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3 **Contextualising, Orchestrating and Learning for Leading: The Praxis and Particularity**
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5 **of Educational Leadership Practices**
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10 **Abstract.** The importance of leadership for improving educational outcomes in
11 schools has been widely promoted. However, the nature of leadership practices, in
12 context, has received less attention in the educational leadership literature. In this
13 paper, we present a case study of the specific leadership practices which developed in
14 one school site serving the learning needs of students in a complex, diverse, low
15 socio-economic community in south-east Queensland, Australia. Rather than
16 focussing on the person/role of ‘the leader’, or various leadership qualities/traits, we
17 examine the nature and particularity of the leadership practices as praxis, across a
18 variety of roles and dispositions, as developed within the school. To help make sense
19 of the praxis and particularity of educational leadership practices, we draw upon
20 recent Neo-Aristotelian practice theory to reveal the specific actions (‘doings’),
21 dialogue (‘sayings’) and relationships (‘relatings’) which constituted leadership-in-
22 practice, as praxis. These ‘doing’, ‘sayings’ and ‘relatings’ for praxis were evident in:
23 formal leadership practices responsive to the context and history of the particular
24 school site; formal and informal leadership practices involved in establishing a
25 ‘leadership group’ within the school to address students’ needs, and; and informal
26 leadership practices focused on cultivating teacher learning for student learning. Such
27 an approach does not simply reinforce sedimented notions of what constitutes
28 ‘educational leadership’, but sheds new light upon the nature of ‘leading practices for
29 praxis’.
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54 **Keywords:** practice theory; praxis; leadership; leading; teacher learning
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56 **Introduction**
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3 Notions of school leadership are far from uniform, and heavily contested (English,
4 2011). The various labels associated with leadership also connote multiple meanings; Gunter
5 (2004) refers to how terms such as ‘administration’, ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ have
6 been used at different times to focus upon a variety of issues/matters: ‘development and
7 maintenance; resources and efficiency; goals and effectiveness; staffing and professionalism;
8 policy and practice; institutional and community relationships’ (p. 22). After Hudak (2001),
9 Gunter (2004) argues it is important to identify whether such labels are ‘benign’, or whether
10 they are ‘toxic’ i.e. having deleterious effects upon those to whom they are directed.
11 Nevertheless, and at the same time, universal conceptions of school leadership continue to
12 exert influence in both scholarship and practice; for example, school leadership is broadly
13 described in the literature as influencing schooling practices, and school leaders as having an
14 impact upon student outcomes (Blossing, 2011; Minckler, 2014). This is also evident in how
15 the influence upon student learning of personnel in formal leadership positions – most
16 obviously, Head Teachers/Principals – is described as indirect and mediated by a range of
17 factors (Lingard, Hayes, Mills, & Christie, 2003). More universalised conception of
18 leaderships are also evident in support for leadership to be ‘distributed’ (Bush, 2014;
19 Spillane, 2006) or ‘dispersed’ (Lingard, et al., 2003) throughout the school rather than
20 residing with an individual institutionally recognised ‘leader’.

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43 The conception of leadership presented in this paper acknowledges that forms of
44 ‘distributed’ and ‘dispersed’ leadership could have more problematic (‘toxic’ aims in
45 Hudak’s (2001) terms) but how they could also be enacted in progressive ways. The research
46 presented here does have a normative aim, but seeks to upfront about this position.
47 Specifically, we seek to better understand a notion of ‘leadership’ focused upon those
48 practices which are likely to be beneficial for the most marginalised in society – leadership as
49 praxis. That is, there is a normative concern for how to effect a more socially just conception
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3 of leadership which seeks to make sense of practices of leadership as these are expressed in
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5 some of the poorest communities in developed countries. Also, how such conceptions of
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7 leadership practices/praxis come about/are developed, and the intricacies and particularity of
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9 such practices/praxis, tends to receive considerably less attention. That is, there is relatively
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11 little focus upon the specificity of such practice – the particular actions, dialogue and
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13 relationships which characterise leadership praxis, of those in both formal and informal roles,
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15 *in situ*. By focusing on the practices of leading as praxis in one school site in south-east
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17 Queensland, Australia, we seek to highlight some of this specificity, and the site-based nature
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19 (Gheradi, 2008) of leadership practices as they unfold, even as we simultaneously
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21 acknowledge the necessarily tentative nature of these actions, dialogue and relationships, and
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23 the potentially varied aims to which notions of ‘leadership’ can be directed.
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28 With these aims and values in mind, the research presented here focuses on the leading
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30 practices which sought to improve the material conditions for students at one diverse, low
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32 socio-economic, urban community in south-east Queensland. The primary school comprised
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34 about 250 students, including many refugee families. In the context of multiple and complex
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36 educational challenges, particular ‘leading’ practices seemed to be enacted which sought to
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38 improve the outcomes for both students and members of the wider community, of which the
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40 school was an important part. To situate our learnings from this site, we begin by briefly
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42 reviewing relevant literature related to school leadership, followed by an overview of the
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44 theoretical resources of neo-Aristotelian practice theory – particularly Kemmis, Wilkinson,
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46 Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer and Bristol’s (2014) focus upon practice as praxis, and
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48 the particular ‘doings’ (action), ‘sayings’ (discourse) and ‘relatings’ (relationships) which
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50 constitute praxis – which we bring to bear to better understand leadership practices in this
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52 context. Following details of the study site, which was based on qualitative methods
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54 including 27 interviews with staff, students and community members, observations and
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document analysis, we give an account of the development of specific leading practices in the school, and how these addressed the demands and requirements for a more socially just education in this particular site. Finally, we discuss how the establishment of leading practices in this case might inform educational leadership practices in other sites.

