

**Deepening system leadership : teachers leading from below**

BOYLAN, Mark <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8581-1886>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/10116/>

---

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

**Published version**

BOYLAN, Mark (2013). Deepening system leadership : teachers leading from below. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 44 (1), 57-72.

---

**Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

# Deepening System Leadership: Teachers Leading from Below

Mark Boylan  
Sheffield Hallam University  
m.s.boylan@shu.ac.uk

Published online before print October 28, 2013, doi: 10.1177/1741143213501314 Educational Management Administration Leadership October 28, 2013 1741143213501314

## Abstract

The increasing importance of educational collaborations and networks that blur organizational boundaries requires conceptual developments in leadership theory. One approach to both theorizing and promoting such phenomena is through the idea of system leadership. Three different meanings of the term are identified: interschool leadership; a systemic leadership orientation and identity; and leadership of the school system as a whole. Previous descriptions of system leadership, and policy initiatives related to it, have focused on headteachers and senior leaders. However, teacher leaders may also exercise system leadership in relation to all three meanings. Professional development networks and school collaborations provide a range of distinct contexts for interschool leadership by teacher leaders and these are identified. This extends existing theories of teacher and distributed leadership. Further, it is proposed that teacher leaders can, like headteachers, have a systemic leadership practice orientation that is informed by moral purposes. The model of teacher activist professional identity provides a starting point for analysing teacher system leadership identity. Teacher leaders can and do influence system-wide change and, to conceptualize this, the concept of system leadership from below is introduced. In making this argument a number of issues and methodological tools are identified that are important in researching both headteacher and teacher system leadership in relation to the three meanings of system leadership.

## Keywords

distributed leadership, network leadership, professional development, system leadership, system leadership from below, teacher leadership

## Introduction

'System leadership' is a relatively new addition to educational leadership discourse. It is principally used to describe the practices of those who extend their arenas of leadership from within a school or organization to interschool or wider networks. It is relevant to a wide range of contexts internationally in which organizational networks and various forms of school collaboration are increasingly important to school improvement (Chapman et al., 2010; Pont et al., 2008) and to professional development (Sachs, 2003). More recently it has been used to as both a descriptor and an advocated stance in English policy for school improvement, leadership and teacher professional development (Hargreaves, 2011; NCSL, 2012).

The concept of system leadership, arguably, has emerged in relation to four interconnected developments: the growth of cross-organizational educational leadership; the increasing importance of network and interschool collaborations; interest in the relationship between systems theory and

leadership; and concern for school-led system-wide change. Given this, and that both 'system' and 'leadership' have malleable meanings, it is perhaps unsurprising that the term system leadership is used in a variety of different ways. The growing importance of the concept, including in policy, means there is a need to clarify these uses and to do this existing literature in this area is analysed below. Three distinct meanings are identified and discussed: leadership exercised beyond a single school – interschool leadership; leadership practice that has a systemic orientation related to systems thinking (Fullan, 2004), a form of leadership identity; and a system leadership paradigm that examines how school leaders influence the system as whole and advocates for this – system-wide leadership.

As will be discussed, the idea of a system leader is principally used in the literature to refer to someone holding a senior leadership position who exercises or evidences leadership beyond their own school. Usually, this is through a formally designated role that involves supporting or changing the practice of school leaders in 'recipient' schools, thus defining a system leader as 'a headteacher or senior teacher who works directly for the success and well-being of students in other schools as well as his own' (Higham et al., 2009:2). However, reviewing recent developments in interschool collaborations, partnerships, networks and professional development activities indicates that these create space for, and enable, teacher leaders as well as senior leaders to lead beyond their own organizations.

