Beyond educational excellence: leadership ‘styles’, the child and the priority of recognition

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Background
Educational leadership has been reconfigured in recent years as a consequence of shifting government objectives for education. The traditional role of the Headteacher as a primus inter pares (Gunter 2004) has evolved into a complex portfolio of responsibilities, ranging from resource allocation, performance management and stakeholder relations to overall accountability for ‘educational excellence’. In enacting their roles, Headteachers and other school leaders now adopt various leadership ‘styles’, such as the ‘heroic-leader’ associated with transformational and strategic leadership or, alternatively, forms of distributed leadership. However, a preoccupation by leaders with tailoring their ‘styles’ in response to specific government priorities encourages ways of relating which are leader-centred rather than child-centred. This may result in a diminished consideration or even a misrecognition of the essential needs of children and young people to be cared for and respected.

Focus of the enquiry
The paper will focus on a critical analysis of Headteacher competencies and standards (NCSL 2011; DfE forthcoming) within the analytical framework based on modes of recognition (Honneth 1995, 2006).

Analytical framework / Mapping of the literature
The importance of recognition has been expounded by the critical theorist Axel Honneth (1995, 2006). His argument for the priority of recognition is a synthesis of the thinking of G.W.F. Hegel, G.H. Mead and J. Habermas, supplemented by object relation theory developed by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. Honneth’s social theory of identity emphasises recognition as a prerequisite for psychologically and socially healthy development of children and young people. This paper will apply Honneth’s modes of recognition and disrespect to look beyond the current vogue for ‘style’ and consider forms of educational leadership rooted in the priority of recognition.

Contribution to knowledge
The importance of developing critical thinking tools to counter dominant approaches to educational leadership has been emphasised by a number of leadership scholars, leading to the publication of the Critical Studies in Educational Leadership, Management and Administration series (Gillies 2013; Niesche 2014; Gunter 2014). This paper responds to the appeal for more critical intellectual work within the field made by the series editors (Thomson et al. 2014). Honneth’s theory of (mis)recognition provides a foundation for a critical evaluation of ‘educational excellence’, as well as suggesting an alternative approach to leadership, based on the principles of respecting and understanding children and young people.