NCSL

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School Leadership

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PositiveLeadership**⁺**
THINKING + RETHINKING LEADERSHIP

Challenging Leadership Practice
Exploring new forms of leadership practice

Alma Harris, Leif Moos, Jorunn Moller,
Jan Robertson, James Spillane

▶ **Exploring different perspectives and approaches to the practice of school leadership.**

Setting the scene

It is early Tuesday morning at Woodsfield Primary School. Two groups of teachers are meeting before school starts. The literacy working group is in having its usual weekly meeting in the school library. Down the hall in one of the Year 6 classrooms, the mathematics working group is also in session. Both of these working groups have been established to lead improvement in teaching and learning in both subject areas. The literacy and mathematics co-ordinators run weekly meetings and many other teachers are involved in leading different initiatives. The chairing of both groups rotates among the literacy and maths co-ordinators and other teachers. In the school, teachers happily take on leadership responsibilities for various tasks as the need arises or as opportunities present themselves.

The Sherwood Technology College is currently part of a new federation involving three other schools: one primary, one special and one secondary. There is a cross-school technology working group that has the responsibility to exchange good practice and to offer training opportunities for staff both within the federation and outside it. The membership of this group is broad-based, involving teachers and support staff from each of the schools. There is no formal structure for the group but a set of priorities they have to respond to and attend to as they undertake their work. The group is not fixed in terms of membership and is not intended to be permanent. It exists to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the specialist subject area across all schools in the federation.

▶ Knowing how leadership occurs is as critical as knowing what to do when you are in a leadership position.

Leadership practice

It is clear that leadership practice is significantly evolving and changing in our schools. The current configuration of schooling as collaborative, extended and multi-agency is generating different kinds of leaders and different forms of leadership practice daily. Here we explore new forms of leadership practice and their implications for those with leadership responsibility. Our aim is to stimulate discussion and debate about the contemporary challenges facing school leaders by exploring different perspectives and approaches to the practice of school leadership.

So what exactly is meant by the practice of school leadership? By leadership practice, we mean the particular instances of leadership as they unfold in the moment-by-moment interactions in a particular place and time. In short, leadership is undertaken through the ordinary, everyday, and sometimes extraordinary, interactions in schools (Spillane, 2006). Of course, leadership practice in a particular place and time has to be understood as part of an overall system of practice that is influenced not only by the immediate situation but also the broader contextual and social influences upon the school. Leadership practice is part of the social world of the school and is intrinsically linked to the everyday interactions that take place there. Attention to these everyday interactions is essential if we want to create schools as solid professional communities. The way people work together will dictate how far they can learn together and from each other.

As schools become more complex organisations, the more traditional forms of leadership will no longer be able to deliver sustainable improvement. Both lateral and vertical forms of leadership will be required to build organisational capacity and to secure long-term improvement. In this respect, knowing how leadership occurs is as critical as knowing what to do when you are in a leadership position. Hence, our focus is upon leadership as practice not leadership as position and we aim to:

- **Challenge certain ideas about leadership and leadership practice**

- **Offer some alternative lenses on leadership practice in schools**

- **Give some insights and illustrations into alternative frames for leadership practice**

- **Offer some questions in order to start a dialogue with you about leadership practice**

We start by outlining some challenges to school leaders and the contemporary leadership field.

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Leadership challenges

In any field there are inevitably tensions, differences and competing interpretations. In the field of school leadership, certain beliefs persist even though there is evidence to the contrary. Therefore, in order to frame our later discussion of leadership practice, we first dispel some popular myths about school leadership.

Leadership equates with position

Despite much writing to the contrary, there is still a tendency to equate school leadership with the actions of principals or headteachers. Clearly, headteachers do have significant responsibilities for school leadership. This is not contested. But it is also clear that the task of leading a school is just too complex and demanding a job for one person or a small senior management team. Instead it requires more distributed forms of leadership that embrace those with formal leadership designations, such as lead teacher or department head, as well as those with no formal leadership role, that is, teacher leaders, support staff and parents, to assist in the broad-based leadership work of the school. But taking a distributed leadership stance involves much more than acknowledging that multiple individuals take responsibility for leadership work. It also involves understanding how leadership practice unfolds in the collective interactions among leaders, followers and aspects of their situation. Think about it: it is impossible to describe leadership practice without referring to all sorts of actions, interactions and activities. For example, how teaching is organised in a school, how mentoring takes place and how peer observation is undertaken are all forms of leadership practice as they all involve some form of influence and direction. Distributed leadership practice arises through discussion, negotiation and consultation among different groupings within the school. It emanates from the interactions of the many rather than the actions of the few.

