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## **Reflecting on themes in teacher leadership using principles of Leadership for Learning**

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a paper presented within the symposium:

**Teacher leaders in a culture of accountability - Emergent roles for transformative teacher learning or the new dispensable middle managers?**

### **Abstract**

Teacher leadership is inextricably bound with learning – at the three levels of student, teacher and organisational learning. These are core elements of the Leadership for Learning framework, which is concerned with the nature of leadership and of learning, and with their interrelationships. The Leadership for Learning framework was developed through a seven country international project that included Denmark, England, Greece and Norway. Examples from these four countries illustrate the framework's five principles: a focus on learning; conditions for learning; dialogue; shared leadership; and a shared sense of accountability. These principles are then used to analyse themes from the other papers in the symposium. Thus, the potential of the Leadership for Learning framework as a robust and illuminative analytic tool is demonstrated by looking at themes in contemporary conceptions of teacher leadership.

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# Reflecting on themes in teacher leadership using principles of Leadership for Learning

Sue Swaffield

## Introduction

With the political and public press for raising school performance, particular significance has been attached to the role of leadership at all levels. This paper is a contribution to a symposium in which teacher leadership is considered in relation to current policy context and discourse. Rather than standing alone it examines the three other papers through the lens of a Leadership for Learning (LfL) framework and particularly its five principles. It is suggested that the framework is not only an overarching organizing device that is useful in bringing coherence and a common language to a set of papers, but more significantly that it contributes to the concept of teacher leadership itself.

The paper has three main sections. Firstly the LfL framework is very briefly introduced. Following that the five LfL principles are discussed, each one being illustrated by examples from European schools, and the full detail of each principle is given. The three complementary symposium papers are then examined using the LfL framework and principles, leading to a concluding reflection.

Teacher leadership is a contested notion but in this paper the use of the term 'leadership' connoting action is deliberate. It mirrors the conception of leadership in the Leadership for Learning framework that forms the backbone of the paper.

## The Leadership for Learning framework

The phrase 'leadership for learning' has become common educational parlance over the last decade or so, but that was not the case when - after extensive deliberation and consultation - it was adopted as the name for a network established at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education in 2001<sup>1</sup>.

The Leadership for Learning (LfL) framework was developed through an international project that involved city sites in five European countries (Denmark, England, Greece, Norway and Austria), along with Australia and two sites in the USA. Researchers and critical friends from Copenhagen, Cambridge and London, Athens, Oslo, Innsbruck, Brisbane, Seattle and New Jersey worked with teachers, principals, students and community members of secondary schools to investigate understandings of leadership, learning, and particularly the connections between those two central concepts. This research and development project, named the Leadership for Learning Carpe Vitam project in acknowledgement of its Swedish funders, was documented in many publications including an edited book (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009), a special issue of the journal *Leading and Managing* (Vol 12, issue 2, 2006), and an illustrated booklet (MacBeath et al., 2006). Practical development work in and among

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/lfl/about/>

the 24 participating schools melded with research and conceptual development. Figure 1 below encapsulates the resulting Leadership for Learning framework.

