

Eldership for Modern Times

Elders and eldership are problematic terms in this day and age. Firstly, the concepts are unfamiliar and the words can be misunderstood. In the US, for example, 'elder' can refer to older adults, with the associations of old age and elderly. Secondly, eldership can seem alien in a contemporary secular society. Elders are typically connected with tribal and religious groupings, and an image of a community long since consigned to the past. And finally, elders and eldership may have connotations with the mystic, the ethereal; matters which appear to have little to do with our rational, post-modern sensibilities. Yet, I do believe that the theme of eldership is emerging as pertinent to what is happening generally in communities and specifically in education. Elders in education, or more precisely the need for *eldership in education*, is an old tradition for a modern time. This paper is a first foray into exploring the territory and considering implications.

The changing landscape

As ever the life in schools changes. Education, as it is played out in the state school system, is subject to the cultural and political shifts over time. My purpose here is not to offer an extended critique of today's neo-conservative vision. I want to focus on a particular demographic feature that I have noticed in my work over the past fifteen years with head teachers. I then want to identify a significant vacuum fast emerging that presents both a potential major systemic weakness in the long-term, and a possible solution.

There are few school leaders that I know who are still in post above the age of 55 years. That generation has gone. Lost to the profession entirely, or dabbling in consultancy, executive posts in educational charities, academy organisations or establishing themselves in a second career as a school inspector. The point is that they are not running our schools anymore. There is a second slightly younger cohort – late 40s to early 50s, and these are most feeling the pinch, professional and personally. Those caught in schools in RI or special measures, feel trapped and set upon. They are easy prey for the DfE, Ofsted, the Regional Academy Directorate, Local Authority, their own governing body and/or Academy Trust. This particular group is especially conflicted as they are the last generation of school leaders who would have done their professional training prior to the 1988 Baker Act. It's a significant point. They were raised in a different time; their formative time, in terms of professional identity, was markedly contrasting with our current arrangements. Unfortunately for them, as opposed to the previous generation, they are too young to quit. With a remaining ten to fifteen years of work they are faced with tremendous professional and personal challenges; between a rock and a hard place.

The question of who will next lead our schools is simple enough – they are the class of the mid- to late 90s. In some regions these are the bright, ambitious portfolio-careerists of Teach First, or the GTTP initiatives so popular with the previous couple of governments. They have progressed during a time of radical change in how schools are organized which has included significant shifts in perception of, and actual changes in terms and conditions of employment alongside expectations of how school teachers should work, how they qualify and what they do, and don't do. Headship is coming now for those in their mid-30s and early 40s. For some, especially the growing number arriving late into the profession, they may have not been in teaching for the duration of a full cohort of students.

These observations are not intended as a criticism of the general trend to promoting younger headteachers; this is not the key issue. The point is the implication of a new order of school leadership created in the absence of eldership. Followership, leadership,

eldership are the three dynamics of effective groups, systems and organisations. For my purpose here I am interested in the latter two. Communities, professions – schools – do best where their leaders can ‘lean into’ elders. For too long there has been a cultural pre-occupation with leadership and I am pointing out that there is something else that lies *beyond leadership*, which is eldership.

Historically, the role of elders in education has been carried out at an informal level. The old-style HMI, with prior experience as a school leader, immersed in research or academia, providing a critique of current policy and skilled in observation, was one such example. The longstanding Local Education Authority officer with their knowledge and understanding of how local communities had evolved, with a network of connections across councilors, families, community groups was another eldership resource. Professional associations, rooted in regional affairs could also, for some play an occasional role. And school governing bodies, so often comprised of individuals with a deep sense of commitment to their local community were another source of potential eldership. Of course, each of these areas were equally prone to weakness and ineffectiveness, in terms of eldership although my point at this stage is that channels existed which have been gradually diminished. None of these are currently fit for purpose in terms of supporting eldership in the emerging arrangements in education.

Governing bodies are as embroiled in the spectre of accountability and culpability as the head teacher, professional associations have been utterly distracted by matters that have less to do with vocation and more with professional survival. Local authorities have neither the remit nor resource to provide educational eldership and HMI has become enmeshed in the politically expedient world of the regulator. So, where will our new, increasingly younger, cohort of head teachers ‘lean into’ now?

Ideas of Eldership

I want to set out a framework for understanding a new concept for our time: secular eldership. My proposals draw from conventions in the past about eldership, account for how eldership is currently practiced in specific communities and a few observations drawn from my own practice.

First, let me clarify a common misunderstanding;

Elders do not have to be old – they just tend to be. When individuals are setting out their career there are a range of activities and skills to be acquired. The key objective during what is often best described as followership – being an effective team member - is accomplishment and that runs against the role of the elder, who in most respects has already become accomplished. Nevertheless, some of the qualities of eldership can be spotted in younger, newer members of the group – it’s just that they often have more significant matters to attend to.

