The Legacy of the Carpe Vitam Leadership for Learning project

The Carpe Vitam Leadership for Learning (LfL) project was a three year international research project involving researchers and practitioners in eight different cities – Brisbane, Australia; Innsbruck, Austria; Copenhagen, Denmark; Oslo, Norway; Athens, Greece; London, England; Trenton (New Jersey) and Seattle (Washington) in the United States. It was a collaborative venture between academic institutions and schools within each of those sites, and among those colleagues internationally. The project was planned in parallel with the foundation of the LfL network as a means of exploring ways in which our values could be realised in practice in a range of different cultural and political contexts. The LfL values enabled potential participants to make the choice to opt into the Carpe Vitam project. They were expressed as follows:

Learning, leadership and their inter-relationsip should be our central concern.

Learning and leadership are a shared, as much as an individual, enterprise.

Leadership should be distributed and exercised at every level within a school and its community.

We saw the project as a challenge to the performativity culture prevalent in education systems across the world, – an alternative to the dominant school effectiveness paradigm and the standards agenda. The project was designed to explore leadership, learning and their inter-relationship independently of this dominant discourse. We wished to work with schools, encouraging them to explore alternative perspectives.

International collaboration

The international research team consisted of university academics from the cities listed above. The characteristics of these team members and the nature of the schools to which they had access played a significant part in shaping the project. The Danes and Norwegians, for example, had been experiencing creeping 'new public management' and saw the project as an opportunity to identify leadership practice more in line with their strongly established democratic traditions. In contrast, colleagues from New Jersey wished to bring fresh thinking to the seemingly intractable problems of urban public schools. These had become victims of opting out of the state system on the part of those parents with the economic power to do so (MacBeath, 2004). The fact that there were eight different policy contexts represented within the project enabled us to use contrast as a resource in our research. We sought to embrace the differences in language and culture rather than see them as problems. The distinctive nature of these eight sites generated a cross-national dialogue and enhanced collaboration.

Discussion of the developing policy contexts in the participating countries was a leading theme in our regular team meetings. These were also occasions for detailed planning of data gathering strategies, along with conferences and other networking events that brought practitioners together. This discursive process based on critical dialogue was the key to the success of the project.

The legacy of the project

The potential of a project to affect policy and practice depends on the nature of the outcomes and how these are represented and made public. Too often outcomes are couched in terms of 'findings', published in the hope that policy makers or practitioners will take notice and make changes. With the Carpe Vitam LfL project we wanted to address this concern by leaving a legacy which we envisaged as a continuing live discourse. The legacy that transpired was not just a set of insights and recommendations, but a set of intellectual and

practical tools designed to help people fashion their own discourse and to support professional and organisational learning. These tools included:

