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**The leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) movement: Transforming education research through applying an emerging frontier to teacher collaborative inquiry research**

(this is a paper-in-progress and the author welcomes any developmental feedback)

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**Abstract:**

A new frontier of understanding leadership is emerging in the broad field of leadership studies known as the leadership-as-practice movement. Rather than assume leadership resides in the specific behaviours and traits of individuals as a precursor to action, L-A-P repositions leadership as a consequence of collective action. It decentralises leadership from individuals and positions it as a phenomenon that takes place as work is done. It goes beyond and still includes a focus on relations, as emphasised in the knowledge stream known as relational leadership, to also include non-human elements that are integral to patterns of action. L-A-P is also allied to shared and distributed leadership due to leadership being viewed beyond individual embodiment, as emphasised in leader-centric conceptualisations. The education field has been one of the busier arenas for shared and distributed leadership research over the last two decades. Much of the application of this research has tended to focus on how individuals (particularly those higher up the organisation's structure) distribute leadership (or what I would argue is more work and sometimes responsibility) to others, rather than focus on day-to-day practice as emphasised in L-A-P.

This paper applies some of the emerging principles of L-A-P to a research study that did not intentionally start out with a L-A-P informed ontology or methodology in mind. The study centres on the activities of principals, deputy principals, team facilitators and teachers over a year, where they sought to establish collaborative inquiry projects in their schools. Ten schools participated in this project where I had a dual role as a professional learning facilitator and researcher along with some colleagues. L-A-P informs the units of analysis to understand the data patterns emerging from a teacher survey across all ten schools, three case study schools and personal experiences from professional learning activities. This has meant the starting place to understanding the data and findings has not uncritically defaulted to assuming leadership practice is dependent on one individual rallying everyone else. Rather, the focus is on collective activity, both that which appears orderly and at other times emergent. My quest is to see if we can better understand practice often labelled as leadership without needing to fall

back to the unchecked use of a leader-centric ontology. It is here where the new frontier being created by L-A-P in the broader leadership field could bring transformation to how we carry out educational leadership research.

### **Introduction: Why question leadership?**

Leadership appears to be ever present. It is positioned, often unquestionably, as the key enabler of change, the driver for improving outcomes, and when deemed to be absent or ineffective, a reason for failure. Leadership development is now a global billion-dollar industry, so there are economic reasons for it to remain popular. It is described in many forms through the addition of a preceding adjective, such as transformational, situational, or distributed in the leadership studies field and can be broken down further when used in a bounded field of knowledge such as education (for example, educational leadership, instructional leadership, learner-centred leadership). Often the call is for more leadership, strong leadership, leadership that provides direction and vision, particularly in relation to organisational performance. There is a demand for this call, particularly when organisations are situated in performative policy contexts that can over-emphasise the measurement of outcomes shaped by principles of New Public Management (NPM). These principles focus on efficiency, effectiveness and being economical with resources. In education, the expectation for more effective leadership is also multiplied due to the human and relation based nature of activity in educational organisations. The focus on learning, beyond narrow measurement mechanisms as well as prioritising human relations and care that contribute to the conditions of learning in democratic and culturally responsive ways, also contribute to the expectation of leadership to shape and maintain these foci.

In response to this there are a range of positions a person can take. At one end the leadership development industry and research that supports it carry on without question. At the other end is the questioning of leadership where a variety responses can be articulated (for example, Lakomski, Eacott, & Evers, 2017). This paper is situated in this questioning space, though does not advocate for a rejection of leadership, rather it questions the reification of leadership and those labelled by others as leaders and the limitations this brings to understanding day-to-day activity in organisations. This reification tends to be associated with leadership being restrictively conceptualised and institutionalised with certain individuals who are deemed to possess suitable traits, behaviours in prescribed organisational roles. Leadership is viewed as being embodied in individuals and so ontologically becomes based on leader, followers and reaching organisational goals. There is an assumption that leadership in this embodied human form must precede activity where activity deemed to be leadership is dependent on having individuals with certain traits and behaviours. This is known as the leader-centric approach to understanding leadership and still informs most of the leadership theorising and research that takes place in the leadership studies field (Dinh et al., 2014). As an alternative, leadership-as-practice decentres leadership away from individuals and places the focus on practices. Ontologically, leadership is viewed as emerging from practices as well as being in the flow of practices as they occur (Raelin, 2016b; Simpson, 2016). This decentring goes further than distributed leadership, which can still rely on a leader-centric ontology.