Leadership and management are separate

Much of the writing on leadership and management still remains separate, polarising management and leadership at different ends of the organisational development spectrum. While many functions could be crudely labelled as either leadership or management and therefore could, in principle, be assigned to different people, in practice both leadership and management overlap. If management is viewed as maintaining the school organisation and leadership is seen as developing the school, they cannot take place separately. School leaders inevitably combine management and leadership activities in their daily work and therefore leadership practice is about both. Even though it may be helpful to delineate activities under each heading, for example to assist in delegation, in practice this serves to detract from the prime purpose of creating the conditions for school change and development. This cannot be neatly divided as it requires broad-based leadership practice that maximises both individual and collective capacity.

▶ If management is viewed as maintaining the school organisation and leadership is seen as developing the school, they cannot take place separately.

Leadership challenges

One leadership style is sufficient

Within the literature on school leadership there remains a series of books that endorse a particular style or approach to leadership often with evangelical zeal and often in favour of other leadership approaches. They promote democratic leadership, autocratic leadership, transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, exhilarating leadership and so on. While we know that leadership does not take on a new meaning automatically when a new adjective is added, there remains a predominant view that the right leadership style, if found, practised and implemented, will make all the difference. But there is more to leadership than just finding the right style or approach.

While one leadership style or approach may work well for some leaders, most leaders have a range of leadership styles. They adapt and adopt their leadership practice to meet the changing needs of circumstances in which they find themselves. As schools develop and change, different leadership approaches will inevitably be required and different sources of leadership will be needed to ensure that the development work keeps moving. Therefore a one-size-fits-all style or approach to leadership or checklist of leadership attributes may seem superficially attractive but can often limit, restrict and distort leadership behaviour in ways that are not always conducive to school development and improvement.

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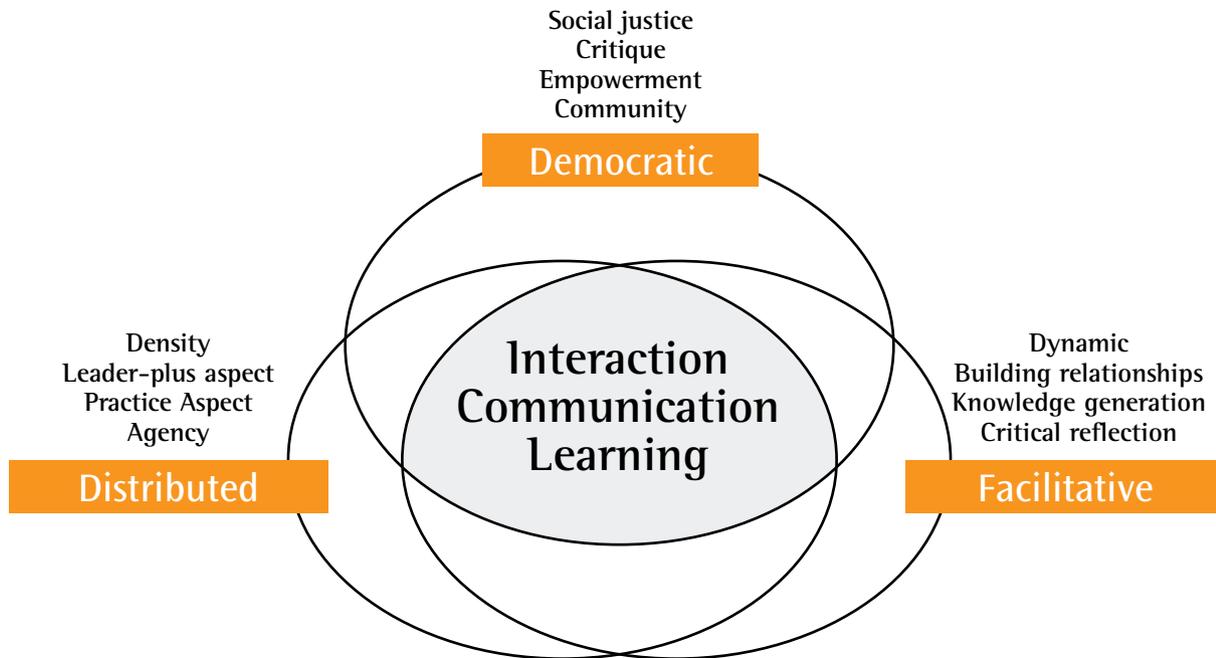
Alternative perspectives on leadership practice

These challenges provide a background for our exploration of alternative perspectives on leadership practice. Here, we consider different frameworks on leadership practice that school leaders might find helpful. Clearly, there are other frameworks that could be used, but the intention is to focus on those that reflect broad-based leadership practice.

