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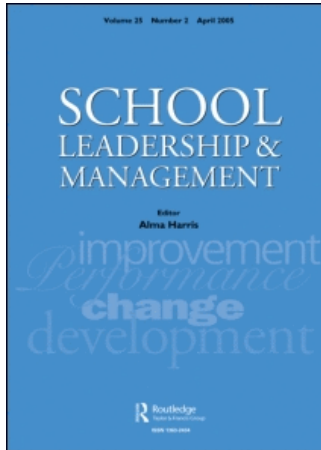
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Co-leaders and middle leaders: the dynamic between leaders and followers in networks of schools

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This paper sets out to explore the nature of leadership within networks of schools. The research is based on a large-scale funded initiative in the UK of over a 100 school networks. The empirical data are drawn from a series of programme-wide research and enquiry activities that took place over the first two years of the initiative. Drawing on school leadership and social movement theory it analyses the practices of strategic network leaders and the overall growth of leadership capacity within school networks. This analysis explores the interaction between groups of leaders and the dynamics of their relationship. In doing so it raises the question of whether the leadership of school networks is qualitatively different from that of leading a school. The issue of leadership shearing, where the differential developments in the agency of groups of leaders in a network can lead to increasing tensions and fragmentation of effort, is used to exemplify the emergent leadership challenges offered by an education system that is increasingly becoming networked.

Introduction

There are relatively few empirically well grounded accounts of the impacts of school networks in the UK, and even fewer which draw out the roles of leaders in achieving this impact (Hadfield *et al.*, 2005b). It is therefore too early in the development of school networks in the UK to discuss what effective ‘network’ leadership looks like, or even if it is radically different from the leadership of an individual school. This paper therefore focuses on some of the early problems faced by leaders as they try and establish their school-to-school networks, within a single nationwide initiative, the Network Learning Communities (NLC) Programme. Focusing on this specific stage of development provides some evidence that the increasing popularity of network-based approaches to school improvement, service delivery and urban regeneration is generating new and emergent leadership challenges, which in their turn are likely to create new leadership approaches.

Beyond the lack of empirical evidence there is a theoretical problem that needs to be addressed when the terms ‘leadership’ and ‘networks’ are brought together.

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Leadership on its own is a complex enough construct to define and practically delineate as an area of research (Gunter, 2005). Similarly what constitutes a network, and how it is to be differentiated from networking, is equally problematic (DEMOS, 2004). Unsurprisingly, combining the two constructs can lead to conceptual confusion. When researchers into leadership have looked at networks they have often struggled with the plethora of metaphors and potential models used to describe different forms of networks and networking (Skidmore, 2004). The converse of this problem presents itself to researchers of networks when they look at the leadership literature. Here they can struggle to connect appropriate leadership models to their particular view of a network. For example, Allen and Cherrey (2000) ask, when discussing the nature of what they describe as 'systemic leadership' in a networked society, 'Would the CEO of the Internet please stand up? How does the Internet survive without job descriptions, strategic plans, or performance appraisal?' They argue that 'current' notions of leadership are inappropriate within our evolving networked society. They reach this conclusion though by taking a highly individualistic metaphor of leadership, the CEO. They then emphasise the CEO's role in managing the formal aspects of a 'classical' organisation, such as job descriptions and strategic plans. They then combine this with a network metaphor based on the Internet, which emphasises the social and cultural aspects of networking. It is therefore not surprising that they reach the conclusion that 'the Internet, governed loosely by a broad range of persons, is a harbinger of institutions to come – sophisticated networks of people and resources that inherently cannot be "managed" using current models of leadership' (Allen & Cherrey, 2000, p. 7). Allen and Cherrey's (2000) radical analysis of the form of leadership required within a more networked society unfortunately arises from a conceptual mistake, the juxtaposition of two incongruent generative metaphors (Schon, 1993).

To avoid making a similar categorical error and to overcome the confusion that often arises by the use of very generic or simplistic notions of 'network' and 'leadership' this paper adopts a particular stance. First, in defining what is meant by 'leadership' it draws a distinction between the practices of network leaders and the overall development of leadership capacity within networks. Second, it analyses these two aspects of leadership separately. It uses a metaphor drawn from network theory to analyse the practices of network leaders, and a metaphor from leadership theory to analyse the development of leadership as an organisational capacity within a network. Finally, these two analyses are re-synthesised in order to highlight key leadership tensions with the early stages of network development – tensions which give some indication that leading a network of schools maybe a very different task from leading an individual school.

Leadership practices

One of the difficulties of discussing leadership practices within a network is that the very nature of a network makes it difficult to define who its leaders are. In this paper

the focus is on those individuals who were held responsible for the overall functioning of the network, and were held accountable for its activities by the funders of the NLG initiative. The practices of these strategic leaders of a network were of a different order from other 'leaders' such as headteachers of schools in a network or those responsible for a specific piece of network activity. This was because they were responsible for the development of the network as a whole rather than just an element within it, or how a single organisation interacted with it. Within the NLG initiative these strategic leaders were described as co-leaders, because there was a requirement within the funding regulations, based on research in previous network initiatives, (Hopkins & Jackson, 2002) that co-leadership was an effective model in dealing with the complex demands of large networks.

A very specific metaphor is used to describe the work of these co-leaders in the initial stages of their network's development. This is to treat the early stages of a school network as akin to trying to initiate activity within a 'new' social movement (Melucci, 1989). Such social movements encompass a wide range of campaigning and political movements, from local community groups to global environmental campaigns, that set out to affect change in their locality or globally. This metaphor was chosen because of the conceptual overlap in the purposes, organisational structure and types of processes involved in attempting to mobilise social action within a new social movement and those involved in generating coordinated professional change across a network of several schools

Leadership capacity

Leadership capacity is a multi-faceted construct (Harris & Lambert, 2003) in this instance the analytical focus is on the overall patterns of leadership, who becomes involved in leadership activities and how their work interacts with each other. To investigate empirically the development of these patterns within the NLG networks the paper examines the expansion of 'middle leaders' within networks and their developing relationship with the co-leaders. Middle leaders were described as such because of their relative position within schools, and networks, in that they were generally positioned between those who had responsibility for the strategic development of the network, co-leaders, and the classroom-based practitioners who ultimately delivered change 'on the ground'. Their development and interaction with co-leaders are analysed through the lens of 'distributed leadership', here used as a metaphor for 'thinking about leadership' (Bennet *et al.*, 2003) as a social phenomena within a network.