Educational leading

Arguably, notions of ‘educational leadership’ have become more prominent since the advent of compulsory schooling (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). A significant proportion of the research and scholarship into the various articulations of educational leadership continue to engage with various roles – primarily the principal¹– and various ‘traits’ of those in key positions; this literature also seeks to retheorise more traditional accounts, including addressing more hybridised configurations of ‘leadership’ formations beyond those associated simply with individuals (Gronn, 2011). There is also some attention to various forms of ‘transformation’ which may be effected by ‘great leaders’ (Burns, 1978), and how a broader and deeper form of ‘transformational school leadership’ should involve fostering ‘teacher leadership’ (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999). Such ‘transformational leadership’ includes the capacity to serve as role models, motivate and inspire, intellectually stimulate and provide for the individual needs of colleagues, in context; such leaders also ‘help followers grow and develop into leaders’ (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 3). Throughout this literature, there is an assumption that the nature and quality of ‘leadership’ makes a difference in schools. And some of this literature provides interesting insights into some of the practices of individual principals; Riddle and Cleaver (2013), for example, reveal the nature of the practices a principal engaged in, in an alternative school setting, to foster successful student learning amongst previously disengaged students. However, there is also increasing understanding that the influence of ‘formal leaders’ upon student learning is

¹ In Australia, the positional head of a school is typically described as the ‘principal’. In other countries/contexts, the terms ‘Head Teacher’, ‘Headmaster’, or ‘Headmistress’ are used.

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3 indirect. For example, in their research into 'leadership' practices in schools in Queensland,
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5 Australia, Lingard, Hayes, Mills and Christie (2003) noted that the "principal effects on
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7 student outcomes were small and indirect" (p. 51) and, that in relation to school-based
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9 factors, "teachers have the greatest impact upon student learning of all educational variables"
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11 (p. 148). As a result, there is considerable support for more 'distributed' approaches. While
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13 considered an 'elusive construct' (Hairon & Goh, 2014) lacking a clear definition (Hartley
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15 2007), and with an inadequate focus on issues of power (Hartley, 2010), 'distributed
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17 leadership' also includes a focus on more 'collective interactions among leaders, followers,
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19 and their situation' (Spillane, 2006, p. 4), and criticism of the idea that responsibility can be
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21 vested in one 'head', or 'senior management team' alone. There is also a considerable
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23 emphasis upon 'pedagogical leadership' within more distributed approaches (e.g.,
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25 Sergiovanni, 1996; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). This notion of 'distributed leadership' in
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27 the theorising, policy-making and practice of school leadership appears to have been popular,
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29 even as there have been some criticisms, such as Woods' (2004) call for a more 'democratic'
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31 mode of leadership which enables greater critique of the conditions within which educators'
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33 work is undertaken, and involving actors in schools (students, parents) who are not teachers.
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35 There is also advocacy for more 'dispersed leadership', which is seen by some researchers as
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37 a way of more clearly capturing 'power as practice involving relationships and operating in
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39 diffuse ways' (Lingard *et al.*, 2003, p. 54) than the term 'distributed'.
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45 Such approaches encourage a 'thickening' of leadership across a school as a means of
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47 improving student learning outcomes (Lingard *et al.*, 2003). More particularly, with the
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49 increasingly managerial nature of principal's work, and the need to have the capacity for
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51 decision-making closer to the critical site of learning – the classroom – recognition of
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53 'teachers as leaders' has become increasingly significant (Muijis & Harris, 2006). To this
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55 end, the literature reveals an increasing body of research focusing on 'teachers as leaders' or
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3 ‘teacher leaders’. Frost and Durrant (2003) highlight the critical nature of ‘teacher
4 leadership’ for schools to promote good student outcomes through a climate focused on
5 learning. More recently, Berg, Sundh and Wede (2012) emphasise the importance of teacher
6 leaders in developing and sustaining effective teaching practices. We support these more
7 nuanced and diverse approaches to understanding leadership. However, at the same time, we
8 also suggest that this research needs to be further developed by focusing more explicitly upon
9 the nature and purposes of such forms of leadership, and the specificity of these practices.
10 This includes in school settings characterised by significant cultural diversity, and within
11 which ‘leading practices’ are exercised in complex ways along a spectrum between more
12 celebratory and more problematic assimilationist practices (Hajisoteriou, 2014). Specifically,
13 we seek to explore further the particularity of more complex, situated forms of socially-just
14 conceptions of leading, key personnel involved, and how these actually play out in schooling
15 settings; we do this even as we acknowledge the difficulty of ‘identifying’ leadership
16 practices, and how such practices are always open to contestation over their nature and value.

34 **The practice and praxis of leading**

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36 To undertake this work, we apply recent theorising of the particularity of forms of social
37 practice to educational leading practices, and more overtly socially-just informed conceptions
38 of practice (‘praxis’). We draw upon recent insights in the field of practice theory to redress
39 concerns about the level of generality which characterises much of the educational leadership
40 literature, and which makes it difficult to make sense of actual leadership-in-action, and the
41 conditions which enable more socially-just conceptions of leadership practices. Specifically,
42 we draw upon theorising by Kemmis *et al.* (2014) which understands educational practice as
43 an organized arrangement of ‘sayings’, ‘doings’ and ‘relatings’ that are undertaken in social
44 sites, and oriented towards the good for all. Utilising Schatzki’s (2002) notion of practice as
45 inhering in specific sites, Kemmis *et al.* (2014) argue that such practices are both product and
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3 productive of these sites, the particular conditions which influence these sites, and of those
4 who occupy them. The ‘doings’, ‘sayings’ and ‘relatings’ which characterise sites constitute
5 three kinds of intersubjective ‘space’ within which practices are enacted:
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9 • semantic space – characterised by a shared language in which meanings are shared
10 and mutual understandings are constructed;
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- 12 • physical space-time – characterised by shared locations in space and time to enable
13 shared activities and work, and;
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- 15 • social space – characterised by different kinds of relationships and ways of relating.
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20 (Kemmis, *et al.*, 2014, p. 32)

