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Distributing leadership: practice is at the heart of the matter

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Developing leaders for tomorrow

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Building leadership capacity
and planning for succession

Distributing leadership: practice is at the heart of the matter

School learning networks offer exciting possibilities but are complex to manage. Traditional thinking about solo leaders running schools or networks does not begin to capture how to make networks successful in promoting improvements to pupil, adult and leadership learning.

By drawing upon the work of **James Spillane** and **Helen Timperley** to explore what knowledge exists internationally about distributed leadership in school networks, this think piece provides some food for thought on the practice of distributing leadership to build capacity and support succession planning arrangements within and across schools.



Although leadership has always been distributed in schools, until recently we have not really begun to understand how it is distributed, because the focus of research has been on identifying the personal characteristics of the so-called ‘heroic leader’, positioned at the top of the hierarchy and influencing others towards their organisational vision. For a number of reasons, this vision of leadership has proved unsustainable: there are insufficient numbers of such people for all our schools, their achievements are often short-lived and many potentially effective leaders have been discouraged from seeking promotion because of the perceived impossibility of emulating these kinds of leaders. In reality, we have many highly effective leaders who make very different contributions to leadership practice.

Practice is the heart of the matter

Distributed leadership emphasises practice rather than personality. Practice is the heart of the matter. A distributed perspective frames leadership practice as a product of the interactions of school leaders and followers, and their situation. Practice is co-constructed, generated in or defined by the interactions of these three elements, rather than a function of what leaders know and can do, though what leaders know and can do is still essential. So, leadership practice is not only distributed across people, it is also distributed over aspects of the situation in which the practice takes place – situation is more than a container for practice.

Pause for thought...

Leadership is not just something that is done to followers, followers contribute to defining leadership in interaction with leaders and aspects of the situation.

Staying coherent

Distributed leadership is more than dividing up tasks or responsibilities among different individuals who perform defined and separate roles. Rather, it recognises that leadership involves dynamic interactions between multiple leaders involved in the execution of both separate and overlapping leadership activities. The important leadership task is to understand how it all works together. Networked learning communities provide significant challenges when keeping a handle on this big picture. Many people are involved in a range of complex activities and leadership positions are often assumed without formal responsibility or authority.

Pause for thought...

- Some important review questions for leaders:
- Which activities promote the kinds of interactions that address the key aspects of the vision for the network?
 - Which activities divert the focus from the vision and how might they be redefined in ways that are more productive?

- Who keeps an eye on the big picture to ensure that the complex leadership activities fit together to maintain the important work of the network?
- How do network activities and ideas mesh with individual school’s activities in ways that maintain the integrity of each participating school’s organisational and instructional coherence?

Staying connected

Unless a school is very small, it typically has different leaders and groups undertaking different leadership functions and routines. Traditionally, headteachers have responsibility for the big picture, middle managers have responsibility for smaller organisational units (such as a department or year group) and teachers focus on classrooms. These units need to stay connected if the school is to maintain coherence. Failure to stay connected may mean that the school will develop patches of brilliance as well as places where things do not work well. These connecting mechanisms can be described as ‘boundary spanners’.

In the same way, networks of schools need connecting mechanisms. A relatively familiar idea is having people acting as boundary spanners in co-ordinating roles.

Less familiar, is the idea that when teachers take on leadership responsibilities (or leaders take on teaching responsibilities) they are more likely to be able to span leadership and teaching boundaries, and to develop a better appreciation of the place of each in the bigger picture. Similarly, if individuals participate in more than one networked group, and they take some responsibility for ensuring coherence in the developing ideas of each group, they are more likely to keep the groups connected with one another. When establishing leadership positions within the network, therefore, it is important to keep in mind their potential for acting as a connecting mechanism among different network activities.

Pause for thought...

Materials, such as written documents, can also act as boundary objects that span different communities. Meeting agendas and minutes, for example, can help to keep others informed and can help keep networks connected.

Achievement data acts as boundary objects across schools and when shared by groups of teachers and leaders, can help to keep the focus of network activities on improving pupil learning.

The subject matters

School leadership practice differs depending on the school subject. Specifically, the way in which leadership is distributed over leaders, followers and aspects of the situation varies depending on whether the subject being taught is mathematics, science or arts and humanities.

“Distributed leadership is more than dividing up tasks or responsibilities among different individuals who perform defined and separate roles.”

Account of practice

A study in elementary (primary) schools in the USA found that there were fewer leaders in mathematics compared with arts and humanities, and fewer still in science. Leadership of literacy typically involved the principal and/or assistant principal, a co-ordinator or specialist, teacher leaders, and often an external consultant. In maths, subject leadership in some schools (though not all) involved the principal and/or assistant principal, lead teachers and sometimes external consultants, whereas leadership in science was typically confined to classroom teachers, few of whom had any official designation such as senior teacher or co-ordinator.