The empirical basis: researching within one networked-based initiative

The research evidence drawn on in this paper is from a single network initiative. This is the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) Programme; launched in September 2002 it provided three years of funding for each network. This initiative brought

together networks of schools, local education authorities (LEAs), higher education institutions (HEIs) and the wider community to work collaboratively to raise standards and improve opportunities for their pupils. The Networked Learning Communities Programme is still quite probably the largest such initiative in the world, and was funded by the National College for School Leadership and the Department for Education and Skills. At its peak in 2004 there were 137 school networks involved, including approximately 1500 schools, 25,000 staff and 500,000 pupils.

The networks within the NLC programme spanned England and their composition was such that approximately 70% were from the primary sector and 30% from the secondary and special schools sectors. Networks varied in size from a minimum of 6 to over 40 in one instance, with an average of approximately 10. With regard to the socioeconomic contexts in which the schools operated they broadly reflected the national picture with slightly more schools operating in lower socioeconomic contexts. This reflected the number of networked-based funding initiatives that already existed in many inner-city communities.

When studying network leadership it is important not only to be clear about the nature of the network being researched, its purpose and organisation, but also its stage of development. This paper focuses on those networks that were formed as a result of the NLC call for proposals, rather than those that were already in existence. The leadership challenges associated with a new network will be very different from that of a mature network. As a network develops new structures and processes are created and new roles emerge that interact with individual schools organisation and leadership. At the commencement of a network this dynamic can become the dominant leadership challenge; as networks mature new issues such as achieving a critical mass of network activity and their sustainability tend to come to the fore (Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2003, Anderson, 2005).

Many of the schools in the NLC Programme were already involved in a network of some kind (see Figure 1); however, 51 identify new foci and processes and 33 were

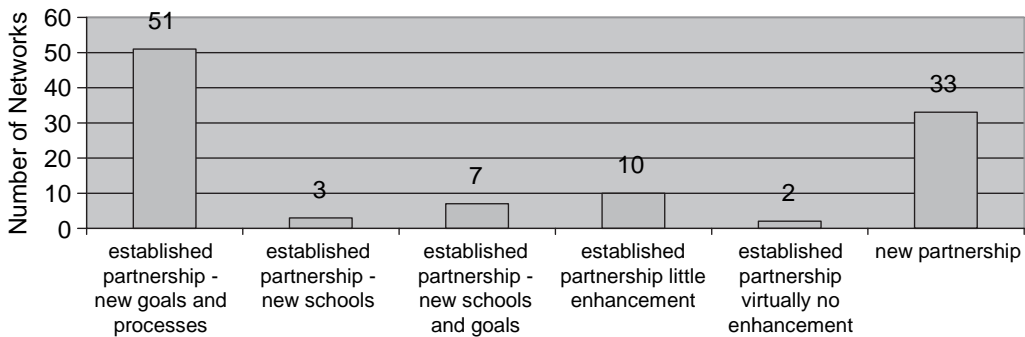


Figure 1. Prior histories of Networks involved in the NLC programme.

'new' networks in that this was the first time that these schools had worked together as a formal network, although some may have collaborated previously.

To understand the nature of these networks it is important to set their work in the context of the whole NLC programme. This was designed not only to create networks that would help individual schools to work together and coordinate their improvement efforts but also, by bringing together sufficient numbers, to change the education system. The programme therefore aspired to fundamental changes at the level of schools and individual networks and incremental shifts in the degree and nature of collaboration within local education systems (Hopkins & Jackson, 2002).

To support the networks and to promote the development of school networks across the education system the programme set up a core team. This consisted at its peak of some 26 facilitators, who worked directly with networks of schools, and a smaller core group of 6 researchers. Organised in regional teams, and supported by a strong knowledge management infrastructure, this core team carried out a wide range of research and inquiry projects, many collaboratively with networks. Some were programme-wide studies while others involved more targeted and focused research.

Data collection

The data on which this paper is based are drawn from three programme-wide studies. These were the Year One and Year Two Reviews and the Second Annual Enquiry. In terms of data collection and analysis the two review processes were broadly similar, in that they were designed and managed by the research team and carried out by the facilitators in conjunction with the co-leaders of the networks. Members of the facilitation team visited each network to introduce the data-collection tasks, and helped complete them, before they were sent to the research team for analysis using Nvivo software. The data collection tasks consisted of:

- co-leaders and facilitators reviewing the progress of the network against the original submission to become an NLC and identifying activities that have gone ahead, been postponed and stopped;
- co-leaders being interviewed about major network achievements and obstacles which were then recorded under a range of headings, from leadership to funding;
- co-leaders creating a form of organogram, termed a network-o-gram within the programme, that indicated the main network structures and groups;
- submitting a portfolio of network materials containing evidence of activities.

The Year One review took place between October 2003 and May 2004, with 76 from the first 84 networks completing all their elements. The Year 2 Review process was launched in June 2004 and completed by January 2005. All but five networks, which withdrew from the programme, completed this review.

The Second Annual Inquiry was again designed and managed by the research team and focused on the impact of the most developed adult learning processes

within each network. To assess impact, and how this was achieved, the facilitators carried out interviews with those who had led and benefited from these activities. The number of interviews ranged from a minimum of 2 to over 10 depending on the complexity of the network and the adult learning processes. In addition to these interviews documentary evidence of impact on adults and within classrooms was also collected. This included examples of pupils' work as well as newsletters, course materials and evaluations.

The interviews were coded onto two analytical frames by the facilitators. The first was based on the EPPI review of collaborative professional development (Cordingley *et al.*, 2003). This ensured consistent categorisation of the various learning activities used within the networks. The second framework was based on a development of Shulman's (1987) categorisation of teachers' professional knowledge. This allowed facilitators to differentiate between the various impacts claimed by the adults they interviewed. These grids were used as the basis for short case studies of the network's activity written to a common format set out by the research team. The research team carried out a meta-analysis of these grids using Nvivo software. The Enquiry took place between January and June 2004 and the grids from 77 networks were used in the analysis.

