

**ICSEI 2003**  
**16<sup>th</sup> International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement**  
**Sydney, 5th – 8th January, 2003**

## **Teacher leadership: towards a research agenda**

**David Frost**

University of Cambridge Faculty of Education

a paper presented within the symposium:

***‘Leadership for Learning: the Cambridge Network’***

University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, UK

### **Abstract**

This paper explores alternative conceptions of teacher leadership drawing on literature from the UK, the USA and Australia. In particular it draws from Gronn’s work the idea of conjoint agency and activity theory. A conceptual framework is discussed and set out in the form of a research agenda.

### **Contact**

David Frost  
University of Cambridge Faculty of Education  
Shaftesbury Road  
Cambridge CB2 2BX  
Tel: + 44 (0)1223 369631  
Fax: + 44 (0)1223 324421  
Email: dcf20@cam.ac.uk

# **Teacher leadership: towards a research agenda**

**David Frost**

“Teacher leadership: its time has come” proclaims one recent American text (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001), but are current proposals for teacher leadership in the UK really about recycling the same old organisational conditions dressed up in more attractive terms?

This paper explores the concept of teacher leadership at a time when the discourse in educational policy arenas in the UK is increasingly focused on the idea of distributed leadership. In contrast, the idea of teacher leadership has been well established in the USA for more than a decade. This does not mean to say however that schools across America have actually embraced the practice. The title of Katzenmeyer and Moller’s book, “Awakening the sleeping giant” suggests that there is enormous potential in the idea of teacher leadership; it could also be said that giants can take some time to rouse.

In the UK the website of the recently launched National College School Leadership (NCSL) publishes ‘a review of research’ (Harris and Muijs, 2002). It is significant that, although the review was not commissioned by the NCSL, it is clearly thought to be an idea worthy of attention. This recognition of the idea of teacher leadership might be said to have been confirmed recently when the NCSL’s Director of Research, Geoff Southworth contributed a short piece in the Times Education Supplement (TES) - the UK’s weekly newspaper for teachers - in which he said:

...the long standing belief in the power of one is being challenged. Today there is much more talk about shared leadership, leadership teams and distributed leadership..

(Southworth, 2002)

But Southworth's piece is cautious rather than embracing; it poses questions about how the distribution of power is to be handled and what exactly it is that is to be distributed. Perhaps the problem here is the concept of 'distribution' itself, which may imply that leadership roles and functions can be allocated or assigned by Headteachers/Principals while power is retained within a traditional hierarchical structure. It is clear that in its first year or so of operation NCSL is investing most of its energy, unavoidably perhaps, in programmes which support Headship. Coming hard on the heels of these is the 'Leading From the Middle' programme: its programme manager said the following in the TES just one week after Geoff Southworth's comment:

..National Standards portray both primary and secondary subject leaders as 'leading professionals', hallmarked by secure subject knowledge, an insight into contemporary pedagogy and an ability to motivate colleagues.

(Hammond, 2002)

Implicit here also is a hierarchical model in which middle manager roles are defined by National Standards produced by a government agency. The emphasis is on a formal position in the organisation (Subject Leader, Head of Department) and the idea of team leadership. If we couple this with the highlighting in countless OFSTED reports of the need for middle management development and the development of procedures for the monitoring of teaching on the part of middle managers, it is possible to discern a set of assumptions about teacher leadership which resonates with the concept of 'instructional leadership'. The classic definition includes the following:

- defining mission
- managing curriculum and instruction
- supervising teaching
- monitoring student progress
- promoting instructional climate

(Krug, 1992)

Krug's definition clearly belongs with the contemporary culture of performativity; it portrays teacher leadership merely as the missing link in the chain of command and control which is an established part of the contemporary educational landscape in the UK.

According to John MacBeath, instructional leadership:

...was a radical notion in a climate of managerialism in which principals had been cast as administrators and managers, with matters of day-to-day learning being left to teachers. The concept implies overseeing, monitoring and evaluation of teaching by senior managers and contains the seeds of appraisal and performance management.