Another way of presenting this argument, discussed below, is as an extension of theories of teacher and distributed leadership. The individualistic heroic concept of leadership is embedded in a wider 'traditional' view of leadership (Simkins, 2005). This has been contested and complemented by conceptualizations of teacher and distributed leadership that have become seemingly ubiquitous (Harris, 2003, 2005; Muijs and Harris, 2006; Yorke-Barr and Duke, 2004). However, these have not yet fully taken account of the new landscape of more fluid organizational boundaries and the notion of teacher system leaders contributes to doing this

In addition, the concept of the activist teaching professional (Sachs, 2001, 2003) provides a starting point for a description of teacher system leader identity and is useful in accounting for leadership practices in collaborative and interschool contexts. For headteachers to engage in system leadership requires them to have a moral concern that extends beyond their own school (Higham et al., 2009). However, that moral concerns also motivate teacher leaders has, arguably, been overlooked in the recent 'leaderist' (Simkins, 2012) discourse. This is in spite of the importance of teachers' moral purposes being acknowledged in literature on teacher leadership (for example, Day, 2000; Fullan, 1995; Sachs, 2003; York Barr and Duke, 2004). The second argument made is that teacher leadership can have a morally informed systemic orientation.

The third meaning of system leadership, found in research and policy literature, is in reference to activity for change within the educational system as a whole – the macro system. Theories of distributed leadership that consider leadership as a systemic quality suggest that, both formally sanctioned and informal opportunistic (MacBeath, 2005), system leadership by teachers has the potential for system-wide effects. Thus recognizing system leadership by teachers suggests the possibility of system leadership from below as a complement to the promotion of centrally designated policy goals in which school leaders are mobilized to enact change from the 'top down'.

The structure of the article broadly follows the theoretical and methodological aims outlined above. The first part describes the current developments in schooling practice that have given rise to notions of system leadership and different meanings of it are discussed. Following this, a consideration of professional development and collaborative contexts is the basis for an argument that there are many examples, internationally, of teacher leaders engaging in interschool leadership activities and these are categorized. This leads to a discussion of distributed and teacher leadership as well as of activist teacher identity. This informs a model of teacher system leadership that can be

a starting point for future research. Considering teachers as actors in the wider system leads to positing and discussing system leadership from below, both as an analytical approach and as a complement to centrally orchestrated system leadership. The overall argument is that teacher system leadership is an important extension to the three identified meanings of system leadership. In making this argument a number of issues are identified and methodological tools discussed that are potentially important in researching both headteacher and teacher system leadership in relation to the three meanings of system leadership.

## **The Emergence of System Leadership**

At the time of writing, the discourse of system leadership is mainly found in the English context. However, the developments that have spurred it, and that it has informed, can also be found internationally. The emergence of federations and academy chains in England (Chapman and Salokangas, 2013; Chapman et al., 2010; Higham, 2010) is paralleled by the growth of charter management organizations in the USA (Bulkley and Hicks, 2005; Farrell et al., 2012). This has led to the creation of new roles including executive heads and principals (Chapman et al., 2010; Harris et al., 2007; Higham, 2010; Higham and Hopkins, 2007). The concept of leadership implicit in these new roles is that of heroic or strong leadership exercised by highly competent individuals (Wright, 2001). This reflects a policy discourse in which headteachers and school principals are positioned as akin to corporate Chief Executive Officers (Fitzgerald and Gunter, 2008) managing different parts of a single business.

In some cases in England and the USA, relationships between schools are similar to corporate mergers and takeovers. However, looser collaborations are also found and here there is greater similarity with those found internationally. For example, 'communities of schools' in Belgium consist of clusters with collective leadership by principals, involving varying degrees of collaboration, led by a co-ordinating director (Day et al., 2008). Similarly, in some areas in Finland school principals are shared between schools (Hargreaves et al., 2008). More informal collaborations are found in school networks in a number of other countries, which increasingly have been promoted and encouraged through policy and financial incentives (Matthews et al., 2008; Pont and Hopkins, 2008).

As previously stated, the use of system leadership as a theoretical tool has primarily developed in the English context before, more recently, being applied elsewhere (Pont et al., 2008). Thus, it is worth examining in some detail developments in England as these have influenced the different ways it is used and currently have considerable policy significance (Hargreaves, 2011; NCSL, 2012). Phenomena such as school collaboration and schools sharing practices clearly pre-date the origins of references to system leadership. Teacher-led interschool professional and curriculum development were significant features of the school landscape prior to the 1990s (Higham et al., 2009). However, accountability practices and other changes in school policy led to a competitive environment between schools.