Analytical framework: two underpinning metaphors

The analysis of network leadership is complex because it requires an adequate conceptualisation of leadership to be combined with a similarly robust notion of 'network'. As argued earlier, confusion often arises by the use of very generic or simplistic notions of either 'network' or 'leadership'. In order to try and overcome this difficulty this paper approaches the analysis of network leadership from two perspectives. First, it draws from an established area of what might be called social network theory, the study of 'new' social movements, and uses this as an analytical metaphor to unpick the key practices of network leaders, i.e. the co-leaders. Next it draws on an established area of leadership theory, the notion of distributed leadership, to analyse the development of leadership as an organisational capacity within a network. In doing so leadership as a social construction, arising from the interaction between groups and individuals, is used to understand the growth of middle leaders within networks and how their activities interacted with those of the co-leaders. The analysis of two different aspects of network leadership using metaphors drawn from different theoretical origins is an attempt to overcome the problems inherent in unpicking the unique leadership issues within networks of schools.

New school networks and 'new' social movements

What kind of network metaphor is helpful in considering the leadership practices involved, for example, in getting 10 schools with little history of formal collaboration to set up a professional development programme that intends to impact on multiple

classrooms in each school? The metaphor used here lies towards the 'social' end of network metaphors, in contrast to more technical or organic metaphors, and this was to view individual school networks, and the whole NLC programme, as a form of 'new' social movement.

New social movements exemplify a specific type of network structure:

It is difficult to grasp the nature of social movements. They cannot be reduced to specific insurrections or revolts, but rather resemble strings of more or less connected events, scattered across time and space; they cannot be identified with any specific organization either, rather, they consist of groups and organizations, with various levels of formalization, linked in patterns of interaction which run from the fairly centralized to the totally decentralized, from the cooperative to the explicitly hostile. Persons promoting and/or supporting their actions do so not as atomized individuals, possibly with similar values or social traits, but as actors linked to each other through complex webs of exchanges, either direct or mediated. Social movements are, in other words, complex and highly heterogeneous network structures. (Diani, 2003, p. 8)

At first reading this description may not seem particularly close to how most people would imagine a school network operates. This is because the construct of a new social movement is used as an analytical metaphor, not as a theoretical model. As such it needs to encapsulate many of the characteristics of how a 'new' school network operates, by being sufficiently analytically close to the phenomenon to resonate with it and help sharpen the focus of the analysis. At the same time though there needs to be a certain analytical distance in which the worth of applying aspects of the metaphor to the notion of leadership can be tested, and if need be rejected. There needs to be a degree of analytical resonance between what Schon (1993) describes as the target metaphor, in this case networks, and the domain metaphor, in this instance 'new' social movements. As the two resonate, constructs and empirical findings generated within the study of social movements can be applied to the study of school networks.

What, then, are the points of resonance? The overarching point is that social movements, as with school networks, are highly heterogeneous network structures working across several organisations trying to achieve social changes. Within these networks are individuals who, though they may share a broad common moral purpose, may not share the same values, and whose connection with each other will be based on complex webs of exchange. It is this combination of factors that sets out the basic link between the two constructs and that shapes the leadership problems and practices associated with leading either.

Each point of analytical resonance is worth considering in more detail before looking at the empirical data from the networks. With regard to purpose, social movements are about achieving some form of social change, and are organised around this. This change is normally set within a broad moral agenda, but entails specific concrete improvements. This resonated with the NLC networks, which normally brought their work together under a range of broad moral purposes, for example working more collaboratively to improve the educational achievement of

local communities, but who also set out to improve the curriculum and quality of learning and teaching within individual classrooms. The leadership challenge created here is the scale and breadth of change required, ranging from whole communities to individual schools, from reversing generational underachievement within a community to changing the teaching of literacy in 20 or so classrooms.

The moral purposes of social movements tend to stand in opposition to the direction of historical processes (Touraine, 1981), in that they are essentially antagonistic to the broad social trends that are the origins of the issues that they set out to deal with. For example the expansion of the trade union movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in response to new forms of capitalism and industrial production. School networks within the UK find themselves working against key policy trends within the education system, which have set schools in competition with each other, weakened the interdependence between schools, and stifled innovation and collaboration (Glatter *et al.*, 2004). To an extent working collaboratively in this policy environment requires the development of a resistant leadership posture to both local and national education systems. This is a factor that affects the kinds of leaders that become involved in networks as well as their approaches to the challenges presented to them.

The next point of resonance is that social movements are not constant or uniform in their activity. Network activity ‘pulses’ over a changing patchwork of organisations leaving a series of historical social structures behind. Similarly, schools will move in and out of various collaborative arrangements over time; only sometimes will this be formalised into networks. They will have different sources of funding that require a range of structures. Some schools will drop out for short periods of time, while being externally inspected for example, while others will move on permanently and join a different network, again resonating with organisations in broad social movements, which, as part of their campaigning activities, often form alliances across a range of different networks. This pattern of interactions shapes the historical and social contexts from which school networks emerge.

In terms of key leadership processes there are other interesting parallels. New social movements are described as ‘new’ because they are not based on existing structures such as social class or ethnicity that have traditionally brought people together to deal with common causes (Melucci, 1989). Leaders within such movements have to build a collective identity across groups and individuals. As with most social movements the school networks within the NLC were voluntary in nature, to the extent that the schools chose to create a network, were free in determining its membership and were given only broad outlines as to what was seen as an acceptable focus. They were therefore, to a large extent, free to define for themselves the purposes and vision of their network (NCSL, 2003). Often a core of activists formed the network and with the exception of certain key personnel, who may have been given formal roles within the network, their involvement was voluntary. The voluntary nature of individual participation meant that network leaders, particularly in the early stages, faced similar issues to leaders of new social movements. They had to pay particular attention to legitimising network activity

within a broad range of alternative professional actions that could help improve ‘my’ school or ‘my’ classroom, and deal with value differences around what constituted ‘improvement’.