(MacBeath, 2003)

In the USA, the concept of instructional leadership occurs most commonly in discussions about the leadership functions of principals, but in the UK it seems to underpin current thinking about 'leading from the middle'.

In contrast to this, the view put forward by Katzenmeyer and Moller seems broader; their definition of teacher leadership is:

Teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, influence others toward improved educational practice.

(Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001: 5)

This view sounds more inclusive but nevertheless seems to be based on the idea that only some teachers will be persuaded to take on leadership roles. Katzenmeyer and Moller's observation that many teachers are reluctant to identify themselves as leaders is seen to be an inevitable part of the performativity culture in which it is hazardous to identify yourself as a teacher leader because along with responsibility goes increased accountability. In the USA the proliferation of teacher leadership programmes initiated externally to schools may be counter-productive if teachers take

the view that such programmes are the means to force the square peg of national reform into the round hole of professional practice.

Within the American literature there is also some mention of the idea of informal teacher leadership (for example Leithwood, *et al.*, 1999) which recognises that leadership can be exercised by teachers whether or not they hold administrative positions. Leithwood *et al.*'s research suggests that the effect of such teacher leadership is not significant, but I would suggest that this tells us more about the limits of their school effectiveness style research than about the possible impact of teacher leadership. I am doubtful about the usefulness of the analysis of survey data and causal inference.

In my own work (Frost and Durrant, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c) this question of whether a teacher is exercising leadership by virtue of having a formal position or not is beside the point. Our work has been dedicated to the development of frameworks of support for teacher leadership regardless of position in the organisation. Indeed it has been argued that leadership by its very nature is bound to be distributed:

....the properties displayed by leadership are more likely to take a distributed rather than concentrated form.

(Gronn, 2000: 318)

What then is the nature of leadership? What are those properties?

### **What is leadership?**

For Katzenmeyer and Moller, "leadership is influencing" (2001) and, although Leithwood *et al.* (1999) take up a great deal of space saying that the concept is too complex to be easily defined, they too plump for the notion of *influence* as being at

the core of the concept. They argue that it is just a question of who exerts influence, how they do it, for what purpose and with what outcomes.

I have suggested elsewhere (Frost and Durrant, 2002a) that the concept of leadership can be illuminated using the three key words: *values*, *vision*, and *strategy*. The exercise of leadership rests on the clarification of values and the articulation of a vision underpinned by those values. 'Vision' can be assumed to be the result of imagining what could be and what ought to be. In addition, the exercise of leadership necessarily entails strategic action intended to realise those values in practice and narrow the gap between that vision and the current reality of professional practice. This corresponds to some extent with Sergiovanni's 'heart, head and hand' framework (1992) although I find his language rather loose. In relation to his second category – 'head', he discusses the idea of 'mindscapes' which seem to equate to theories. For me theories are part of the process of personal vision building, they are the intellectual tools that we use to work out how our values can be realised in practice.

A thorough analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, but I suspect that when we take the idea of leadership apart, it becomes apparent that it is nothing more than a fundamental dimension of what it is to be human. For example, it is characteristically human to be able to imagine something other than that which we apprehend through our senses in the here and now. Our early hunter-gatherer ancestors benefited not only from being able to imagine the herd of antelope that might be found just over the next hill but also from the capacity to imagine that there could be a way of life other than that which depends on hunting antelope. As Einstein famously observed, imagination is more important than knowledge (Taylor, 2002). What is interesting for the purposes of leadership in organisational contexts is the question of the factors that encourage or inhibit the human capacity to use the imagination and to act on it.

To argue that leadership is a fundamental human capacity is not however to argue for the redundancy of the concept. Gronn (2000) makes an effective defence of the continuing need for it and rebuts Lakomski's position that organisations can be seen as 'networks of distributed cognition' (Lakomski, 1999). For those who are interested in the idea of schools as learning communities, Lakomski's stance is appealing, but like Gronn, I am not convinced that learning is enough. This is why I have argued for some years that real and sustained school improvement depends on a fully integrated approach to teacher led development work in which teachers are enabled to move beyond the confines of the action research tradition and act strategically. We have well established traditions of professional development through school based inquiry, but the impact of such work on educational practice tends to be limited because of the tendency for it to be individualistic and for the knowledge gained to be shared through outmoded forms of dissemination.

