Full Length Research Paper

Concerning systemic educational alignment: Moving beyond neoliberal discourse

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Further education is perceived to be education's Cinderella. To combat such a perception, a new metaphor of organizational alignment is delineated, drawing upon the importance of collaboration among different FE organizations. Current alignment theory is based on the premise of competition among such organizations, whereas its application in education is based on neoliberal theory. Such theories are generally eclectic in nature focusing on a number of attributes, such as strategy, mission, employees, clients, and social capital. While these attributes are important, organizational alignment may be better perceived as an organizational capability. A pragmatic approach is utilized to demonstrate the problems inherent in the neoliberal formulation of alignment. Problems include the role of actors within the educational system and the way alignment is perceived by such actors. Furthermore, collaboration, based on organizational networking, may helpfully lessen these problems and create a healthy and vibrant FE sector.

Key words: Further education; organizational alignment; neoliberalism; pragmatism; organizational networking.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to uncover the theoretical implications of organizational alignment theory within further education (FE). Various alignment models exist (Vandal, 2009; Caldwell, 2007; Kaplan and Norton, 2006; Duffy, 2004; Labovitz and Rosansky, 1997), but such models appear based on the premise of competition among different organizations. To date, the author has not encountered an alignment metaphor catering for the FE sector. Such a metaphor might be useful in uncovering the workings of FE organizations, within the political milieu of government policies, in the hope of contributing towards FE students' well-being and to the country's economic development.

This paper starts with an account of contemporary management alignment theories, focusing on their similarities and differences, followed by a generic critique of alignment. A discussion of alignment as another manifestation of neoliberalism and a new alignment metaphor are presented in this paper, ending with a practical need of conceiving FE as a collaborative effort, rather than a competitive one.

Current alignment theories are eclectic, with different researchers displaying a wide variety of foci as outlined in Table 1 (Vandal, 2009; Caldwell, 2007; Kaplan and Norton, 2006; Duffy, 2004; Labovitz and Rosansky, 1996). These models are based on different sources of data: Kaplan and Norton's model on quantitative data from an online questionnaire, but with no details as to the number of organizations surveyed; Labovitz and Rosansky's model on client conferences periodically held by Organizational Dynamics, Inc., but with no details regarding data type, that is, quantitative or qualitative; Duffy's model on qualitative data with education leaders, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in the USA; Caldwell's model on case studies (49), master classes (4), and workshops (60) in Australia, Croatia, England, New Zealand, Malaysia, Mauritius, Netherlands, Philippines, Singapore, and Wales; Vandal's model on qualitative data gathered from eighty-seven educational leaders during two online polilogues. It seems that Caldwell's model involved the greatest amount and variety of data.

The terms 'people' (used by Labovitz and Rosansky), 'learning and growth', and 'intellectual capital' (mentioned by Kaplan and Norton and Caldwell respectively) allude to staff. Intellectual capital relates to the knowledge and

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skill competences of those who work in organizations within a system that is constructed to convey the best teaching to students (Caldwell, 2007). Kaplan and Norton (1996, 8) explain that 'front-line employees must understand the financial consequences of their decisions and actions; senior executives must understand the drivers of long-term financial success'. By focusing on what members of staff at different levels actually carry out, and linking those activities to organizational mission, alignment may be attained within the organization (*ibid.*), leading to an improvement in the quality of degree programs, student achievement and educational innovation, increasing student learning by using the right pedagogy, attracting talented faculty, and increasing staff development that may lead to learning and growth (Storey, 2002; O'Neil et al., 1999). The latter might mean that organizations need the right internal processes (Labovitz and Rosansky, 1997; Kaplan and Norton, 1996). Duffy's model is partly based on Labovitz and Rosansky's model. However, Duffy describes a whole school system, rather than individual organizations. While conceding that systemic improvement begins at school level, the school-based improvement model is termed 'insufficient' as it may lead to inequality among different schools in a district (Duffy, 2004, 5). The basis of Vandal's model rests upon using the concept of educonomy, that is, the intersection between education and the economy whereby educational organizations shape students to fit economic interests (Fitzsimmons, 2009), while helping untangle the complicated pathways available to students in the American post-secondary arena. It is acknowledged that there are many alignment barriers, such as uncoordinated federal programs, partisanship, lack of trust, and the absence of standardized data systems (Vandal, 2009; Duffy, 2004).