Distributed leadership within networks

A distributed leadership lens moves the analysis of leadership beyond individual practices to the patterning and emergence of leadership activities within and between groups. From a distributed perspective leadership is understood as:

- an emergent property within a group or network of interacting individuals;
- an inclusive activity where the boundaries of leadership are open;
- based on the distributed expertise of the many not the few. (Bennett *et al.*, 2003, p. 3)

In Spillane’s (Spillane *et al.*, 2001) evocative imagery this treats leadership as being ‘stretched over’ the social and situational contexts of the school, or network. In this paper there is insufficient space to rehearse the various definitional arguments that surround the concept of distributed leadership (see Harris, 2004 and Bennet *et al.*, 2003 for a detailed discussion). Rather, in this instance as a metaphor for thinking about leadership it is applied not to the dynamics within a group of leaders in the network but to the relationship between different groups of leaders, specifically the interaction between co-leaders and middle leaders. These two groups represent the key points at which school and network leadership interacted. The co-leaders, the majority of whom were headteachers, were the strategic leaders of the networks and initially represented the point of connection between the schools’ existing leadership structures and new network structures. The ‘middle leaders’ became the point of connection ‘back’ into individual schools from these new structures.

An analysis of co-leaders’ early leadership practices

In the Network Learning Group programme co-leaders were responsible for the strategic development and overall management of the collaborative activities between schools. The programme’s review of existing research into networking (Hopkins & Jackson, 2002) had led them to specify that there had to be a minimum of two co-leaders in each network. In practice there were no clear patterns of co-leadership that emerged in the first year (Anderson *et al.*, 2004), partially because of the difficulty these strategic leaders had in clarifying their roles. The majority of co-leaders were headteachers or senior leaders within network schools. The number per network varied from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 12. In terms of thinking of these networks as social movements the co-leaders were the activists who had decided to form the network in the first instance.

In the Year One Review a category of co-leader practices, termed ‘strategic and structural development’ within the Nvivo analysis, was the third highest ranked

activity, occurring in 89% of all the networks. In practice this category mainly involved co-leaders bringing together other headteachers into various forms of network leadership groups. An in-depth analysis of their leadership practices showed that co-leaders were involved in three main activities, termed courting, aligning, and connecting and embedding (see Table 1).

The processes of courting and aligning schools in the network also involved co-leaders making changes to their original proposals to the NLC programme as they negotiated with headteachers to ensure network activity more accurately reflected the current problems and issues faced by schools:

Leadership of network has been restructured to meet identified need rather than that originally perceived. Recognised that coordinators are not always drivers of change, hence head teachers required in a strategic group. Co-leader group therefore enlarged to produce a steering group, which includes two head teachers. Steering group provides vision and direction for networked learning. (Year One Review materials)

Connecting and embedding the work of the network required coordination and capacity beyond the co-leaders and leadership teams. The vast majority of networks created cross-school teams who were given the responsibility of progressing the network's plan within schools. It was from within these groups that the middle leaders emerged.

Table 1. Year One Review: strategic and structural development activities

| | Network leadership activity | Examples from network reviews |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Courting | Approaching potential partners, developing proposals for new network activity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collecting contacts and courting possible networked partnerships ● Building links with networks with similar foci or those who offered new learning opportunities |
| Aligning | Winning leadership buy-in through individual or group negotiation. Preparing plans for the network | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Developing mission statements, establishing network-wide focus or specific enquiry foci ● Whole-school target-setting ● Establishing steering groups |
| Connecting and Embedding | Creating structured opportunities for teachers to work together Formalising the network through links within and between schools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establishing new network-based roles and responsibilities ● Creation of lead learner forums, cadre groups, leadership learning groups, learning partnerships, and school improvement groups |

The growth of 'middle leaders' within networks of schools

A sudden growth in middle leader roles within school networks is a widely recognised phenomenon. It has been reported in school networks in both the UK (Shaw *et al.*, 2003; Noaks *et al.*, 2004) and internationally (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2003; Kaser & Halbert, 2005). On average within the NLC programme, nearing the end of the second year of the programme, 5–8 individuals had taken on such roles in each network, equating to nearly 1000 new middle leaders within two years across the whole programme. What, then, were these middle leaders leading?

At the time of the Year One Review their primary focus was on specific aspects of network activity. They were either given responsibility for a particular cross school initiative, or were working within their own school to coordinate and implement network initiatives. The various titles these roles were given broadly reflected their responsibilities: 'Lead learners' were common in networks involved in curriculum development, 'School Improvement Group coordinators' in school improvement networks, as well as more generic terms indicating an overall involvement in leading, in and across school projects such as 'Theme Champions' or 'Cultural Architects'. Often these roles and the groups they worked within had grown out of existing positions that already entailed an element of school-to-school work, such as Advanced Skills Teachers. In those networks that were established prior to the NLG programme they were often adaptations of established network roles, such as 'Gifted and Talented Coordinators'.

The Year One Review revealed that formal middle leadership roles were more likely to be associated with two types of networks. In the larger (more than 12 schools) networks 19% had created some kind of middle leader role, compared with 9% of smaller networks, while 13% of established networks reported having them, as compared with only 3% of new networks, possibly reflecting the fact that new networks needed to spend more time in mobilising effort at the headteacher level, and that larger networks were often based around the nuclei of a previous network where such roles were already established.

By the end of the second year such groups and roles had been created in the majority of networks. Indeed many had now evolved further, particularly those networks that had been established prior to the NLC programme. Below is a 'network-o-gram' (Figure 2) of a fairly typical secondary school network of 11 schools demonstrating the range of middle leaders operating within a single network. Co-leaders in this network, as in many others, were now working with several groups of middle leaders, each operating slightly differently owing to the focus of their work and the constitution of their teams. Each of these groups provided a space where the leadership of the network interacted with the leadership of individual schools.

In this network the key middle leaders group comprised the 11 Teaching and Learning Strategy Managers and one senior manager from each school, who were joined by the two co-leaders to provide day-to-day leadership of the network.