In networked learning communities, teachers and leaders are expected to create and exchange knowledge collaboratively and continuously, to reflect deeply on teaching and learning and to take up difficult challenges. Creating collaborations that support the creation and exchange of knowledge is likely to pose different challenges for teachers and leaders with a background in different curriculum areas, so it is important to take into account how they think about the work of improving teaching and learning differently, depending on their subject. Further, it is important to prepare for the fact that how teachers might participate in these collaborations may depend on their subject specialism.

Coherence and vision

Traditional approaches to leadership recommend that organisational and instructional coherence can be established by creating a strong vision for a school that pervades the organisational culture. The activity focus of distributed leadership, however, places the lens on the things people do to enact those visions and create coherence. Visions are embedded in activities rather than inscribed on pieces of paper, and coherence is maintained by ensuring consistency in the multitude of day-to-day activities in individual schools within the network.

Adapted with kind permission from the authors from: Spillane, J, Halverson, R, Diamond, J, 2004, Towards a Theory of School Leadership Practice: Implications of a Distributed Perspective, Journal of Curriculum Studies, 36, 1, 3-34. Timperley, H S, 2004, Distributed leadership: Developing Theory from Practice, Journal of Curriculum Studies.



A more detailed account of the perspectives shared by James Spillane and Helen Timperley in this think piece can be found in the NCSL publication *International perspectives on networked learning* which can be downloaded directly from www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

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Ice-cream innovation! Leading from the inside out

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Ice-cream innovation!

Leading from the inside out

“The network has created an environment in which innovation can take place. There is a strong focus on professional practice best illustrated in the work of the Lead Innovators. It has created a forum for high level, quality professional dialogue.”
LEA associate consultant

In Stockport Primary Schools Success Through Learning NLC it is those in middle leader roles who have been leading the way during the past year of the network’s development. They carry the title of ‘lead innovators’ and it is their job to inspire, develop, implement and share innovative practices across the network. Here they describe their work in leading from the inside out within the network’s capacity building model for development.

If you asked us to describe the model for development which has grown out of our work as a networked learning community (NLC) in the past year, then it has to be captured in the idea of an ice-cream cone (fig 1). As lead innovators we are positioned in the middle of the network structure, which means that our work has involved ‘leading from the inside out’.

Over the last 12 months we have been involved in leading network activity from both the inside of our schools and out in the network, through work in three school-to-school project groups which have explored different strands of the network’s pupil learning focus. There are 12 lead innovators in our NLC, one drawn from each of the network schools. Our work as lead innovators is centred upon the leadership of network activity within one of three project groups:

- Creative learning
- The thinking classroom
- The effective learning environment

It was intended that these groups would provide a structured basis for developing the internal expertise of the lead innovators involved, which could then contribute to the learning of other network participants through both school-wide and school-to-school learning. As lead innovators, we were identified as having a leadership role in moving the work of the network across schools and in developing expertise in our chosen field of school-to-school learning.

The role of the lead innovator

The role of the lead innovators within our network is to lead development within our schools and to coach colleagues in other networked schools.

In this way, we have a key part to play in supporting network activity and adult learning across the network. In defining roles and responsibilities within the NLC, our role was described as follows.

Lead innovators will:

- develop an action plan for the group
- feed into planning of group/school conferences
- attend appropriate training
- inform appropriate strategic working group (SWG) agent 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

The leadership of project groups

Our work as lead innovators involved the leadership of the project groups and included five categories of activity associated with putting our expertise into practice within our chosen field of school-to-school learning.

- 1 Staff development/INSET – designing, delivering and facilitating staff development activity in the related area of project expertise, eg through INSET sessions, school visit exchanges, trialling of resource materials.
- 2 Evaluation and evidence gathering – monitoring and evaluating the use of teaching and learning strategies introduced through project groups and gathering evidence of the impact of project activity.
- 3 Knowledge management – developing strategies for the roll out of knowledge and experience gained from project activity within the school or project group context, on a school-to-school basis across the NLC.
- 4 Co-ordination and coherence building – in respect of the knowledge management, staff development and evaluation functions of the project groups, and the need for co-ordination across the groups on a network-wide basis.
- 5 Participation and reach – facilitating the wider involvement of network participants on a school-wide and school-to-school basis, to include the extended distribution of leadership roles within the network.