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22 Particular *sayings*, *doings* and *relatings* not only constitute but are also constituted by the
23 particular conditions/spaces for practice; these spaces enable and constrain the practices
24 which arise. These conditions – ‘practice architectures’ – influence practices, and are
25 expressed in various cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political forms or
26 ‘arrangements’. Also, practices do not exist in isolation, but are instead interwoven, or
27 ‘ecologically’ arranged, with other practices in the specific sites in which they are undertaken
28 (Kemmis, *et al.*, 2014); for example, practices of leading for social justice are inter-related
29 with practices of teachers’ learning, teaching and evaluation.
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40 In a neo-Aristotelian sense, in professions such as teaching, practices also seek to be
41 deeply ethical, moral, virtuous – as difficult as this may be in modern times (MacIntyre,
42 2007) – and responsive to the particular needs of the site in which they are located. The
43 result is a conception of practice as ‘praxis’ – practices which are oriented towards the good
44 for not only the individual in question, but society as a whole, including the most
45 marginalised (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). We take up such a view, conceptualising praxis as a
46 particular form of practice that has a broadly understood, collective, moral and ethical
47 dimension (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). In short, ‘praxis is what people do when they take into
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3 account all the circumstances and exigencies that confront them at a particular moment and
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5 then, taking the broadest view they can of what is best to do, they *act*' (Kemmis & Smith,
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7 2008, p. 4; emphasis original).
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10 Under these circumstances, 'leading praxis' is about being active in the site of the
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12 practice, making judgments and acting in the best interests of all involved, including those
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14 least able to represent themselves, even when an obvious path or choice is not clear. The case
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16 study presented here is informed by these conceptions of practice and praxis theory, revealing
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18 the specificity of practices oriented towards improved learning for significantly marginalised
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20 students. Specifically, the study was designed to address the following research questions:
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- 22 • What was the nature of the 'leading practices' developed to help meet the
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24 learning needs of these students and their community?
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- 27 • What conditions – practice architectures – enabled and constrained these 'leading
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29 practices' at this specific site?
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32 **The Research**

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34 The research reported was undertaken at one school site in south-east Queensland as part
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36 of a broader study into the educational practices in six schools in two school districts in New
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38 South Wales and Queensland. Located in a low socio-economic suburb in an Australian city,
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40 the school had about 250 students – many of whom came from diverse cultures and
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42 backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities, the Pacific Islands,
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44 and refugee camps in South-East Asia and Central Africa.
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48 The students at the school are among the poorest and most educationally disadvantaged
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50 in Australia. Consequently, the school and district office developed a range of initiatives and
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52 programs to help address these student and community needs, all oriented towards improving
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54 their lives and circumstances. In 2007, the school and district office conducted research
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56 internally, and found that over half of the students came from homes that were considered 'on
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3 the margins'; this included students who were living out of home, whose attendance was very
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5 poor, and who were living with mental illness in the home, and/or well below the poverty
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7 line. With 61% of the student population in the lowest socio-economic quartile, the school's
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9 ICSEA² value of 901 was well below the Australian Average of 1000. By any measure, the
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11 school community was significantly disadvantaged, and this posed many challenges for the
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13 school. It is within this context that specific 'leading' practices are reported.
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17 **Data Generation** Reflecting the deeply qualitative nature of research which seeks to
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19 describe the specificity of such practices *in situ*, data were generated through individual and
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21 group interviews, observations of classrooms, staff meetings, other school-based events, and
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23 document analyses (school and district). Apart from two interviews (one with a former
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25 principal and one with a system/district leader), all the data generation occurred at the school
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27 site. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and designed to allow participants to talk
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29 about their experiences of leadership within the school. 27 interviews were undertaken with a
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31 range of participants including:
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35 • a representative of the system/district office;
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39 • the current and previous school principal;
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43 • 6 other formal school leaders including the deputy principal and curriculum
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45 leaders;
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49 • 8 teachers;
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53 • 6 groups of students (about 4 or 5 in each groups); and,
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² ICSEA – Index of Community socio-Educational Advantage – a score of socio-economic difference created to enable comparison between 'like' schools on the national literacy and numeracy testing regime in Australia (NAPLAN – National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy).

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3 Interviews were approximately 45 minutes, although some were up to two hours; the tone of
4 these conversations was convivial, and the participants seemed to enjoy the opportunity to
5 talk about their school. Both authors were typically involved in the interviews, but at times
6 only one was present during observations of meetings, classrooms and other events.
7 Interviews were the principal form of data generation, and augmented by a number of formal
8 and informal observations of lessons, school staff meetings and other school-based events, as
9 well as relevant document analysis (e.g. school policies, samples of student work). During
10 these observations the researchers took detailed notes of the practices they witnessed.

11
12 Initially all the transcripts and observation notes were carefully read by both authors in
13 order to identify emergent themes and recurrent concepts (Shank, 2002). Relevant leadership
14 literature was also read and re-read to assist in identifying these themes. At the same time,
15 neo-Aristotelian theorising of practice and praxis was deployed to better reveal the nature of
16 the specificity of practices associated with leadership-for-justice as expressed at this school.
17 After Kemmis *et al.* (2014), this specificity related to the particular ‘doings’, ‘sayings’ and
18 ‘relatings’ evident within the data, the conditions (practice architectures) which made these
19 practices possible, and the extent to which these practices reflected more praxis-oriented
20 stances. As specific ‘doings’, ‘sayings’ and ‘relatings’ were identified within the data, this
21 helped reveal larger ‘constellations’ of practice around which these actions, discourse and
22 relationships coalesced. These constellations of practice related to both formal and informal
23 practices of ‘leading’. These constellations of practices were in turn critiqued in light of the
24 leadership literature outlined above. Collectively, these analytical steps revealed three broad
25 themes (outlined below).