### **The distributed properties of leadership**

Gronn's contribution to the theoretical basis for teacher leadership is substantial and extremely helpful in that he puts forward a theory of action based on the idea of *conjoint agency* and a consideration of Engeström's *activity theory* (1999). I can best illustrate this with reference to a case of teacher leadership which is described in detail elsewhere (Frost *et al.*, 2000). In this case it is clear that the improvements in professional practice were the result of a complex pattern of activity shaped by the agency of a wide range of actors.

Andrew was a relatively inexperienced teacher who joined a group established at the school to support teachers who were interested in engaging in inquiry-based development work. Group members registered for a masters degree and the group was facilitated by a university tutor working in collaboration with the Deputy Headteacher. Having participated in a workshop designed to enhance group

members' sense of agency, Andrew's personal development priorities focused on an ambitious, whole school project to develop student voice strategies, in particular a student council. He discussed the idea and how best to frame a proposal with the university tutor who facilitated the support group. The Deputy Head advised Andrew that he should put his proposal in writing to the Senior Management Team using the format for writing personal development plans examined in the support group. The Headteacher, new to the school, responded positively to Andrew's proposals. She subsequently coached him on strategies for consulting interested parties (colleagues, pupils, parents, governors) and collaborating with colleagues and pupils to take the idea forward. She saw the project as a way of smuggling in some changes that she was interested in. Some colleagues were supportive and had been wanting to introduce such ideas but needed a way in. Some colleagues were vehemently opposed and presented Andrew with challenges which constituted key learning opportunities. After a year or so, a student council was established and the school had undergone a considerable shift in its culture.

Andrew went on to be appointed as Head of Department and subsequently became a Deputy Headteacher only five years after joining the teaching profession. This led to the obvious suggestion that Andrew's capacity for leadership can be explained by his extraordinary personality and ability. Given that my aim was to develop frameworks of support that would enable the *majority* of teachers to exercise such leadership, I was troubled by this issue. My own explanation of the case at the time was that in order for individual teachers to exercise leadership, they need support both internally and externally. Internal support needs to come from Headteachers / Principals who must first recognise and understand the potential for leadership in teachers, then create the internal structures and conditions conducive to teacher leadership. External support comes when the school enters into partnerships with other agencies who can provide: 'scaffolding' for a process of reflection, planning and strategic action and foster critical discourse through membership of a support group, critical friendship and networking. However, Gronn's work, particularly in the paper 'Distributed



Properties: A New Architecture for Leadership' (2000) provides an explanation which answers the question of whether teachers need to be extraordinary in order to exercise leadership. In Gronn's terms, the case described above can be explained as the product of the agency of many people – Andrew, the Headteacher, the Deputy Headteacher, a number of teacher colleagues, a number of pupils, the university tutor who acted as Andrew's critical friend, fellow members of the support group etc. This is not to say that all concerned were working to the same vision or pursuing the same goals; indeed some of the agents were in fact pushing in the opposite direction; rather that the outcomes were the product of a complex pattern of *activity* which was shaped in different ways by a wide range of agents.

My previous analysis had focused on the individual teacher as the sole agent. Clearly this was inadequate, but so would be an explanation that privileges the idea of distributed cognition in the form of organisational learning. To say that the school had developed student voice strategies is far too simplistic; equally, to say that Andrew had developed student voice strategies or even to say that he had achieved this with a little help from his friends would be to fail to recognise the nature of the *activity* in the sense that Engeström *et al.* (1999) use the word.

In activity theory, the notion of *activity* bridges the gap between *agency* and *structure*. In Giddens' sociological theory of action, social or organisational structures can be modified by the agency of individuals by using whatever power resources are to hand – 'bottom-up power' if you like (Giddens, 1984). In activity theory, leadership is more of a collective phenomenon. As Gronn puts it:

...the potential for leadership is present in the flow of activities in which a set of organisation members find themselves enmeshed.

