

Introduction

This book was originally intended as the sequel to my earlier publication *The Making of Educational Leaders* (Gronn, 1999b). There I outlined a four-stage leadership career framework and I discussed in detail the first two stages: the initial formation of leaders, and the subsequent accession of those leaders to locations of influence in schools and educational organisations generally. The focus here, by contrast, is on the third of the four stages, incumbency, and what it means to be an educational leader in the new millennium.

The gap in time between the publication of this book and its predecessor has been fortuitous, because three important emerging trends, which are likely to shape the practice of school leadership for the foreseeable future, have come into even sharper focus. The first factor is systemic in origin and part of the wider framework of school policy. It is the increasing reliance by school-system employing authorities on an entirely new means of producing and replenishing cohorts of school leaders. I have labelled this emerging mode of leader formation designer-leadership or, analogous to other design systems, the method of producing leaders according to design specifications. The second is a structural factor which is also externally induced but institutional in its manifestation. This is the increasing reliance of school personnel on qualitatively different modes of work performance. These modes represent a loosening of previously tightly defined and interpreted individual role boundaries, and the exploitation of informal workplace interdependencies in accomplishing tasks. I refer to this phenomenon as distributed practice. The third factor is cultural, and manifests itself both institutionally and systemically. It emanates from a reappraisal and redefinition of those traditional employee commitments which comprise part of what it means to be a good organisational citizen. This factor signals a potential legitimation problem for education systems, and it might loosely be termed an emerging culture of disengagement or abstention in respect of leadership roles. It is manifest most glaringly in the increasing inability of school systems, globally, to recruit senior school-level administrators.

Taken together, the themes of design, distribution and disengagement constitute the three main components of a definitional or architectural framework for school leadership in the sense that, for the foreseeable future, they can be expected to shape much of the new work of educational leaders. 'New', because these factors will provide qualitatively different points of reference for understanding professional practice, compared with the traditional sets of assumptions that have informed the work of previous generations of school leaders. Not only will these factors help determine school leadership practice but, as I hope to show in more detail in Part 1, there are tensions between them. Here is a simple

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illustration of the point. Grace (1995) has drawn attention to the phenomenon of UK principals' work intensification under conditions of local school management. A consequence of intensification, he notes (Grace, 1995, p. 203), is that 'the culture of individual school leadership, as practised by the headteacher, is breaking'. It is partly these intensified pressures, I suggest in Chapter 2, which have resulted in a reliance on distributed forms of work practice in schools. Yet, at the very time that work demands are intensifying, and distributed practices appear to be becoming the norm, governments are adopting leadership accountability measures that bear little connection with distributed practice and are likely to exacerbate intensification. Standardisers, such as the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), as I show in Chapter 1, are invoking a hero paradigm in their leadership designs. A slightly more technical way of putting this is to say that they are relying on neo-trait theories of leadership. Trait theories fell into disrepute amongst commentators during the 1950s but, since the mid-1980s, they have undergone a huge revival. The effect of heroic individualism, however, is to raise the bar of individual school leader performance even higher than it is currently positioned and, as I point out in Chapter 3, it risks making school leader roles even less attractive as career options for teachers. Moreover, such a regime of heightened performance expectations provides those teachers who may be uncertain about the future direction of their careers with additional grounds for disengaging and abstaining from becoming leaders.

Designer-leadership was an idea implicit in the early discussion of leader formation systems in *The Making of Educational Leaders* but it has since become a defining theme for leadership. The significance, but also the flaw, of the idea of leadership by design, as I shall try to show, is captured in Wenger's (1999, p. 229) remark that 'one can design roles, but one cannot design the identities that will be constructed through those roles'. What this statement means is that there are limits to the capacity of a training regime to tightly and precisely mould the consciousness and future behaviour of its products, quite apart from any ethical concerns about the desirability of doing so. On the other hand, while designer-leadership seems to represent a substantial break with the past, one should always tread warily, as historians would readily attest, when asserting the emergence of qualitative breaks, turning points or watersheds in explanations of the development of social systems and institutions. With the resort to leadership by design, however, in the guise of regimes of assessment, accreditation and, in a couple of instances, licensure standards for school leaders, some education systems appear to be changing their leadership development and succession planning trajectories. But what is meant by this idea of trajectories?