26 **Findings: Contextualising, Orchestrating and Learning for Leading**

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28 In light of the theorising of leading practices and the broader leadership literature, the
29 research revealed three key themes relating to the specificity of such practices at the school
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3 site, and in relation to both formal and informal leadership practices. Firstly, there was clear
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5 evidence of the central role of the principal ('formal' leading) whose leading practices took
6
7 school context and history into account when seeking to make interventions. Secondly, both
8
9 formal and informal leading practices were evident in the establishment of a 'leadership
10
11 group' within the school to guide the work of the school. Finally, more informal leading
12
13 practices were particularly evident which related to more 'distributed' practices of fostering
14
15 teacher learning as a vehicle for enhancing student learning, supported by those in more
16
17 formal roles. The research reveals the specificity of these practices – the 'doings', 'sayings'
18
19 and 'relatings' which constituted them, and the broader conditions, 'practice architectures',
20
21 which enabled and constrained these practices as praxis.
22
23

24
25 **Leading as Contextualising Schooling.** From the outset, it was clear that the location of the
26
27 school had significant implications for the nature of the leading practices which developed.
28
29 This included a form of 'historical relating' on the part of the principal to former members of
30
31 the community involved in running the school:
32
33

34 I was really thankful that I had never been a principal before going there, because I
35
36 really had no idea of what to do. So I think I just came with an openness of doing
37
38 things that were going to fit that community. And I was always really respectful to
39
40 what had happened before and the leadership from, particularly through the Josephite
41
42 Sisters. So that ... – what we call the Mary MacKillop³ spirituality of welcoming
43
44 or/and meeting needs and doing things that make a difference, but with a
45
46 'groundedness' of never thinking that we have the answers. (Margaret⁴, Principal)
47
48

49 This 'relating' to previous work and 'situatedness' was evident in the 'doing' of the principal
50
51 sharing in and supporting the foundational Josephite values of Southwood in this site. These
52
53 values were not her's alone – those of some sort of 'great leader' (Burns, 1978) – but centred
54
55

56
57 ³ Founder of the Order of St Joseph.

58 ⁴ All names are pseudonyms.
59
60

1
2
3 on a culture of social justice, empathy, respect, inclusion and cooperation established over a
4
5 long period of time, and they were values that were specifically required in this community of
6
7 considerable diversity and disadvantage. These values were manifest in modern material and
8
9 virtual forms, including posters on the school's walls, and the school's website:

- 11 • Each person is accepted for the person he/she is
- 12
- 13 • Nationalities make us culturally rich
- 14
- 15 • Learning is valued and gifts encouraged
- 16
- 17 • Listening, compassion and peace are nurtured (Southwood School Website)
- 18
- 19

20
21 The influence of these principles was evident in the 'doing' of living the values of social
22
23 justice, including rejecting any deficit thinking regarding the diverse student population at the
24
25 school:

26
27 I guess utilising their strengths and knowledge to have this very clear focus on what
28
29 can we do that's going to make a positive difference to the lives of the children within
30
31 that school community. And in that, very much in terms of progressing their learning,
32
33 and particularly in literacy and numeracy. (Margaret, Principal)

34
35 Allied to this were clear 'sayings' on the part of the principal in strong support of the school
36
37 and in contrast with deficit talk – talk which occurred beyond, not within, the community:

38
39 I think for Southwood, the most important thing about the practices were that they
40
41 were strengths-based practices. I think a key contribution that I may have made
42
43 was that I didn't ever see us as this poor school that was dying you know, and that
44
45 poor little disadvantaged school ... always sort of rallied strongly against any of that
46
47 talk. I didn't really ever hear it within the community because we knew differently.

48
49
50 (Margaret, Principal)

51
52 This 'doing' of constantly 'saying' how students had various strengths from their prior
53
54 experiences and learning, and their cultural backgrounds, constituted a form of 'relating' to
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1
2
3 members of not just the school community but beyond. Also, as with Riddle and Cleaver's
4
5 (2013) principal, these practices foregrounded the capacities of these students and their
6
7 community, rather than what they were perceived as not possessing. As such, the 'leading'
8
9 practices were grounded in conceptions of social justice – clearly responsive to this site.
10

11 In a similar vein, the deputy principal also actively realised the need to be able to 'relate'
12
13 to people from a variety of cultural backgrounds and circumstances – many of them
14
15 challenging:
16

17
18 The nature of Southwood is that it changes continually, so as a school over the
19
20 decades, it went from being a very large school with a lot of [people from] Anglo
21
22 Celtic backgrounds in the 1970s. And then through the '80s it was, I think, families
23
24 from Central America, El Salvador and Eastern European. And then, in the '90s began
25
26 the arrival of Pacific Islander cultures into the community. So, that central, local
27
28 community has always been a place where newly arrived immigrants [live], and often
29
30 through refugee experience. So, in my time there, it changed again; it went from
31
32 being predominantly Pacific Islander to the arrival of African families, and then, just
33
34 at the time as I left, Burmese families started to arrive. (Brian, Deputy Principal)
35
36

37
38 This capacity to relate to these people's circumstances was also evident in the way in which
39
40 the principal, from the outset of her arrival at the school, engaged with new students and their
41
42 parents. The 'doing' of reception interviews with parents entailed particular 'sayings'
43
44 (sometimes to herself) and 'relatings' with parents and students who had had horrific
45
46 experiences, including of domestic abuse and suicide:
47
48

