task and target driven paying little regard to relational ethics. Seven of the 13 papers curated for this review rearticulate variations on this theme. It is a refrain that while emerging from different arguments, different data sets, indeed from different TLP countries, nonetheless leads to a single meeting place. The role, disposition, and responsibility of the college leader - in Foucault's terms, their 'ethical substance' - is redefined by managerialism.

The practical (rather than ethical) consequences of incorporation

Incorporation changed the ethical substance of college leaders overnight into business managers. Iszatt-White's (2010) paper acknowledged this shift but remained resolutely silent about its ethical dimensions. This paper outlined precisely what being a business rather than an educational manager meant - finance, strategy, personnel, marketing, - 'the practical consequences of incorporation' p414. The significance of this change in the ethical substance of college leaders – the change in what they are required to do, what they need to think about and thus, who they are – does not fall within the paper's remit. Though others have explored precisely this nexus, (Lumby 2001). Iszatt-White's (2010) paper offers an ethnomethodologically informed ethnography of college leadership, speaking to scholars who

explore *leadership* but are not directly interested in *educational* leadership. The paper focusses on the day-to-day process of developing and implementing strategy. Yet, nothing betrays an interest in or awareness of telos: the ends to which strategy is intended, or the ethics, values or policy which drive that strategy. Educational ethics is relegated to 'context'.

While my purpose has been to explore empirical research based on FE leadership to identify the changing ways in which ethics is implicated even if not acknowledged, this paper offers a slight change in direction. Situating her analysis in the practice-turn in social theory, her primary concern is the mundane activities of everyday leadership practice. As such she notices college leaders strategizing as involving - clarification, rehearsal, upholding, adapting and elaborating. It is at this point that slightly contradictory points of analysis appear possible.

With little freedom there is little ethical scope.

The ethical substance of the college leader is thinly textured in this study. This is surprising given the apparent focus on very human activities through which leadership work is routinely accomplished. It is as if the leader is conceptualised as an embodied function or series of processes. The leader appears as one element in an extended chain of events – 'praxis, practice, practitioner' ([Iszatt-White, 2010](#)) p412. Considering the notion of freedom as the ontological condition of ethics ([Foucault and Rabinow, 1997](#)), the paper seems to point in important but contradictory directions. On one hand, college leaders have a minimal role in determining college strategy. Leadership strategy is an on-going series of events in a processual social order, a perpetually unfinished project, requiring engagement with policies and procedures originating elsewhere. These strategies pass through the context of the college, as an obligatory passage point (Callon, 1986). Emergent accountabilities – commercial and educational, the inspection regime, the culture of targets, all suggest that the freedom that incorporated colleges were offered was in fact little more than the freedom to be directed from a distance through a series of complex levers and mediations – funding, targets, inspection, policy.

On the other hand, Iszat-White's (2010) focus on strategy might invite an interest in telos – opening the possibility of a purpose oriented ethical audit. But this possibility does not emerge because Iszat-White's (2010) focus is strategic practice not strategic purpose. It would seem therefore to evidence that college leaders work within a tightly bound ethical space. None of their activity takes place in an atmosphere where the ethical space required to make choices appears to open up. Their telos – that is their overall purpose is predefined, college leaders trace the steps required to reach already defined policy ends.

Yet, this can also turn in again, in a slightly different direction and Iszat-White (2010) does unexpectedly open up space for ethical action in the restrictive process rather than purpose driven strategizing she identifies: clarifying, rehearsing, upholding, adapting and elaborating. Here the college leader's values (which might include the overall strategic purposes defined elsewhere) are held as resources that may redefine plans when confronting an unanticipated chain of events. Strategy as process has potential to lead or mis-lead in several un/intentional and un/anticipated directions. Thus, the ethical space is unexpectedly re-opened. The college leader who emerges through Iszat-White's (2010) paper has little existence beyond that of a mechanism, an embodied institutional process in an effective and efficiency chain of events. This focus negates the college leader as the bearer of values. Returning to my central refrain – college leaders as leader of learning or business leader, Iszat-White's (2010) paper offers an ethical silence.

