



Leadership for learning: concepts, principles and practice

‘Leadership and learning are indispensable to one another.’

So said John F. Kennedy in the speech he prepared to give in Dallas on the day of his assassination.

What did he mean and what do we mean when we talk about Leadership for Learning?

Words, words, words

‘Leadership’ is a word in common everyday use and with a multitude of meanings for different people. Its purposes and effects are not always positive, nor does it always serve the interests of those who become, or choose to be, followers. The inherent danger of individual leadership, as we know from history, is that power can corrupt, and that when leaders start to look inward rather than outward to the people around them, they lose their moral compass.

Moral agents [leaders] who should act as exemplars by seeking as much information about situations as they can obtain before they take action and who should also consider the welfare and interests of all who stand to be affected by his/her decision or action. (Schrag, 1979)

Deliberate interventions that require the moral use of power. (Bogotch, 2002)

‘Learning’ too is a commonsense term. It occurs in everyday exchange between parents and children, for example, as in: ‘You will have to learn to do what you’re told’. Although learning is all around us and in every action we take, ‘learning’ is generally associated with what happens in the classroom and is very often simply equated with teaching, or being taught. Yet most of our learning is not the result of teaching.

So common are these two big ideas – leadership and learning - that, without seeing them with new eyes we can take too much for granted and fail to perceive ways in which they interconnect. ‘Insight’ is the term we use to denote an act of taking a new look, a new way of seeing, and a new way of knowing.

We must learn to know what we see rather than seeing what we already know. (Heschel, 1962)

For educators (who come in a variety of shapes and sizes – Directors, circuit supervisors, headteachers, teachers, university and college lecturers, district officials, parents, village chiefs) taking a second look at what we already think, or believe to be true, has two complementary elements – the conceptual and the practical.

The Conceptual may be called ‘thinking outside the box’. It may also be called ‘theory’, which presupposes a willingness to be open to emerging knowledge, to inquire into how children learn, to want to know more about how learning takes shape, from even before conception. What helps and hinders children’s intellectual and emotional growth as they develop? What path does learning take as they progress



through the stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age? What do we know, and what are we still finding out ('learning') about the effects of health, diet, play, exercise, sport and social relationships on the creation of intelligence? 'Intelligence' is a seed that is laid at conception and continues to be shaped and reshaped throughout a lifetime – by ourselves, with a little help from our friends. As the Harvard scholar David Perkins once put it: 'We are the architects of our own intelligence'.

The Practical may be called 'thinking inside the box'. It means recognising and taking note of all the structures and protocols we have created for ourselves and for the children we teach. The buildings, the classrooms, the furniture, the teaching materials, the tests and exams are all put in place to provide a home for children's learning – a place we call 'school'. And it is a privilege and, we hope, a pleasure for children who sometimes travel miles on foot to get an education. But do those structures always serve the purpose for which they were designed? They have been made and they can be re-made.

How can we bring the conceptual knowledge and the practical knowledge closer together? What is there in our carefully designed structures and routines that doesn't really help but, in fact, constrains children's learning? In what way do the formal relationships of schools and classrooms - between adults and children, and among children - actually inhibit not only children's learning but the learning of those who teach and lead them? Why do some children fail to learn well? Why do some teachers stop learning? Why do many children and their teachers stop leading and simply 'learn to do what they are told'?

This is where leadership comes into its own. Leadership is enhanced when it takes account of three simple but profoundly important ideas - which we call Connect, Extend, Challenge.

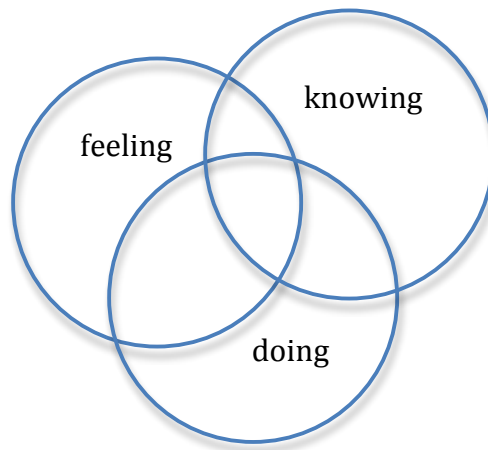
Connect means to begin to try and make the connections between the conceptual and practical. It means seeking out the connections between what we already know about children and adult learning, what we know about professional learning, and about what is called 'organisational learning' which is how an organisation, such as a school, learns. Learning and leadership come together in this constant and ongoing activity of making connections. It is also what the brain does in every waking, and sleeping minute, making connections and 'making sense' – an interesting term when we think about it. As human beings we 'make' sense. And, of course, that is what classrooms are, and should be about – making connections, making sense.