49
50 It was before the school year, and I was interviewing new enrolments, and one was
51
52 from a family that came through the domestic violence refuge centre for women.
53
54 There was a mother with three children ... [including] an older boy who ... hadn't
55
56 had any successful experiences of schooling. And then, there was a daughter, and
57
58
59
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1
2
3 then there was a little guy – he was ready to start Year 1. And so, this mother had
4
5 escaped an obviously, very dangerous environment where there has been physical
6
7 violence. And I was just sitting there thinking, ‘This is what I’m here for.’ And, ‘This
8
9 is what our school is, and it’s to offer refuge to this family’. And I really had no idea
10
11 how we were going to do that. But there was just always that openness that we can
12
13 and that we’d find a way, because that was, I guess, the mission of the school and
14
15 always had been.
16

17
18 And then, the next interview was a fairly elderly Polish man who was enrolling his
19
20 son into the school in Year 4. And in their previous months, they’d been living in an
21
22 enclosed monastery. ... He was speaking and he asked his boy to leave the room. And
23
24 he told me that the boy’s mother had hung herself when he was 12 months old.
25
26

27 (Margaret, Principal)
28

29
30 At the same time, the action/doing of remaining calm in unfamiliar circumstances and
31
32 seeking to learn about different cultural traditions, and not taking a deficit or assimilationist
33
34 stance (see Hajisoteriou, 2014) was an important leading practice developed in this context:
35

36 Also, the night before, one of the leaders of the Tongan community had passed away.
37
38 So, during these two interviews there were two vans arriving into the school, and the
39
40 doors were opening, and these huge cow carcasses were just being thrown onto the
41
42 cement in our undercover area. So, I’m thinking, ‘This is different.’ And I’ve heard
43
44 of hangis, ‘Are they planning to dig holes and put these in the ground?’ Then, after a
45
46 while, I went back out and all these carcasses were gone. ... I learned later that
47
48 because the person that had died was considered a chief in the community, it was his
49
50 gift to the community, and different families, to sort of continue to nourish them.
51
52

53 (Margaret, Principal)
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1
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3 These were not some generalised forms of ‘best practice’, but rather they were practices that
4 were site-based and particular to the needs, people and traditions of this community. The
5 ‘doing’ of the interviews, the ‘sayings’ which occurred within them, and the ‘relatings’
6 (within and beyond the interviews) of engaging with the members of the community to make
7 sense of the traditions which characterised the community, were not simple and straight-
8 forward but deeply influenced by the specificity of the site in question (Schatzki, 2002), and
9 the very particular needs of the students and families associated with the school. For this
10 principal, ‘relating’ to the students entailed recognising their needs and the difficulties which
11 confronted them:
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23 That thinking then was very much part of, I guess, the energy I had to have, ...
24 because I knew what I wanted to achieve for that school, because it was important for
25 those kids that they have the best. Because they deserve it. And that was always my
26 driving thing – that these kids deserve the best, and they deserve it more than others
27 because of the experiences that life has thrown their way. (Margaret, Principal)
28
29
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34 Importantly, and reflecting the difficulty of being a ‘transformational’ leader (Burns, 1978;
35 Leithwood *et al.*, 1999), this ‘doing’ of cultivating the conditions for students to ‘have the
36 best’, in spite of the principal’s best intentions and words, ‘sayings’, revealed the need for a
37 different form of engagement, ‘relating’, focused on sharing the work of leading across the
38 school. As outlined in the next section, this was a more ‘distributed’ approach (Bush, 2014;
39 Spillane, 2006), but one focused on the very substantive needs of these particular students.
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47 **The leadership group.** Contrary to the notion of the principal as the ‘great leader’ (Burns,
48 1978), the principal quickly realised that the ‘doing’ of cultivating a strong student focus
49 within the school entailed the ‘doing’ of leading by everyone across the school. This entailed
50 developing a broader ‘leadership group’ to build understanding for improved engagement for
51 students:
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1
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3 Yeah, it was physically and mentally draining. I was just carrying the weight of
4
5 Southwood here [pointing to her heart], so that's when I set up the leadership group
6
7 within the school. (Margaret, Principal)
8

9
10 Reflecting a more 'democratic leadership' approach (Woods, 2004), the team included
11
12 members of the broader school/parent community, those in formal leadership roles, teachers,
13
14 non-teaching administrative staff, the pastoral and community development staff, and the
15
16 librarian. This 'doing' of establishing such a broadly representative team entailed developing
17
18 new forms of 'relating' with teachers and other members of the school and community, and
19
20 having the opportunity to learn about one another's roles, activities and capacities.
21

22
23 This notion of leadership practices being 'dispersed' (Lingard *et al.*, 2003) across the
24
25 school was clearly evident through recognition of the 'doing' of the principal fostering the
26
27 conditions for teachers to learn new roles and responsibilities, and 'relating' to one another
28
29 and other members of the community in trusting and supportive ways:
30

31
32 I guess a lot of schools will say they have shared leadership, but here, from Margaret
33
34 Allwood who was the principal when I first started 3 years ago, she actually lived it
35
36 every day and ... she had faith in others and their professional ability to make
37
38 decisions, and I guess that was a driving force. As well, she trusted other people and
39
40 *implicitly* trusted people. She didn't just say, 'Oh I trust you to make the right
41
42 decision'; she gave people opportunities to succeed and to fail, and then to support the
43
44 person or people, whatever happened. (Brian, Deputy Principal)
45
46