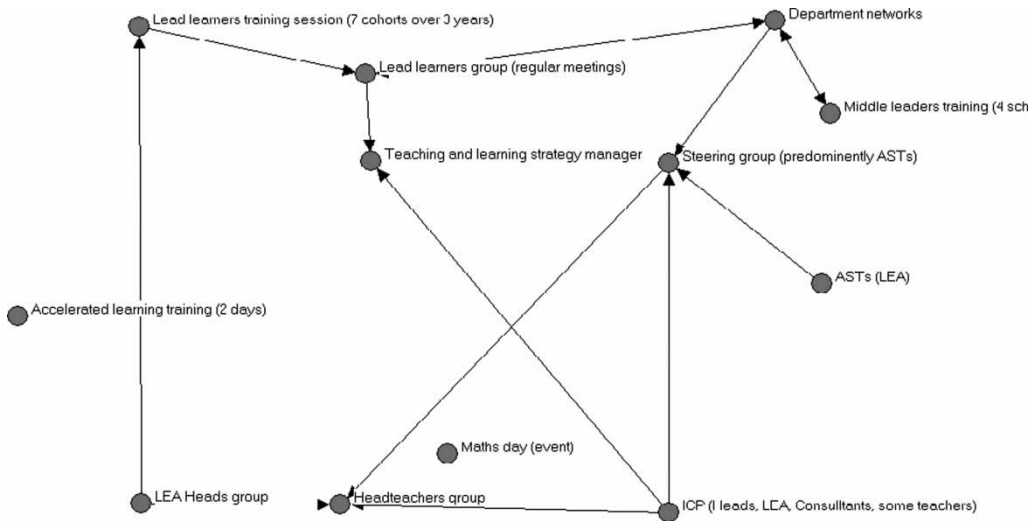


Figure 2. Network-o-gram of a secondary school network. *Source:* Hadfield *et al.* (2004).

Initially the Strategy Managers were responsible for monitoring how individual schools implemented the network plan. By the end of the second year this group served as a point of connection, both directly and indirectly, for other middle leaders such as the Lead Learners group, who linked with school-based learning teams, and the Departmental Network, based on Heads of Department. By the second year this network was not unusual in having co-leader and middle leader groups that were a complex interaction of school- and network-based leadership roles. It was in such groups that middle leadership was incubated and developed, and in the relationship between such groups that they exerted their influence on other leaders.

The initial dynamic between co-leaders and middle leaders

Spillane (2001) urges researchers to pay attention to the issue of time when considering the nature of distributed leadership. Therefore the following analysis of the relationship between the two groups of leaders is split into two sections. The first deals with the initial relationship as the middle leaders came into being. Then, after an analysis of how the roles of co- and middle leaders developed, the second section of the analysis addresses how this relationship changed as a result.

At the end of the first year co-leaders were having to adapt to the increased leadership demands being placed on them, both by the new groups many networks had launched to take forward development activities and as a result of their own emerging clarity about what 'leading' a network involved.

I think we did make the mistake early on of trying to keep everything within eight Head teachers, keep it all neat and tidy. . . . (Co-leader)

The kinds of pressures they found themselves up against were revealed in the Year One Review. Here co-leaders were asked if they had changed their leadership learning foci; each network was required to have a clearly stated pupil, adult and leadership learning foci. The Nvivo analysis of their responses revealed three emergent leadership themes.

- increasing leadership capacity and involvement in network activity;
- developing new models and approaches to leadership development;
- understanding the effectiveness and impact of leadership development.

Taken together these themes illustrate the issues the co-leaders were trying to tackle in their leadership development work. There was a growing recognition of the need to increase the leadership capacity within the network by both the recruitment and development of new leaders throughout the network.

How can we increase the numbers and learning of more people in the network to sustain network activity and distribute leadership opportunities?

What is the process for developing leaders in schools in NLCs? (Hadfield *et al.*, 2004, p. 12)

Within both new and existing networks middle leaders began to drive the development of their networks at a pace, and at so many levels, that what resulted could easily diverge from the directions set out by co-leaders and headteachers. In a minority of cases co-leaders began to perceive the level of activity as something of a threat to their position within the network, and by some headteachers to their existing school leadership and management structures.

Does the development of 'lead learners'¹ challenge our current structures and styles? (Hadfield *et al.*, 2004, p. 15)

New co-leaders began to define their role within a complex mix of both strategic and pragmatic 'pushes and pulls'. For example, their initial push to clarify the purpose of the network led them to exert a high degree of control over its direction but then they felt the pull of the increasing demands on their time, which led to the recognition that they could not 'keep it all neat and tidy'. Pragmatically therefore they mobilised additional leadership capacity within the network at various levels, leading to the creation of more middle leaders. Soon, though, they felt pushed in different directions by the various middle leaders groups who were increasing in confidence and developing their own identification with the network.

The emergent nature of middle leaders' roles in networks

The mobilisation, within different tiers of the networks, of groups of middle leaders and their growing identification of themselves with, and as, the network, created the next major issue for co-leaders and headteachers. It was at this point that many new networks began to move from a form of delegated leadership, where middle leaders were responsible for the delivery of specific activities, to a more genuinely distributed

form of network leadership. What initially emerged was what Denis *et al.* (2001) termed a 'leadership constellation' where no single leader could impose his/her vision and members worked relatively harmoniously. Only later did this apparent harmony start to crumble as the 'orbit' of certain leaders started to decay.

The first signs of this decay were picked up in the Year One Review, particularly in more established networks, and in middle leaders groups involved in enquiry. The Year One Review report made a distinction between the:

Leadership of enquiry; where their core activity is leading the enquiry process from initial idea through to impact in the classroom and its broader dissemination in the network. (Hadfield *et al.*, 2004, p. 11)

and

Leadership through enquiry; where the leadership role is focused on broader structural changes within their school and the network on the basis of their or other's enquiry outcomes and processes. (Hadfield *et al.*, 2004, p. 11)

By the end of the second year this shift between the leadership 'of' network activities and the leadership of network development 'through' such activities was much more prevalent, and not just restricted to enquiry groups. The details of this shift can be illustrated by reference to the work of two middle leaders in very different networks, who called them 'knowledge brokers' and 'lead learners'.

The 'knowledge broker'

The Knowledge Broker focuses on translating ideas into nitty-gritty action points for teachers. She admits that this does involve 'spoon-feeding' staff but feels that her work ensures the material is accessible to staff. Staff friendliness is important to ensure that not all activities are seen as add-ons for staff overloaded with work. The power of this approach is that it puts time and energy below the Headteacher level. The Headteachers have the vision and are excited about NLC but don't have time to turn it into meaningful projects. (NLC Annual Inquiry Report, 2004)

The broker is leading inquiry, providing capacity 'below the Headteacher level' within a secondary school, and acting mainly within that school. His/her role was to transfer inquiry outcomes into classrooms. A clear distinction was made between the strategic and operational leadership 'the nitty-gritty action points' of enquiry. Here the middle leader was tasked with ensuring network-based enquiries resulted in school-based change. This can be contrasted with the following description of 'Lead Innovators' within a primary school network.