Mulcahy & Perillo's (2011) socio-material analysis of vocational education institutions in Australia has much in common with Iszat-White (2010). Both papers resist a view of the college leader as hero. A rejection that is also shared by Wilson & Cox (2012) and Pinnington (2011). Pinnington (2011) studied the five classical leadership approaches, (charismatic, transformational, authentic, servant and spiritual) and their fit with private sector and public organizations. The four papers together allow the suggestion that when leaders in educational organizations conduct themselves as if they were leaders of a corporate enterprise rather than leaders of learning – the commodification of learning is further

entrenched, enabling a process of ethical fading to set in. Iszat-White ([2010](#)) considers the leaders role in terms of her strategic function as a node within an extended social process – praxis, practice, practitioner – thus narrowing the ethical space. Mulcahy and Perillo ([2011](#)) situate their analysis within a similar network of events, but their flat ontology and distributed agency manages to broaden the ethical space. Adopting the Actor Network Theorist’s (ANT) signature ontology of treating agency as distributed between human and non-human actants, their concern is with leadership as mundane process – the day-to-day how rather than the what or the why or even the who of college leadership.

Tracing various management narratives, they ground leadership in connections that are contingent, emergent and relational. The agency of things does not include ethical agency, which remains exclusively human. Though socio-material networks presumably mediate the ethical agency of college-leaders. Thus the college leaders’ ethical space is extended and the lines of disturbance that enable the shift from living in harmonisation to living historically are, potentially at least, exposed. But this is a wilful reading. Mulcahy and Perillo ([2011](#)) insistently focus on the performativity of practices, objects and discourses, declaring this to be an effective strategy for unsettling obdurate certainties. They speak directly to my central refrain by explicating, the pervasive logics of market and economism that have come to define contemporary education. The ethical substance of the college leader is indeed thought differently; instead of individual attributes she becomes an contingent enactment. Mulcahy and Perillo’s ([2011](#)) ethical interest is in exploring these enactments, the networked events through which college leadership is constituted and thus the fault lines and fissures which enable its disruption.

Managers’ perceptions of their role

With [Thompson and Wolstencroft \(2013\)](#) there is a welcome return to the primacy of the social. Understanding the banal, mundane processes through which leadership is enacted does not offer satisfying insight into the perceptions that distinguish the logics of market and the ontology of education. [Thompson and Wolstencroft \(2013\)](#) review managers’ perceptions of their role through the

lens of a professional-managerial paradigm. Exploring various manager identities and positions, they construct a typology (one of several such typologies) of the college leaders ethical substance: reluctant conformers, lone warriors, career navigators and quixotic jugglers. This typology indicates the exhausting depth of activity implied in negotiating these tensions. Colley ([2012](#)) sites deeply troubling experiences of the psychic pain that this stitching together of contradictory discourses causes, a grim reminder of the emotional toll living within the managerial triumvirate causes public professionals. Bourdieu's concept *illusio* ([Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992](#)) is useful in understanding this dynamic. Rarely discussed beyond his own work, *illusio* denotes being caught up in the game: the strategies used to influence, shape and pursue interests to which players are committed ([Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992](#)). The *illusio* of college leaders invokes their belief in the worthwhileness of what they are doing; their commitment to it and their willingness to invest time and energy into achieving their desired professional outcomes, even if this is to their personal detriment ([Jameson and Hillier, 2008](#)). The concept of *illusio* is closely connected to ideas about identity and belonging. The professional-managerial paradigm requires college-leaders to live a professional life – a life premised on ethical desire, but offers minimal ethical space for the expression of this desire. This shattering of *illusio* leads to the malaise of inauthenticity and mistrust, a corrosive impact picked up by [Thompson and Wolstencroft, \(2013\)](#) and Jameson (2010)

With little freedom there is little trust

[Thompson and Wolstencroft, \(2013\)](#) focus on trust – an inter-subjective ethic written into the grammar of our relationships. To corrode relational trust in education is to fundamentally alter its ontology. It becomes something else: schooling, training, the aestheticization of college life (a process through which harsh indigestible truths are made palatable without changing their substance) ([Aguiar, 2011](#)) or learning. The personhood of the FE leader is now so tightly constrained that they have little choice but to be, to pretend to be or to negotiate their being (their ethical substance, their sense of professional self) against the overwhelming desire to be otherwise. This discussion of relational ethics

is a timely reminder that organisations are social systems, leaders and managers and their interpersonal relationships are more than mechanistic devices. Employees' perceptions have impacts on loyalty, commitment and effort. The ethical pulse check I put forward at this point is one that leads to the argument that if the managerial context of FE provides too little space for the emergence of college leaders as critical ethical beings this has damaging effects on all aspects of college life. Indeed, so restricted is the ethical space within which college leaders operate, that the institutions they lead far from being educational establishments become target hitting enterprises ([Dennis, 2012](#)), students become funding units and the role of the college leader becomes one of negotiating the next wave of Central Government policy, funding cuts and piloting institutional change.