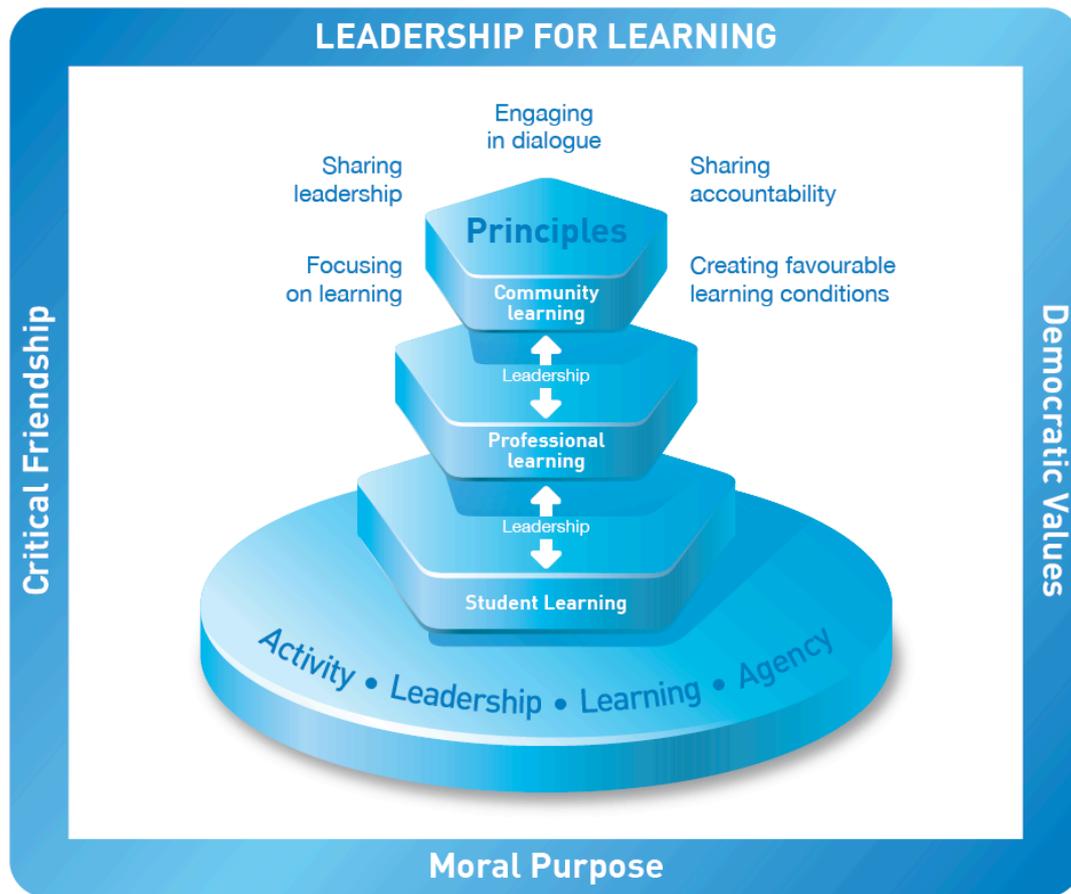


Figure 1. The Leadership for Learning framework (based on Swaffield and MacBeath (2009))

Key elements of the model are:

1. Its frame with **moral purpose** encompassing everything.
2. Its base with **activity** and **agency** being key concepts.
3. Three **levels of learning** – student, professional and organisational.
4. Five **principles** for practice:
  - A focus on learning
  - Conditions for learning
  - Dialogue
  - Shared leadership
  - A shared sense of accountability.

## Five principles illustrated by some European examples

The five principles are headlines for groupings of a more extensive set of statements arrived at through an extended collaborative and iterative process of inquiry and reflection. Part way through the Carpe Vitam project nascent ideas about the connections between leadership and learning began to crystallise into statements that were repeatedly refined and reconfigured. By the end of the project there was an agreed set of five principles, each with sub-principles, that it was imagined would be further revised. In fact they have proved robust over time and been adopted in many contexts (currently being investigated through the 'LfL Travels' project). Each of the principles is addressed in turn, incorporating examples from the five European countries represented in the LfL Carpe Vitam project. The full text for each principle and its sub-principles or elaborations are also reproduced.

The first principle, '*a focus on learning*' encourages close critical appraisal of learning, as illustrated by an example from Norway. In this school there was little didactic teaching, and the initial impression was of project work with much student activity including working with peers and using the internet for research. Teachers were satisfied because the classroom felt busy and the students seemed engaged. However, when prompted by critical friends to focus on the *actual* learning taking place teachers and senior leaders realised that some changes were necessary. They began to think more carefully and clearly about the kind of learning learning, about the hoped for outcomes, and consciously to plan groupings and activities with these in mind. Individually and collectively the school staff raised their levels of awareness and practice.

Towards the end of the LfL Carpe Vitam project one of the Norwegian teachers reflected: "I have become more focused on learning in my own teaching, and I know that influences my work. I have also seen how important it is that we as teachers have time and space for discussing our teaching with colleagues, with a focus on learning" (MacBeath and Dempster, 2008, p88). A school principal commented: "To be part of Leadership for Learning has 'speeded up' and provided a direction for focusing on learning in my daily practice" (ibid).

The sub-principles make clear that learning is for everyone and is not the purview of pupils alone, that it is a complex activity, and that it is dynamically related to leadership in a virtuous circle.