In spite of the existing literature, the level of alignment may be low due to scarce financial, temporal and human resources, changing plans, weak implementation, wrong training, inaccurate estimates, self-serving people, and lack of communication with stakeholders (Fogg, 2009; Kaplan and Norton, 2006; Labovitz and Rosansky, 1997). In educational organizations this may arise from lack of resources, inappropriate school design (echoing 19th- and early 20th-century industrial values), imbalances between leadership and management, decision-making limitations, and time management (e.g. lack of time devoted to teacher training) (Caldwell, 2007). In Australia, school principals cite lack of time for planning mission, vision, and strategy and their subsequent alignment to each other and government policy as some of the major issues they face (*ibid.*).

A Critique of Alignment

Despite the positive rhetoric quoted above, alignment has been severely criticized on theoretical and pragmatic levels. Theoretically, alignment research may be mechanical and possibly fail to imitate real life (Ciborra, 1997), because alignment is unlikely where organizational strategy is unknown or in flux (Chan and Reich, 2007). It may be that the alignment literature fails to capture important phenomena such as context and the roles of different actors (Brown and Magill, 1998), indicating that alignment may not always be desirable. Alignment research has therefore been criticized, since researchers have generally continued using bivariate studies at the overall organization level, with a focus on structural variables to the detriment of strategy variables; researchers have overlooked capability factors such as management knowledge on the part of business managers; researchers have disregarded contingency context factors, such as competitive strategy; researchers have failed to identify the best decision-making solution when organizational-level and department-level contingency factors are in conflict.(*ibid.*).

Pragmatically, the tightly coupled arrangements which alignment favours can have negative outcomes, especially when organizations have to adapt to new realities, that is, if the external and/or the internal environment changes, organizations may struggle to adapt to their new contexts (Avison, Powell, and Wilson, 2004). For example, since most governments operate on a four to five year mandate, educational organizations align their strategies to capture this cycle, even though some policies may need a longer time for implementation (Sultana, 2008). This potential clash between colleges trying to align with government, while also meeting internal needs, is compounded by the additional voices demanding to be heard in FE policy making such as employers. For example, employers have been found to prefer a just-in-time system which is rapidly adjustable to external and internal environment changes (Sheldon and Thornthwaite, 2005). To facilitate such rapid responses by the FE system, employers may put forward a variety of strategies, including tighter links between training providers and the workplace (Van Buren, 2003). However, such micro-alignment strategies have been criticized as serving industry rather than students (*ibid.*).

Further pragmatic challenges to alignment focus on possible increased costs and worker dissatisfaction, where there are inconsistencies between organizational strategies, internal processes and procedures, and external stakeholders (Sauer and Burn, 1997). Such inconsistencies may arise when organizational strategy is imposed in a top-down fashion without any consideration for its effects on employees and external stakeholders (Mintzberg, 1994). Empirical research on organizations in the knowledge economy seems to legitimize an agent-based approach, where employees lower down the organizational ladder make their own decisions, which are then aggregated by top management (Brady and Walsh, 2008). This is opposed to the traditional textbook approach emphasizing a top-down procedure, which therefore omits the diversity of stakeholders and plurality

Table 1. Comparative summary of organizational alignment models.

