

Tensions in Prioritizing Adult English Language Learners' Literacy Needs

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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing ethnic diversity globally, there has been little research into meeting the further education needs of these learners (Bidgood, Saebi, & May, 2006). In particular, the international literature provides scant understanding of how organizations go about meeting the literacy needs of adult English language learners (ELLs). It is recognized, however, that organizational factors can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of adult education (Fincher, 2010). This paper provides insights into the organizational strategies adopted by one educational provider in its endeavours to meet the needs of adult ELLs in a context similar to Hargreaves' (1994) description of a "moving mosaic" (p. 195). Case study data gathered included individual interviews with senior managers, a focus group discussion with teachers, and document analysis. Amidst the uncertainties of a shifting environment, three key organizational strategies appeared to help in sustaining the goal of maintaining a student-centered program: flexibility, internal and external collaboration, and a leadership model that provided clear direction as well as engendering a sense of shared purpose.

INTRODUCTION

Provisions for adult ELLs have thus far received scant attention in the international literature (Bidgood, Saebi, & May, 2006). It is known, however, that organizational factors can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of adult education (Fincher, 2010). Also, it is known that resolving organizational issues can divert time away from student support (Brown & Wynn, 2009). One area of concern mentioned in the literature is the continued uncertainty in adult literacy funding (Hamilton & Barton, 2000). This is an issue that also impacts on ELL literacy provisions:

While many aspects of the ESL [English as a Second Language] profession have acquired a certain glamour, or even panache, with their foreign travel and university affiliations, the same cannot be said for adult ESL literacy. Dependent on external funding sources, such as 'soft money' grants by government agencies, and thus condemned to uncertain long-range prospects. (Ross, 1992, p. 3)

This paper provides insights into how one Private Training Enterprise (PTE) strove to prioritize the literacy and language needs of diverse adult English language learners (ELLs) against a backdrop of uncertain funding, external accountability, and on-going policy changes. It opens by summarizing literature on adult literacy needs and provisions, and identifying relevant organizational approaches. The research design and the questions guiding the study are then outlined, after which the case study is presented. The paper concludes with discussion of three key strategies that assisted the PTE in maintaining a learner-centered approach amidst the tensions generated by external factors.

Adult literacy and language needs

Zepke (2011) notes “international literacy surveys in 1996 and 2006 showed that a large proportion of adult New Zealanders were not literate and numerate at a level needed to meet the challenges of a knowledge society” (p. 432). After an extensive review of the literature, Leach, Zepke, Haworth, Isaacs, & Nepia (2010) concluded that progress on addressing this issue was initially hindered by “a lack of reliable research evidence about literacy and numeracy teaching for adults internationally” (p. 8). In common with governments in many other parts of the world, New Zealand has recently begun to focus more on addressing adult literacy issues. However, meeting the literacy and language needs of adults, who are English language learners (ELLs), is often not a priority despite the fact that western, English speaking countries are fast becoming nations “of minorities with widely differing backgrounds and perspectives” (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 184).

Enhancing adults' literacy skills has many

societal benefits (Wignall & Bluer, 2007; Eskey, 2005; Orem, 2005; Wiley, 2005; Barton & Pitt, 2003; Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003; White, Watts, & Trlin, 2001). Lo Bianco (2008) suggests that English language and literacy provides ELLs with “the critical medium for accessing employment, progressing through education and participating in the entitlements and duties of citizenship” (p. 344). The United Nations affirms that literacy “involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society” that is linked to both individual and social aspirations (UNESCO, 2004, p. 13). However, international research (e.g. Wignall & Bluer, 2007) as well as research in New Zealand (e.g. White et al., 2001) continues to raise concerns about the low levels of English literacy amongst adult ELLs. Adult ELLs need to quickly learn a new language to enable them to operate in their new cultural context (Pitt, 2005). Also, many migrants may need to construct a new professional identity (Roberts et al., 2005; Wignall & Bluer, 2007) as their prior qualifications may not be recognized in the new setting (Department of Internal Affairs, 1996). Therefore, the challenge for providers of literacy and language programs for adult ELLs is perhaps how best to address these learners' diverse, immediate, and long-term needs.