- a set of principles for practice,
- a conceptual framework,
- developmental strategies; and
- practical tools / instruments.
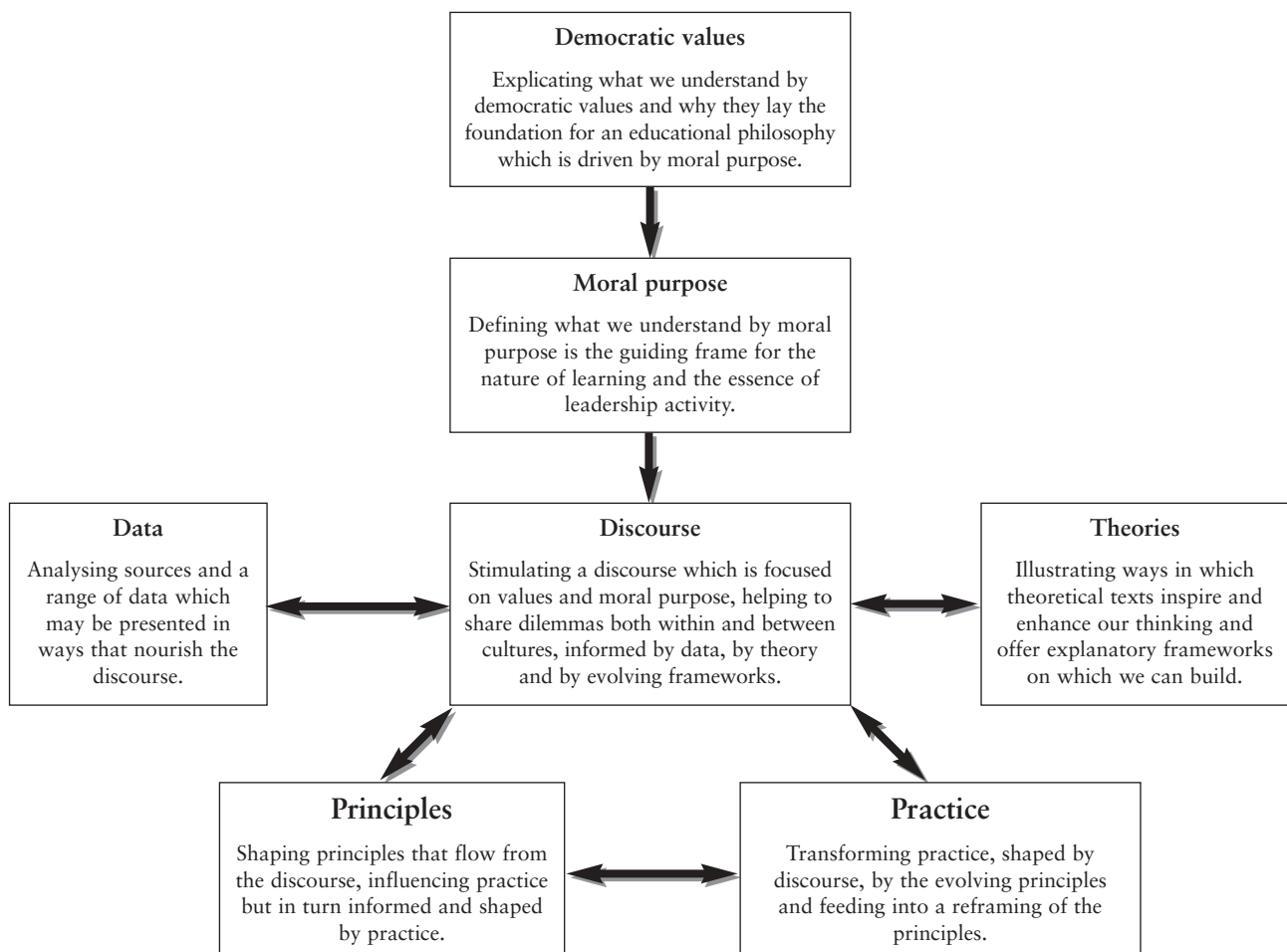
Principles for practice

The idea of principles for practice emerged in the Carpe Vitam project as a way of capturing what we were learning about leadership, learning and the connection between them. Our principles for practice were derived in part from the theoretical perspectives introduced by both research team members and visiting speakers, and in part from research data gathered in the first year of the project. We put forward draft principles to inform discussion during international conferences. Posters listing the principles were displayed in rooms where workshops took place and participants were asked to use the principles as a framework for discussion. Participants were also asked to test and challenge the draft principles. Discussions were observed by members of the research team, noting where the principles were upheld and where they were challenged. At our final conference the critique of the principles intensified and we emerged with a set of principles for practice that defined our collective view of what leadership for learning could and should be.

In offering the leadership for learning principles for practice to others we want to be clear about their nature and purpose. They are first and foremost statements in which values are embedded. Second, they are an attempt to express, in a sufficiently concrete way, a vision of ideal practice which others can refine and develop. It must be emphasised that they are not conceived of as a normative checklist against which to measure performance; rather, they are an expression of pedagogical aims; a tool for discourse.