### **From distributed leadership to leadership-as-practice**

Distributed leadership and its cousin, shared leadership, are generally seen as an alternative and a shift away from leader-centrism and one that is evident across the leadership studies field (Grint, 2011). In education, attention came to this distributed alternative as being usually attributed to the theorising work of Gronn (2002) and Spillane and his colleagues (2004). Even though both worked independently from each other, the underlying shift they argued for was a change to the unit of analysis, one from leader-centric to one that provided a distributed perspective. Contrary to some understandings of distributed leadership, neither advocated for more leadership, nor for its wider distribution; instead a distributed perspective encouraged our understandings of leadership to go beyond institutional leadership roles to

also encapsulate more emergent and practice based forms that could be situated anywhere across an organisation and in the midst of interdependencies. There was one clear distinction between the two; Spillane and his colleagues relied on an ontology of leader, followers and practice, whereas Gronn questioned the reliance on leaders and followers. The former could be seen as still drawing on a leader-centric ontology, though Spillane and his colleagues were careful to argue the interchangeability of leaders and followers. Nevertheless, both writers sought to see a shift to understanding leadership that was more embedded in activity and practice, rather than roles and individuals.

When attention is given to the practices in an organisation, distributed leadership as a unitary concept starts to unravel. There are numerous critiques in the field of education where it under-emphasises: power (Hatcher, 2005; Lumby, 2013); politics (Flessa, 2009; Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006); policy capture (Gunter, Hall, & Bragg, 2013; Youngs, 2009), and the various forms it can take in day-to-day practice (Youngs, 2014). Despite this, and also in acknowledgement of these issues, distributed leadership is acknowledged as a means for understanding practice and bringing improvement (Harris, 2014). Distributed leadership can still be reliant on a leader-centric ontology despite the wider gaze it brings to understanding practice across an organisation. As a unitary concept it cannot contain all of the differing forms it may take, so a shift to distributed forms of leadership may take us closer to what is occurring in organisations (see Youngs, 2014). It is in this quest to better understand practice, where the leadership-as-practice movement (Raelin, 2016b) may provide a fuller alternative to a leader-centric ontology compared to distributed leadership which can still rely on this centrism.

Leadership-as-practice is recognised as an emerging movement in the leadership studies field that decentres leadership from individuals (Raelin, 2016b) and may help address the concern of a lack of focus on practice in the leadership studies field (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014). Crevani and Endrissat (2016) by drawing on other related literature, argue that the leadership component in leadership-as-practice “is about producing direction for organising processes (Crevani, 2011; Packendorff, Crevani & Lindgren, 2014), re-orientation of the flow of practice (Simpson, 2016), and emergent co-construction through collaborative agency (Raelin, 2014)” (p.23). This way of viewing leadership disrupts the more traditional leader-centric views that pervade most leadership research and leadership development programmes, “because it does not rely on the attributes of individuals, nor does it focus on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers” (Raelin, 2016b, p.3). Raelin (2016a) also contends that “leadership occurs collectively amongst us in the moment and over time” (p.128). It is when the practice aspect of leadership-as-practice is employed that an ontological shift may take place so leadership is decentred from its centralised constructions.