**Leadership for learning practice involves maintaining a focus on learning as an activity in which:**

- a) everyone<sup>2</sup> is a learner
- b) learning relies on the effective interplay of social, emotional and cognitive processes
- c) the efficacy of learning is highly sensitive to context and to the differing ways in which people learn
- d) the capacity for leadership arises out of powerful learning experiences
- e) opportunities to exercise leadership enhance learning.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Everyone' includes students/pupils, teachers, teaching assistants, headteachers, the school as an organisation.

*Conditions for learning* can be favourable or detrimental, enhancing or adverse, and go beyond the physical to include the social and cultural. At a school in Greece a very traditional model of teaching from the front of the class was predominant at the beginning of the Carpe Vitam project, reflecting perhaps the heavily centralized national education system. Teachers in this school began to enquire into and change the conditions for learning in ways that could be considered quite risky given the prevailing culture. They explored and appreciated the enhanced learning opportunities provided by well structured group work, realising that dialogue with a few students at a time could provide insights into their learning process and understanding. Students were also invited to prepare and teach the rest of the class something, taking on the role of teachers. The students were encouraged to use approaches that best helped their classmates learn, to involve them actively in the lesson and to interact in a teaching-learning situation. The most powerful aspects of this exercise were the appreciation it gave the student-teachers of the daily task of the teacher, the insights teachers had about the students' perspective, and the dialogue between teacher and students about conditions and activities for effective learning. Further examples that illuminate other aspects of the second LfL principle include inviting parents into classrooms during lessons, students completing questionnaires about their teachers' teaching and then analysing the data together with their teachers, and celebrating achievement in a wide variety of ways.

**Leadership for learning practice involves creating conditions favourable to learning as an activity** in which:

- a) cultures nurture the learning of everyone
- b) everyone has opportunities to reflect on the nature, skills and processes of learning
- c) physical and social spaces stimulate and celebrate learning
- d) safe and secure environments enable everyone to take risks, cope with failure and respond positively to challenges
- e) tools and strategies are used to enhance thinking about learning and the practice of teaching.

*Dialogue* about leadership for learning is the third principle. The epistemological roots of the word dialogue - meaning flowing through - distinguish it from 'talk' and its many variations that do not build meaning and can be inherently destructive. Dialogue in the Carpe Vitam project came to be thought of as 'disciplined dialogue', wherein professional conversations are positively focused on the moral purpose of the school, are based on values and reason, and are stimulated by quantitative and qualitative data. People dialogue with those beyond their familiar and usual safe group of colleagues, engaging with others in different areas and at different formal 'levels' of the school, crossing boundaries of direct shared interest, of position and power.

Factors that assist dialogue are trust, understanding, and a common purpose. These take time to establish and are themselves aided by dialogue, so there is a sense in which moving from 'talk' to 'dialogue' is cumulative. It is also aided by scaffolding from activities and the use of 'tools' such as particular routines. These were deliberately provided at the annual conferences of the Carpe Vitam project, so participating teachers came to know teachers in other countries, to learn about their

respective settings, strengths and challenges, and to appreciate others' specific aims within the broader common purpose of developing leadership for learning. The English and Norwegian teachers found they established a particular rapport and trust. At the time the London school was in the early stages of planning a new building, and how this could best promote leadership for learning became a topic of dialogue. A group from London visited the Oslo school to see the quite radical arrangements there and to explore possibilities for the building design. Their enquiry was aided by the understandings and concern for LfL they shared with their Norwegian hosts. This one example illustrates many sub-elements of principle three, given in full below.

**Leadership for learning practice involves creating a dialogue about LfL** in which:

- a) LfL practice is made explicit, discussable and transferable
- b) there is active collegial inquiry focusing on the link between learning and leadership
- c) coherence is achieved through the sharing of values, understandings and practices
- d) factors which inhibit and promote learning and leadership are examined and addressed
- e) the link between leadership and learning is a shared concern for everyone
- f) different perspectives are explored through networking with researchers and practitioners across national and cultural boundaries.