Extend means to go beyond what we already know. It is about making new connections, extending our field of vision to the things that often lie hidden. As educators take part in conferences and workshops they go with an intention of enhancing what they already know. As they take part they move from the known to unknown, enriching not only their knowledge fund but enlarging their repertoire of skills and strategies. These may be the skills of management, of how to deal with the routine and predictable tasks of running a school or district, or the more finely nuanced skills of responding to the unpredictable. What cannot be predicted are the changing relationships, unanticipated events, crises and unexpected opportunities to



make a difference. And it is tested by the ability to take the conceptual matter - the stuff of workshops - into the practical day-to-day of school life, so extending and enriching learning.

Challenge is the less comfortable aspect of leading and learning. It means looking again at what we think, or what we think we know. It means looking again at what we feel and why we feel it. It means taking a fresh look at what we do and asking ourselves why we do it. These are the three aspects of leading and learning which may be represented by overlapping circles because what we **do** in the busy demands of school life is very often invested with **feeling**. What we **think** (or '**know**') both guides, and is a response to, what we do; and our feelings about opportunities and challenges are always there in the background or in the very forefront to our thinking and acting. It may be said that how leaders respond to the challenge is the true and best measure of leadership.



Who leads?

Much of our focus is on the headteacher – the gatekeeper of what happens in a school, leading others within his or her realm of influence but also accountable to others beyond, as well as within, the school. His or her leadership and his or her accountability requires an ability to connect, extend and challenge. It requires a developing self knowledge and an ability to reflect on actions taken as well as those about to be taken. It requires being in touch with one's feelings and a recognition of the extent to which emotions can guide, but also confuse, actions taken.

Leadership and learning are indispensable to one another

However, everything that is said about leadership and learning is not the sole province of the 'big leader'. Being a professional, being a teacher, means recognising that teaching is above all an emotional business and that all of what teachers do in a classroom is infused with knowing and feeling. But above all, knowing and feeling are not static. They change and evolve. Teaching, therefore, means being able to connect to what is already known and connecting to what children know and bring with them into the classroom – prior knowledge, prior feelings, prior skills and expertise. As professionals holding one of the most responsible jobs in a nation's welfare teachers also have to extend their knowledge and their repertoire of skills.



And as they become better and more skilful practitioners they have a moral and professional obligation to challenge their practice and to be open to challenge. Good teachers are learners and they are leaders, not only in their own classroom but in relation to their colleagues and their communities.

Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee: for this thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone.
(Advice to Moses, Exodus 18 v. 21)

For teachers too leading and learning brings accountability. It is both 'external' (to district, region, Ministry and parents) and 'internal' – to the headteacher, colleagues and the children entrusted to one's care. It is complex and demanding to have to account for what is taught, and more importantly what is learned, but it is highly satisfying when there is a good story to tell about children's progress in their learning.

The 'good story' is one in which we recognise that children's learning is also founded on the trinity of connect-extend-challenge. Effective teaching honours and observes these three precepts. Whether it is adding two and two to make four or making connections between spoken sounds and printed words, learning works best when it builds on, connects to, what children already know, from their home and community life, from the intuitive abilities they are born with. For example, babies as young as one or two years old 'know' that two and two make four, and they can make two things into four, and subtract two things from four to leave two, but they haven't yet acquired the symbolic form in which to express those ideas. Teaching, therefore, is about extending their repertoire of skills and challenging them, to think, and not simply to respond to what they are told, or simply give answers to a closed question around which there is no room for debate or creativity.

For children, knowing, feeling and doing are especially powerful. Pupils freeze when the challenge is too high and they withdraw when they face embarrassment or ridicule. They get bored when the challenge is too low and they enjoy a challenge when it brings their natural curiosity and innate desire to learn to the fore. They learn best when they are active, when they have opportunities to talk and discuss a problem and how to solve it, when they are freed from the tyranny of the right answer.