Practice theory and practice studies have been evident for a period of time and have undergone increased interest with organisation studies (Blackler & Regan, 2009; Nicolini, 2012) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). In a practice-based approach the units of analysis switch from practitioners to understanding practices (Nicolini, 2012). There is no one definition of practice, though some writers do distinguish between practices and practice. Both Raelin (2016b) and Crevani and Endrissat (2016) cite the work of Pickering (1995), where practices are associated to activity sequences that can be recurring and practice refers emerging dynamics that unfold over time. Furthermore, practice is constituted by “slow, longitudinal processes of coming to be” (Bjorkeng, Clegg, & Pitsis, 2009, p.147). Practice-based approaches, though few and far between, have been employed with educational leadership studies as discussed earlier in this paper. Recently, Wilkinson and Kemmis (2015) employed a practice-based approach for their case studies of four primary schools, where they replaced leadership with the verb, leading, so that attention shifted from the leader-centric and role-based approach to understanding leadership to the “practices that constitute leading” (p.346). Leading did not sit above other practices, but rather alongside others such as teaching and learning in an orchestrating manner as either an enabler or restraint. To this they employed practice architectures consisting of: cultural-discursive; material-economic; and, socio-political. One common aspect evident in a practice-based approach to

understanding organisations, or perhaps the more appropriate term to use is organising, is the recognition of non-human elements beyond being limited to the context and how also they shape practices and practice.

### **The research and PLD design**

The application of a practice-based approach can be methodologically sophisticated so that pre-fixed categories of leader, follower and goals are not intentionally drawn on (Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008). Kempster, Parry, and Jackson (2016) argue that researchers employing a practice-based approach must make the ontological position of their work very clear. For the research study discussed in this article, the research design did not originally set out with an explicit leadership-as-practice approach in mind, though it was informed by a collective perspective of leading rather than assume leadership was the property of individuals. The practice-based approach to interpreting the research findings and informing our facilitation of professional learning and development sessions with principals, deputy principals, heads of departments, deans or syndicate heads, and those who spend the majority of their working week in classrooms has emerged through the accumulation of practices such as:

- Designing each session based on previous accounts of emerging practices and established practice across a network of ten schools;
- Giving attention to practices rather than individuals, emerging in the data from a questionnaire completed by 155 participants; and,
- Searching for the establishment of practice over a period of time based on reports of practices provided via focus groups in three case study schools in the network.

The network is a voluntary one, where ten schools in one region of Auckland have chosen to come together to focus on collaborative inquiry approaches to practice. At the time of writing this network has been in operation for three years and the data collected in the research study were collected in the second year of operation. Professional learning and development in 2015 occurred through two formats. Eight afternoon sessions spread throughout the year focused on teachers and their collaborative inquiries into their practice and student learning. In addition to this, eight breakfast sessions were provided for principals, deputy principals, and heads of departments, deans or syndicate heads with a focus on the conditions for teacher collaborative inquiry. During the morning sessions, attention was given to the articulation of practices and language from the practitioners and so shaped subsequent sessions.

As an example, practitioners identified what practices were assisting teachers establish collaborative inquiries. These were completed in their school groups on sticky-notes and attached to a whiteboard. As they were attached, practitioners sought to group their responses where there were connections. At a later date, these connections were then rewritten in the form illustrated in figure one, capturing word-for-word the sticky-note responses from the practitioners. On the left hand side, the responses tended to emphasise a socio-cultural aspect of practice, whereas the right hand side emphasised more of the structure and systems dimension of practice. These two aspects then informed the approach for the remainder of the professional learning and development through the year. It surfaced the leadership practices taking place in line with a leadership-as-practice development approach (Denyer & Turnbull James, 2016) without reifying a leader-follower ontology.