The fourth principle, *shared leadership*, is directly and obviously related to teacher leadership. It is a much more expansive and inclusive notion than giving teachers formal roles that position them as teacher leaders. LfL's shared leadership rests, as with all the other principles, on the fundamental ideas of activity and agency. This means that leadership is something that is done by anyone deliberately exercising influence, rather than a status bestowed on a chosen few. It is driven and directed by democratic values and moral purpose. Denmark is a particularly democratic society, with flatter hierarchical structures than in many other countries, yet the Danish LfL Carpe Vitam participants found there was still room for extending the notion and practice of shared leadership. At a time when New Public Management was in ascendance, finding acceptable ways of accommodating top-down and bottom-up pressures was particularly pressing. According to the Danish report:

“The conceptions of leadership have been broadened and differentiated for all the stakeholders that we have talked to. Whereas the concept was at first a ‘steering’ manager concept nobody liked, it is now shared and described as an integrated aspect of relations in small groups (of students, of students and teachers, of teachers and of Senior Management Team) and in the greater community of the whole school. In particular it seems that teachers’ conception of themselves as leaders of groups of students has changed significantly: leadership is now seen as an integral part of teaching and building and maintaining communities” (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009, p129-130).

Comments by students illustrate the sharing of leadership with and among the student body:

“We have great freedom and take responsibility for our own learning ... The independent responsibility for learning makes me inclined to learn more ... We choose what we want to work with on our own, but the teachers keep tabs on you if

you start reducing the demands you make on yourself ... If somebody gets a good idea in relation to the task or has some kind of insight beforehand, it seems natural that he or she takes on the leadership for a period” (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009, p132-133).

**Leadership for learning practice involves the sharing of leadership** in which:

- a) structures support participation in developing the school as a learning community
- b) shared leadership is symbolised in the day-to-day flow of activities of the school
- c) everyone is encouraged to take the lead as appropriate to task and context
- d) the experience and expertise of staff, students and parents are drawn upon as resources
- e) collaborative patterns of work and activity across boundaries of subject, role and status are valued and promoted

*A shared sense of accountability* is closely linked with shared leadership, and is also a notion of particular concern given the global accountability imperative. Schools worldwide are driven by external demands manifested by prescribed measures, while for practitioners professional accountability and moral purpose provide compelling motivation. Navigating these sometimes conflicting pressures is perhaps felt particularly keenly in Scandinavia. The Norwegian and Danish LfL Carpe Vitam teams identified responsibility to others as a feature of practice in schools. “In self-governing teams there is no formal leader. Instead, they make use of everybody’s resources by talking about teaching, students and learning” (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009, p152).

**Leadership for learning practice involves a shared sense of accountability** in which:

- a) a systematic approach to self-evaluation is embedded at classroom, school and community levels
- b) there is a focus on evidence and its congruence with the core values of the school
- c) a shared approach to internal accountability is a precondition of accountability to external agencies
- d) national policies are recast in accordance with the school’s core values
- e) the school chooses how to tell its own story taking account of political realities
- f) there is a continuing focus on sustainability, succession and leaving a legacy.

In this section each principle has been addressed separately for clarity, but in practice they are all interconnected. Examples from the LfL Carpe Vitam project were provided to illustrate them, and in the following section the five principles and the LfL framework as a whole is used as a device to analyse three papers concerning teacher leadership.

### **Three papers and Leadership for Learning**

In his paper Philip Poekert (2014) reflects on themes in teacher leadership research. He reviews literature published since York-Barr and Duke’s (2004) review, and

identifies three themes: (1) Teacher leaders have backgrounds as accomplished teachers, which demonstrates their expertise and has the potential to give them credibility under the right conditions; (2) Teacher leadership is often centered on a vision of leadership built on influence and interaction, rather than power and authority; and (3) Effective professional development leads to teacher leadership leads to effective professional development – when properly supported. Poekert then illustrates these themes using empirical evidence from a study of a teacher leadership development program in Florida, USA. Throughout Poekert's work the interconnections of leadership and learning - the whole basis of the LfL framework - are evident. Teachers who are identified as exercising leadership are described as 'accomplished', an adjective which in this context clearly focuses on learning. As lifelong learners these teachers have developed a deep understanding of their subject and of pedagogy, and they continue to hone their craft and skills of teaching; they are centrally focused on the learning of their students. Their accomplishments as learners and teachers give them credibility in the eyes of colleagues, a necessary condition for influencing peers. They exercise their leadership through influence and interaction based on dialogue, and in building relationships and having a concern for sustainability they demonstrate a shared sense of accountability.