(Gronn, 2000: 331)

Explanations based on activity theory are particularly applicable to professional contexts such as schools because most conceptions of professionalism include the idea of autonomous judgement. Again Gronn is helpful when he says that:

In activities in which there is greater scope for discretion, examples of reciprocally expressed influence abound. In the relations between organisational heads and their immediate subordinates or between executives and their personal assistants for example, couplings form in which the extent of the conjoint agency resulting from the interdependence and mutual influence of the two parties is sufficient to render meaningless any assumptions about leadership being embodied in just one individual.

(Gronn, 2000: 331)

This view of leadership - it being the result of conjoint agency and it existing as a property of activity - resonates well with Sergiovanni's concept of leadership density (2001). He argues that high leadership density means that a larger number of people are involved in the work of others, are trusted with information, are involved in decision making, are exposed to new ideas and are participating in knowledge creation and transfer. In such a situation, a larger number of members of the organisation have a stake in the success of the school.

### **Towards an agenda for research**

Future research focused on teacher leadership needs a firm conceptual foundation so I want now to consider what might be some of the most important elements of such a conceptual framework.

In an overarching sense, it is assumed that a key variable is the extent to which school administrators are able to create the conditions which are conducive to teacher

leadership. The focus here would be on the capacity building strategies employed and the way these impact on leadership density.

Looking at teacher leadership itself, I suggest that there are the themes of professionalism, authority, resources and personal / interpersonal capacity. I now discuss each of these in brief.

### *Professionalism*

A key variable must be teachers' and administrators' conceptions of what it is to be professional. In his seminal 1975 book about curriculum development, Lawrence Stenhouse engaged with Eric Hoyle's work on the idea of the 'restricted and extended professional'. Stenhouse argued that the teacher's role should encompass a commitment to study one's own teaching and test pedagogical theories in practice. The individualism referred to above in relation to the action research tradition - which a reading of Stenhouse encouraged - has clearly come under considerable pressure in the post-reform era. Twenty five years after Stenhouse, John Quicke argues for 'a collaborative culture of professionalism' based on the idea of situated rather than absolute professional knowledge (Quicke, 2000). Clearly the extent to which teachers are able to engage in values clarification, personal vision building and strategic action for change depends on their perception of professionalism. Research on teacher leadership would need therefore to account for the way professionalism is constructed and gain insight into the role of collaboration in such conceptions.

### *Authority*

The traditional hierarchical model of organisation assumes a fixed connection between the position in the hierarchy and the authority possessed, but as Sergiovanni reminds us this 'bureaucratic authority' is only one type. He lists five different sources of authority for leadership:

- \* Bureaucratic authority

- \* Psychological authority
- \* Technical-rational authority
- \* Professional authority
- \* Moral authority

(Sergiovanni, 1992)

The first of these belongs with the view of teacher leadership described earlier in this paper and there are many stories from the UK of schools where middle managers have been required to implement systems of monitoring and then have been disappointed with the degree of influence they have been able to achieve. Psychological authority does not appear to me to be authority at all: to be able to influence colleagues because of your interpersonal skills for example seems to me to be more a matter of your competence as a strategist. Technical-rational authority is increasingly important as the evidence-based practice discourse gathers momentum and I can point to a great deal of evidence from my own work to support the view that this is a powerful source of authority for teacher leadership (Frost *et al.*, forthcoming). Carefully prepared proposals based on good data gathered within a well managed, collaborative process of change can often have far more impact than the urgings from the Head of Department or a member of the 'senior leadership team'. Professional authority based on 'informed craft knowledge and personal expertise' is powerful in that teachers seem prepared to trust the practitioner with a reputation for excellence in the classroom. Sergiovanni's 'moral authority' seems to me to be part of that wishful thinking that Fielding talks about in relation to the idea of 'schools as learning communities' (1999).

Felt obligation and duties derived from widely shared community values.  
ideas and ideals.

(Sergiovanni, 1992: 39)

If leadership density is maximised and if teacher leadership flourishes, I would imagine that a climate would exist that would favour teacher leadership based on moral authority, and we would be justified in using the term 'learning community' to

describe it. So, research on teacher leadership would need to explore the sources of authority that teachers can draw upon and how this relates to the organisational environment in which they work.

