

## **A leadership typology for professional learning and development**

Una tipologia di leadership per l'apprendimento e lo sviluppo professionale

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### **ABSTRACT**

This reflective paper is inspired from a research by a school leader to promote teacher agency in professional learning and development. It draws on the similarities and differences of both leadership and facilitation roles to propose a typology that is shaped by roles and goals. We present here a critical view of a phenomenon that is often distinguished by styles and characteristics of leadership. Through the perspective shared here, we aim to contribute into the leadership discussions that specify and distinguish responsibilities. It complements with the axiom that leaders have a key role in concerting the vision and driving the goals of the organization.

### **SINTESI**

Questo articolo è ispirato da una ricerca di un dirigente scolastico per promuovere l'*agency* dell'insegnante nell'apprendimento e nello sviluppo professionale. L'articolo attinge alle somiglianze e alle differenze di due ruoli di leadership per proporre una tipologia modellata da ruoli e obiettivi. Viene presentata dunque una visione critica di un fenomeno spesso contraddistinto da stili e caratteristiche di leadership. Attraverso la prospettiva condivisa, si mira a contribuire alla discussione sulla leadership stessa. Il contributo si integra con l'assioma secondo cui i leader hanno un ruolo chiave nel concertare la visione e guidare gli obiettivi dell'organizzazione.

**KEYWORDS:** leadership, professional learning and development, professional development facilitator

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** leadership, apprendimento e sviluppo professionale, facilitatore dello sviluppo professionale

## Introduction

Schools are more than mere institutions of academic learning. They are social systems and now, more than ever before, very complex and demanding ones. The human relations dimension among educators and students plays a crucial role in school life as much as the curriculum does, and indeed has a powerful effect on the learning and teaching that takes place.

This reflective paper focuses on two critical areas, namely leadership and facilitation. The paper will explore the role that leadership and facilitation have on nurturing professional learning and development (PLD) in a school community. It focuses on the experiences gained through the journey undertaken by the main author as a researcher in his school (Farrugia, 2021) where he serves as a senior school leader. The research explored teachers' professional learning and development (PLD). This area was deemed critical because the quality of learning is believed to be relative to teachers' openness to growth and self-efficacy. Research was carried out through an exploratory case-study of teachers in the primary section of a school in Malta who were given the opportunity to plan their PLD over a year. In all, 14 teachers took part. Through collective reflections, projected goals have been implemented, evaluated and adapted in their classrooms. Using a mixed methods approach, data were gathered through varied methods. Gathered data provided evidence on teachers' response to self-determined PLD, with a focus on agency and self-efficacy. The researcher occupied multiple roles within the research: leader, researcher and participant as observer.

### 1. A collaborative culture

Leaders occupy a pivotal role in determining the culture of a school, which in turn is highly dependent on the adopted styles of leadership. As we know, transactional or transformational leadership induce different behaviors and results. The former is sustained through extrinsic rewards while the latter aims at renewing values, beliefs and attitudes that can change practices or vice versa where changed practices challenge existing beliefs (Guskey, 2002). School leaders also have a strategic capacity to inspire what happens in schools through a series of what Walker (2010) describes as "connective strategies". Leaders draw on supportive structures to connect the community through implicit and/or explicit rules, funding, assigned roles, timetables, etc., purposely to enact a particular vision. Leaders' beliefs, values and norms influence these connectors, which in turn create complementary cultural connectors.

Moreover, if a more communitarian culture is embraced, through collaborative cultures, the values and beliefs that shape visions and goals are more representative of the elements in the school. Nonetheless, *how* a PLD is approached, *what* knowledge is addressed and *why* the need of PLD was felt is similarly dependent on the values and beliefs embraced by the community. Inevitably, this phenomenon is highly influenced by those who lead. Cordingley et al. (2015, p. 8) conclude that «successful CPDL occurred where school leaders created conditions which allowed

it to flourish». Support for learning is thus one of the primary responsibilities of school leadership. In the literature on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), there is a distinction between two necessary infrastructures needed for support, likewise reliant on leaders. Firstly, support for nurturing the collegial relationships that contribute to the professional capital which is the product of the human, social and decisional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013). Secondly, structural support on an organizational level such as time to meet, proximity of teachers, communication procedures and provision of experts (Timperley, 2011).