The benefits of leading and learning in the network

“The experience has raised my self-esteem in terms of my ability to lead small groups of professional people and improve my management skills to ensure targets are achieved. The most significant benefit of working in a school-to-school way was the chance to discuss current issues relating to our project with other practitioners outside our school to gain a shared and broader perspective on how we can achieve what we want to achieve.”
Creative learning group

“The school-to-school partnership has provided an opportunity to work alongside colleagues with a similar ethos and philosophy towards teaching and learning. The sharing of approaches, expertise and success, has been crucial in realising our aims. The collaborative approach has been truly beneficial with regards to time – we are not having to constantly re-invent the wheel!”
Thinking classroom group

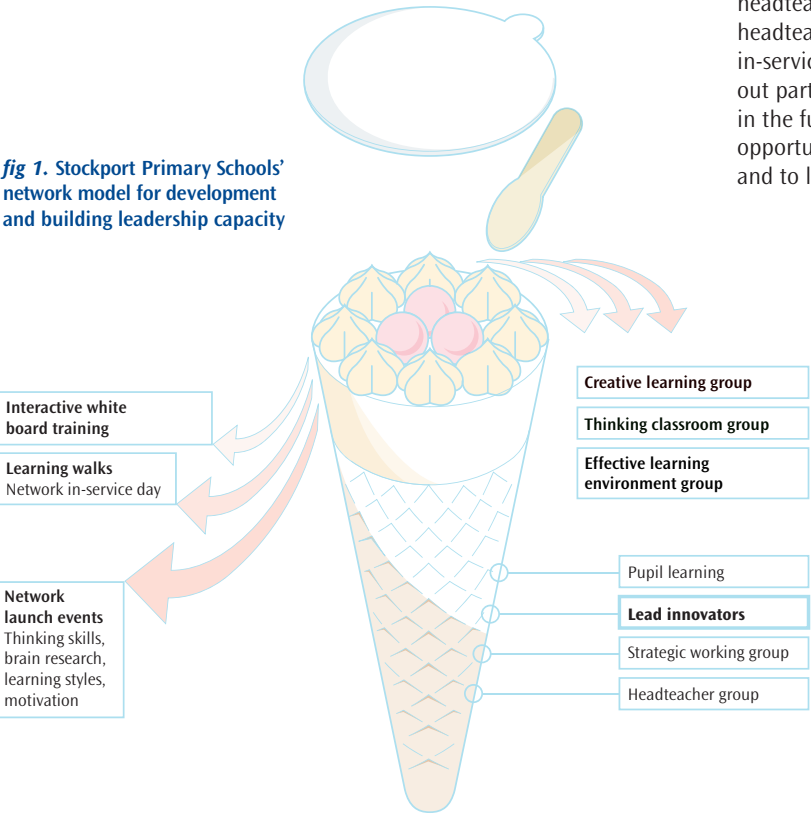
“Working with other staff from different schools has been beneficial in that it widens your knowledge and experience. Our work in the NLC has provided a real opportunity for professional discussion, a professional dialogue around teaching and learning...an opportunity which is not often given in schools. The key was that the project has provided structured time and a purpose for this dialogue, rather than just snatches of conversation which often, in school, is all you have time for.”
Effective learning environment group

Support for leadership learning

The leadership learning opportunities provided to us through this work have been supported by means of peer coaching within project groups, headteacher support through the strategic working group and headteacher group, and via subject specific staff development (eg NLC in-service days and other training opportunities). The NLC aims to roll out participation in the NCSL Leading from the Middle programme in the future, which will further support the leadership learning opportunities made available to middle leaders in our network and to lead innovators in particular.

More information about networked approaches to building leadership capacity can be found in the paper *Striving for sustainability; redesigning leadership for learning*, Carter et al, 2004, which can be downloaded from ‘Networked learning in conference...’ at www.ncsl.org/nlc

fig 1. Stockport Primary Schools’ network model for development and building leadership capacity





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Growing leadership in community

Kate Bond & Maggie Farrar, NCSL

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Growing leadership in community

Children’s life chances are most likely to improve where schools work in partnership with families and with other professional agencies. **NCSL’s Community Leadership programme** is looking at how schools can bring these different groups together to create new, more inclusive and responsive community networks which have the potential to grow educational leaders for the future.

Community leadership – why do we need it?

Communities do not exist in isolation from schools and schools are not islands. Communities and schools are made up of people, living and working together, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in dissonance. Economic well-being, the effects of poverty, health, our family, our community and the schools we attend, all have a significant effect on our life chances.

In communities where disadvantage is greatest, low educational outcomes and a widening gap between the highest and lowest achievers are our greatest challenges. More effort in the classroom often seems to give us only marginal improvement. For sustained growth we need to look beyond the classroom. John West-Burnham says:

“If academic standards are to be raised in a sustainable way and broader educational aspirations achieved then educationists will have to see their role in terms of creating social capital rather than just improving classroom practice.”