The lead innovator

We have made a conscious decision to focus early on [in the life of the network] upon adult learning as the route into the other levels of learning. An important part of this has been to adopt an 'invitational' approach to leadership at all levels. The

Lead Innovators were identified as key participants in moving the work of the NLC across schools and in developing 'expertise in their chosen field of school-to-school learning'. By breaking down the 12 schools into smaller groups with focused objectives and specific projects it has been possible to distribute the leadership of network activity through the Lead Innovators. There has been an element of risk taking for headteachers here, in handing over the project to staff. The role of the Lead Innovators has been central in building excitement for the work amongst teachers in the network schools and in moving things forward at the school level... the intended role of the Lead Innovators within the network is to lead development within the school and to coach colleagues in other networked schools. In this way, Lead Innovators have a role to play in supporting network activity and adult learning across the network, at the school level, the project group level and at the school-to-school level. (Second Visit Report, NLC, 2004)

Here the Lead Learners worked at 'the school level, the project group level and at the school-to-school'. They were being asked to act as 'bridge leaders' (Robnett, 1996) forming links between different groups across several schools. These middle leaders were expected to exercise leadership across schools in the network. Again this is mainly focused on their peers, *generating excitement amongst teachers*, rather than with school leaders. Their core practice had begun to change from leading a specific innovation to influencing the direction of network development itself based on the links they were creating with activists in other schools.

A 'social movement' analysis of co-leaders' developing practice

The emergence of groups demonstrating distributed leadership across the network not only created demands on co-leaders but also changed their leadership practices. If previously much of their work focused upon strategic leadership groups they now had to expand the scope of their work to deal with the rising number of middle leaders. Using the resonances between the leadership of a new social movement and those of leading a network of schools highlighted three broad categories of leadership practices demonstrated by co-leaders:

- consensus and identification building;
- mobilisation of individuals and groups;
- aligning and cohering the work of activists.

These three practices did not occur sequentially; rather they occurred at various levels of the network around different issues, and at different times. The following analysis concentrates on how these practices contributed to the development of leadership capacity within a network.

Consensus and identification building

One co-leader neatly summarised the initial leadership challenged faced by those in a new network:

Seven different schools with seven different sets of priorities, seven different development plans, and what you're trying to do in one network is prioritise one thing that goes across the whole system. (Co-leader, NLC, 2004)

Consensus building at some level was a prerequisite to mobilising network activity, including the leadership practices of others in the network. The application of the metaphor of these networks as social movements is analytically useful as it emphasises consensus building as being both multi-layered and multi-dimensional (Melucci, 1988), in that it needed to occur at different points, or layers, within a network and across a variety of issues. In the NLC networks the key layers were the whole network, individual schools and departments, and specific projects or initiatives within the network. The dimensions ranged from a broad moral commitment to work collaboratively as a network, through the selection of network themes, to the specific aims and objectives of school-based work.

In the early stages of their networks the aspect of consensus building that preoccupied co-leaders' development was the selection of an initial theme, or set of themes, that could give cohesion to the work of the network as a whole. Although such themes were a requirement of their initial proposals, in which they were set out as a series of learning foci, they were often too vague to provide coherence or too specific to build identification across all the individual schools in a network. The core team from the NLC programme attempted to facilitate a process of refining their learning foci during the first 18 months of the programme, the aim being to identify themes which were sufficiently engaging to ensure meaningful rather than just symbolic agreement while ensuring that the foci were not so diverse or numerous as to undermine the power of working collaboratively.

The kinds of leadership practices that underpinned consensus and identification-building processes were varied and here again research within social movements is analytically helpful. Snow *et al.* (1986) discuss a combination of four practices central to these processes. They are frame bridging, providing information to those already disposed to your cause so that they identify with it; frame extension, where the boundaries of the cause are expanded so that they encompass the agendas of potential recruits; frame amplification, which places emphasis on the compatibility of the values and beliefs of the movement with those of potential members; finally, frame transformation, which involves changing the views of potential recruits so that they aligned more closely with change agenda being laid out. All four such practices were often required in new networks and they needed to occur not just with the leaders of schools but with middle leaders as well.

Well, I've been out to visit some colleagues in their own schools, people who didn't engage. . . . So really doing a selling job, explaining how it can enhance the work that's going on in the area. It's a long slow process I think really, I think it's continually re-enforcing the message. (NLC Annual Inquiry Report, 2004)

Mobilisation

In analysing the key practices involved in mobilising other leaders it is helpful to apply a construct developed within the NLC programme, that of lateral agency (Hadfield *et al.*, 2005a). Lateral agency is the desire and ability of individuals to work across school boundaries and engage with colleagues in other schools to change their practices and the local education system. Lateral agency initially tends to be focused on peers in similar positions in other schools. As the majority of co-leaders were headteachers it was not surprising that they were more likely to work with other headteachers. Similarly, although middle leader groups tended to be more varied in their make-up they were relatively homogeneous in terms of their status within the leadership and management structures of individual schools. They too therefore tended to concentrate on working with their peers in other schools. This propensity for lateral agency to be directed at peers comes about because of a number of factors. Partly it is a matter of opportunity: groups in the same position within an organisational hierarchy have similar patterns of availability and resources. Peers tend to share similar responsibilities and problems, so collaborating with them is intrinsically worthwhile in terms of being able to share concerns and pick up new ideas. There are also cultural issues, in that similar groups share a great deal of common knowledge regarding the pressures and issues that occupy each other.

Taken together these factors tended to restrict the lateral agency of both co- and middle leaders to those in similar positions in other schools. During the initial stages of a new network this often resulted in a great deal of mobilisation within only certain tiers of a network. This established strong bonds and trust within these tiers but limited the connections between them. Some network co-leaders in the first year recognised the problem they had set themselves by not developing lateral agency at more than one level early on in their networks:

There is a possibility that if the co-leaders were to begin again with the benefit of hindsight, that during the first year when the heads spent a lot of time networking and growing their own capacity to learn from each other, they would have started more networking initiatives at 'lower levels' to accelerate the network growth. They are however well aware of their capacity for growth at all levels now and in the future. (NLC Network Inquiry Report, 2004)

This concern to ensure that lateral agency and leadership capacity were developed at various levels within the network was one of the main reasons why new groups of 'activists' were needed, the middle leaders. The co-leaders recognised the need to broaden mobilisation within other 'levels' of the network, and that they were not in the best position to do this. This did, though, lead to issues around aligning and cohering the work of the middle leaders.