However, leaders are not merely responsible for engineering organizational structures, but have the potential to be highly effective when they model and actively involve themselves in learning (Hallinger, Liu, & Piyaman, 2019). Leaders' beliefs on learning are critical, but their involvement can vary from the understanding of changes needed to the practice process, to the facilitation of the conditions required to enact the PLD (Cordingley et al., 2015). At the same time, we need to acknowledge that leaders are not exempt from the need to grow as they need to learn and develop as much as teachers do (Voogt et al., 2015). Leadership has a cascading effect on an organization like a school, and Bubb and Earley (2007) emphasize the cascading impact concerning PLD. Cascading leadership is defined as «the co-occurrence of leaders' values, attitudes and behaviors, at different hierarchal levels within an organization» (Jeuken, 2016, p. 110). When a leader understands and values the importance of learning and creates a strategy that generates opportunities for learning through sharing of decisions, the leadership capacity in a school increases (Earley & Porritt, 2009). King (2011, p. 3) states that effective leadership is defined as «talking with teachers and promoting teachers' professional growth and reflection through providing time and resources». King's (2011) statement discloses the highest value of learning-centered leadership (Hallinger et al., 2019) that can initiate a cascade down to lower hierarchical levels of generated leadership.

The belief of a leader that PLD is significant for school improvement will consequently evolve to create the time, space, budget and resources that are needed (Porritt et al., 2017). The support that comes from a high formal hierarchical position will permeate down to others in leadership positions who are, in turn, influenced and motivated to enact the collective vision. The official hierarchical position of principal takes a symbolic meaning in that the leader holds socio-structural power to drive the collective vision. The latter generates a personal sense of power, that is «the perception of one's ability to influence another person or other people» (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 316). Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, and Kyndt (2015, p. 54) state that «teachers reporting a supportive school culture attributed this in large part to the personality, values, and actions of the principal. These principals described themselves as *people-centred*; they were interested in the wellbeing, development, and overall job satisfaction of the teachers and modelled their commitment to the school».

Leadership involvement would appear more like what Eaker and Gonzalez (2006) describe as leader of leaders. A shared vision is likewise important where

leaders are instrumental in encouraging an alternative reality (Cordingley et al., 2015) or better way (Evans, 2014). Earley and Porritt (2009) point out that the impact of PLD is maximized when leadership understands the significance of PLD and how it makes a difference; leaders are strategic with PLD approaches, and also when leaders augment PLD opportunities for all.

Moreover, Timperley (2011, p. 129) suggests that a focus on students, ensuring worthwhile content, engaging in meaningful processes, and having skills and opportunities to check impact should be the central vision and underlying principles of PLD. Hallinger et al. (2019, p. 344) thus propose learning-centered leadership underpinned by four dimensions that are perhaps a synthesis of what has been discussed above. They state that learning-centered leadership: builds a learning vision; provides learning support; manages the learning program, and offers role models. Yet, while the first two are for the broad leadership responsibilities, the last two may not always be the responsibility of the principal but actually sees other teachers or Senior Management Team members taking the lead.

In an empowered organization, everyone's contribution to improvement is encouraged and valued. Empowerment becomes a structuring principle. To achieve empowerment requires constant dialogue and discussion so that a sense of trust is fostered (Bezzina & Bufalino, 2022; Balyer et al., 2017).

As educators engage and reflect on the various encounters they are involved they help to strengthen the values behind learning, namely listening, participation, collaboration, co-operation and activism. Central to the encounters sees the nurturing of a sense of *ownership*. Development is more effective if it is designed by the people that are going to be affected by them (Farrugia, 2021; Garmston & Zimmerman, 2013) and *collective responsibility*, which sees people coming together and being prepared and willing to share (Stosich et al., 2019; Venables, 2018).