Focus		Attributes			
Sources					
Kaplan and Norton, 1996	Strategy	Learning and growth (staff)	Financial	Internal processes	Client (student)
Labovitz and Rosansky, 1997	Mission	Strategy	People (staff)	Internal processes	Client (student)
Duffy, 2004	Whole school system	Horizontal alignment among schools	Horizontal alignment among school services	Vertical alignment among district authorities, schools and support services	
Caldwell, 2007	Student	Intellectual capital	Financial capital	Social capital	Spiritual capital
Vandal, 2009	Educonomy	Situated perspective	Education institutions are viewed as the arbiter of student supply and workforce demand	Requires a P-20 approach	

Source: Author

of the institutions involved (Thompson, Strickland, and Gamble, 2007). Stakeholders as actors within the educational system may understand alignment in different ways (Maes et al., 2000), leading to confusion both on the level of policy formulation and interpretation (Earley, 2005). For example, research into the rapport between state and local reading standards in four US states indicated that alignment had 'different utility to districts, ranging from helpful to benign to nuisance' (Dutro and Valencia, 2004, 31).

In another study, a micro-level analysis of the highly contested Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) in the UK was conducted via institutional ethnography to explore the alignment between government policy and school practices (Hamilton, 2009). ILPs are presently part of a system of performance measurement, based on assessable indicators of teaching and learning. These are used for various purposes such as quality assurance, and while practitioners note the value of ILPs for documentation purposes, they may be difficult to administer. Such alignment may lead to 'perverse and unpredicted outcomes' (*ibid.*, 240), since ILPs tend to focus on hard rather than soft measures, suggesting that there are preferred types of learning. It might be that, notwithstanding the broad acceptance of alignment, the nature of alignment is substantially contested in the litera-ture (Avison, Powell, and Wilson, 2004).

This may be due to the diverse range of alignment definitions encountered in the literature (Maes et al.*,* 2000; Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence, 1997). Alignment, for example, may be understood in cognitive terms as 'a state of being and a set of actions', thus being used as a noun and an adjective (Labovitz and Rosansky, 1997, 5). Another way whereby alignment is discussed in the literature is based on communication, that is, the way that leaders' propagate information to middle managers and staff (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Crotts, Dickson, and Ford, 2005). Further definitions focus on short term responsiveness/flexibility and long-term strategy, formal organization/informal structure, and internal/external alignment (Penuel et al., 2010; Dimmick and Walker, 2004; Semler, 2000). Alignment is therefore a controversial and contested concept, and it cannot be assumed that alignment is indeed useful in the context of any particular FE sector.

Alignment as Another Manifestation of Neoliberalism

While education is understood to be a public good (Holstrom, 2000; Grace, 1994), neoliberal education may be conceptualized as a commodity placed in the private sphere. For example, the Maltese educational system is

currently perceived to be strongly influenced by the EU's neoliberal agenda (Zahra, 2013; Kuhn and Sultana, 2006). An analysis of the present Maltese curriculum requirements for the FE sector suggests that the national cultural, social, and political objectives of education have become adulterated with economic ones (Zahra, 2013). It seems that the main aim of education is that of preparing human capital, as demanded in various EU documents (Euorpean Union, 2010; European Council, 2008), thus creating the manipulatable man (Olssen, Codd, and O'Neil, 2004).

Such a manipulatable man is one who can process information in order to develop skills required by the market, get employment, and earn wages with which to purchase goods and services. Furthermore, such skills are subject to change, hence the accent on lifelong learning locally and internationally (Kuhn and Sultana, 2006). Alignment between government policies for the FE sector and FE organizations' missions may help develop such a skilled workforce (Vandal, 2009).

The role and strength of the state, in achieving the above, is disputed. It has been advocated that neoliberalism manifests itself by a competitive market based on the beliefs in 'the individual; freedom of choice; market security; laissez faire, and minimal government' (Larner, 2000, 7). Conversely, Olssen, Codd, and O'Neil, (2004) propose that neoliberalism needs a strong state, whose function is not to enrich social justice, but to generate an environment favorable to an enterprise culture. The enterprise culture is explained as one where all commodities are freely marketed (Fitzsimons, 2000). This means that the task of the state is in building a technically skilled workforce (Hill, 2006), and to assist the unemployed to gain the means to partake in consumption (Fitzsimmons, 2000). Both of these divergent views of neoliberalism appear to require organizational alignment with state objectives.