Adult literacy provisions

The Tertiary Education Strategy in New Zealand does not identify a specific pedagogical strategy for adult literacy; however, the Tertiary Education Commission advocates an embedded literacy, language and numeracy approach (Zepke, 2011). An embedded approach ensures that “literacy is developed while it is being applied” (McKenna &

Fitzpatrick, 2005, p. 19). It is therefore suggested that literacy skills need to be built in or integrated into real life needs, rather than bolted on in the form of separate literacy programs isolated from social and work practices (Suda, 2001; Wickert & McGuirk, 2005). The benefits of this approach include: the provision of authentic, relevant learning environments related to students' interests and experiences, and the creation of situations where learners can exercise autonomy (Benseman et al., 2005; Benseman & Sutton, 2007), as well as the introduction of key industry and technical language, and the modeling of text types common in particular professional discourse or industry (McKenna & Fitzpatrick, 2005; Rogers & Kramer, 2008).

An embedded approach to literacy and language learning provisions has been advocated for adult ELLs (e.g. Nunavut Literacy Council et al., 2007), contributing to valuing the diversity of learners (Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2003; Miralles-Lombardo et al., 2007; Nunavut Literacy Council et al., 2007), building a literacy-aware learning culture with the learner at the center of practice, and creating a supportive atmosphere with respectful and trusting relationships (Tett & MacLachlan, 2007; Tusting & Barton, 2007). Reports in Australia (e.g. Miralles-Lombardo, Miralles, & Golding, 2007) and New Zealand (McDermott, 2004; Shameem et al., 2002) suggest that embedding English language in work and life skills helps in connecting immigrants to each other, to learning contexts, and to the wider community. Also, embedding English literacy in work-related courses has been found to be motivating for adult ELLs (Barton & Pitt, 2003; Holmes, 2009; Holmes with Stubbe, 2003; Riddiford & Joe, 2006).

While availability of funding and the

development of appropriate learning resources have been reported as significant influences on the effectiveness of embedded literacy models (Casey et al., 2006), it has been suggested that embedded courses provide an economical approach to learning, which makes better use of learning/teaching time (Roberts et al., 2005). However, in reality many adult ELL classes have a diverse range of literacy needs (Barton & Pitt, 2003; Burt et al., 2003; Adams & Burt, 2002). In New Zealand, such classes may include ELLs with differing cultural perspectives, spoken languages, discourse patterns, written scripts and prior educational experiences. Learners in one class may range in age from 16 to 60 years or older with some being pre-literate in both their first language and English; while others have high levels of tertiary education (Shameem et al., 2002). Therefore, despite the recognized benefits, embedded provisions may not always be appropriate. Nation (2008) points out that ELLs with low English proficiency, especially those adults who are preliterate in their first language(s), need to achieve foundational English language before being able to integrate this with work or study-related content. In fact, preliterate adult learners generally require a minimum of 12 hours regular input each week (Shameem et al., 2002), and between 800 and 1200 hours of English language tuition to reach foundational level in English (Ingram, 1981).

Beyond advocating an embedded approach, the literature provides little guidance on the pedagogical structure of literacy and language programs for ELLs. However, the literature does suggest that ELLs experience greater success where a holistic approach to creating a learning culture exists (Bates & Wiltshire, 2001; Guenther, 2002; Miralles, 2004; Miralles-Lombardo et al., 2007;

Nunavut Literacy Council et al., 2007; Schein, 1990). Organizational factors would therefore appear to be important to study in this context.

Effective leadership may be a critical factor in shaping a shared learning culture because it has a transformative function resulting in growth for all of the members of an organization (Lambert et al., 1997). In particular, a distributed model of leadership is said to create synergy between members of a culture in encouraging all participants to move towards common goals (Harris, 2004; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Hulpia, Devos, & Van Keer, 2010; Lambert et al., 1997). It is unclear whether such a leadership model is effective across cultures, but leadership does appear to be a critical factor in the ability of an educational organization to initiate or cope with change.

Stoll and Fink (1996) have identified a continuum of organizational effectiveness, encompassing organizations that are *sinking* (ineffective, lethargic and not able to change); *struggling* (wanting to improve but not knowing how); *strolling* (neither effective nor ineffective due to ill-defined goals); *cruising* (having the qualities of effective organizations but not striving to improve further); and *moving* (having a well-defined direction, as well as the motivation and skills to improve). It could therefore be said that an effective organization will have a coherent, cohesive and collaborative culture, and be continually working to enhance its performance. These features are closely linked to a distributed leadership model.

