

# Principals reviewed

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Maire Daley, Kevin Orr and Joel Petrie (eds), *The Principal. Power and Professionalism in FE*. London: Institute of Education Press, 2017. (ISBN: 978-1-85856-844-7)

*The Principal*, sequel to *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses*, similarly uses a metaphoric image, this time of *The Prince* - ie of the model ruler depicted by Machiavelli in his 1513 book - to symbolically communicate the power and duplicity that occupy the mores of FE governance systems. Machiavelli's writing forms the dominant ethos of the book, each contributor therefore drawing on the metaphorical image of *The Prince* to illustrate deeply entrenched notions of irony and duality embedded within FE practice and leadership systems.

In the introductory chapter, Joel Petrie draws on the Machiavellian image to provide an overall introduction and brief analysis of power, leadership and professionalism in FE. A key focus here is on broader political discourse and the varying ways in which formal power is exercised in FE. In chapter 1, Rob Smith begins with a critical analysis of neoliberalist influences on the Area Reviews and the end of incorporation, to demonstrate tension and contradiction that are integral to FE leadership, agency and work practices. When FE colleges gained incorporated status, Smith argues that at first glance the sector appeared to be over-populated by what he refers to as 'would-be-princes', essentially wielding power and fiscal control over FE operations. Although on the surface this model of leadership grants each principal a 'mini-fiefdom', in reality neoliberalist structures of governance and austerity measures not only re-organised FE provision but also created stringent work conditions and financial constraints, thereby making the "principals' princely robes look decidedly threadbare" (p6). Running in parallel, this duality is seen in *The Prince* and also within FE governance structures.

Smith, along with several other contributors, identifies an inherent deceit that operates with FE practice. They liken this to Machiavelli's trickster qualities to illustrate how duplicity and cunning behaviour are used by those wielding power in the FE sector. Sharing insight into the experiences of principals, in chapter 4 Damien Page highlights how principals and princes face two types of fear: 'one from within, on account of his subjects' and 'the other from without, on account of external powers' (p35). Here Page brings into focus a prevalent sense of fear that underpins the practice of principals - fear which originates from the principal's concern over the survival of his/her college, but also a fear that stems from performativity pressures associated with government funding. In response, the suggested solution (from Machiavelli's perspective) is for the principal to become both a fox and a lion: 'a fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves' (p84). Page therefore cautions that, on the basis of the precarious FE climate and the culture of fear within institutions, principals will endeavour to show strength and wisdom, and choose behaviours, sometimes including cunning strategies, to exercise power and exert influence over operations.

## Troy

Each contributor enters into a critical exploration of power and professionalism in FE. With a specific focus on teacher education, in chapter 18 Rania Hafez casts teacher educators as Machiavellians at the gates of Troy, positioned as a workforce to establish critical thinkers amongst FE teacher trainees. The aim here is to enable trainees to question instrumentalism and education policies so they become radical leaders for renewal. However, current models of practice constrain opportunities for critical thinking and instead mostly encourage

automatic imitation of experienced teachers. As a consequence, although teacher trainees are learning what to do, they do not critically examine the reasons why these behaviours are chosen in the first place. Hafez argues for a change, stating the need to create teachers who are independent critical thinkers and actors who are willing to engage in transformative practice which extends beyond the classroom - a practice that influences wider society.

Likewise, James Avis in chapter 21 highlights the significance of agency. Here he draws attention to the different sites of struggle and tensions inherent within FE practice, which he identifies as having roots in Machiavellian plots and cynicisms. Using the image of *The Prince*, he introduces the term 'comfort radicalism' (p200) to describe the duplicity lodged in FE practices, whereby practitioners adopt the role of radicals, criticising the broad structure of governance but in reality not posing a challenge to the systems that operate in colleges. Avis argues that, instead, such practitioners have an ulterior motive and are more concerned with 'shuffling positions of advantage', in the process running the risk of becoming complicit with those in positions of power. He argues that, in order for change to take place, it is necessary to work on the good side of the conditions in which we are placed, recognising restrictions but also striving to push the boundaries as far as possible. This can be achieved through processes of reflexivity and a critical analysis of our practice and political systems.

### Diversity

*The Principal* makes an influential contribution to knowledge and understanding of current FE leadership. A key strength is noticeable in the diversity of its contributors, working in FE throughout the UK, Ireland and Australia, and covering topics that range from general FE through adult education to apprenticeship. The book therefore captures the diverse outlook and heterogeneous nature of the FE sector. It also provides a critical space and sense of freedom for practitioners to engage in critical debate and consider how power is exercised and experienced within the sector. Each contributor is an experienced practitioner. As a collection, therefore, the articles reflect and draw on everyday practice to demonstrate a critical understanding of how practitioners experience power in FE. Although they share similar work pressures and experiences within the sector, the contributors occupy different fields of practice, and accordingly write from different vantage points. This can be seen in the different perceptions and interpretations of Machiavelli, and of what such practice looks like in particular FE contexts.

*The Principal* is thought-provoking and creates an essential awareness of contemporary issues facing teaching, learning and FE practice in general. It offers a realistic outlook and critical analysis of FE leadership, management and governance systems. The articles highlight complexity and duplicity, and expose the sinister side of FE operations and current work practices. Nevertheless, there is optimism in the text, seen in the resilient outlook captured in those articles where some authors more than others illustrate collective strategies actually used by practitioners to find freedom and deliver critical education despite tight institutional constraints.

Hence this book makes an important contribution to the discipline of further education, in particular through its focus on power and leadership in a neoliberal context. It is highly recommended: teacher trainees, educators, researchers, policy-makers and careers guidance advisers would certainly benefit from the contributions within it.

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