Leading as practice

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In this paper, we examine how the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political conditions for transformed practices in schools can be created by reshaping the arrangements amidst which educators practise. Drawing on case studies of New South Wales and South East Queensland primary schools, conducted as part of a larger Australian Research Council study of ecological connections between leading and professional learning, we focus on leading as a practice, rather than as series of traits or capabilities invested in sovereign individuals. Our focus on practices is not to eschew the important work that is undertaken by principals and other formal leaders. Rather, by using the verb ‘leading’ we draw attention to the situated knowledge and situated action which resides in the work of leading. On this view, ‘leading’ is not a set of practices that is invested solely in the principalship.

We discuss the practice architectures (Kemmis and Grootenboer, 2008) which make possible both formal and informal practices of leading and show how small but highly significant changes in the relations of power embedded in the practices and practice architectures we observed in these primary schools had enabled a richer sense of shared responsibility for leading and learning to be facilitated amongst executive teams, teachers, students and communities.

We conclude that stimulating educational development requires not only the enlightened practices of positional leaders but also a thickening of leading practices throughout the school, and, beyond the school setting, in school districts and among other key stakeholders including the community. This also requires a fundamental shift towards viewing leading practices as situated in an overall project of education development (a social and critical view) rather than school improvement (a technical and managerialist view).