While such neoliberal concepts have been criticized, such critique, may, at times, not be ubiquitous, since different countries may operate in different contexts. For example, research on the educational system in Saudi Arabia has revealed a slow shift from a theocratic educational regime to one based on glocal neoliberalism that is characterized by both global and local considerations (Elyas and Picard, 2013).

Alignment is perceived as important in organizations, since it may enhance performance by creating more educational benefits to students, lowering costs whilst enhancing the organization's reputation (Kaplan and Norton, 2006; Khosrow-Pour, 2006). Some researchers claim that alignment may lead to transformation, defined as 'significant, systematic and sustained success for all students in all settings' (Caldwell, 2008, 1), and is an approach whereby government policies may bolster each other, resulting in a positive impact on student outcomes (Watterston and Caldwell, 2011). Lack of alignment is perceived to be hard to justify in a world where efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness, transparency, and accountability are becoming ever more important (OECD, 2006). Situations may also arise whereby FE organizations align themselves to government policies, in order to achieve grants, as in the US Race to Top fund (Kolbe and Rice, 2012).

The Need for a New Alignment Metaphor

Metaphors are 'linguistic vehicles which go beyond the flat two dimensional representation' (Bredeson, 1988, 293). Through transfer of meaning, metaphors attempt to broaden perspectives, enhance understanding, and provide insight into the organization, operation, and administration of schools.

The use of metaphors can be traced back to, at least, Classical Greece (Plato's Allegory of the Cave) (Oztel and Hinz, 2001). In this paper, it is adequate to remember that in the pursuit for knowledge, metaphors have their place in understanding organizations (Etzold and Buswick, 2008). Concepts from the world outside education may be useful for the educational practitioner and academic. In the present chaotic and turbulent global environment, educational leaders may utilize perceptions from other sources of knowledge. Such creative thinking may lead to a deeper understanding of the situatedness of educational organizations and may ultimately lead to systemic change (Sergiovanni, 1994).

For example, Wood (2002) explains how the emergence of a post-World War 2 cinematic society in the USA, based on spectacle and illusion, may be used as metaphor for organizations. Such a metaphor is based on the relationships among actors in space and time, the role of artefacts, as well as other symbolic items such as success stories and myths. Bredeson (1998), lists several metaphors which school administration and students utilized. Some of these metaphors were Taylorist (e.g. factory assembly line and a ticking clock) while some were more organic in nature (e.g. mirrors of society and garden). In the same vein, Bolman and Deal (1997) demonstrated how embracing metaphors could reframe the school as a factory, jungle, family or theater. Similarly, Arnett (1999) compared educational administrators to builders and renovators since they try to inculcate "ethical values, ideas and beliefs to the next generation of students, faculty and alumni" (Arnett, 1999, 80). I will now delineate a new alignment metaphor and compare it to other metaphors currently used. Alignment may be compared to a well-functioning operating theatre. The main attributes in such a scenario are the head surgeon, the anaesthetist, the nurses, fully functional equipment, the patient (all internal stakeholders), the patient's relatives and friends, and hospital administration (all external stakeholders). The role of the surgeon is to identify the patient's problem and perform an operation to enhance the patient's health.

To achieve this, the surgeon must communicate with the patient and next of kin, informing them what and why an operation is necessary. The patient must also be adequately prepared for the operation (e.g. no intake of food and water before the operation). The surgeon must also communicate with the nurses and anaesthetist in the operating theatre. The surgeon, nurses, and anaesthetist's actions and behaviour must be aligned towards achieving a successful outcome. Such behaviour is the result of training, trust, and open communication among medical staff. The equipment available in the operating theatre helps medical staff achieve this success by monitoring the patient's vital functions and providing scalpels, forceps, and gauze that may be necessary to perform the operation.