Aligning and cohering the work of activists

The problem of aligning and cohering activity across a network touches at the heart of the distributed nature of its leadership and is dealt with in more detail in the next

section. In this section the emphasis is on the practices that arose to link the middle leaders with the work of the co-leaders. As has already been discussed, the need to build consensus and mobilise activity at a number of levels within the network led to the creation of a variety of middle leader groups within the majority of networks. As these groups developed their various areas of activity needed not only to be given greater coherence but also to be aligned with the work of co-leaders.

Strengthening the link between the two groups of leaders took various forms. In some networks it was based on formally recognising the leadership roles of the middle leaders:

Formalising the role of the Lead Innovators as part of the process of defining roles and responsibilities within the network, it was recognised that they had a key part to play in facilitating progress with the stated outcomes of the NLC. (Second Visit Report, NLC, 2004)

In other cases it resulted in them being given job descriptions:

Lead Innovators will:

- Develop an action plan for the group [three smaller subsets of schools were formed, each with a different enquiry focus].
- Feed into planning of group/school conferences.
- Attend appropriate training.
- Inform appropriate Strategic Working Group members responsible for communication, marketing, monitoring and training.
- Facilitate appropriate training with schools.
- Implement group action plan.
- Act as a role model for the initiative.
- Share best practice.
- Consult children about the success of their learning. (SWG Roles & Responsibilities Document, 2003)

In other networks middle leaders became part of the co-leaders group, or improved the degree and quality of communication between the groups.

Certain co-leaders believed it was only by working directly with the middle leaders that they would be able to give coherence to their aspirations and approaches and align these with their own:

Our early meetings were concerned with establishing shared values and principles, we were looking for ways of working so that leadership was distributed in the network and establishing a clear sense of how we would work. The establishment of clear roles and responsibilities here has been key. . . . It is a diverse group of schools and because we wanted a shared, non-hierarchical approach there has been lots of talking to come up with a shared philosophy. (Second Visit Report, NLC, 2004)

This analysis paints a picture of interlinked leadership practices that cycle through periods of consensus building, mobilisation and alignment with both individuals and groups moving through such cycles at different rates at various points within the network. Relatively quickly a complex patina of interactions becomes established

from which develops the leadership capacity the co-leaders needed in order develop activity across their new networks.

A distributed analysis of leadership capacity within networks

A distributed leadership perspective should help reveal the way in which the overall leadership of networks is a dynamic between groups who not only responded to each other's work but also the overall context in which they were operating:

A distributed perspective frames leadership practice as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation. Practice is a co-production, generated in or defined by the interactions of these three elements rather than a function of what leaders know and can do. . . . Leadership practice is not only stretched over people, it is also stretched over aspects of the situation. (Spillane *et al.*, 2001, p. 25)

In this study the 'aspects of the situation' that dominated included the relative newness of the networks, and hence co-leaders' lack of familiarity with their role, and the need to mobilise lateral agency at more than one level. This need to 'build leadership capacity' in the words of the co-leaders led to a rapid increase in middle leader roles. From a distributed perspective this growth in new middle leaders was the visible aspect of what Gronn (2002) terms the 'concertive mechanisms' that structure distributed leadership within an organisation. Within these mechanisms a complex dynamic between middle and co-leaders was set up, a dynamic that reflected both groups' growing understanding and beliefs about the nature of the leadership required within such networks, and their shifting patterns of identification with what 'the' network was about and their position within it.

Co-leaders of new networks moved rapidly over the first 112 months from the relative simplicity of mobilising their strategic vision with key leaders in schools in the network to the mess and complexity of coordinating an increasing number of groups and activities within the networks. They began to recognise the need to 'let go' of the strategic reins to a far greater degree than they initially thought and to become more responsive to the individual needs of schools in the network.

When the lead learners group first came together there was a real sense of thrashing about looking for a purpose. They had the opportunity to read the submission made by the headteacher group and they also had a sense that their work should be centred on some form of enquiry into teaching and learning. As they wrestled with how they might take this forward they began by initiating small-scale enquiries into their own practice. Their anxiety at this stage was reflected in the headteacher group, who were treading the line between giving guidance and controlling the agenda. (Year Two Review Report)

Co-leaders' development of extra leadership capacity came about as a result of a complex mixture of pushes and pulls, rather than being either a purely pragmatic response to an increasing workload or an ideological commitment to distributed leadership. There was evidence from interviews with several co-leaders (Anderson

et al., 2004) that their network was a place where they felt more confident in experimenting with different approaches to leadership, and where they were also presented with an opportunity to observe others who had experience of developing distributed forms of leadership. Both these factors appeared to support increased risk-taking and greater experimentation amongst co-leaders.

For the middle leaders, what occurred over the first 12–24 months of the programme was a dramatic expansion in their numbers and a more gradual shift in their ‘core business’. They began to evolve from leading individual initiatives to connecting groups both laterally and vertically within the network. Groups founded early on in the networks took on broader coordination roles and as the level of network activity rose they became more autonomous and self-managing as co-leaders struggled to keep in contact. The middle leaders therefore shifted towards the facilitation of the networks, and away from leading just an aspect of it. They not only became committed to the network but were also willing to contribute leadership practices to sustain it. It therefore became increasingly common to hear of these groups seeing themselves as ‘the network’ rather than simply leading a piece of network activity.

The developing dynamic between co- and middle leaders

The shift in middle leaders’ construction of their role and their increased identification with the network changed their dynamic with co-leaders and hence shaped the nature of the distributed forms of leadership that emerged within the networks. Analytically it can be related to similar dynamics within social movements, where the relationship between leaders and followers is complicated by the means by which leaders gain authority and the nature of followers’ involvement with a movement. In terms of leadership authority and their influence within social movements theorists have moved on from discussions of individual capacities to emphasise the position of individuals within a movement, somewhat paralleling the movement from individual to more relational notions of leadership within education. In part the ‘prestige’ of a leader (Wasserman & Faust, 1995) is based on the number of connections an individual is able to make with others in the social movement.