The ethical desire to become and to be a leader of learning is misplaced. The managerial college leader is one who is exhausted by the delivery of parochial institutional interests rather than the bearer of ethical values. If the role has any ethical dimension, it is an ethics of survival. This 'ethics of survival' may imply passive compliance, but like silence, an ethics of survival can also be defiant. It is unlike resilience – which suggests hardy aestheticizing endurance. Jakobson (1960) and Ephratt (2008) refer to an 'eloquent silence' a form of resistance which Jameson (2010) identifies as a feature of low trust organizations. A redolent silence signifying more than absence of speech, or the presence of exclusion and shame. It is possible that this silence may be a feature of the 'discourses of denial' that Collinson (2014) presents as a key research theme in leadership studies. Framed in this way, ethical silence is evidence of an attempt to deny the power effects, dilemmas and tensions in college life. A denial that becomes more pressing for the post-incorporation college working through substantive changes in its being.

This ethical silence - multi-dimensional and ambiguous - segues into authentic leadership. 'Values-based leadership based on personal integrity' ([Stoten, 2014](#))p514. Exploring the ethical substance of the college leader through the somewhat abstract ideal type construct of authentic leadership [Stoten \(2014\)](#) empirically assesses the extent to which this construct translates into actual practice, concluding that while the sector would benefit enormously from authentic leadership, transactional

leadership was far more prevalent. He attributes the absence of authenticity to the pressure placed on college leaders to act within an increasingly competitive and uneven educational market. They operate in an environment that offers very little ethical space and are reduced to an ethics of survival or minimally, to the aestheticization of institutional life: acting strategically to accomplish short-term goals. Thus, the managerial triumvirate of efficiency, effectiveness and economy mythologises its own necessity.

Stoten's (2014) paper would seem to support the thesis this ethical pulse check has explored: the absence of freedom – amounts to the absence of ethics, the displacement of its ontological condition. Yet, as Pinnington's (2011) study in Scotland suggests, a full ethical evacuation has been unsuccessful, as leaders remain attentive to their ethical substance.

This is a desolate post apocalyptic educational landscape peopled by educators beset by an 'emotionality of despair' (Allen, 2014). The landscape of hope – hope for the impossibility of emancipation, hope in the likelihood of fulfilling the ethical desire for equity, social justice and democracy – is now laced with repression, commodification, audit and managerialism. The direction my argument takes here is provocative and unsettling: an 'indigestible meal' offered to educators who are the complicit object of its critique (Allen 2015). The corrosion of illusion is the antithesis of authenticity; the aestheticizing narcotic of institutional busyness does nothing to alleviate this loss. Speaking to the bleakness of this situation Allen (2015) advocates an 'extreme form of nihilism'. From this position the educator is able to embrace the crisis of value, to seek out and fully experience the unbearable reality of that loss. Once the strong educational cynic (rather than the weak educational cynic, the one who through gritted teeth forces a smile) boldly admits that education is fatally undermined (that it is no longer education but something fundamentally different requiring rescue and reconstitution) - it becomes possible to reconsider and re-assert an ethical commitment and make a decision to continue with a new agenda.

The weak cynic is one who, silencing their grief, carries on reluctantly ([Gleeson and Knights, 2008](#)) attempts cognitive escape ([Page, 2011](#)) or finds alternative spaces for dissent ([Dennis, 2015](#)). It implies that however well intentioned, however skillful their negotiations and however exhausted college leaders become in their reconciliatory suturing of contradictory discourses the ethical space within which they operate is no longer an educative one. In the desolate post apocalyptic educational landscape only an ethical silence remains.

The value of strong cynicism

To survive this desultory landscape requires what – the romantic poet [Keats \(2005\)](#) refers to as ‘negative capability’: the capacity to manage ‘uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without an irritable reaching after fact and reason’ ([French, 2001](#)) p481. But the trouble with negative capability is that it implies ethical compromise, or more accurately ‘ethical fading’. [Tenbrunsel and Messick \(2004\)](#) explain how it is that leaders systematically exhibit a glaring lack of ethical awareness. They attribute this capacity to self-deception: the self deceiving itself. This is arguably what happens when ends assume an inherent value and how is just a question of deciding the most efficient and effective means to an end. The ethical colors of a decision fade into bleached hues void of moral implications. This stance emerges through compromise, a trade-off between self-interest (an ethic of survival) and ethical desire. I do not attempt a simplistic mapping of their ideas from business – the corporate corruption of Enron, WorldCom and Adelphia - to education. My suggestion is that the now dominant culture of education – managerialism - implies ethical corrosion. Symptomatic of this is the lack of relational trust surrounding college leaders (Jameson 2010), or more pervasively – as suggested by [Allen \(2015\)](#), a loss of faith in the ethical desire that defines further education – however ill defined, naive, impossible and contradictory. The ethical corrosion goes deeper and is more fundamental – leading to ethical silence: the idea of ‘ethics’ itself as a resource for educators in defining who they are, their motivations and its purposes. The sector no longer has the vocabulary that enables it to think and talk about itself in terms