The degree to which leadership is distributed within an organization has been linked with the potential and willingness of its members to allow changes to occur, and the level of trust and respect that exists between them (Waterhouse, 2007;

Grant, 2009). A distributed leadership model has also been found to “generate excitement about teaching and learning” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2009, p. 185). It is significant that a distributed leadership model is often affiliated with the educational ideals of inclusivity and social justice (Adams & Burt, 2002; Grant, 2009; Suda, 2001); hence, it may align with the aspirations of providers who cater for adult ELLs.

A key challenge for organizations that cater for adult ELLs may be the creation of a shared, yet moving culture, which addresses government aims and accountabilities. However, an effective educational organization must also place the learners' needs at the heart of their planning (Tett & Maclachlan, 2007; Tusting & Barton, 2007; Crowther et al., 2003). Understanding how an educational organization, catering for adult ELLs, achieved equilibrium in the face of tensions created between external accountabilities and learner needs is central to this paper.

The study

The study described in this article took a case study approach, which has been defined as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit” (Merriam, 1998, p. 16). This approach allows for understanding of the diversity of the context, since in adult and community learning, “given the paucity of detailed national age-aggregated data, one is forced to rely on qualitative studies and individual institutional surveys to gain a picture” (McGivney, 2004, p. 36).

This article discusses an aspect of a larger government funded project (Leach et al., 2010), which focused on identifying organizational factors influencing the effective provision of adult literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) programs.

Ethical approval for the research procedures in this study was gained from the University at which three key members of the research team, including the author, were based. Data were gathered to address the research questions in the wider study, which centered on identifying the profile and position of LLN provisions in the tertiary organization, tutor factors (e.g. employment, qualifications, further training and support), LLN requirements in programs, and strategies for assessing LLN skills. In the current article, discussion of numeracy needs has been omitted; because data indicated the learners' needs were primarily English language literacy.

The wider study involved five different case settings. Although two cases were situated in different private training enterprises (PTEs), the PTE central to this article was the only provider that catered specifically for adult ELLs. This PTE was selected, based on local knowledge of the researcher, as a provider that was effectively catering for the diverse literacy needs of adult ELLs. Although she had never worked at the PTE, the researcher was acquainted with the context, and was known to several staff members, as a result of several decades of teaching and conducting research on issues related to ELLs in this region of New Zealand.

Data was gathered from across key organizational strata within the PTE. Individual interviews were conducted with four senior managers: the Director (D), Literacy Specialist (L), Assessment Moderator (A) and Office Manager (O). A focus group discussion was also conducted with a representative group of four tutors (T) responsible for teaching class groups at different English proficiency levels. The initials in the brackets above are used to identify quotes in the

data cited in this article. The interviews and focus group discussion each took an hour. These were audio-taped and the resulting transcripts were edited and verified by participants. In addition, document analysis helped in developing an institutional profile.

The analysis of case study data was conducted firstly through manual coding, based on emergent themes related to the key research questions. Data was later entered into NVivo, a qualitative software analysis tool, to check and refine the analysis. While each case study was independently conducted, the formal report cases were all written up using a common framework that met the brief of the funding body, the Ministry of Education. The significant tensions discussed in this article emerged later, following further reflection on the data.

The setting

The PTE central to this article was located in a suburban area in the central North Island of New Zealand. This training establishment was unique in that no comparable providers existed in this region of New Zealand; although similar providers can be found in the country's three largest cities.

Document analysis showed that all teachers at the PTE held a teaching qualification and/or a Baccalaureate degree, and several had postgraduate qualifications (including one person with a doctorate)—an exceptional level of professional skill for a PTE. The Literacy Specialist also had extensive experience as a school principal, an advisor to the Tertiary Education Commission, as well as teaching in a Chinese University. Overall, the management team had a high degree of stability. The Director had first established the PTE as a general training provider fifteen years ago.

The Assessment Moderator had worked with the Director from this time and the Office Manager had also been with the PTE for a number of years. Nonetheless, the PTE experienced challenges akin to many other providers due to constant external changes, as the Office Manager explained:

Well TEC [Tertiary Education Commission] have changed theirs [their structure] about four times, and that affects the people and how we interact with them; because when I first started we were dealing with areas like the Ministry of Education, which they divided up and we got TEC as well, and now TEC is divided, and then they merged, and then they went apart, and then they came back together again.