We know that what happens outside the school gates has a significant effect inside the classroom and yet different agencies – social workers, health and voluntary services, the police and families – have traditionally operated in relative isolation. Each provides to the best of its individual ability but is restricted by organisational boundaries and by difficulty in accessing each other.

There is now a growing demand for us to pool our collective capacity and work better together for young people and for our communities.

What does it mean for us?

In response to this challenge, education policy has shifted radically. The green paper *Every Child Matters* and the subsequent Children’s Act propose a closer integration of schools within communities. This will be achieved through extended schools, integrated delivery of the children’s service and lead professionals working with multi-disciplinary teams to address the holistic needs of the child, family and the wider community.

This new agenda for schools and communities is being created now. It is complex and significant. It requires some painful rethinking and the scrutiny of current practice, on the part of both the community and the school. We are learning from what has already been done by exploring international practice and we’ve been particularly struck by work done at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington.

In years to come the old territorial distinctions symbolised by the school gates may cease to have real meaning. Getting to that point demands a very different approach to school leadership. Parents and students will move from being consumers of schools to co-creators of a learning experience. Schools will no longer be enclosed communities within the community but will be the hubs through which community needs, aspirations and planning are routed. Schools will no longer be seen solely as guardians of young people at different stages of their development but will take their place as fully-fledged, adult shapers of community life.

What is the Community Leadership Strategy?

NCSL’s Community Leadership strategy is a project designed to transform communities through collaborative and distributed leadership. The initiative works with schools, community groups and public sector agencies who want to re-configure their existing relationships. It is bringing together people and organisations who are making a collective commitment to better outcomes for young people. Through this strategy we want to create a new system for school and community leadership and learning, a system that is more responsive to the institutional and personal realities of today’s world.

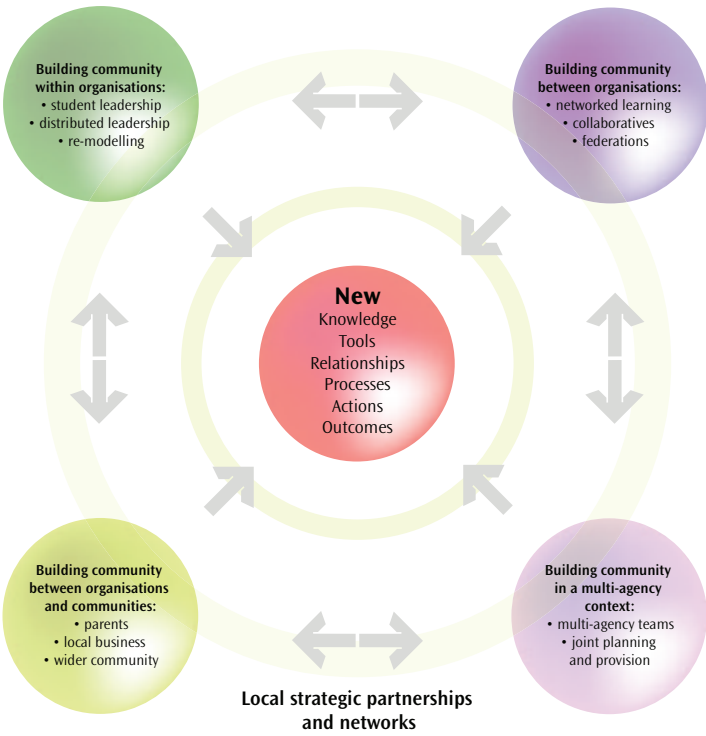
We have a four part framework (see fig 1) that builds community leadership. We are populating this framework with examples of practice that others can learn from. We are also supporting its development through a change process which connects all four areas.

Community leadership can be characterised as engaging people to make something mutually beneficial happen. It involves those aspects of leadership which help people to grow, develop relationships, enhance communication and facilitate team work. A community leadership strategy has involved seminars where participants were challenged to look beyond the confines of school improvement to the global issue of community transformation. Participants explored the models of leadership that would be required of school leaders working together on the holistic needs of children.

“Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”
Margaret Mead

- Further information about the work of the NCSL Community Leadership Network is available at www.ncsl.org.uk under ‘community leadership’.
- The publication *What are we Learning About...?* *Community leadership* provides a useful resource for exploring the growth and development of leadership roles in multi-agency and community network settings. This can be downloaded directly from www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

fig 1: NCSL Community Leadership Strategy



- Dimensions of community leadership**
NCSL has a working model that identifies the dimensions of community leadership:
- Leadership of **place** – geographical and interest led, not organisational.
 - Leadership of **purpose** – child, family and community outcome focused.
 - Leadership of **style** – distributed and in partnership, not vested in an individual.