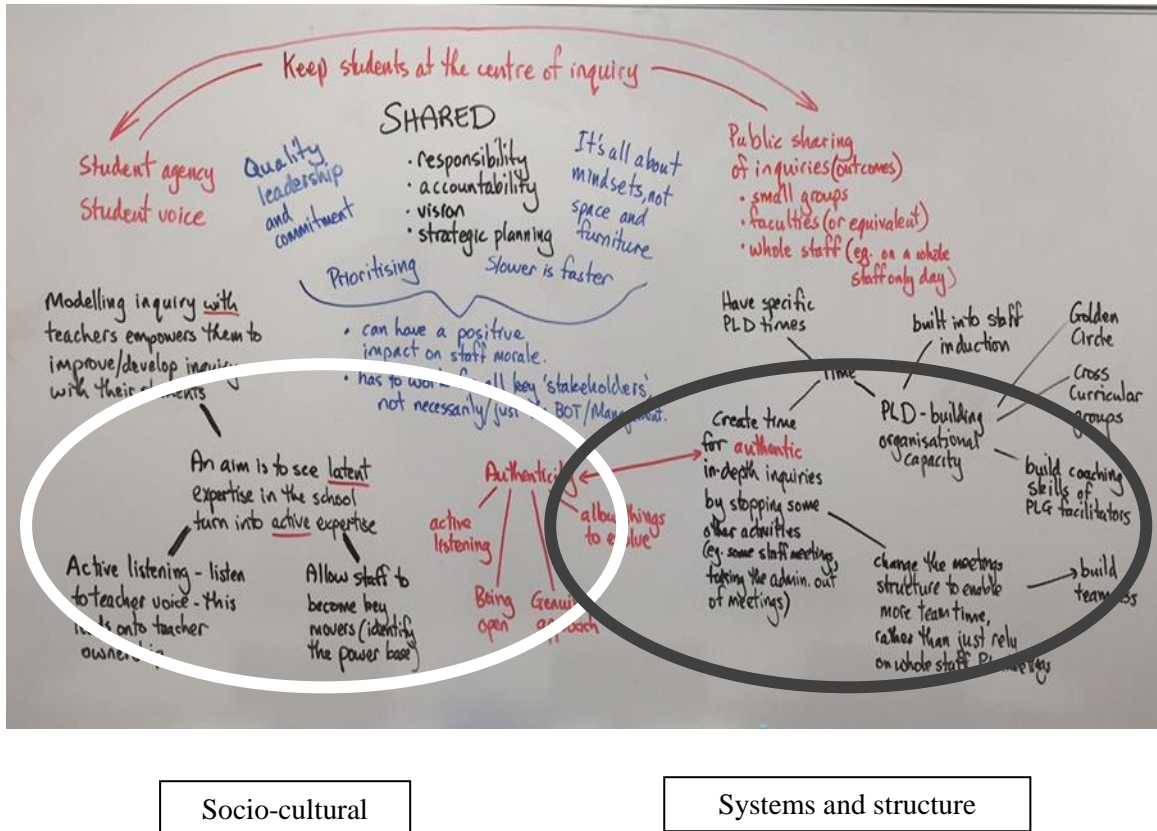


Figure one: The emerging practices supporting collaborative inquiry

The following section provides two examples from two of the schools participating in the network. There are multiple examples to draw on from the data, though in this paper there is room to focus only a small portion of this, so some accounts of practices and the emergence of practice can be highlighted.

### Findings

In this section, first some data from the questionnaire is reported to provide an overview of the collaborative inquiries occurring to differing degrees across the ten schools. This is particularly done to help the account given in the first example and connect it to figure one where practitioners emphasised their hope to see greater student agency in learning activities as well as their engagement with teachers in relation to teacher practice.