The discursive process through which the principles came into being is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.
Developing principles for LfL practice through a discursive process
(from MacBeath, Frost, Swaffield and Waterhouse, 2006)

The discursive process depicted above is grounded in democratic values and the moral purpose of education. The relationship between the principles, professional practice, data and theories is an iterative and interdependent one. The principles are not only an outcome of the project – an expression of our collective understanding about leadership for learning and our commitment to its realisation in practice – but also a tool to enable us to develop that understanding.

The principles for practice developed through the project are expressed in Figure 2 below as five broad statements, each of which is expanded by five or six more specific statements, sometimes referred to as 'prompts for action'.

Figure 2.
Principles for practice – five headings

Leadership for learning practice involves maintaining a focus on learning as an activity

Leadership for learning practice involves creating conditions favourable to learning as an activity

Leadership for learning practice involves creating a dialogue about leadership and learning

Leadership for learning practice involves the sharing of leadership

Leadership for learning practice involves a shared sense of accountability

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It should be noted that the five principles are interrelated but presented as five separate statements to facilitate discussion and deepen understanding. We now discuss each principle in outline.

Maintaining a focus on learning as an activity

It may seem unnecessary to emphasise the central importance of learning, but the familiarity of the word and the different ways it is used can prove problematic. Learning is often taken as synonymous with attainment as measured by tests. In popular conception it is what happens in classrooms as the result of teaching, often with the idea of a curriculum being 'delivered' by a teacher and 'received' by pupils. By contrast, our principles for practice are built on the idea of learning as an activity. This is not a purely cognitive activity engaged in by individual

students, but it is also a social activity involving all members of the school community in the widest possible range of transactions and locations. Learning is assumed to involve the development of understanding, practical capability, meta-cognitive awareness, and the ability to learn how to learn, as well as dispositions such as resilience and curiosity. Learning occurs in the flow of interaction among members of the learning community and therefore has social and emotional dimensions that are inseparable from the cognitive. This is where the connection between learning and leadership becomes so apparent, as learning is enhanced through opportunities to exercise leadership. For example, when children teach one another or collaborate to support each other's learning, the development and expression of human agency and moral purpose impel learning and discovery.

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

   a. everyone 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

The word 'focus' in the expression of this first principle is key because, regardless of the national context, the everyday discourse within schools is shaped by policy pressures and by the demands of organisational convenience, so that learning ceases to be the main consideration. Maintaining the focus on learning has to be worked at and be seen as the paramount concern of leadership. Our surveys of school staff clearly indicated that a commitment to maintaining a focus on learning grew in strength during the life of the project, yet remained a challenge. Nonetheless, it is clear that working to maintain the focus on learning is profoundly satisfying and intrinsic to teachers' professional identity.

Creating conditions favourable to learning as an activity

If there is to be a focus on learning as activity, there is a need to work on the conditions that nurture this fragile entity and provide opportunities for learning capacity to grow. This is as much about culture building as it is about the design of the physical environment and the use of appropriate pedagogic strategies.

> **2. 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

As teachers pursue goals in relation to pupils' learning they are obliged to focus on their own learning. Indeed it may be argued that professional learning is an even higher priority than children's learning, as ignorance of how children learn and grow may be worse than no teaching at all. Teachers who seem unable to learn, or who do not acknowledge their role as learners when they are with their students, convey a hidden, but nonetheless powerful negative message. It is therefore an organisational challenge to enable teachers to learn; to create a climate within which teachers feel able to innovate, reflect on their practice and open it up to debate with their colleagues. Organisational learning depends on the capacity to open up 'the way we do things round here' to continuous, critical scrutiny. A focus on organisational learning implies a deep capacity to respond to situations intelligently. It requires a toolbox of strategies and techniques to be used flexibly to develop shared knowledge. An effective institutional memory is vital to ensure forward momentum that does not depend on the particular individuals who might be in formal leadership roles. Learning at the level of the system is also crucial, not only as a way of enabling professional and organisational, but also in order to review and challenge the policies and structures which might constitute affordances or hindrances.