### *Resources*

I use the term *resources* to refer those cultural resources such as power, knowledge and reputation which a person will need to take stock of and deploy to best effect in exercising leadership. Of course those with formal positions in the hierarchy may have power: a Head of Department for example may have been delegated the power to deploy team members and allocate particular teaching groups to them but if this power is exercised without authority derived from some of the other sources that Sergiovanni describes, their influence may be negligible. Teachers who seek to lead without any formal position are forced to be more subtle in their approach; they will need to reflect on and assess their stock of power and authority and plan accordingly. A teacher may have for example a reputation built on a consistent pattern of excellent results in her pupils' public examinations. Another teacher may have specialist knowledge as a result of being involved in research or training. She may have personal resources such as optimism or cheerfulness to call upon; these are dealt with under personal and interpersonal capacity below. It is important therefore to understand more about the resources that teachers can call upon as they become more strategic and to understand how such resources can be deployed.

### *Personal and interpersonal capacity*

I am using the distinction made by Mitchell and Sackney (2000). Personal capacity is to do with teachers' professional knowledge, personal attributes, clarity of purpose and commitment to professional values. Interpersonal capacity is to do with teachers' participation or involvement and the development of skills in building and maintaining professional relationships (see Frost and Durrant, 2002b for a more detailed discussion of this). We are accustomed to considering teachers' personal

capacity within discussions about CPD (continuing professional development) but perhaps there has been less attention paid to interpersonal capacity.

In order to be able to exercise leadership it is necessary to have good personal understanding of the aspect of practice that stands in need of improvement, indeed a personal vision depends not only on having a clear value position but also on having a theory about how those values might be translated into different practice. A teacher's professional knowledge is clearly an important variable in accounting for success in exercising leadership, but perhaps equally important would be the individual's feelings and dispositions such as optimism and courage. Research into teacher leadership could therefore explore the factors that shape teachers' capacity for personal vision building.

Strategic intervention also requires a good deal of situational understanding; the ability to assess the obstacles and opportunities is crucial to action planning for change. This is a capacity for which the classical Greek word 'nous' makes a good fit. Arguably nous comes with experience, but I suggest that it can also be cultivated through the application of appropriate forms of support. For example, I have argued elsewhere that teachers' micro-political literacy can be developed through workshop activities (Frost and Durrant, 2002a). Similarly, we could say that, in order to be able to read the situation, a teacher needs to have a good deal of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) as well as other dispositions such as confidence and resilience. The quality of planning for change is an important variable, but equally important is having the communication and other interpersonal skills essential for collaborative engagement with colleagues and other stake-holders. Research would therefore need to include a focus on teachers' situational understanding and their collaborative competence.

In dealing with the elements briefly outlined above separately I would not want to suggest that they can be viewed discretely; rather I would want to see them as part of

a broader concept which is perhaps best summed up by the Aristotelian term *phronesis* (MacIntyre, 1981) a concept which embraces practical wisdom underpinned by moral consciousness. The link between this idea and activity theory is worthy of further investigation. There are also implications here for the research methodology; this is beyond the scope of this paper but there are clearly issues to do with how meanings are constructed and negotiated in social situations and the nature of the narratives that teachers produce to explain their roles.

### **Summing up**

In this paper, I am proposing that teacher leadership is highly contestable, there being a number of competing alternative conceptions in use at the present time and that it stands in need of research. That research agenda would include:

- \* strategies to achieve leadership density,
- \* teachers' and administrators' conceptions of professionalism and the implications for teacher leadership,
- \* sources of authority for teacher leadership,
- \* cultural / symbolic resources and how teachers can deploy them in exercising leadership,
- \* teachers' personal capacity: the professional knowledge and dispositions that shape the capacity to engage in personal vision building,
- \* teachers' nous: their situational understanding and the emotional intelligence necessary for strategic intervention,
- \* teachers' capacity to collaborate: the skills and dispositions involved.