## 2. The notion of power

In such a context, the notion of power changes meaning and significance. The personal power discussed above may also be exhibited in a school through expert power, where educators at a lower organizational level, or even external to it, may have more knowledge and experience to achieve a specific goal than higher-level leaders in the organization. The latter may, however, retain 'referral power' (Jeuken, 2016). It is here where the 'collective leadership' to achieve a goal is imperative (Pór, 2014) as the diversity of the community is reorganized to maximize effectiveness for a common purpose. Expertise in curriculum, content and pedagogy is recognized and given expert power and leadership to facilitate peer learning and development, as success in learning generally dictates the common goal in schools. The expert power can be internal to the school or even external when the learning and development demand higher expertise than that possessed within the community, where these experts often act as facilitators in the learning process.

### 3. Professional learning and development: the facilitator's role

Within the literature, leadership roles within learning teams are often referred to as “facilitators” (Becuwe et al., 2016; Vangrieken et al., 2017). The descriptor fits well with what has been discussed above as the leader's agency, or indeed their trust and belief that the community has the capacity to improve and develop, enacts a catalytic effect that transmits encouragement and support. It is through this belief and the cultures it creates, that authoritarian ideology or deficit models of PLD become problematic. In a culture of what Atlee (2014) describes as co-intelligence, «facilitators ... embrace transformational leadership, which leads to a shared vision and trust within the team» (Becuwe et al., 2016, p. 143). The facilitator's role is resonant with supportive leadership types, where the leading identified roles are seen to be « [...] providing logistic support, [...] scaffolding the design process and [...] monitoring the design process» (*ibidem*, p. 141). Within the facilitator's tasks, Erickson, Minnes Brandes, Mitchell, and Mitchell (2005) include the mediation for generating consensual goals, the connection of practice to a formal theory within the process of learning, and a clear understanding of who is going to lead the agenda. Facilitators need to elicit constructively prior knowledge, generate cognitive dissonance, apply the knowledge with adequate feedback, and reserve time for reflection on learning (Baviskar et al., 2009). Meanwhile, they also have the complex task of harmonizing the learners' expectations and the learning styles with the learning experience, which makes the role intense and one which requires a lot of thought and preparation. Notably, Ince (2017, p.203) identifies the five skills a facilitator needs to be influential in the role: «the ability to critically reflect; experience in the role; acuity of observation; personal motivation or commitment; and knowledge and understanding of cognitive dissonance in learning».

### 4. Relational challenges for leaders as facilitators

The facilitator's tasks are challenging for varied reasons. Creating and sustaining positive cultures and learning communities is not easy. Though benefits may be encouraging (Hargreaves, 2019), some challenging factors arise. Criticism of the collaborative ideal is often rooted in the challenges it creates on various levels (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Growth is often associated with moments of conflict. Viewed from an individual perspective, giving up personal beliefs is straining. It demands a shift from personal comfort zones where sometimes one is compelled to participate and contribute in spite of a lack of conviction of the collective proposals (Johnson, 2003). Thus, autonomy in such a social setting needs sacrificing and redefining. The redefining process brings with it many conflicts, both internal, on a personal level, and external, with collaborators (Somech, 2008). These moments often create anxieties that do not develop a natural motivation or easiness to contribute or learn. Participation, however, demands a level of professional and personal maturity driven by a strong will and trust in colleagues.

Moreover, self-efficacy also plays a role in coming together. Bandura (1998, p. 66) claims that «chronic self-doubters are not easily formed into a collective efficacious force». Thus, personal maturity, professionalism and trust, all need time, open mind-sets, experiences and support to develop. There is even the chance of suppressing dissonant voices, consequently creating negative feelings that may limit willingness to contribute and hence bring about disassociation (Johnson, 2003). Understanding dissonance is another matter, as its trigger can vary from lack of self-efficacy to other influential social intricacies.