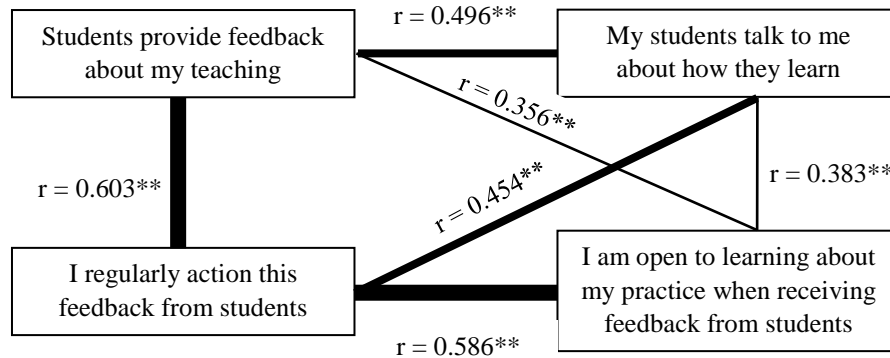
#### An introduction to example one: Interpreting the questionnaire data

A number of months after the sticky-note activity (see figure one), participants were invited to complete an electronic questionnaire that consisted of six-point rating scale statements and several open-ended questions. One open-ended question asked participants to comment on shifts seen in students due to the teacher collaborative inquiry projects.

Table one: Outcomes of collaborative inquiry projects

Response	Frequency
Improved student agency	41
Enhanced quality of discussions and communication	19
Deeper understanding of learned knowledge and skills	17
Improved attitudes towards learning	17
Improved peer cooperation and relationships with others	9
Improved achievement	8

The improved student agency appears to be associated with student voice about how they learn and their comments to teachers about their teaching. Of the 15 rating scale statements, some specifically focused on classroom practices. Pearson correlation co-efficients were generated for each possible pairing of the 15 scale items (see Appendix Table two). Figure two illustrates how an inquiry-based approach goes beyond teachers reflecting on their focus of inquiry amongst themselves. Students too, are active players in these practices.



\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Figure two: Possible associations of scale variables at the teacher level

Of significance here and as a precursor to example one, teachers appear to not only respond to how students say they learn, but perhaps more importantly given the stronger correlation, how and what students say to teachers about their teaching practices. These findings however, do need to be held lightly at this early stage in the research which will continue into a subsequent phase in 2017.

*Example one: From practices to practice*

The first case study school is a large co-educational secondary school and illustrates how the accumulation of practices has started to form a practice of collaborative inquiry that involves a greater degree of student agency compared to the practice of five years ago. In the school, teachers establish collaborative inquiries into their teaching practices and share these with their students. It is now a practice where students provide voice to the teacher about their inquiry. This culminates in student presentations about a teacher’s inquiry to an audience of other teachers. In these presentations students are agents in the collaborative inquiry with the teacher. The establishment of this practice has taken time. One of the focus group participants explained how the transformation to practices were minute: “if you took people’s inquiry processes and got to the nitty-gritty of what is the thing that’s happened here, they might seem to be really small” (Person A). Another participant also highlighted the small steps practitioners took:

I think what comes out in the inquiry presentations and the discussions is very much linked to pedagogy and very much linked to teaching strategies that have been trialled and so a lot of the inquiry was then trying to get some student voice to show whether that was effecting or not. A lot of the time they might seem to be quite small steps that people are taking, it might be to do with group work or the structure of a lesson or something. In themselves they’re not particularly big strategies, but I think one of the things that happens in teaching is that we keep coming across new strategies, we try them and they might embed or they might just disappear. But part of the inquiry process itself and the focus on it by going back and back over it, it kind of makes it more of a routine. (Person A)

Of note here is how there was a focus on going back over the process small changes to practices were taking place. The practice of students acting as agents was also raised:

I think too just the language of students in terms of... and this part of the language like you were talking about, the expectations of teachers. I think for the majority of our students, not just those involved in the presentations, they've moved to a point where their expectations of us are more than just we're going to sit there and you're going to teach us, that it's going to become a collaborative thing and they're happy to call you on it if it doesn't happen. (Person C)

This example starts to reveal how “an organisation is an orchestration of practices” (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). There is in play a constellation of interwoven practices that may produce leadership, including, but not restricted to:

- The coaching and support provided to teachers in the school related to their inquiries so that teacher practices are re-oriented;
- The utilisation of achievement data and the written collaborative inquiry goal as non-human contributing elements;
- The co-ordinating of the coaching and student feedback sessions that accumulate to providing direction in the school; and,
- The emergence of collaborative agency with teachers and the students.