In addition, research would need to explore forms of support for teacher leadership but specifically focused on strategies and frameworks that support the above elements rather than programmes labelled ‘teacher leadership’.

If it is true that teacher leadership’s time has come, then it is also true to say that the time has come for some substantial research into teacher leadership that will inform emerging policy and practice in the UK.

## References

- Engeström, Y. (1999) Activity Theory and Individual and Social Transformation in Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen and R-L Punamäki (eds) *Perspectives on Activity Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Fielding, M. (1999) Communities of learning. Myth: schools are communities, in B. O’Hagan (ed.) *Modern Education Myths*, London: Kogan Page
- Frost, D., Cullen, J. and Cunningham, H. (forthcoming) Making a difference: building capacity through a university and LEA collaboration, submitted to *Professional Development Today*
- Frost, D. (2000) Teacher-led School Improvement: Agency and Strategy, *Management in Education*, 14 (4) pp 21-24 (& 5) pp 17-20
- Frost, D. and Durrant, J. (2002a) *Teacher-led development work: guidance and support*, London: David Fulton Publishers
- Frost, D. and Durrant, J. (2002b) Teachers as Leaders: Exploring the Impact of Teacher-Led Development Work, in *School Leadership and Management*, 22 (2) pp 143-161
- Frost, D. and Durrant, J. (2002c) *Teacher Leadership in a Culture of Change*, paper presented at an ESRC funded seminar ‘Challenging Orthodoxy in School Leadership’ at the University of Warwick, 28<sup>th</sup> November
- Frost, D. and Durrant, J. (forthcoming) ‘Supporting Teachers’ Leadership: What Can Principals Do? A teacher perspective from research’ in J. Chrispeels and K. Martin (eds) *Learning To Lead Together: The Promise And Challenge Of Principals Sharing Leadership*, Sage Publications



- Frost, D., Durrant, J., Head, M. and Holden, G. (2000) *Teacher-Led School Improvement*, London: RoutledgeFalmer
- Fullan, M. (2001) *Leading in a Culture of Change*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Goleman, (1995) *Emotional Intelligence*, New York: Bantam Books
- Gronn, P. (2000) Distributed properties: a new architecture for leadership, *Educational Management and Administration* 28 (3) pp 371-338
- Hammond, P. (2002) 'Think Piece from NCSL', *Times Educational Supplement*, 13<sup>th</sup> December
- Harris, A. and Muijs, D. (2002) *Teacher Leadership: a Review of Research*, NCSL and GTC websites
- Katzenmeyer and Moller, (2001) *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders*, second edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press
- Krug, S. (1992) Instructional leadership: A Constructivist Perspective. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 28 (3) pp 430-443.
- Lakomski, G. (1999) 'Against Leadership: a Concept without a Cause' in P. Begley and P. Leonard (eds) *The Values of Educational Administration*, London: Falmer Press
- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D. and Steinbach, R. (1999) *Changing Leadership for Changing Times*, Buckingham: Open University Press
- MacBeath, J. (2003) 'The Alphabet Soup of Leadership' *Inform*, a series of briefings on the website of Leadership for Learning: the Cambridge Network [www.educ.cam.ac.uk/lfl](http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/lfl)
- MacIntyre, A. (1981) *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*, second edition, London: Duckworth
- Mitchell, C. and Sackney, L. (2000) *Profound Improvement: building capacity for a learning community*, Lisse, Neth.: Swets and Zeitlinger

- Quicke, J. (2000) A New Professionalism for a Collaborative Culture of Organizational Learning in Contemporary Society, *Educational Management and Administration*, 28 (3) pp 299-315
- Sergiovanni, T. (1992) *Moral Leadership: Getting to the Heart of School Improvement*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Sergiovanni, T. (2001) *Leadership: What's In It for Schools*, London: RoutledgeFalmer
- Southworth, G. (2002) 'Think Piece from NCSL', *Times Educational Supplement*, 6<sup>th</sup> December
- Stenhouse, L. (1975) *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, London: Heinemann
- Taylor, K. (2002) When Fact and Fantasy Collide, *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 20<sup>th</sup> December