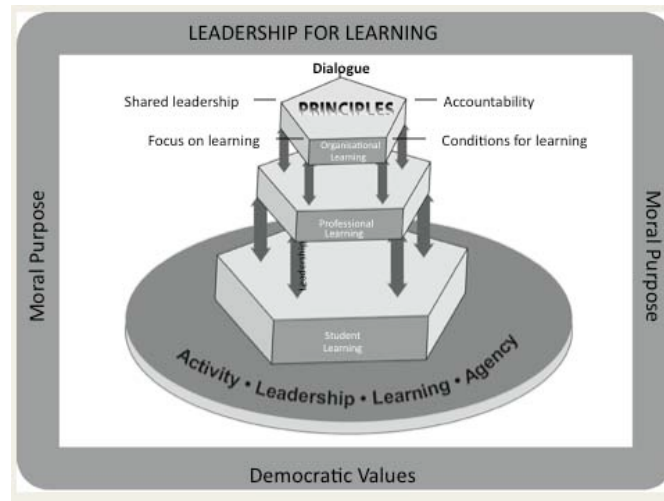
And like everyone else children are accountable. We expect them to be accountable for their behaviour, for their attention to the task at hand, for the respect they give to their peers and to their teachers, for the privilege of learning. At the same time, as with teachers and headteachers it is unfair and demoralising to be held accountable for things which are not within your own discretion, over which you have no control.

There is an important principle which should guide relationships at every level with a school and beyond. It is the principle of reciprocity, also known as the first moral imperative 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'.

A wedding cake

We have tried to capture these complex ideas with a diagram. It is one not of our making but one that has evolved from work with teachers, headteachers, school

boards and other ‘stakeholders’ in a number of countries including Ghana. We have tested and refined it on the basis of discussions, workshops and school visits and we hope it will continue to evolve and grow deeper as we continue on this collaborative learning journey.



The outer frame is a reminder that all leadership in education stems from a moral purpose. Like democratic values these are open to debate but come back to the reciprocity principle which is about respect for people of whatever age. It holds that the power and authority given to us carries with it an accountability for how we use it, not to our own personal benefit but for the benefit of others.

The base on which the three tier model (or ‘wedding cake’) sits carries the four key words – *agency*, *leadership*, *learning*, and *activity*. The two words ‘leadership’ and ‘learning’ sit between two important but complex ideas – ‘agency’ and ‘activity’.

Agency refers to something which all human beings share – the ability and indeed the need, to be an active ‘agent’ on the environment you find yourself in. We could simply let the environment act on us and, like a vessel adrift at sea, allow it to push us around, helpless to do anything for ourselves. Agency means being proactive, taking the initiative. One can stand on a river bank and watch someone drown or, one can exercise agency and jump in to save the drowning person. Or one can marshal all the onlookers to work together to take joint action. This is an act of agency and an act of leadership. It is leadership as activity.

Activity refers, in the above example to something done, without reference to status or position. It may be an adult or a child, a man or woman, a boy or girl who takes the lead, who influences and directs others. In a school context the scope for leadership activity is immense. When we see leadership in an activity, however large or however small, we begin to connect with the idea and extend its scope. So, for example, when a pupil, without being asked, takes the initiative to help another pupil, it is a small but significant act of leadership. When a teacher, unbidden, gives advice, counselling or support to a young inexperienced colleague it is an act of leadership.



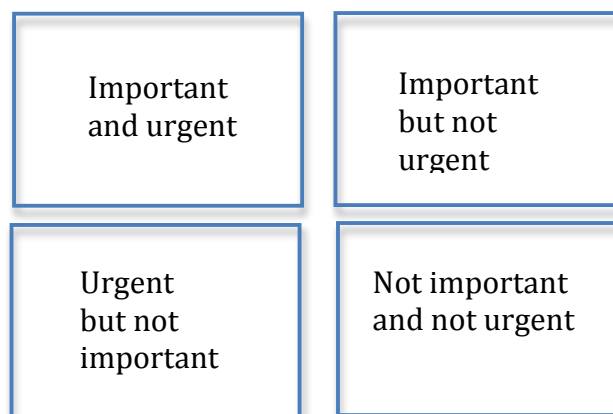
The three tier ‘wedding cake’ rests on this foundation. It can only be truly made sense of within the values which frame it and the four key ideas on which it is based. Its three tiers represent different levels and forms of learning and the interconnections between them. So, student (or pupil) learning is not simply a matter of what happens in the classroom but depends on, and is closely related to, professional learning. This raises the question – How can pupils learn well if their teachers don’t see themselves as learners or aren’t continuously open to extending and challenging their work? And how can teachers learn well if the school isn’t a learning organisation, in other words a place which is constantly making the connections at all three levels, challenging itself to do better and extending the skills of all its members?

The topping on the wedding cake are the five LfL principles, created during an international project financed by the Carpe Vitam Foundation in Sweden. They have been further applied and developed in Ghana.

These five principles reach down and permeate all three layers. All apply to student learning, professional learning and organisational learning.

1. A focus on learning

The first principle is ‘a focus on learning’. The two key words are ‘focus’ and ‘learning’. To focus means to pay close attention to, to select what is important and to keep it in the foreground. Those who exercise leadership have at times to pay attention to things other than learning. Managing a school requires attention to a host of priorities and it is easy to be distracted by constant demands and other peoples’ urgencies. However, while a focus on learning always remains in the background of thinking, whenever possible it has to be brought into the foreground. It comes into the foreground when leadership is able to discriminate between the important and the urgent and knows where the priorities lie.