These practices are constantly in play and over time have become part of the collaborative inquiry practice that is “coming-into-being” (Bjorkeng et al., 2009, p.156).

#### *Example two: An emerging flow*

The second example illustrates what can occur when practitioners distance themselves from an established practice and “engage in its critical reflection, and ... what kind of communicative actions are associated with this reflection” (Geiger, 2009, p.135). The case study school is a form of middle school, that transitions students from primary school education, through to secondary school education. During the past few years, the school has been redesigned from buildings consisting on single-single cell classrooms to Flexible Learning Spaces (FLS). A FLS in this school contains the equivalent of three to four classrooms of students and teachers in one open space. The open space is flexible, due to areas being able to be closed off for small to large groups of students with a teacher or teachers. In these settings teachers plan and teach in a collaborative manner. This expectation and learning environment, along with a student-centred pedagogy are aligned to what is termed Modern Learning Practice (MLP) in New Zealand. In this school, practitioners have been engaged in learning and apply MLP into the learning environments. This focus on MLP had become an embedded direction for practice, however, this practice was soon to be disrupted.

As the process went on it suddenly became apparent that here we were doing modern learning practice, but we were still using quite old-fashioned style reports to parents. It shifted to how does modern learning practice affect our assessment and what might reports look like? What might reporting to parents look like in a modern learning practice environment? So the big picture [MLP] has kind of been left until we've done that because that actually feeds back into the main question [of MLP]. (Person A)

I think it was. I think there were people who were saying we're doing the first reports this year, this is really hard because actually I see XY and Z but they're not in my class. How do I write a report if they've been seeing another teacher? That's kind of where it started from really. As

people were beginning to embrace the modern learning practice more they suddenly realised... (Person B).

It was and it was a groundswell, it was once someone said it everybody said it and there was a group of people had reported back to the Principal. The Principal earlier in the year saying about the reporting, but this isn't working for us. When it was opened up everybody said no, it's not working for us; it's not working for us. (Person A)

The exchange here between Person A and B captures the sense of disruption caused when a mismatch of two seemingly overlapping forms of practice did not merge. Some new practices emerged that caused some re-orientation. Firstly, a small number of teachers started to voice concern over the practice of report writing. This concern quickly grew to become a "groundswell" as teachers stood back from the expected report writing practice and reflected on how the emerging MLP practice was now disrupting this. The emergence of collaborative agency involving the principal and the teachers provided a new direction to the flow of practices in the school. In this example the report format as a non-human element contributed to the re-orientation of practices so that practitioners are now focused on how reporting and assessment should be reconstituted so they are informed by MLP.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

These two examples illustrate how a practice perspective can start to illuminate practice without resorting to a leader-centric ontology. In school settings, this centrist approach would reify the role of the principal and others in institutional 'leadership' roles above that of other agents and non-human elements that also shape practice. In both examples practice cannot be adequately explained relying on leaders, followers and goals. Nor can either be fully explained through distributed leadership, especially in the form where those supposedly with power distribute leadership to others. By situating inquiry

on the level of the practicing community and the subjective viewpoint of the practitioners and their construction of the world we gain a deeper understanding of how organisations are constructed, how they are changed, how innovations emerge, how decisions are made and how knowledge is generated. (Geiger, 2009, p.135).