The three perspectives on leadership are:

• **Distributed Leadership: core concepts are leadership density, leader-plus and collaboration.**

• **Democratic Leadership: core concepts are social justice, critique, empowerment and community.**

• **Facilitative Leadership: core concepts are dynamic, building relationships, knowledge generation and critical reflection**

These lenses on leadership practice have certain concepts in common:
They all focus on **interaction, communication and learning:**

Social justice
Critique
Empowerment
Community

Democratic

Density
Leader–plus aspect
Practice Aspect
Agency

Dynamic
Building relationships
Knowledge generation
Critical reflection

Distributed

**Interaction
Communication
Learning**

Facilitative

Alternative perspectives on leadership practice

Democratic Leadership implies that one of the main responsibilities of school leaders is to build educational institutions around central democratic values such as promoting equity and social justice in school as well as in the wider community. It emphasises that the underlying principles and values of a democratic approach need embedding in both management and leadership practice. Both need to reinforce and uphold a focus on social justice and a concern for the welfare of others including the dignity and rights of minorities and individuals. Putting empowerment as a central principle involves balancing power and trust whether in the areas of leadership or of management. It means creating a stimulating learning environment where pupils flourish and develop as citizens.

Democratic leadership requires serious attention to the value base of leadership practice and the processes that create and sustain social justice, empowerment and community. It includes a consideration of the ways in which external social structures are reproduced through the administration of schooling. The task ahead is not just about modelling and developing democratic practices within the school; it is also about challenging the wider power structures in which the school is embedded, and committing oneself to work for social change.

- **How far does your school reflect democratic values and principles?**

- **What do these values imply for your leadership practice?**

- **Who is included and who is excluded in setting directions?**

▶ Democratic leadership requires serious attention to the value base of leadership practice and the processes that create and sustain social justice, empowerment and community.

▶ When leadership practice is viewed from a distributed perspective, then you allow for and take into account the work of all individuals regardless of whether they are formally designated leaders.

Alternative perspectives on leadership practice

Distributed leadership is a conceptual framework for thinking about the work of leadership. The distributed leadership framework involves three essential components. Firstly, leadership practice is the central and anchoring concern of distributed leadership. Secondly, leadership practice is generated through the interaction of leaders, followers and their situation. Thirdly, the situation both defines leadership practice and is defined in and by leadership practice. So for example, when leadership practice is viewed from a distributed perspective, then you allow for and take into account the work of all individuals regardless of whether they are formally designated leaders. Distributed leadership can be either democratic or autocratic; it is not necessarily good or bad, as much depends on how leadership is distributed and for what purpose. Furthermore, when leadership is viewed from a distributed perspective, it is the day-to-day practice of leadership in its broadest sense rather than leadership strategies or functions that are the focus of attention. It is the interactions and not simply the actions of individuals that provide the leadership practice.

• **Over whom is leadership stretched at your school?**

• **Who are the informal leaders in your school and how might their interactions define leadership practice?**

Facilitative leadership acknowledges that leadership and knowledge reside within the education community and that all members have the potential (and responsibility) to contribute, albeit in different roles, to organisational decisions in the pursuit of the continual improvement of student achievement. In this way, facilitative leadership encourages formal and informal leadership from the members of the learning community in different ways at different times for different tasks. The focus of facilitative leadership is on knowledge creation and developing creative ways to achieve outcomes and improve performance. This necessitates that all members of an education community are learners and engage in critical reflection, debate and dialogue around their professional practice and students' learning. Facilitative leadership challenges participants of the community to not only solve problems together but also to pose problems and questions that will lead to changes in practices and systems. This implies that there are many sources of leadership and many ways of leading.

• **How does the leadership in your school promote and support relationship building?**

• **How far does the leadership practice in your school support knowledge generation and sharing?**

▸ The focus of facilitative leadership is on knowledge creation and developing creative ways to achieve outcomes and improve performance.

These lenses or frameworks on leadership practice inevitably raise some general questions you may wish to consider.

- **From a distributed perspective: how is leadership stretched over formally designated and informal leaders in your school for a particular leadership function?**
- **From a democratic perspective: who is included and who is excluded in setting directions and making decisions? How are new group members identified and selected? How do you work for social change? How are the wider power structures in society challenged?**
- **From a facilitative perspective: how is knowledge being generated and shared within the group?**

▶ How do we maximise and sustain future leadership capacity in our school?

These frames on leadership practice and the questions they raise present an opportunity for reflecting upon leadership practice in your school. They are not intended to be prescriptive but rather they aim to provide alternative ways of thinking about leadership practice. Some additional questions you and your colleagues might now consider directly relate to the stages of school improvement and development (Harris, 2002). These stages are diagnosis (where we are now), development (where we should be going) and drive (how we sustain our efforts). The questions are as follows.

DIAGNOSIS

- **How do we think about and understand leadership practice in our school? To what extent do these three lenses reflect current leadership practice at our school?**
- **Are some forms of leadership practice in our schools more effective or beneficial than others? How do we know?**

DEVELOPMENT

- **What particular aspect of leadership practice should we be developing, and for what reason?**
- **How do we ensure that leadership is more broad-based and collaborative? Who should be involved in supporting and facilitating this development?**

DRIVE

- **How do we ensure that our leadership succession planning supports the types of leadership practice we aim to grow and develop?**
- **How do we maximise and sustain future leadership capacity in our school?**

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