Creating a dialogue about leadership for learning

The third principle lays emphasis on dialogue, whose Greek roots (dia logos) remind us of a particular kind of conversation – a search for shared meaning and common understanding. This principle is concerned with the link between leadership and learning which is fore-grounded when we go beyond the tacit, taken-for-granted assumptions about both leadership and learning and make our beliefs about them visible and explicit. In the Carpe Vitam project we found that the development of dialogue about learning was increasingly manifest in practices such as consulting pupils about their learning preferences, but far more challenging was the idea of a continuing dialogue that embraced leadership for learning.

Bringing all members of the school community into the dialogue about leadership for learning raises fundamental issues about power and authority. For many teachers and schools, order and respect are hard won and so it is not surprising to find a degree of reluctance to invite pupils, parents and others to question leadership structures, styles or processes. Nevertheless, if the leadership density that Sergiovanni (1992) talks about is to be more than a pipe-dream, we have to face this challenge. There is also a difficulty about language in that not all teachers, students and other members of the community have a confident grasp of the vocabulary of leadership. It is through the resolute pursuit of such dialogue that we begin to see leadership and learning becoming shared concerns for everyone.

> **3. 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 focussing 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

Participation in the project modelled the process of dialogue about leadership for learning. The systematic reflection and debate that took place through the project conferences and through school-based activities supported by project 'critical friends' helped to promote the value of such dialogue. Collegial inquiry in which staff and students raise questions about pedagogy and gather data to fuel collective reflection flourished. In many cases the Carpe Vitam project survey data provoked this kind of process but it was taken forward most powerfully when teachers and principals drew upon their partnerships with their local university and were engaged in award-bearing investigations leading to Certificates, Masters degrees and Doctorates.

The second tranche of survey data gathered in the final year of the project told us something about progress in relation to the dialogue about leadership for learning. The responses suggested that, although some schools had made great strides forward, embedding LfL in practice remains a significant challenge. In a pressured environment where deep or 'authentic' learning can become submerged, our evidence suggests that it is possible to draw all members of their learning communities into the dialogue about leadership for learning. This is more likely to happen when school principals, headteachers, senior leadership teams and district superintendents have the necessary will, courage and resilience.

The sharing of leadership

A key dimension of the values on which the Carpe Vitam project was founded was the commitment to sharing leadership. Principals and headteachers had brought their schools into the project because of their belief in the value of shared leadership, but for many schools this proved to be a challenging proposition, particularly where there were long established hierarchies of responsibility.

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4. **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

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In the project schools, senior leadership teams created structures that encouraged wider participation in school development and allowed informal leadership to have fuller expression.

How the principle of shared leadership played out in different cultural contexts was an enduring subject of discussion among project participants. The traditionally flatter organisation of Scandinavian schools seemed to encourage broader participation than in other parts of Europe and the U.S. where more hierarchical structures dominate. For many schools shared leadership is about working together, teamwork, and collaboration, but it is the interplay of strong leadership from the top and leadership as distributed that emerges as a recurring paradox.

The inclusion of young people within distributed leadership was a major theme in the Carpe Vitam project. In some schools student leadership was fostered through the allocation of special roles such as being a mentor to younger students or as a representative on the school council. In some cases it was evident that student leadership opportunities arose where there had been a cultural shift caused by a more systemic focus on learning. This tended to create a virtuous circle of increased pupil attendance, greater student engagement, and more opportunities for authentic learning.

The data from the various sites suggested that 'shared leadership' is something that principals, teachers and students increasingly aspire to but is understood quite differently in different settings. In some instances it is understood as delegation, while in others it is seen in more bottom-up terms, as initiative spontaneously exercised and as teamwork. In conference workshops we offered tools such as a 'leadership density grid' which groups work with to identify potential leadership opportunities and growth points for shared leadership. These workshops reminded us of how deeply embedded conceptions of leadership are, and the time it takes for new forms of shared leadership to emerge and become established in thinking and practice.

Fostering a shared sense of accountability

Accountability is a particularly problematic concept, rooted as it is in political structures and linguistic conventions with connotations that evoke strong responses in different cultures. In discussions at our international conferences it aroused vigorous debate, reflecting in part the enormous variation in colleagues' experience of accountability. To some the word suggested the dutiful report of levels of measured attainment to political masters; to others it was something more collegial.