This paper has focused on arguing that to study leadership, "it is not about the leaders ... we must look to the practice [and practices] within which it is occurring" (Raelin, 2016a, p.128). One way of conceptualising this focus is to show practices and practice as phenomenon always in motion. In figure two, there is deliberately no start and end point, nor any focus on individuals as leaders or followers. It is "situated in historical and material conditions" (Nicolini, 2012, p.6) that cannot be separated from practice. In the diagram, leadership emerging from practices are assumed to emerge and accumulate in a moment as argued by Carroll et al. (2008) and Wood (2005), as well as collaborative activities that have been observed to take place in very short exchanges (Kramer & Crespy, 2011). The accumulation of these moments aggregates into practices which can lead to the (re)formation of social orders, forms of capital, identities, and sense-making. If the practices are embedded over a sustained period of time they then become constituted as a practice, which then becomes "a key term for signifying how we achieve active being-in-the-world" (Bjorkeng et al., 2009, p.146).



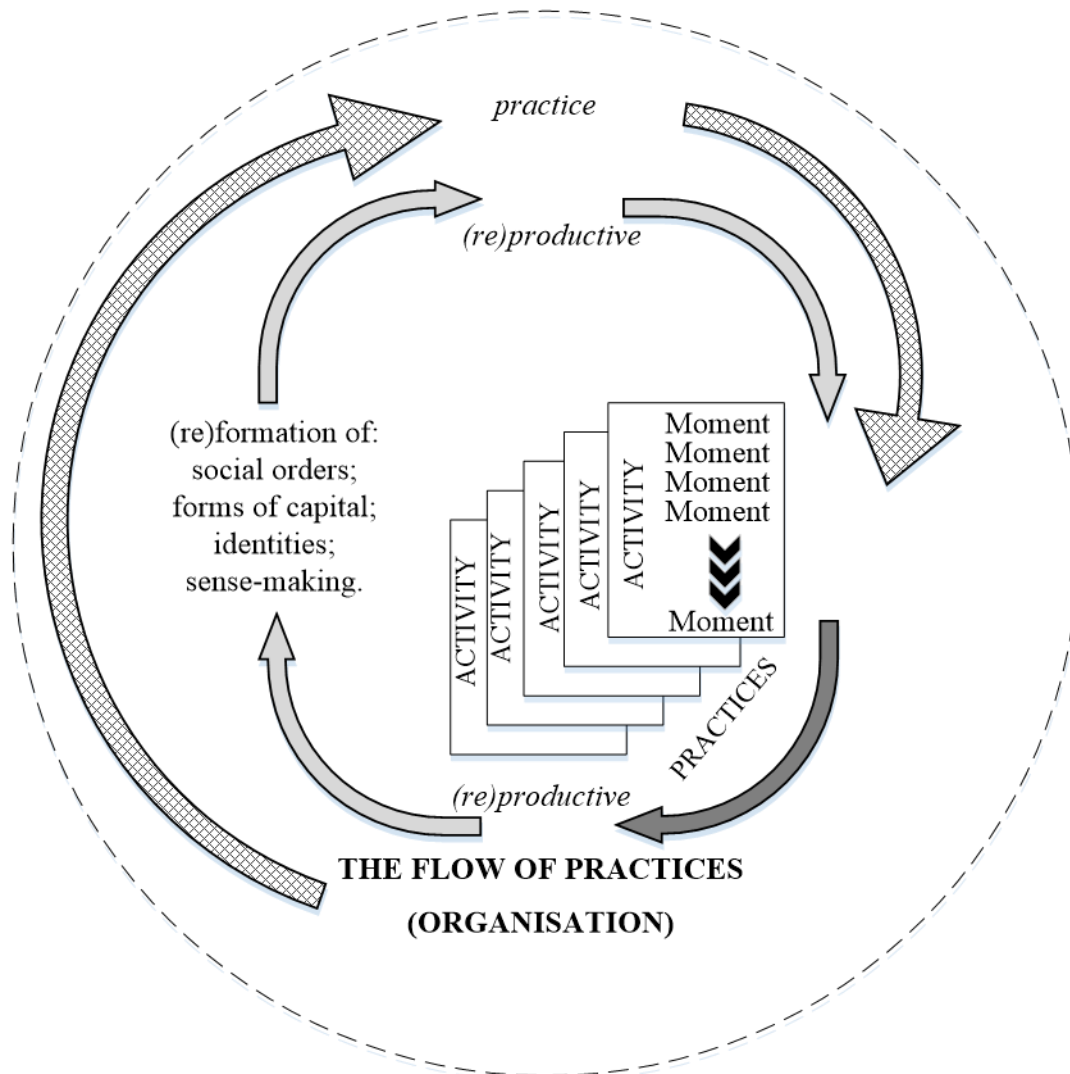


Figure two: The flow of practices and practice

The implications for research turn our attention to our ontological assumptions about leadership, leaders and leading and the data collecting methods we employ. At a personal level this has implications for the second phase of our research. What methods are appropriate? What inquiry questions should inform our research practices? Leadership-as-practice continuously makes me question how the practices of development facilitation should emerge, particularly in and for organisations constructed and possibly dependent on a leader-centric ontology. The leadership-as-practice movement is starting to appear as a new frontier because my own sense-making and practice is being disrupted.

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## Appendices

Table two: Pearson's correlation co-efficients for rating scale statements

	I understand our school vision related to MLP	I have contributed to a shared school vision related to MLP	My students talk to me about how they learn	Students provide feedback about my teaching	I am open to learning about my practice when receiving feedback from students	I regularly action this feedback from students	I have sufficient time to deeply reflect on my practice	I experience our school culture as one that encourages me to take responsible