David Frost's (2014) work is based on a conception of teacher leadership that has moral purpose at the centre. It also has strong resonance with the LfL framework as a whole in its use of principles to guide practice. Through analysis of empirical data Frost has developed a set of principles specific to teacher leadership development work, but the original five LfL principles are also clearly evident. Frost's whole notion of non-positional teacher leadership speaks particularly clearly to the principles of shared leadership and a shared sense of accountability; it is the teachers who lead the developments, and their actions are directed towards improving student learning. Dialogue is at the heart of networking among teacher colleagues within and beyond their own schools, and this is supported by physical and cognitive 'tools' used in an enabling culture. The teachers' focus on student learning is facilitated by their own learning, which at the same time builds collective knowledge and fosters innovation.

In their paper Janet Fairman and Sarah Mackenzie (2014) explicitly use the LfL framework 'as a lens to examine both the progress and problems in making the LfL model a reality in schools' (p2). In their context of Maine, USA, they are heartened by examples of growing teacher leadership capacity but concerned that financial, political, geographical and cultural factors constrain development. Fairman and Mackenzie focus on the second and fifth LfL principles, but the other three can also be identified in their work. In terms of conditions for learning, they cite time, networks and professional development as particular factors bearing on teacher leadership, each of which can be enhanced or hindered fiscally. Fairman and Mackenzie argue that far from increasing a shared sense of accountability, the enactment of external accountability measures have resulted in teachers collectively having a reduced sense of efficacy and responsibility, but opportunities for genuine collaboration and teacher leadership have the opposite effect. They also report that 'for the most part, teachers regarded their leadership activity as a normal part of their professional role, but they did not see leadership as an important part of their identity' (Fairman and Mackenzie, 2014, p8). Yet despite their cautions, Fairman and Mackenzie see a broadening range of opportunities for teachers to exercise leadership,

professional learning communities fed by dialogue, and examples of teacher learning through coaching and the examination of data.

Figure 2 below summarises the resonances of the three papers with the LfL framework.

	Poekert	Frost	Fairman and Mackenzie
LfL framework	Leadership ↔ Learning	Moral purpose, guiding principles	Analytical lens
Focus on learning	Accomplished teachers	Innovation and knowledge	Coaching, examining data, +
Conditions for learning	Credibility	Culture building, tools	Time, networks, professional development
Dialogue	Collaboration	Networks in and beyond the school	Professional Learning Communities +
Shared leadership	Influence and interaction	Teachers leading developments	Broader opportunities +
Shared sense of accountability	Relationships Sustainability	Actions improving learning	Responsibility and efficacy; identities

Figure 2. LfL and Poekert, Frost, and Fairman and Mackenzie

## Conclusion

The Leadership for Learning framework was developed through collaborative work with practitioners and academics in seven countries. It was an attempt to encapsulate what had been learnt through the LfL Carpe Vitam project about leadership, learning and their interconnections. The framing of principles for practice, with their full elaborations or sub-principles that were also adapted into prompts or questions for principals, teachers and students (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009), provide the conceptual framework with a practical action orientation.

LfL has been used in different contexts as a framework for analysis, and been adopted and adapted in many ways that are currently the object of the ‘LfL Travels’ project ([www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/lfl/projects/LfLtravels](http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/lfl/projects/LfLtravels)). In relation to teacher leadership, LfL has already been shown to have applicability and resonance (Swaffield and Alexandrou, 2012; Alexandrou and Swaffield, 2014). Consideration of the papers by Fairman and Mackenzie (2014), Frost (2014) and Poekert (2014) provides additional evidence of its usefulness as an analytic tool.

However, Leadership for Learning provides more than a tool for retrospective conceptual analysis, useful as that is. It also provides pointers to the enactment of teacher leadership. All the above leads to a conception of teacher leadership infused with moral purpose, respectful of democratic values and utilising critical friendship, based on understandings of leadership and of learning as activity co-joined by agency, focused on the learning of everyone – at student, professional and organisational levels – creating conditions for learning, engaging in dialogue about leadership for

learning, sharing both leadership and a sense of accountability. This could be the future of teacher leadership.

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