However, the provision of the right equipment and medical staff at the right place and time is the responsibility of hospital management. Anything less than this might put the patient's life at risk. Furthermore, the surgeon and nurses generally communicate with the patient's next of kin, informing them of developments. After the operation, the patient may have to change his/her behaviour and take medicine accordingly till fully recovered.

In the above metaphor, the student is the patient. To successfully enter and complete FE, the student must be adequately prepared in secondary schools (pre-operation). The actual operation is akin to the learning processes at FE. To achieve a positive outcome, academic staff must work together and given the right equipment. The scalpels, forceps, and gauze signify those resources that are directly related to learning (e.g. books, classrooms, and whiteboards), while monitoring equipment relates to a direct feedback mechanism ensuring students' progress and wellbeing. Such resources must be made available from the government (hospital administration). In addition, other stakeholders (e.g. industry and tourism) must be informed about students' progress.

Alignment has been likened to a cockpit view in an airplane, as well as a rowing crew (Kaplan and Norton, 2006; Labovitz and Rosansky, 1997). The way an airplane aligns itself with a runway, using an Instrument Landing System, taking into consideration current conditions (e.g. airspeed, crosswinds, and rate of descent), means that organizations are challenged to ascertain their exterior and internal environment before embarking on an alignment program (Labovitz and Rosansky, 1997). This alignment is both vertical as well as horizontal. The rowing crew analogy shares similarities, in the sense that an organization must be able to assess external and internal conditions (in this case competition from other crews, water currents, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the individuals within the crew) (Kaplan and Norton, 2006). The human element is evident in the rowing crew metaphor, with its emphasis on the leadership of the coxswain, ascertaining

the relative strengths and weaknesses of the individual oarsmen, and how they combine together efficiently to produce a winning team (*ibid.*).

The focus on individual team members in the rowing boat metaphor is akin to the different functional units within the FE system. As each team member contributes in different ways to a winning team, so a great FE system is made up of different units contributing to the overall function and stability of the system. Furthermore, the rowing team needs to expend energy to achieve co-ordination – in other words, the rowing team may be said to be an open system. It is difficult to apply the same conceptual analysis using Instrument Landing System, since the link between energy expenditure and actual alignment seems to be unclear.

The rowing boat metaphor offers additional advantages. The focus on the human element is stronger than that in the Instrument Landing System metaphor. Modern airplanes have the advantage of computer-controlled mechanisms, whereby the human element is diminished. While not disputing the technological inputs related to rowing in terms of specialized equipment, different people have to co-ordinate their actions for the ultimate goal, that is, winning the race. This co-ordination seems to be lacking in the ILS metaphor.

However, Kaplan and Norton's rowing metaphor has limitations. Their analysis of the external environment is restricted to competitors (other rowing crews), and exclude other stakeholders. In the FE context such stakeholders would include the government, other FE organizations, students, parents, trade unions and possibly supranational organizations, such as the EU. Furthermore, Kaplan and Norton's rowing boat(s) metaphor excludes the possibility of rival crews helping one another. Besides, Kaplan and Norton's metaphor focuses on internal communication only. Such internal communication seems to be a one way process – from the coxswain to the oarsmen but not vice versa. The operating theatre metaphor includes two-way communication among medical staff, patient, next of kin, and administration and seems to better reflect organizational realities. The above metaphor gives a deepened understanding of how alignment occurs since communication with internal and external stakeholders is given a central role.