From the perspective of social structure, a trajectory represents a relatively stable and enduring period of regular action and activity, or 'an overarching social process that has the character of coercing processes within it, and of preventing those processes from creating combinations that disrupt it' (Abbott, 1997, p. 93). The pre-specified roles to which Wenger draws attention are the products of such institutionalised trajectories. Yet, just as identities differ from roles, so too do personal experiences of trajectories differ. From the point of view of the individual, trajectories are 'interlocked and interdependent sequences of events in

different areas of life' (Abbott, 1997, p. 88). But whichever the level – individual or social structural – trajectories are separated by periods of transition or radical shifts known as turning points. Structurally, however, unless we are concerned with events as extreme as revolutions, transition points rarely amount to abrupt breaks in policy or practice. With these thoughts in mind, the leadership of schools appears to be experiencing one such transition which, if I am right, is likely to spawn an entirely new set of master narratives as the justification for school leadership, in the form of nationally defined design specifications for leaders.

Two common points of reference in the social sciences for positioning one's research and writing are the analytical levels of focus known as the macro and the micro. Partly in reaction to what was referred to in derogatory tones in some quarters as 'grand theory', the 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a hefty swing towards micro-level focused research. This 'turn', as it is sometimes known, was evident in the popularity of methodologies and theoretical approaches such as life history, ethnomethodology, conversational analysis, hermeneutics, interpretivism, case study and so on. More recently, rather than juxtaposing these two levels as alternative analytical standpoints, commentators have been calling for an explicit recognition of their interplay in the construction of interaction orders (e.g., Mouzelis, 1991), while others of a critical realist persuasion (e.g., Archer, 1995; Sayer, 1992; 2000) have been arguing for causal accounts of institutionalised action which acknowledge the dynamic interplay of structure, culture and agency.

The structure and argument of this book is intended to be in keeping with these trends. In Archer's terms, the significance of the architectural factors considered in Part 1 is that they impose constraints on both individual and concertive agency. But, while the reality of their contextual imposition cannot be ignored by the particular situated actors, at the same time such constraints on practice are unlikely be experienced as insuperable. For a start, their impact will vary from school context to school context, for reasons of differences in the amount and quality of pre-existing resources, differences in personnel composition, and differences in the make-up and social capital of the communities served by schools. The impact of design, distribution and disengagement trajectories in particular policy contexts is also likely to vary because of the differing personal dispositions and capacities of the actors. While some organisation members will no doubt feel powerless in the face of what they perceive to be overwhelming external constraints, others, in the pursuit of their interests, will display a flair for ingenuity, improvising, making do or, in the microcosmic circumstances of their practice, devising what Suchman (1995) has termed 'workarounds'. Thus, at the same time as practice may be constrained, it is to some degree enabled and new options for practice are opened up and exploited.

It is the possibility of this dynamism which I have sought to capture in Part 2, and which, in an attempt to bridge the micro and the macro, I have labelled 'the ecology of leadership'. In Chapters 4–7 I have synthesised research into the practice of leadership. I focus on the micro-level details of practice as these articulate with the three identified effects of macro-level policies, because the micro is the point at which policy-required roles and subjectively defined professional identities meet. Here, structure is realised through the acts of agents and, recursively,

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agents have an impact on structure through their words, deeds and emotions. For these reasons, practice represents an accomplishment, the outcome of both the intentions of agents and the unintended consequences of their actions.

In Chapter 4, I consider a number of problems and possibilities in a tradition of field research intended by its proponents to answer a question, roughly worded as: 'What do managers (and leaders) do?' Beginning in the early 1950s, the findings of this work accumulated in a number of countries over the next four decades or so. There were some landmark studies within this tradition, one of which, Mintzberg's (1973) *The Nature of Managerial Work*, has had (and continues to have) a significant impact on research into educational administration and leadership. There were other studies which, in retrospect, as I shall show, merited considerably more attention than they received (e.g., Sayles, 1964). Broadly, this body of work emphasised the tracking or shadowing of senior and mid-level organisational personnel in an attempt to pinpoint the rhythm and flow of their work patterns and routines. Its appeal and promise was that it offered both descriptions and analyses of role performance, rather than the kind of normative theoretical fare which comprises the substance of much leadership and management theory. Unfortunately, this 'work activity' school, as Mintzberg labelled it, failed to live up to its promise. But as I point out, the emerging field of workplace studies has begun to revitalise field research into leadership practices in a way which accommodates the distributed realities of work.

One of the consistent findings in these investigations into the work of leaders and managers has been their strong reliance on talk. As I was able to show in two pioneering studies which helped to develop this area of research in education and beyond (Gronn, 1983; 1985), 'talk is the work'. Subsequently, others (e.g., Boden, 1995) have built on and extended this line of research in other realms of management. Managerial and leadership talk plays an important structuring role. That is, the significance of talk in the structure–agency interplay is that, while providing evidence of social and institutional structure, and being the vehicle for its realisation in practice, talk is simultaneously a means for the potential modification of structure. This claim is consistent with the popular emphasis amongst social theorists, in particular discourse analysts, on 'social construction', except that I eschew the tendency, criticised by Sayer (2000, p. 91), for some social constructionists to maintain that the objects of social reality are solely the artefacts of our discursive practices.