The PTE catered to approximately one hundred adult ELLs, mainly from Asian nations and with roughly the same number of international students on short-term study visas, and permanent resident adults (including both ex-refugees and new immigrants). The students represented a wide range of needs. Some students had tertiary qualifications in their first language and were preparing for an international English language test to gain entry to New Zealand universities; others were preparing to take the Occupational English Test in order to gain entry to nursing training. The PTE also catered for a number of ex-refugees, making it “one of the few remaining language schools which offer ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] at the lowest levels” (Investment Plan, 2008, p. 1). As it will be seen later, a strong commitment to meeting the diverse needs of local ELLs was a particular feature of this PTE, but also led to organizational tensions.

RESULTS

Maintaining a student-centred focus

The centrality of student needs was evident in the PTE's commitment to on-going evaluation of student satisfaction:

[Evaluation is] not something we do once. It's not always formal ...It's [often] casual, like: 'How are you going? Your class is good? Your teacher is good? You're doing the work? ... How are the kids? Would you rather come in the morning instead of all day? ... Is this the right place?' (A)

English literacy was a priority since “[students] need literacy ... to be able to get jobs ... to be able to go on to [polytechnic] to do a trade ... do another ... training course ... go on to university” (O). Computer literacy was also identified as a particular area in which some ex-refugee learners required additional support (L).

Given the diversity of students, it was often necessary to personalize (Green & Howard, 2007) literacy provisions; so the literacy specialist provided one-on-one or small group support (up to five students), while also being available to “go in at a teacher's request and help deliver a particular part of their program” (L). In addition, he reported once sitting in the back seat during a driving test, to identify authentic language needed by his students.

Personalized literacy support was especially important for ex-refugees and new immigrants. For example, help was provided with “everyday matters such as power and telephone accounts” (L). Individual vocational goals also needed to be addressed, because “you can't concentrate on that [one need] in the class” (L). For example when

a student was preparing for work experience in a nursery “we spent time talking about plants; he helped make the rooftop garden upstairs” (L). Another group of students wanted to become mechanics:

They were paired up with a ... tutor. We ... got some textbooks from the library on automotive mechanics, the vocab was taught. ... Neither of the guys had driving licences, so we got the road code and went through that. ... So ... when they went out into a work experience placement they had some confidence. (L)

In order to avoid interfering with the on-going class program, the Literacy Specialist had to vary the times he withdrew students from class. Prioritizing student needs therefore involved a degree of collaborative negotiation.

Emerging tensions

It quickly became evident that there were tensions between the pressures for compliance and external accountability and the desire to maintain a student-centered ethos. For example, the PTE had approval to offer only level-three qualifications. The New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQA, 2010) identifies four levels of certificate (the lowest qualification) ranging from basic, through foundational, to preparation for specific work roles and study, and preparation for broad areas of study and work. However, some students (mainly ex-refugees) were only at level one on arrival, so completing the level-three qualification within the funding maximum of two years was difficult. Meeting students’ needs in an environment of high compliance inevitably created

competing agendas: “We have to provide a service, not only to the student but to the government” (A).

Faced with tension between accommodating learners’ needs and attracting and retaining government funding, three key mediating factors appeared to help staff retain a sense of equilibrium, and assisted in establishing and maintaining a learner-centered program. These factors were: flexibility, collaboration and leadership.

Flexibility

Flexibility permeated the PTE’s organization. For example, the PTE’s core program, a Certificate in English for Living in New Zealand, was specifically designed to meet a range of needs. This encompassed life skills modules designed in-house as well as unit standards drawn from the New Zealand Qualifications Association framework. Units included those specific to English for Speakers of Other Languages as well as general literacy, numeracy, business processes, communication, and work and study skills. Students could pursue either an academic strand, or an employment strand, or a combination of these in their program.

Class sizes were small (about 12 students), but students frequently moved on to employment or higher study, and new students arrived. To maintain external funding new students were enrolled each Monday: “in order of arrival ... or availability of [an appropriate] class” (D). As a result of on-going student changes, course offerings often needed adjustment: “At the moment we have got quite a heavy academic emphasis ... but at other times we might be much more a general institution. It’s constantly changing depending on the numbers and on the needs of the students” (D).

In addition, while the needs of older migrants

were often difficult to cater for, younger students tended to move up levels quite quickly, sometimes mid-way through a program (Investment Plan, 2008, p. 3). Flexibility was also provided if a student felt their level was higher than identified in the entry assessment. He/she could try a higher class, and move back down again if unable to cope.

The PTE was funded to deliver literacy support to just 50 students over 46 weeks, at an hour per student per week. However, student movements allowed this to be spread further: “The last intake of Bhutanese refugees ... was a young group of people who had done two or more years of tertiary study. ... They were only here for 6 months and then I could put someone else in” (A).