Competition and Collaboration in the FE Sector

The concept of competition in the FE sector is closely linked to the neoliberal policies adopted in the UK, USA, and Australia. In many cases, the rationale for such policies has been market efficiency with the introduction of incorporation in the FE sector in many countries (Mather, Worral, and Seifert, 2007; Keating, 2006). This was done to increase parental choice, based on information such as school league tables, and to help FE

organizations focus on utilitarianism (Dalley-Trim, Alloway, and Walker, 2008). Such utilitarianism is discursively expressed in terms of skills, qualifications, mobility, and knowledge, attributes all seemingly important in the modern, globalized knowledge-based economy, grounded in a flexible workforce (Nairn and Higgins, 2011; Juul, 2010).

The managerialism that is seen as one of the outcomes of neoliberal attitudes in UK politics has been intensified through incorporation (Rothwell, 2002). Incorporation led to industrial action in the nineties, as FE organizations have become more managerialistic, tied with distrust, insecurity, and a lack of openness. The factors which contributed to industrial action included job losses, wage conditions, and employment procedures (Hill, 2000). There has also been a rise in part time teachers in FE education, a factor which may contribute to a fall in standards due to lack of qualifications, professional development, and service delivery (Husbands and Davies, 2000).

In a parallel situation to the UK, the FE sector in Australia began the process of incorporation in the late eighties and continued throughout the nineties. Reform was brought about by the Federal Labour Government, due to unsustainable youth unemployment in the late seventies and financial collapse in the eighties (Keating, 2006). The FE sector was closely, and still is, closely linked with industry (*ibid.*). In many cases, it may be that the managerial team consisted of a core of professional male managers who set policy, surrounded by female middle managers with a teaching background (Blackmore and Sachs, 2003). It was found that in this scenario, decision making in FE organizations was becoming centralized towards top management, thus omitting other stakeholders, while the FE sector was going through decentralization as a whole (*ibid.*).

The above seems to have become the dominant reality faced by FE organizations. I would like to challenge this outlook by debating the merits, or otherwise, of collaboration among FE organizations. Such merits may be perceived in networking. A network may be defined as a set of actors connected by a set of ties (Borgatti and Foster, 2003). Actors include individuals, groups of individuals, and organizations. The occurrence of collaboration in networks is becoming increasingly significant, and as such there are several organizations which may partake in various networks (Srokaa and Cyglerb, 2014). Such networking may reduce opportunistic behaviour, increase trust, and lower costs. Furthermore, networking may enhance organizational outcomes such as job performance and strategic information (Gibson, Hardy, and Buckley, 2014).

Such collaboration is exemplified in a study on inter-organizational networks in German schools (Schulz and Geithner, 2010). Employing a mixed methods approach (quan-qual), the authors describe the results of 62 schools participating in a networking project in Germany.

Quantitative data was collected through a standardized questionnaire sent to the respective 62 schools. Qualitative data was collected via semi-structured interviews with 20 individuals who were directly involved in these networks. Results from the standardized questionnaire indicated that respondents valued organizational networks since they fostered personal learning, enhanced experience, and served to share experiences which led to a critical evaluation of the value systems existing in these schools. Qualitative data determined that while the motivation of school representatives within the networks was high, there was the perception that disseminating and implementing knowledge gained from network meetings was difficult due to lack of resources.

While inter-organizational networking may lead to a FE regime based on collaboration rather than competition, the implementation thereof requires careful consideration. Apart from the problems evidenced in the previous paragraph, excessive level of conflict, excessive growth of network structures, bureaucracy, and corruption may also surface leading to lowered trust levels (Srokaa and Cyglerb, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Current alignment theories seem to focus on similar elements (e.g. clients, employees, strategic plan, and social capital). These views roughly coincide with neoliberal discourse in FE, based on the creation of a quasi-market, whereby different organizations compete for students and resources. In line with contemporary research, the author believes that such a situation is detrimental to both students and teaching staff. A new alignment metaphor is outlined with a focus on inter-organizational collaboration rather than competition among different FE organizations. While the focus has been on FE, it might be worthwhile applying this new alignment metaphor to secondary and primary education.

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