47
48 Through the 'doing' of the leadership team meeting once a fortnight, participants also learnt
49
50 to set and monitor the strategic direction of the school. Anyone could add to the agenda, and
51
52 the topics covered constituted 'quite a broad range' (Brian, Deputy Principal). The meetings
53
54 were not closed, 'and everyone who wants to come is allowed to come; it is not an invite only
55
56 sort of thing' (Brian, Deputy Principal). Indeed, a number of the interviewees noted that often
57
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1
2
3 most of the school staff were present. A more democratic conception of leadership (Woods,
4
5 2004) was evident in the way decisions were reached through dialogue and consensus,
6
7 ‘sayings’, such that no one could recall a vote being undertaken during a meeting. The
8
9 ‘doings’ of the meetings and associated ‘sayings’ cultivated newly developed
10
11 relationships/‘relatings’ which were not dependent upon formal roles. Through the meetings,
12
13 participants learned new ways of being themselves, of engaging with one another, and learnt
14
15 about one another’s work and activities within the school. Such an approach formed a very
16
17 different architecture of practice – practice architecture (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014) – than that
18
19 which typically characterises schooling settings. Also, and again, these leading structures
20
21 enabled decisions to be made that were cognisant of the needs of all – a form of democratic
22
23 justice – and responsive to the broader educational demands of the school and its community.
24
25

26
27 **Fostering teachers’ learning.** This work of more democratically-just leading through the
28
29 work of the leadership group was evident in a variety of arena, including in relation to the
30
31 ‘doing’ of ongoing teacher learning/professional development. At Southwood, all staff were
32
33 encouraged to take a lead in their own development, and that of colleagues – a learning-
34
35 oriented form of teacher-led school improvement (Muijs & Harris, 2006). While some
36
37 members of staff had formal roles for promoting the professional learning of colleagues –
38
39 such as a ‘Lead Teacher’ responsible for how the curriculum was implemented overall within
40
41 the school, and an English as a Second Language Teacher (ESL) focused upon language and
42
43 literacy learning within the school – the ‘doing’ of encouraging teachers’ learning at
44
45 Southwood reflects a more democratic form of practice than that typically described in much
46
47 of the professional learning literature. The way in which ideas could ‘percolate up’ from
48
49 amongst the staff, and were supported, was evident in how momentum for a new spelling
50
51 program, *Spellright*, initiated by a classroom teacher, was taken up in the school:
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3 There were a few teachers who raised concerns about spelling, and so we brought it
4
5 up in a staff meeting. From there the interest started and we supported Melinda [Year
6
7 5 teacher] who then took the lead in the project. (Afia, Lead Teacher)
8

9
10 A leading role was evident amongst two classroom teachers in their 'doing' of attending an
11
12 externally provided professional development event about *Spellright*, which they then worked
13
14 on together themselves, before approaching the Lead Teacher ('Afia') within the school to
15
16 work with them. At the same time, these classroom teachers were supported, mentored and
17
18 provided time and space by teachers in middle-management roles (Lead Teacher (Afia); ESL
19
20 Teacher ('Celine')) as they cultivated their interest in this program. The 'doing' of leading
21
22 learning was evident in the two teachers' efforts to mentor their colleagues, as well as in the
23
24 Lead and ESL teachers providing them with the flexibility to do so (including classroom
25
26 release, organising meeting times and observation sheets):
27
28

29
30 Afia: Melinda mentored both Fanella and Georgia, and Rebecca mentored David. So,
31
32 there are lots of observations, and I'd release teachers and they'd go observe each
33
34 other and-
35

36
37 Celine: See, they really, pretty much ran it.
38

39
40 Afia: And my role in leading was not to run the program but to give them space, and
41
42 to give them time. So, I'd release them too, so that they could go and observe each
43
44 other, and we would meet ...
45

46
47 Celine: And then, we just organised to meet and they'd all talk about it, and then
48
49 they'd go off and do something else, but we weren't directly involved in – no.
50

51
52 Afia: No, they did it themselves. I mean, we'd provide them with observation sheets
53
54 and then we'd ask them to feed back to each other and, yeah, but they pretty much did
55
56 it all themselves.
57
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59
60

1
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3 The sentiment here that ‘they pretty much did it all themselves’ belies new forms of
4
5 productive ‘relatings’ between the classroom teachers and middle-leaders (see also
6
7 Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2014) which enabled the ‘doing’ of these
8
9 teachers taking a lead in their own learning (including space to meet to discuss their work
10
11 (‘sayings’)) and that of others. In this case, the ‘doing’ of learning as a form of leading was
12
13 genuinely shared by the two teachers concerned.
14
15

16 Finally, leading as fostering and sharing learning was evident in teachers’ support of one
17
18 another’s learning in relation to the *Approaching Reading* program, an initiative designed to
19
20 develop teachers’ capacity to help students to ‘read for learning’ (Mandy, Year 6 teacher).
21
22 The results of learning about this program were clearly evident in the confident way a teacher
23
24 in only her second year of teaching described the initiative:
25
26

27 The unit of work that we’re doing is on Australian Aboriginal history, and the kids
28
29 have to choose a famous Indigenous person to write a biography about. So the
30
31 *Approaching Reading* actually goes through the process of discussing the structure of
32
33 a biography, and then we read the biography. They have to then take notes, so we
34
35 highlight the key words in the biography. And then from there we write the notes
36
37 together on the board. From the notes then they can write their biography, a
38
39 biography in their own words using the notes. So yes, early stages; so that’s the first
40
41 time for a lot of the kids in that class, that they’ve taken part in that. So it was a, yes,
42
43 first one. (Mandy, Year 6 Teacher)
44
45
46