risks with my practice	I have opportunity to view effective practice modelled by colleagues	Conversations with colleagues about my practice encourage me to identify opportunities to learn	Conversations in our department or syndicate (or equivalent) encourage our team to learn so collaboration is developed	The appraisal process at school helps me with my professional growth	Our collaborative inquiry is closely aligned to our school's goals	Our collaborative inquiry has enhanced collaboration between colleagues	Our collaborative inquiry is building my capacity to reflect on my teaching practice
I understand our school vision related to MLP		.685**	.217*	.151	.141	.182	.380**	.385**	.454**	.292**	.379**	.455**	.303**	.339**	.276*
I have contributed to a shared school vision related to MLP			.199*	.121	.191*	.179	.310**	.344**	.347**	.205*	.341**	.422**	.353**	.344**	.258*
My students talk to me about how they learn				.496**	.383**	.454**	.303**	.101	.109	.131	.174*	.108	.156	.212*	.142
Students provide feedback about my teaching					.356**	.603**	.243**	.118	.280**	.152	.246**	.007	.094	.207*	.167
I am open to learning about my practice when receiving feedback from students						.586**	.303**	.222**	.213*	.294**	.256**	.104	.146	.204*	.069
I regularly action this feedback from students							.326**	.210*	.273**	.137	.128	-.035	.020	.146	.116
I have sufficient time to deeply reflect on my practice								.431**	.457**	.298**	.342**	.385**	.308**	.331**	.373**
I experience our school culture as one that encourages me to take responsible risks with my practice									.551**	.484**	.377**	.422**	.397**	.442**	.432**
I have opportunity to view effective practice modelled by colleagues										.562**	.538**	.405**	.383**	.475**	.485**
Conversations with colleagues about my practice encourage me to identify opportunities to learn											.616**	.467**	.398**	.459**	.336**
Conversations in our department or syndicate (or equivalent) encourage our team to learn so collaboration is developed												.479**	.439**	.498**	.567**
The appraisal process at school helps me with my professional growth													.493**	.319**	.368**
Our collaborative inquiry is closely aligned to our school's goals														.688**	.517**
Our collaborative inquiry has enhanced collaboration between colleagues															.617**
Our collaborative inquiry is building my capacity to reflect on my teaching practice															

Note 1: \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Note 2: \*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