5. 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

Many participants emphasised the importance of various forms of internal accountability (Elmore, 2003). For some, accountability was primarily concerned with the collaborative evaluation of the quality of students' work. For others a major feature of accountability was inviting parents to observe classroom practice, helping to foster a dialogue about the nature of the educational experience the school offers. There was also strong consensus that accountability is about responsibility for actions taken that teachers owe to one another. These different approaches are all part of internal accountability, to students, parents and colleagues.

Complex relationships between internal and external accountability began to emerge through these discussions and the inter-school networking that followed. In some cases the clarification of the importance of a focus on learning and the conditions for learning acted as a counter-balance to a focus on statutory standard assessments alone. This gave the impetus to developing a shared approach to internal accountability as a precondition of accountability to external agencies. The tension between the external pressure created by the 'standards agenda' and professional imperatives was a recurring theme. Some teachers felt a sense of embattlement and ambivalence about accepting responsibilities for leadership in such a climate. What came to be held in common as the project matured was that accountability, however understood, had to confront the disempowering effects of top-down accountability.

Strong internal support gives rise to the resilience and vitality that enables a school to tell its own story in its own register and in terms of its own core values.

A conceptual framework

The principles for practice are key features of a theoretical model which has at its centre leadership and learning, both conceived of as 'activities' and linked by the common concept of 'agency'. Surrounding and accompanying all is the framework of moral purpose (see Figure 3).

The idea of learning as activity has its intellectual underpinnings in socio-cultural theory in which people learn through membership of 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998). A key idea within this way of thinking is 'participation,' implying that learning requires engagement with activity. Within the project examples of participation were for example: the creation of different roles of responsibility that allowed students to exercise leadership; the use of various strategies for enabling students to influence the process of learning by voicing their views about their preferred learning styles; the creative design of physical environments that fostered students' participation in social learning activities.

The idea of leadership as activity has similar theoretical underpinnings. Peter Gronn's (2000) account of leadership draws on a theory of action based on 'activity theory' (Engeström, 1999) in which things happen as a result of 'conjoint agency'.

Leadership as the product of collective interaction between people has been explored empirically by James Spillane and colleagues (2001, 2006), emphasising its distributed nature, 'spread out'

Figure 3.
Leadership for Learning: a conceptual framework
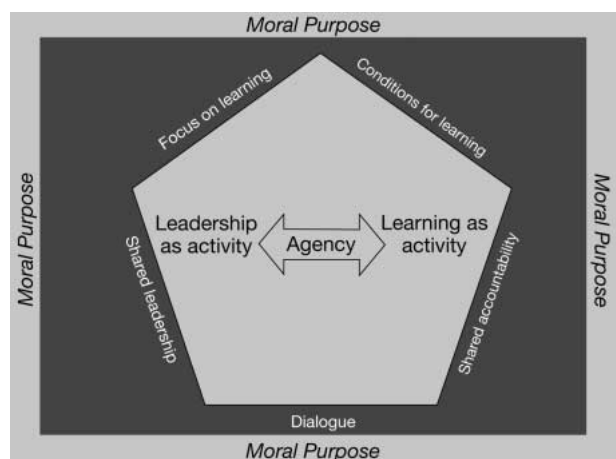
within a school. In the Carpe Vitam project we saw many examples of developing practice which reflected this way of conceptualising leadership. For example reviewing lesson plans by inviting teachers to present a lesson to a group of colleagues from a range of different subject areas, with a protocol enabling colleagues to provide critical feedback in a non-threatening way. In another example teachers and students worked together to plan and evaluate lessons.