47 Once she had mastered the program, this teacher engaged in the ‘doing’ of leading this
48
49 initiative alongside a more experienced senior teacher with a Year 3 class, and the ESL
50
51 coordinator; these more experienced colleagues enabled her grow and develop into a leader,
52
53 perhaps akin to more democratic notions of ‘transformational leadership’ (cf. Bass & Riggio,
54
55 2006). This work was enabled through the ‘doing’ of deliberately establishing a team with a
56
57
58
59
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1
2
3 relatively junior staff member working alongside a senior staff member. In her journey of
4
5 facilitating others' learning, the group provided a key source of learning for this less
6
7 experienced teacher, just as her work constituted a form of teacher leading for developing and
8
9 sustaining effective teaching practice (Berg *et al.*, 2012).
10

11 The leading-for-learning was perhaps most apparent in the way this group not only
12
13 undertook specific training and professional development with external providers (over six
14
15 days off-site), but took responsibility to facilitate the professional development for the
16
17 program across the school. This was done through focused seminars presented by members of
18
19 the group, team teaching, in-class observations, and collegial coaching. We observed a class
20
21 where a more experienced Year 6 teacher ('Corina') had clearly benefited from the 'doing' of
22
23 having Mandy collaborate with her about the *Approaching Reading* program, and which they
24
25 prepared together and co-taught:
26
27
28

29 So *Approaching Reading* is something that Mandy learnt about last year, and is
30
31 continuing to learn about this year. And so I wasn't learning about it last year – that
32
33 was Mandy and a few other teachers ['Belinda' and Celine]. This year, Mandy is
34
35 coaching me in how to implement that strategy. And actually, that was my first time
36
37 using it [the lesson observed]. It's great, and it seems that you're doing comprehension
38
39 as well as spelling, as well as sentence structure, all in the one lesson. (Corina, Year 6
40
41 Teacher; post-observation interview)
42
43
44

45 In this way, specific 'sayings' involving discussions between members of the team
46
47 responsible for developing teachers' understandings of the *Approaching Reading* program
48
49 enabled further 'sayings' and 'doings' between the less experienced teacher and her Year 6
50
51 colleague, which clearly had beneficial effects for the teaching practices of the more
52
53 experienced teacher. And the 'doing' of learning about the program was enabled by new
54
55 forms of 'relatings' between members of the orchestrating group (and teachers in the school
56
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1
2
3 as a whole) which did not dismiss the contribution of a relatively new teacher, but instead
4
5 actively nurtured her learning. In this way, involvement of teachers with this program
6
7 enabled the ‘doing’ of new forms of leadership-for-learning, and the cultivation of a school
8
9 staff culture accepting that all would ‘lead’ at some point, in some area – a form of
10
11 ‘leadership dispersal’ (Lingard *et al.*, 2003), but oriented towards the needs of these students
12
13 in this school. This was dependent upon the development of new forms of
14
15 relationships/’relatings’ which ensured that the teachers were willing and able to commit to
16
17 and support the learning of others, just as they would be supported by others, regardless of
18
19 positional status or length of service.
20
21

22 **Discussion: The Particularity of Praxis of Educational Leadership Practices**

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24
25
26 The research provides helpful and important insights into the nature of the leading
27
28 practices associated with recognising and valuing school culture, history, context, staff
29
30 interactions and approaches to teachers’ learning cultivated within a school serving one of the
31
32 most marginalised communities in Australia. Such practices also differ from those which
33
34 exist in many schools. However, what is important to highlight here is the particularity of the
35
36 nature of these leading practices for praxis: the specific ‘doings’, ‘sayings’ and ‘relatings’
37
38 which characterised these practices to enhance learning for these students. These doings,
39
40 sayings and relatings characterised both formal administrators’ and teachers’ leadership
41
42 practices, shedding light on the specificity of actual leading practices for praxis (Kemmis, *et*
43
44 *al.*, 2014).
45
46
47

48 The way in which the principal valued and validated the context and history of the school
49
50 from her arrival at Southwood is clearly an important part of the leading practices which
51
52 transpired. The ‘doing’ of engaging sensitively and positively with students, parents and
53
54 members of the wider community in formal (e.g. the reception interviews) and informal
55
56 settings (e.g. when the carcasses were delivered to the school) enabled forms of ‘relating’
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1
2
3 which valued and validated people's experiences, even as the principal and other members of
4 the school community may have struggled to understand such experiences. The 'sayings'
5 which occurred within these settings (e.g. interviews, and within the community at large)
6 were respectful of the needs, issues and concerns with which many of the students and
7 parents had to grapple, and sometimes entailed 'talking up' the school and community even if
8 others beyond the community had little understanding of it, or were prejudiced by negative
9 perceptions (cf. Riddle & Cleaver, 2013). Such responses constitute a form of educational
10 praxis as the principal and other members of the community sought to productively change
11 both the individual circumstances for themselves, their students and community, and the very
12 conditions within which they undertook their work (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014; Kemmis & Smith,
13 2008).

14
15
16 While the principal, deputy and middle-managers, in their formal roles, had the capacity
17 to 'control' what occurred within the school, much of their work seemed oriented towards
18 creating conditions for practice – practice architectures – which enabled teachers to engage
19 more fully in the life of the school (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014; Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008).
20 There was evidence of more 'distributed' (Bush, 2014; Spillane, 2006) or 'dispersed'
21 (Lingard, *et al.*, 2003) leading practices within the school, but oriented towards the needs of
22 these teachers and students at this school. And this was a multi-faceted process. This was
23 perhaps most evident in the apparent 'distribution' of leading practices (Bush, 2014; Spillane,
24 2006) associated with the establishment of the leadership group. However, this didn't just
25 'come about' but entailed the principal openly acknowledging that the burdens of leading
26 were too much for one person to take on, and realising that to be effective, leading needed to
27 be a shared enterprise. It was her support – doing – of establishing the leadership group – a
28 'hybridised configuration' of leadership (Gronn, 2011) beyond that of the 'great leader'
29 (Burns, 1978) – which enabled new forms of relationships/relating to be become fostered for
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3 more democratic practice, in this school site. This was openly acknowledged by the deputy
4 principal, but also by the teachers themselves.
5
6