So, the following observations are not predicated on elders necessarily being older, although it’s likely that will be the case. To help make the distinctions clearer I have at times contrasted the role of elder with other roles.

Elders have let go of personal ambition; Leaders require it to drive and shape vision

One of the key indicators for eldership is to test whether the individual can walk away from the prospect of personal success. They are capable of ambivalence in relation to power, authority and status.

Elders are defined by who they are, not by an ascribed role

A further test is to see if the individual is able to hold their identity in the knowledge that they do not need to strive to 'be better'. They know that they are sufficient.

Elders uphold the community; coaches uphold the individual

In their work the over-arching concern of the elder is the integrity of the community. The individual leader is a necessary focus of support on the basis that their well-being serves the wider collective

Elders are creatively indifferent; Leaders cannot afford to be so

Elders' advice and insights may, or may not, have immediate value/resonance for others. And having observations accepted is not the point of the elder's offerings. People are free to take or leave them.

Elders seek wisdom; Leaders need to be clever

Elders typically seek out a wider truth in whatever is apparently useful. Looking beyond the immediate detail for emerging processes and patterns is how the elder builds wisdom about the life of the group, community, school. Leaders are compelled to make use of what they know to inform action.

Elders resist agendas; Leaders must pay attention to them

It is an enduring fact of leadership that political nous is crucial in building a sustainable successful term of office. Elders will know agendas exist and need not pay them heed.

Elders always hold psychological leadership: Leaders are obliged to be effective and responsible leaders

I am referring here to the specific references to leadership developed by E. Berne. Responsible leaders represent the public face of authority for a group/school. Effective leaders ensure that the group functions effectively. Schools, like any other organization necessarily require both responsible and effective regions of leadership to be in place. Without this they are vulnerable to dysfunction and lack of accountability. Psychological leadership is held by those who followers know are the most important to the survival of the group. Nowadays head teachers need to occupy all three regions to some degree. Elders have laid down their responsible and effective leadership roles.

In reflecting on the above characteristics of eldership it may appear that the elder is some kind of flawless, ultimate role and this in turn can lead to a second myth about eldership. Elders are neither the embodiment of perfection, nor have achieved any end goal. In addition there are costs for the individual assuming the position of eldership. Some considerations:

- Elders are those who no longer matter so much in terms of getting things done. This is the task of followers and leaders
- Elders are those who no longer have to be listened to. Whilst we need to take heed of what leaders say, elder offerings are optional.
- Elders commit themselves to learning – they are primarily drawn to what remains uncertain. Leaders are often called upon to create certainty for the group
- Elders remain in places of self-doubt; leaders are compelled to resist and reduce self-doubt

- Elders have laid aside being judged by performance. It is the quality of their presence that now counts.
- Elders own their fallibility first, their qualities second. Leaders must safeguard personal qualities to remain credible and manage the impact of personal limitations.

To be an elder requires a level of humility, to the extent that typically the term elder is most often ascribed by others, rather than self-declared. This carries a particular challenge for developing a model of secular eldership.

Where eldership has been integrated in traditional communities it has been associated with the pursuit of relatedness. This is the art of being in relationship, with each other, with oneself, the group and indeed the universe. Relatedness opens up the territory of the psyche and the soul, whether it be in relation to the personal, or in relation to a profession, school or group. The 'practice of relatedness is hard work, a lifelong matter of human discipline and culture'. The elder seeks to be 'a paragon, the honourable, emulable student and practitioner of proper relations (*Honouring Elders*, McNally, 2009, p.48).

Secular Eldership

In turning to the possibility of a model of secular eldership there are at least a couple of challenges. The obvious one being that the language of elders and eldership is problematic, as outlined in the opening of this paper. These are terms which will need to be used more frequently, incorporated into extending our dialogue about coaching, mentoring, leading and supervision. This would constitute a helpful first step in making something happen – language tends to frame reality. If we want to create eldership then we will have to talk about it at the very least.

Secondly, we might begin to ask how eldership is accounted for or might be created in schools and groups, assuming it is recognized as beneficial. This strategy involves being open to how the format and shape of eldership might best meet the needs of a given community. Of course in some instances this might simply mean re-framing existing arrangements and/or identifying individuals. Whereas I suspect increasingly it will necessitate a more fundamental design.

Third, for those working in the mentoring/coaching field and for those in leadership positions, there may be further possibilities for building eldership. Formalising arrangements for the identifying, training and appointment of elders might be a valuable activity for governing bodies, trusts and academy chains alongside coaching and mentoring services. The strategy of formally pursuing secular eldership raises a challenge – if eldership is about personal presence, how can elders be trained and appointed? This is not a new challenge. Specific religious groups have longstanding experience in establishing eldership (often as an alternative and way of avoiding imposing a hierarchical, ordained hegemony).