What links *learning as activity* and *leadership as activity* in our framework is the concept of *human agency*. Put simply, human agency is about the capacity for intentional action and the knowingness that enables us to monitor our own actions. It is what singles us out from other animals. Arguably, to be fully human is to exercise choice and to have a degree of control over the goals and processes integral to our daily lives. Social structures still constrain the way we act and think, but agency acts upon those social structures to reshape them (Giddens, 1984). Within the Carpe Vitam project we saw how the purposes of leadership and learning are realised when human agency is allowed to flourish. Indeed we came to understand that both leadership and learning are optimised when they become part of the same process.

Strategies for development

The Carpe Vitam project was designed to support development work in the participating schools; leadership for learning principles had to be derived from reflective, experimental development work. This was very challenging for some schools where teachers found themselves already overwhelmed by the pace of change. In schools suffering from 'innovation overload' the project had to be construed as a layer of support for development already underway rather than as a brand new initiative.

A key strategy to support development work in participating schools was the allocation to each school of a 'critical friend', a strategy that has been a crucial element in a wide range of school improvement and school self-evaluation projects (Swaffield, 2004). The key to success here is the building of a trusting relationship within which a neutral outsider can bring an alternative perspective to bear. The critical friend raises questions, sharing data and viewpoints that constitute a catalyst for reflection and change. The purpose was to initiate a conversation that would help the schools to move forward with development work that resonated with the leadership for learning values and informed by research data gathered along the way. These conversations played an important part in the discourse that flowed through project conferences, networking and related activity in the schools.

Another significant development strategy built into the project could be described as professional learning through networking. Participants were invited to present portraits of their schools at the international conferences, sometimes by presentations to the conference and sometimes by mounting displays of development initiatives. We borrowed 'thinking routines' from our sister project 'The Visible Thinking Project' to provide a scaffold for discussion (Perkins, 2003). At each of the conferences, participants shared their experience of innovation through focused workshops. One such activity involved the production of concise vignettes and a discussion protocol that enabled participants to ask questions of a given practice and consider its potential for adapting it. School visits were also built in to international conferences, strategies for focussing attention to their own situation. Analysing what visitors saw became the focus for development as the project proceeded, seeding a range of cross-project visits and exchanges that extended far beyond the arranged conferences and which persist at the present time (Swaffield, 2007).

These discussion and networking strategies had a life beyond their immediate use in the project conferences. Participants took them away and adapted them for use in their schools.

Practical tools and instruments

Development strategies usually carry with them tools for the job whether it be a discussion protocol or an observation schedule, but in addition to all these were the research instruments developed by members of the international research team in consultation with practitioners.

One of the most important of our inquiry tools was a questionnaire administered twice during the project. It had a double-sided structure, with each of its forty or so items about leadership and learning requiring two responses – one indicating a perception of importance or value, the other indicating the respondent's perception of the extent of actual practice (MacBeath, Frost and Swaffield, 2005). This showed the gap between each school as it 'is' and how people would like it to be, a form of 'tin opener' (MacBeath, 2002), a device which opens up discussion. The survey data provided starting points for dialogue within and across schools, turning the many areas of ambiguity to positive benefit in exploring consensus and acknowledging difference.

Other tools included interview schedules and guidance sheets for structured reflection activities. These were all developed and improved within conferences and during researchers' fieldwork. They were also taken up by project participants and adapted to suit new purposes. The Leadership for Learning questionnaire for example was re-designed after the conclusion of the project so that it could be used within a consortium of schools in a town in the U.K. The structure and content of the new questionnaire was determined by the principles for practice that emerged from the project (Frost, 2008). This survey instrument is now available for use to enable schools to take stock of their practice and identify development goals and priorities.

Conclusion

In 2006 we published the 'LfL Making the Connections' booklet as a way of sharing the story of the project in an accessible form (MacBeath *et al.*, 2006). We wanted to make this story readily available so that practitioners and researchers could decide if the legacy of the Carpe Vitam was of use to them in their own school improvement processes. We hope that what we pass on is not a set of findings but rather tools that enable others to build their own projects. We offer these as tools for engineering practical discursive processes in which all members of a learning community can be drawn into reflection, review and debate about the connection between leadership and learning.

We are keen to share these tools in whatever way we can and to learn from what others may do with them.

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