7
8 These specific practices associated with the dispersal of leading were also clearly evident
9 in the way in which classroom teachers took a lead in facilitating teachers' learning.
10 However, again, these practices only make sense in terms of the specificity of their enactment
11 to improve learning opportunities for these teachers to better effect learning for their students.
12 The initial 'doing' of learning about the *Spellright* and *Approaching Reading* programmes
13 entailed ongoing 'sayings' between classroom teachers who also participated in external
14 professional development events. In relation to the *Approaching Reading* program in
15 particular, these initial 'doings' and 'relatings' with one another enabled much more
16 substantive leading practices on teachers' part as they engaged in the 'doing' of acting as
17 conduits for the learning of their colleagues; such relating is of a piece with what Eacott
18 (2015) refers to as enacting educational leadership 'relationally' – in ways which foreground
19 the continuous associations and relationships which inform practices of leading through time
20 and space. That this was successful was evident in the new forms of 'relatings' which saw
21 less experienced teachers valued by more experienced colleagues as part of this process, as
22 they engaged in a teacher learning initiative focused upon student learning (Frost & Durrant,
23 2003). In this way, these teachers were instrumental in fostering new practice architectures
24 which enabled a form of collaborative professional conduct which had beneficial outcomes
25 not only for the individual teachers involved (the two teachers who attended the initial
26 workshop), but also for their colleagues who benefited from the opportunity to learn from
27 them about this initiative, and their students. Again, and in spite of the challenges of fostering
28 such a praxis-oriented disposition more broadly (MacIntyre, 2007), a morally informed and
29 committed stance on the part of all teachers enabled changed conditions for the
30 practice/praxis of dispersed leading. Through the 'doing' of working collaboratively with
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3 teachers here, and acknowledging the strengths and roles of others in the staff community,
4
5 new ways of learning/relating – indeed new ways of ‘being’ a teacher – emerged.
6

7
8 The research also reveals that while some teachers had positional authority as part of this
9
10 process – most obviously the Lead teacher and ESL teacher – they did not assert their right to
11
12 lead from the front and necessarily control their colleagues’ work and learning. They did not
13
14 talk about their leading (sayings) using the language of control and directing. And in their
15
16 ‘doings’, they were able to undertake supportive roles, which ensured productive/trusting
17
18 ‘relatings’ with their colleagues. Just as the two classroom teachers involved in the
19
20 *Approaching Reading* program were engaged in learning how to take a lead in developing
21
22 their colleagues’ practice – to act as teachers as leaders (Muijis & Harris, 2006) – through
23
24 their ‘doings’ of fostering their colleagues’ leading and learning practices, teachers in formal
25
26 middle-management roles (Lead teacher; ESL teacher) learnt to provide the conditions for
27
28 new forms of leading by genuinely facilitating their colleagues’ capacities. Again, the
29
30 conditions for cultivating a praxis disposition were clearly evident in the way in which
31
32 younger, less experienced teachers were actively nurtured to act as facilitators for the learning
33
34 of more experienced teachers. The ‘doing’ of later practices of shared lesson preparation and
35
36 team-teaching were enabled by earlier ‘doings’ on the part of more experienced teachers to
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38 ‘relate’ and talk (‘sayings’) differently to their colleague by ‘taking a lead’ in nurturing and
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40 developing a newer member of the profession. However, this was not done in the spirit of
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42 some sort of ‘altruistic’ turn towards the individual teacher involved, but was instead part of a
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44 wider web of development of new forms of relationships/relatings which would not only give
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46 this teacher confidence about her new-found learnings, but enable her, in turn, to orchestrate
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48 the learning of others – to develop and sustain effective teaching practices (Berg *et al.*, 2012).
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50 These were particular and specific actions (doings), talk (sayings) and relationship-building
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(relatings), relevant to the needs of these teachers at this time, and which actively took these particularities into account.

Conclusion: Leading Practices for New Times

We are aware that the account of practices presented here may appear overly optimistic, or as lacking a more critical edge. Indeed, the school reported here had more than its fair share of problems as it sought to provide appropriate educational opportunities for the members of its community. However, we would argue that even as the school struggled to provide a productive learning environment for children from poor and displaced backgrounds, it was a site in which new conditions were also being developed and cultivated – new conditions to help bring about new times for these students. But these potentially ‘new times’ cannot arise through broad understandings of the practices which characterise this school as a site of ‘learning’ and ‘leading’, broadly or unproblematically conceptualised. Rather, it is the specific practices oriented towards improving the lives of some of the most marginalised students – in this case, practices grounded in: understandings of context and history of the school; efforts to establish a leadership team across the school responsive to these needs, and; to nurture teacher learning for all to attain such ends – which were imperative for understanding the ‘leading’ practices at play in this specific site.

The particular ‘doings’, ‘sayings’ and ‘relatings’ associated with the principal’s understanding of the context and history of the school, the establishment of the leadership group to address disadvantage, and the cultivation of active, inclusive teacher learning for improved student learning, were critical elements of actual leading practices in a complex cultural context (cf. Hajisoteriou, 2014). Such particularity helps to ‘bring to life’, to make sense of, these practices – including in ways which seek to extend beyond current and more traditional conceptions of ‘leadership’. In this way, the research suggests an understanding of leading practices as not simply associated with formal and informal positions in schools,

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3 school structures and teachers' learning more broadly, but leading practices as grounded in
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5 the actual *doings, sayings, and relatings* which characterise efforts to improve learning for
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7 the most disadvantaged students in society in specific schools/sites, and the conditions for
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9 such practice.
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