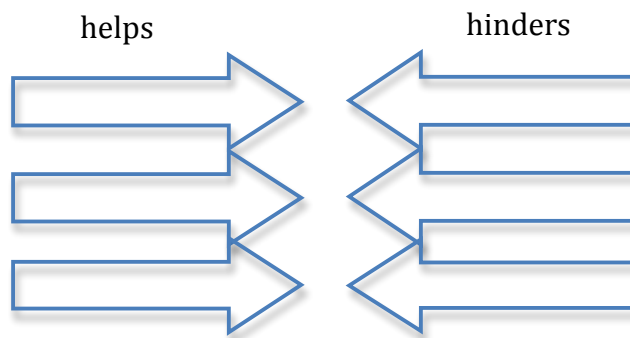


2. Conditions for learning

How can you focus on learning when conditions are so bad that simply getting children, and teachers to school is both urgent and important? How can you focus on learning when the priority is to find and manage accommodation, space, resources and contingencies of food, health, weather, and respond to unexpected crises? How

can you focus on learning when you have a hundred or more children in a class? How can you focus on learning when many teaching staff have little background knowledge of pedagogy?

The physical conditions for learning vary widely in Ghanaian schools, in cities suburbs, villages and rural areas. Demands, expectations and resourcing also vary widely. The principle, however, remains the same. Leadership in every circumstance has to try to optimise the physical, social and emotional conditions which hinder learning, and has to try and seek out the ‘wobble room’ for creating a greater learning focus. In this respect the force field tool can be used to analyse what helps and hinders and what may be possible.



3. Dialogue

The force field can be used by any individual to think through the forces acting against you and the assets you have, or the potential assets still unexploited. Even in the most dire of circumstances the best resources are likely to be people. The force field comes into its own as a tool, a ‘tin opener’ for opening up the dialogue, for extending and challenging the status quo, for trying to think ‘outside the box’. It may reveal the hidden resources of staff or of children which have remained untapped and uncelebrated.

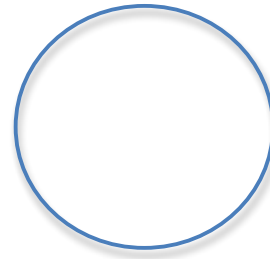
Your school is a place for children to learn. If they do not learn much, you have not fulfilled your first priority. How can you, as headteacher, make sure that the children in your school are learning something new every day?
(Headteachers’ Handbook, Ghana Education Service)

4. Shared leadership

When there is a dialogue around the need to ensure that children are learning something new every day learning can become the first priority. When there is dialogue around securing resources and managing change, the capacity for hidden leadership can come to the fore. ‘This thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone’. It is said that a burden shared is a burden halved. It is also said that 1 and 1 can make 3, that is, my idea and your idea when put together can produce a third idea which neither of us had thought of. Another popular saying which strikes the same note - ‘All of us is better than one of us’ – is a more folksy way of describing the technical term ‘synergy’ which means ‘energy with’. Ghanaian leaders expend a lot of energy sometimes just to stand still but can replenish and even gain energy through working collaboratively with trusted others.



5. Here is a pie. It can be divided into three quadrants to represent the balance of three decision-making processes in your school, district office or circuit supervision. What percentage of those decisions are Command, Consultation, or Consensus?



Shared accountability

When leadership is shared so is accountability. Those in leadership positions (‘where the buck stops’ as Harry Truman said) are, in some sense, accountable for every action taken, every decision made. Nine times out of ten decisions are never explained or accounted for as that would paralyse initiatives whether in the headteacher’s office, the teacher’s classroom, the regional headquarters or the Ministry. But where there is an ongoing dialogue and when there is shared leadership, decisions can be reviewed in retrospect and discussed in prospect, so that what one is accountable for, and to whom, and in what way is open to discussion. This strengthens a sense of ownership of staff, creates a feeling of reciprocity and is in itself an important source of professional development.

Putting the pieces together

The wedding cake model, however unlike a wedding cake it may be, is an attempt to put all the pieces, principles and precepts together into one coherent model in which everything relates to, interlocks with and depends on everything else. Like a jigsaw it will always be incomplete and tantalising if there is a missing piece. We believe, on the basis of our feedback from Headteachers/ School Transformational Leaders, Circuit Supervisors and Professional Development Leaders, that often in the most challenging of circumstances all the pieces are being put together.

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