Apart from conversations, the most prevalent manifestation of leadership and management talk occurs in meetings. As Van Vree (1999, p. 278) notes in his historical study of the development of the meeting genre and meeting manners, contemporary organisation members 'seem to be socially fated to meet and to meet again with the same colleagues on set places and at set times to perform similar acts every time'. The two most prominent arenas in which leaders meet to talk are committees and teams, respectively the subjects of Chapters 5 and 6. As mechanisms for work co-ordination and concertive action, committees and teams are vehicles for distributed work practice, although only teams have been theorised from this perspective. The literature on committees, especially, and, to a lesser extent, teams, combines what commentators refer to as 'tool' and 'topic'

material. That is, each of these meeting forms has generated its own 'how to' or advice and improvement publications, on the one hand, and a set of research findings into the constituent properties of each form, which is substantially larger and more recent for teams than for committees, on the other. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss this 'topic', rather than 'tool', literature.

In Chapter 7, I review work on a relatively new dimension of school leadership and managerial practice: emotions. Beatty (2000, p. 333) notes that the emotional effects of leaders' actions 'remain under-explored' and that 'the emotional processes of the leader her/himself remain virtually uncharted territory'. While this observation may be an accurate one for the specific domain of school leadership, it applies less to leadership generally where the passions aroused by charismatic leaders, for example, have been well rehearsed and documented for some time. Further, negotiation of the emotional division of labour between the three hospital executives who formed a role constellation was central to the early work of Hodgson, Levinson and Zaleznik (1965). There is also, of course, extensive writing on feelings and organisational pathologies within some post-Freudian schools of psychoanalysis, and a growing body of material on humour in management. The principal insights from these areas are synthesised in this chapter.

In Chapter 8, I conclude by outlining the rudiments of a grammar of leadership. Here, the theme of work intensification, which recurs throughout the discussion, is focused on the idea of leadership as 'greedy work'. The concept of greedy work builds on Coser's (1974) early study of greedy institutions and is used to characterise the heightened demands and expectations placed on institutional-level leaders. In the late 1980s, Stewart (1989) proposed a particularly helpful and influential template for future research into the work of managers, which is broadly in keeping with the tradition of research considered in Chapter 4. Subsequent developments, such as Archer's (1995) attempt to systematise the duality of agency and structure, and the recent emergence of activity theory (see Engeström, 1999; Engeström and Middleton, 1998), have brought to bear some useful analytical tools for extending Stewart's suggestions to the realm of educational leadership. My argument in Chapter 2 (and again in Chapter 8) will be that the appropriate point of anchorage and departure for understanding the dynamics of leadership has to be the changing division of labour. This stipulation has great significance for the study of leadership where the convention is for commentators to *prescribe* or take for granted a division of labour (i.e., 'leader' and 'followers'), rather than to *describe* actual, contextualised divisions of labour. Sayles's (1964) focus on the idea of the division of labour was one of the great virtues of his pioneering field studies of managers, an emphasis which, curiously, was completely ignored by later writers, but which is the main reason for my earlier assertion that his analysis deserved better recognition. Sayles is the sole writer in management and leadership, in my view, who has accorded the division of labour the pride of place it warrants.

My final point concerns terminology. There has always been, and continues to be, constant confusion in discussions of leadership regarding its connection with management. Briefly, as I have endeavoured to make clear in a number of my

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recent writings, I regard management as work activity encompassed by the duties and responsibilities of organisation managers as determined by the terms and conditions of their employment contracts. Leadership, on the other hand, while it may be part of what managers do, is by no means the whole of it. Nor do managers have a monopoly on leadership, which I take to be a lay label of convenience encompassing emergent actions (verbal, physical, reputed or imagined) that influence the deeds and thoughts of colleagues, for leadership is something which is open to any organisation member. Thus, leaders may be managers and managers may be leaders, but whereas management has a legal contractual basis, the basis of leadership is cognitive and grounded in the mental attributions of workplace peers (for a more detailed discussion of these points see Gronn, 2002b). Despite the force of these distinctions, the reality is that it is well nigh impossible to quarantine discussions of leadership and management from each another, principally because so many practitioners expect their managers to lead. With these points in mind, in my discussion of the work of leadership commentators I adhere mostly to the authors' original usage of terms and clarify, when necessary, whether and in what ways their work applies to both the domains of leadership and management. On the other hand, given the depth and extent of the expectations of leadership held for managers, I sometimes slip into using a compound noun 'leader-managers'.