In this context, the role of the various stakeholders is an important one, making the endeavor even more complex than it is. It is imperative that all stakeholders truly believe in the set collective visions and goals. When this belief is in place, the time required to meet with colleagues and engage in discussions is viewed as worthwhile, as in such settings, time consumption is one of the drawbacks often levelled against collaborative activities. Time to meet and its value in supporting collaboration is a challenge for both leaders and teachers. Leaders struggle to mediate between curricular demands whilst also creating a structure that allows time and space for collaboration.

On the other hand, teachers equally struggle with the curricular needs and related activities, like planning and assessment. Consequently, collaborative time is often viewed in competition with routine professional tasks, and this makes its value questionable if the long term and more profound benefits are not understood and recognized (Bandura, 1998). If the benefits are not evident through any form of improvements, collaboration can be perceived as an added workload (Bovbjerg, 2006).

Moreover, other challenges brought about through collaboration may root intricacies not only on the individual level, but also on a group level. The cultivation of «groupthink, social loafing, increased incompatibilities, and a mere practical focus» are some reported negative consequences in the literature (Vangrieken et al., 2015, p. 29). Moreover, Bovbjerg (2006, p. 249) purports that collaborative groups may also give rise to what he terms as “balkanization”, a form of isolation that comes from an exclusive, closed social system.

However, it is imperative that those in this role are aware of risks for learners and can mitigate them, as their effect may be counterproductive (Ince, 2017). The facilitators’ experience, personality and emotional intelligence, thus, appears to be positively related to the synergy that can be created in learning teams as they often need to deal with contrasting opinions and complex human intricacies (Ince, 2017; Vangrieken et al., 2017). The probability of contrasting opinions is perhaps why Truijen, Slegers, Meelissen, and Nieuwenhuis (2013) suggest that a facilitator is mostly needed when a visible leader is missing in a group, or when groups are weak in initiative (Becuwe et al., 2016).

It is also noted that situations often determine the nature of facilitation (Becuwe et al., 2016). Considering the complexity of both the PLD activity and the contexts, sharing appropriate responsibility with learners eases the accomplishment, while making it more democratic, sensible, organic and profitable. Facilitators or

coordinators who take a leading role are more effective when the distribution of leadership is practiced. Cordingley and her colleagues (2015, p. 6) noted that when learners were treated as ‘peers and co-learners’ there was greater sharing, notwithstanding a degree of challenge. Distributed leadership is also seen to be beneficial when individuals are encouraged to drive pedagogical or curricular matters (Eaker & Gonzalez, 2006). Distributed leadership and a shared vision will instill trust, increase motivation, and ease the challenge of resistance (Timperley, 2011). By distributing leadership the danger of passivity is diminished, while with the adequate support, self-efficacy is nurtured (Ince, 2017). However, although a facilitator is a typical role in many PLD activities, there is limited research on how best to facilitate teachers’ learning (Patton et al., 2012).

## **5. Leadership and facilitation**

The intertwined characteristics that correspond with both leadership and facilitation in PLD, such as motivating, challenging, supporting, directing, moderating, coaching and mentoring, make both roles very similar in nature. However, our experience has shown us that a distinction can be drawn between leadership support that facilitates resources and sets a general vision, and facilitation in the form of group coordinator or expert direction. The actions described for the former likewise qualify as facilitation and can be defined as an organic facilitator. Organic because the role was vital and essential in creating the vision, following up developments and enabling structures for a supportive environment conducive to learning and development. A leader who shoulders such responsibility has a wide sphere of influence and is central to a community that wants to learn. When considering a leader within a positive learning community, one understands how a leader needs to be proactive, active and reactive to respond to the learning needs of a community.