Similarly, individual middle leaders within networks gained their authority and ability to influence the strategic development of the network because of the number and range of links they made within it. It was the middle leaders in the early stages of the network who most rapidly built their ‘prestige’, owing to the brokerage roles they were developing between and across different tiers of the network as they worked with increasing numbers of groups. As middle leaders began to develop their identification with the network and to enjoy the ‘prestige’ they had accumulated they began to shift in their own minds from just managing a particular aspect of a network to seeing themselves as leading aspects of the network:

The impact on me has been from 'manager' to 'Gosh I am a leader!' I'd grown in confidence, self-esteem. In facing and solving problems and finding solutions. My team was fantastic. (Middle leader, Year Two Review, 2004)

The growing identification of middle leaders with the network, and as leaders, could lead to tensions with co-leaders. Such tensions between tiers of leaders are not uncommon in any organisation; here though they were affected by the essentially voluntary nature of networks. Again, research on social movements is a useful starting point for considering the origins and nature of these tensions.

Research into left of centre movements (Diani, 2004) has highlighted the antipathy that followers in such movements often exhibit towards formal leadership and their ability to 'push' or drive forward the agenda of a movement. This is because followers in social movements are often activists themselves who, though they may share a broad moral commitment with the formal leaders of such movements, may disagree with the specifics of how to achieve it. In such a scenario these followers sublimate their antipathy towards the formal leadership because they recognise the limits of their personal agency in respect of the goals they wish to achieve. This is because of the inherently political and voluntary nature of leadership within social movements. Here an individual's capacity to act as a leader is in part based on his/her ability to mobilise groups of followers rather than his/her position within a formal hierarchy. This means that leaders have to be careful not to become too distanced from the aspirations of their followers, either by being too extreme or not sufficiently strident in their demands. In this dialectic it is easy to imagine situations in which leaders are pushed into adopting positions they feel uncomfortable with because of the need to stay connected to their constituency of followers. Both these phenomena appeared to be in operation within networks of schools.

Antipathy in the school networks was exhibited in various forms, from fundamental disagreements about the focus of the network to the refusal of one middle leader, from a well-established group, to appoint a leader who would report to their headteachers group when they tried to formalise their work:

The heads want us to have a leader, some heads perceive us as needing a leader . . . we don't feel that is what our group is all about. In terms of leadership we haven't got a nominated leader. We have one or two people giving feedback to the heads. (Middle leader, Year Two Review, 2004)

Middle leaders were activists who in the main volunteered to take on additional work because they bought into the broad aspirations of the network, but also wished to pursue their own passions and beliefs. Improving the educational achievement of pupils can mean very different things to the highly experienced teacher of English to lower ability pupils than it does to the headteacher of a large secondary school, concerned about overall pupil attainment. As middle leaders grew in confidence concerning their leadership abilities, developed their prestige, and began to identify themselves and their contacts as the network, they began to exert their own lateral agency in ways that both diverged from the directions set by co-leaders and pushed them to adopt different positions.

This evolving dynamic between the agency of co- and middle leaders, if handled poorly, could lead to the main leadership issue within the early lives of these networks, an issue that could threaten its coherence and very existence. This is an issue that distinguishes the leadership of a network from that of an individual school, which I have termed 'leadership shearing'.

Leadership shearing

Noun 1. shear – (physics) a deformation of an object in which parallel planes remain parallel but are shifted in a direction parallel to themselves

Shearing arises because lateral agency is mainly exhibited within and across peer groups of leaders, as they try to mobilise and build consensus around what actions need to be taken. This agency builds up strong lateral bonds between groups of leaders who share similar positions in the hierarchies of schools, but results in relatively weak vertical bonds between different layers. In this situation, of strong lateral but weak vertical links, the interaction between school and network structures is weakened. This can lead to the different layers of network leadership breaking apart from each other as they develop their own sense of what leading the network means. In this scenario the constellation of leadership (Denis *et al.*, 2001) within the network begins to break apart as different groups spin out of each other's orbit. In some instances in the NLC Programme this came about because the co-leaders and headteachers outstripped the middle leader groups; in others networks with more established and active middle leaders it was they that began to break away from the strategic leadership. These shearing forces, if not dealt with in time, can lead to the disruption of the whole network or the involvement of individual schools.

As discussed in the previous section co-leaders' practical responses to the issue of shearing ranged from formalising the links between the two groups to adopting a more flexible approach to their work. Increased flexibility meant that co-leaders could accommodate greater shifts in the direction of other leaders' work at different levels of the network without threatening the links between them. For some co-leaders this involved a psychological process of 'letting go'; those unfamiliar with this kind of relationship in their own schools often found this problematic. A similar phenomenon has been reported in those adopting more distributed forms of leadership within schools, where leaders need to exhibit 'heedfulness' in relation to the actions of other leaders (Spillane & Orlina, 2005):

Once I got through that initial phase of thinking, wow this is different from what I thought, I then had a fixed idea of what I wanted to do, which actually was quite important and meant that I could get structures in place. But I think once things are in place, you can let them go and grow on their own a little bit so, so now, I've really got no idea and I'm not that bothered, I'm more bothered about

the fact that it comes from schools and it's doing what they want, it's doing what's important. It's not me thinking this is where it should go. (Co-leader, Year Two Review, 2004)

Conclusion

This paper has argued that it is vital in understanding the nature of leadership in networks to adopt appropriate contextual and temporal analytical lenses. In this instance leadership practices in 'new' voluntary school networks were analysed as being akin to being part of networked social movement. Developing leadership capacity was viewed through a distributive lens that emphasised its emergent and interactive nature. Bringing together these lenses identified leadership shearing as a key issue in the early development of networks. Shearing occurred when groups of leaders ended up in antagonistic relationships because of differential rates in the development of their lateral agency, their shifting identification with the network and its aims, and the impact of the various political and cultural influences that shaped the leader/follower dynamic.

Although this analysis begs the question of whether networks require a very different type of leader or leadership it highlights some of the basic practices and tensions at different levels within a network. It raises the possibility that there are inherent aspects of networks and networking, which suggests that if not completely new leadership models are needed then the novel application of existing models will be required.

Note

1. Lead learners is a term frequently used to describe middle leaders.

Notes on contributor

Mark Hadfield is a professor whose recent research has focused on the leadership of collaborative school improvement efforts, an interest he was able to develop when he headed the research team of the NCSL's largest research and development programme, the Network Learning Communities programme. Theoretically his research has explored the links between leadership, collaborative enquiry and the transfer of knowledge and practice.

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