While the flexible enrollment and progression policy was to some degree driven by the need to retain external funding levels, the Director also believed it was a strong contributor to learner satisfaction. Nonetheless, constant flux in the diversity of needs in each class necessitated additional support for individual students who needed to either catch up or keep up with the class (A). Furthermore, constant changes to students and programs resulted in a need to select “staff who are willing to go with constant change, who are willing to set up a program, and then basically walk away from it and set up something different” (D).

Collaboration

Collaboration was a further strategy that assisted in balancing external requirements with learner needs. All participants identified collaboration as a particular strength of the PTE. Formal collaborative practices included weekly staff meetings, and the literacy specialist's annual report to the director on “how we are going in terms of

meeting the delivery criteria—the numbers” (L). Regular consultation also took place between the literacy specialist and tutors: “Every six weeks I meet with teachers individually... [to] identify the areas of learning that ... they [students] are having difficulty with” (L). These discussions helped ensure English literacy was linked to class content; otherwise “the student ends up doing two curricula for two different people” (L).

Collaboration could also occur spontaneously. For example, impromptu consultation occurred between specialist and class teachers with regard to assessment moderation (noted by A and L); as well as in relation to pastoral care (noted by A, L, D and T), program matters (noted by L and A), and student progress (noted by L).

In addition, an informal collaborative network supported class teachers' planning:

[With the] module on civil defence we start with the performance criteria. ... We look at the resources that are needed. ... We go to the teachers ... the library ... [The Ethnic Center] had just received copies of the civil defence emergency procedure in several different languages, so I picked up copies of those to add to the resource pack. Our Office Manager ... might come across something on a website, or ... when she's out she might see something and bring it back. ... We work really well as a team here. (A)

Informal collaboration could also provide collegial support. For instance, the assessment moderator and literacy specialist “did a moderator's course together” to ensure consistency in marking against external standards (L). The assessment moderator also mentioned helping a new tutor:

“We marked the standard together, so that she had a benchmark.” Another new teacher mentioned how much she appreciated the informal collaboration: “Because this team is so robust I got heaps of help. It doesn’t take long with people guiding your footsteps” (T).

Informal internal collaboration, while effective, was however, difficult to formalize with regard to external requirements, highlighting another tension. The Director noted: “We don’t record [these meetings] anywhere. That’s one of the issues. NZQA [the New Zealand Qualifications Authority] do audits. ... How many meetings do we have? Where’s your documentary evidence?” (D).

Collaboration could also be external, with other educational organizations. This supported students’ progression to work or higher education. The PTE believed it had a key niche in a network of post-compulsory providers:

We all offer something different. ... Sometimes it’s better for us to say [to a student] ... ‘Have you thought about going to [Community College] ... before you come here?’ ... [Or,] when you are starting from a pre-literate place at 20 [years old], becoming a nurse is a long way away. ... You have to get your English up to a certain standard ... then look perhaps ... [at] another ... funded course ... [like] Care of the Elderly. (A)

Students were given support in transitioning to new institutions:

When we send students off to [the polytechnic] ... for the first semester, they come back here and have lunch ... and use the computers ...

but by the end of the semester we see less of them. ... I say to the students, ‘We are always here and you can always come back and ask us’. There are a lot of trust issues, especially with refugees. ... They have to build that trust with [Polytechnic staff]. (A)

Flexible arrangements were sometimes negotiated with other institutions to facilitate the student progression:

I will often say to a training provider, ‘I have a student who is ready to go to [a course for training care-givers]. ... Can she come and try?’ If it doesn’t work out I will take her back. ... If the student isn’t ready to move on we will get feedback ... which we can feed back to the teachers. (A)

However, a further tension arose when students gained employment or went on to further study as they often left before completing a qualification at the PTE. Changes to government funding, making this contingent on student completion rates, therefore came into direct conflict with the PTE’s espoused mission to “help the student to move on” (D) to work or higher study.

Leadership

The third organizational strategy that appeared to help maintain the student-centered focus was the leadership. While the collaborative ethos was strongly suggestive of a distributed model of leadership in the PTE, it appeared that there was also clear leadership from above.