Creating a collective vision, setting individual or collective goals that are synchronized with the collective mission and values demand a great deal of emotional intelligence. Thus, the vitality of a leader as an organic facilitator starts from the understanding of the community and its needs and setting a direction that generates growth. Sensitivity, trust and healthy relationships are here fundamental in getting people together, reflect and endorse a vision. This might be more challenging for the facilitator than providing the structural needs or resources that motivates learning. Though every school context may provide different challenges, relationships and changing of people’s beliefs are often the hardest. Yet, once a community understands and accepts the way forward, the role of the organic facilitator evolves into pushing, nudging and aligning (Hargreaves, 2013). The leader encourages the learners either through verbal persuasion, providing resources or human capacity that supports learning and development. The organic facilitator needs to be sensitive and strategic to augment the learning momentum of the community. One can deduce that we are here highlighting a leader’s charisma in encouraging and underpinning growth. The underlying expertise in the role as an organic facilitator is that of a motivator who inspires growth.

The second type of facilitation, on the other hand, had a narrower and more focused range of action. This type of facilitation, while using leadership characteristics, was more focused on the goals and impact of PLD and is more defined by the required expertise. The latter may be defined as operant facilitator as the person had the role of acting on behalf of someone (proxy) to attain improvement. This was true with the introduced facilitators for two groups within the research period. The position varied to the needs of the PLD and the people that engaged in the process (Becuwe et al., 2016). However, both roles had the aim of improving the capacity of the teachers and the school where the impact was critical for both. Though it remains critical, the operant facilitator, in contrast to the organic facilitator, is less concerned at bringing everyone together or setting a collective vision. The operant facilitator was observed to be less engaged in gaining cohesion and was satisfied to find a balance between attaining the learning goal and collective agency. There is a similarity between what is observed in research regarding learner-oriented approaches and matter-oriented approaches. In our research, the operant facilitators were more focused on the matter and the learners' understanding of it. Though it depends on several variables, it is our impression, from this research, that an operant facilitator who is tasked for a PLD is more conditioned by the time of engagement and the targeted learning than an organic facilitator. This might be related to the time of engagement or the magnitude of the vision. As already discussed, an operant facilitator might be limited in the scope of the mission and sphere of influence. The operant facilitator is more specific in his/her mission, where the area of development is much more localized. It is different from the organic facilitator who is responsible for addressing different areas of global school development. Perhaps the remit itself effects the identity, thinking and behavior of both distinguished roles. Table 1 below distinguishes between various levels of the two leadership roles presented in the paper.

	<b>Senior Leadership</b>	<b>PLD Facilitator</b>
Facilitation	Organic	Operant
Sphere of Influence	Wide	Varies
Goal	Building/sustaining a school culture	Supporting/ Facilitating Learning and development
Vision Creation	Participant / Executive	Directed
Motivation	School Wide Development	Localized to Area of Development
Knowledge	Generic	Specific / Technical
Relational Support	Objective	Subjective
Supportive Conditions	Executive	Dependent
Style	Idiosyncratic	Transformational

TABLE 1 – LEADERSHIP TYPOLOGY FOR PLD

## Conclusions

In today's world, leadership stands out as an essential component for personal, collective and organizational growth. Educational research is replete with calls for distributed leadership due to the observed benefits on the entrusted individuals. Leadership can manifest in disparate forms and styles, but those aimed to transform have a common interest to assist human growth. The "organic" and the "operant" as defined in this paper are not contrasting or competing forms of facilitative leadership. Neither can we put any form on a subordinate level as both are needed for the growth of developing learners. Therefore, they are complementing forms of leadership to facilitate learning and development. The distinction addressed in this discussion was noted along a research aimed at understanding teacher's agency towards PLD. Both forms of leadership assisted many teachers to achieve a self-directed goal in their PLD. A better understanding of the relationship and the characteristics of these roles will hopefully develop refined forms of facilitation for professional growth of all educators and lead towards enhanced student learning. Our discussion above is aimed at inspiring further research and study in the field of PLD facilitation and leadership.

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