In England, by the early part of this century, increases in student attainment and other measures that were, apparently, initial outcomes of top down policies began to slow (Hargreaves, 2003; Higham et al., 2009). As a result, interest increased in bottom up reform as well as in greater school collaboration and school to school support. This led in the English context to, or was encouraged by, a variety of initiatives (Earl and Katz, 2007; Hadfield, 2007; Harris and Townsend, 2007; Higham et al., 2009). These included the designation of schools as variously Specialist, Beacon and Leading Edge Schools and the promotion of these as providing either specialist subject or more general school improvement leadership. Developments such as the School Improvement Partner programme (Higham et al., 2009) led to school to school support at executive level. Support for Networked Learning Communities (Hadfield, 2007; Jackson and Temperley, 2007) and similar initiatives created opportunities for wider collaboration across a range of issues. More recently, the concept of system leadership underpins the development of a variety of designated system leadership roles and the

English Teaching School Alliance (TSA) initiative (NCSL, 2012). The last involves high performing schools providing leadership to networks of schools. TSAs are intended to collaboratively take greater responsibility for initial teacher training, professional and leadership development, school to school support, as well as school-led research and development.

A variety of roles, developed and promoted by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), an executive agency of the government's Department for Education (Bolam, 2004), are designed to encourage cross school leadership at, until recently, a senior headteacher level (Higham and Hopkins, 2007; Robinson, 2011). More recently, the NCSL has developed a comprehensive framework for, what it describes as, system leadership (Hargreaves, 2011), identifying the following types of system leader: National Leader of Education, Local Leader of Education and Specialist Leader of Education (SLE) designations (NCSL, 2012). SLEs are recruited predominantly from the middle tier of school leaders, rather than headteachers, and age phase and similar coordinators in primary schools or those in subject leadership roles in secondary schools. SLEs are identified by, and many work through, TSAs. The SLE role is to provide school to school support across a range of specific areas including subject expertise. Thus the SLE designation represents a policy extension of system leadership. The role of the NCSL in the promotion of system leadership, highlights the tensions and possible contradictions within this approach which has been identified as a new way of continuing centralized control (Hatcher, 2008). Nevertheless, given these changes in the landscape of school to school relationships and that system leadership has achieved significant status in the national policy discourse of England at least, it is clear that clarifying how the term system leadership is used is important.

## **System Leaders and System Leadership**

In an interconnected world the boundaries of what constitutes a system are fluid, relative and situated. From a systems perspective any individual, group or organization may constitute a system. The meaning given to 'system' in any particular situation depends on what arenas of action are attended to or considered by actors. Three of these that are used in system leadership research and policy literature are discussed in this section: interschool leadership; systemically orientated leadership practice or leadership style; and system-wide leadership.

A first meaning of system leadership is leadership in the system beyond the leader's own organizational home; that is leadership within the meso-system. The examples and literature discussed in the previous section evidence the range of different forms that this can take. The degree of systemic leadership varies according to the strength and nature of ties and relationships (Chapman et al., 2010) and is shaped by the features of the different arenas.

A second meaning of system leadership focuses on it as a form of leadership practice or orientation (Pont and Hopkins, 2008) informed by systems thinking (Fullan, 2006). This form of leadership practice entails leaders paying attention to, and nurturing, lateral school to school networks to promote self-organization within the context of vertical relationships that may themselves be reconceptualized through ideas drawn from complexity theory, such as co-dependency (Fullan, 2004, 2006). System leadership, here, is an adaptive leadership style or disposition that is based on an understanding of the complexity of educational contexts as involving multiple, interrelated systems. This meaning of system leadership focuses on how leadership is exercised, as much as the context in which it occurs or its potential effects. Thus, it represents an approach to leadership or a leadership style that has a systemic orientation. Here the focus is on the micro-systems that are constellated through leadership activity. This has influenced thinking in England in relation to the NCSL initiatives referred to above (Hargreaves, 2011) but also elsewhere such as the system oriented approach of Austria's Leadership Academy (Stoll et al., 2008).