The Director provided a strong model of hands-on student-centered practice. Although there were 100 students in the PTE, the Director interviewed

most new students on arrival: “I see 95% of them, so I know which class they go into; I get a good idea of where they are heading”. Contact also continued after enrollment: “I would probably talk to [students] on a weekly basis ... some more than others ... juggling different classes, with the different programs, with the different funding, with different student aspirations.”

In addition to being a caring and collaborative leader, the Director also needed to be politically and commercially astute. He constantly referred to how shifts in policy made it difficult to devise long-term plans. His overall commitment to ensuring the needs of these adult ELLs remained visible and became even more evident after the case study was concluded. The researcher was invited to attend a meeting of PTE providers, to provide a broader picture of the challenges in this educational area. A little later she was also asked to provide support through making a submission on a government-proposed policy change.

Concluding discussion

Although the PTE was identified as an exemplary case, it is acknowledged that limited data from one institutional case study cannot provide a model for all, and is simply a snapshot taken at one point in time. Additional in-depth research into educational contexts with diverse adult ELLs will be required to provide a clearer description of how post-compulsory institutions resolve tensions that occur at the interface between learner-centered pedagogy and external accountability. However, given the current dearth of research on organizational strategies to meet the language and literacy needs of adult ELLs, the current study provides some helpful preliminary insights.

Although their views are not examined in this

study, student needs were undoubtedly central to the PTE's organization. Through connecting the program to ELL students' life, work and/or further study goals, English literacy was not viewed as a separate subject, but as “a social practice learned in different contexts over time” (Wignall & Bluer, 2007, p. 7). This is consistent with the UNESCO (2004) definition of literacy noted earlier, as well as Orem's (2005) view that, for adults, English language and literacy are part of a lifelong learning process that provides a bridge to the future. However, organizational strategies were not purely linked to students' needs. Many were related to external constraints such as funding, which created internal tensions for the PTE.

Ultimately, the PTE evolved a number of flexible administrative strategies to enable it to continue maintaining its student-centered ethos while balancing external accountabilities that were often linked to policy changes. The PTE staff also built a high level of internal collaboration to insulate them against the constant changes. The PTE also had to continually balance student needs against financial constraints and external requirements, while building and maintaining collaborative partnerships both internally and externally. Nonetheless, a number of tensions still remained hovering in the background, so constant vigilance was required to keep student needs at the forefront.

Ultimately, it could be said that the PTE established an effective educational culture, in that it appeared to be positioned at the positive, moving end of the continuum in Stoll and Fink's (1996) typology of an educational institution's ability to improve. However, the PTE perhaps more closely fitted Hargreaves' (1994) description of a moving mosaic, in that it was “dynamic and responsive

but [also] uncertain, vulnerable and contested” (p. 195). The PTE appeared to be constantly generating ways to maintain equilibrium amongst a number of competing demands. Nonetheless, while the Director stated that he deliberately sought out staff that would be willing to make changes and relinquish ownership of their program, he was also able to recruit well qualified staff, and his senior managers had been with him for some time. These factors may possibly be attributable to his positive, distributed form of leadership which built a collaborative, supportive culture for both students and staff.

The findings from this preliminary study indicate that the PTE’s leadership fits with a distributed model that allows for “multiple sources of guidance and direction following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent by a common culture” (Harris, 2004, p. 258; Harris & Muijs, 2005, p. 31). As Hargreaves and Fink (2009) note, effective distributed leadership extends beyond the institution itself to form “a multiplicity of connections and threads that link the organization’s various communities within and beyond its own boundaries” (p. 184). Specific examples of these connections have been noted in the earlier section on internal and external collaboration.

It is clear that the distributed leadership approach in the PTE assisted greatly in meeting students’ needs, and promoting a shared direction. However, the Director’s role also extended to including the sort of proactive, political edge that accompanies a strong sense of visionary leadership. As Fullen (1993) asserts, education has a moral obligation to make a difference in the lives of students, regardless of their background, and to help produce citizens who can live and work

productively in increasingly complex societies. In the view of Nelson Mandela (see Stengel, 2010), effective leadership includes leading from the front as well as from behind. Insights from this study indicate that this combination of skills may be vital in maintaining equilibrium in the face of conflicting internal needs and external pressures. For leaders of educational institutions with diverse adult ELLs, many of whom may be viewed as minority groups in the dominant English-speaking society, building a strong, student-centered literacy culture is clearly critical. The findings from this study perhaps highlight the importance of educational leaders who are prepared to prioritize a learner-centered environment within their institutional settings and who will continue to strategically balance this focus with on-going changes in external accountabilities.

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