of this ethical desire. Instead, these discussions have been replaced with the ritualized politics of critical reflection – no more than a variously accented perpetual questioning of: ‘How can I do better?’ This question affords no space to ask what matters or why does it matter. For college leaders what matters is being outstanding, the future viability of the college depends on it. And being outstanding means complying with the detailed specification bestowed by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) according to criteria which change on a triennial basis ([Dennis, 2012](#)).

At this point I draw my analysis towards its final turn by reference to [Elliott \(2015\)](#) who reasserts the ethical dimension of college leadership. With an interest in both HE and FE, Elliott argues that the sector needs ‘an epistemology for living amid uncertainty’ (Elliott, 2015) p409 which requires an ethical turn. Grounding his call in an earlier moment in the history of education, he cites Bantock’s ([1965](#)) call for leadership that was ‘reflective and restrained’ when faced with the fact of change. Speaking from a space and a place that is almost unrecognizable to the contemporary educational scholar, he advises that college leaders are not ‘ethically obliged’ to follow changes by which s/he is not persuaded. For the contemporary scholar, the idea that college leaders can expect to be persuaded by the changes they implement makes the statement strange and unfamiliar.

The incommensurability of college leadership and ethical self

There is no freedom in the contemporary FE college beyond a tightly scripted operationalisation within the mundane. As such, consideration of their ethical substance, the processes through which they become a subject, the purposes a college leader is at liberty to pursue, self and a professional life are all subsumed beneath an ethics of survival. Education is reduced to a set of market based relationships – transmogrified into what [Biesta \(2008\)](#) refers to as ‘learnification’. And yet – a fixed conclusion remains elusive and open. The apparent failure to which this speaks is reminiscent with the dilemma associated with the leader (as liberating) hero motif, (Wilson and Cox 2012): we want to both have and be a hero. Power and autonomy are not inherent definitions of leadership. Gilligan’s (1972)

conception of leadership based on care-giving and interdependence (rather than conquering) might work well in this hostile ethical climate. If leadership is understood as a multi-dimensional relational construct, an ethical FE leader might well be one who is able to survive, or in more sharply vocalized terms ‘fit in with whatever discourse is essential to action and have their part matter’ (Wilson and Cox 2012) p280

This might well mean fitting in with an education that has been reduced to the vagaries of the market and market relationships. And yet, in strong cynical terms, it is quite legitimate to say – as the current Conservative government policies of austerity suggest – that if education beyond compulsory schooling serves no particular need beyond the privatized learning needs of the individuals or the corporation state withdrawal from this provision is entirely justified.

While talk of crisis is often evidence of moral panic, the current wave of austerity and the impact this has had on college provision, does seem to suggest that FE is indeed in a state of crisis. The Conservative Government elected in 2015 – in a perfectly formed case study of Klein’s shock doctrine ([Klein, 2007](#)) – has cut FE beyond recognition. I conclude by suggesting that this review leads to a series of questions: *what precisely is the point of Further Education? Shall we continue? And if so, according to whose agenda?* ([Allen, 2015](#)) or perhaps, with greater authenticity and ethical self-awareness: *along what lines of disturbance is it possible to change living in harmonization with the present into living historically?*

These are unsettling questions. Even more unsettling, given the ethical excavation of the sector a more pertinent consideration, is: *with what language shall we answer these questions?* Philosophy and sociology have not provided the vocabulary required for such a discussion, successive waves of educational policy have purged ethical desire from educational discourse. Professional critique has become aestheticized by critical reflection, placed at the end of the agenda – after the analysis of college performance data, after the annual self-evaluation, after the next OfSTED inspection, after the endless banality of college life – after everything else is complete except corrosion and fading, and the

hopeless naivety of ethical desire: purpose, value, utopia, democracy, equity, emancipation and vision;
a language that is all but forgotten.

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