Based on survey research, Hopkins and Higham(2007) identified five characteristic forms of activity of such system leaders: leading improvements in others' schools and measuring success in terms of student learning achievement and welfare; committing staff to the improvement of both their own and others' schools; leading the development of schools as personal and professional learning communities; leading work for equity and inclusion; and managing strategically the impact of classroom, school and system on one another. The headteacher as system leader represents, it has been argued, the emergence or propagation of a new professional identity (Hatcher, 2008) and system leadership as a professional movement (Hopkins and Higham, 2007). However, it is important to note that there may be gap between policy and actual practice. Robinson (2011), in a study of primary headteachers engaged in roles that involved leadership beyond their own schools, found that such roles were more of a strand that added to their professional repertoire rather than a new central feature.

This form of leadership embraces Fullan's (2004, 2006) call for systems thinking by educational leaders as an essential tool to enact change at the level of the educational system as a whole. Thus, it links to a third meaning of 'system' in the phrase system leadership – system-wide or the macrosystem. Here it is important to note the two different ways system leadership is used in this regard. One is descriptive – that those such as executive headteachers are system leaders because their actions influence system-wide change. The second is normative – that headteachers and others should lead system wide change and this underpins the concept of a self-improving school system(NCSL, 2012).Together they form a leadership paradigm that is central to a policy discourse that promotes school-led change in contrast to centralized directive change by government (Fullan, 2004, 2006; Hargreaves, 2011; Hopkins, 2007; NCSL, 2012). This is notwithstanding that the extent to which school system leadership does represent a change from previous policies is contested, as both in England (Hatcher, 2008) and elsewhere (Matthews et al., 2008; Stoll et al., 2008) power to direct the system is still exercised centrally.

The three meanings of system leadership, identified above, are interconnected and the boundaries between them are blurred. Nevertheless, they direct attention to meso, micro and macro aspects of system leadership, these being: the arenas and nature of leadership activity and relationality; a form of leadership orientation, practice and identity; and the actual or intended effects of activity and practice in relation to the macro-system. A common thread in all three meanings is the importance of a sense of moral purpose (Fullan, 2004; Hargreaves, 2011; Higham et al., 2009) and this is discussed later.

## **Leadership in Professional Development and Collaborative Networks**

Previous descriptions of system leadership and, until recently, policy initiatives using this discourse have been principally concerned with headteachers as system leaders. However, in relation to all three meanings of system leadership, the argument made in this article is that at least some teacher leaders are, or have the potential to be, system leaders. This is most obviously apparent in relation to leadership in interschool contexts, particularly in connection with professional development and collaborative networks. David Hargreaves (2003) identifies the importance of both instigated formal and emergent informal, self-organizing networks for the transfer of innovations and desirable practices. 'Practitioner-champions' have an important role in both forms of network. However, developing an understanding of educational networks, including their leadership, presents significant theoretical and methodological challenges (Hadfield, 2007; Hadfield and Jopling, 2012; McCormick et al., 2011). The challenge is compounded because network leadership frequently emerges through externally prompted or promoted activities in schools, often in response to national, institutional and cross institutional policy drivers. Further, interschool system leadership is exercised in different types of contexts or through different types of role as the following examples illustrate.

Teacher-led professional development programmes, projects and activities that have a specific focus are important contexts for the development of networks. Such projects can be understood as part of an international tendency that emphasizes the importance of teachers setting the agenda for development, interacting with peers, and evolving and testing their own responses to pedagogic challenges (Coolahan, 2002; Fraser et al., 2007). One of the longest standing and most successful of these is the National Writing Project (NWP) in the USA (Lieberman and Friedrich, 2007; Lieberman and Pointer Mace, 2009; Wood and Lieberman, 2000). The NWP is a bottom up teacher-led professional development project in which veterans of the project go on to lead professional development activities for other teachers (Wood and Lieberman, 2000). The programme of the National Centre for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics (NCETM), a government funded initiative in England, offers a variety of professional development opportunities and related support infrastructure (Hoyles, 2010). One strand of the NCETM's activity has been funding teacher-led Mathematics Knowledge Networks. These bring teachers together from different schools to work on areas of common interest. Such networks, and similar projects, have supported subject leadership that extends beyond leaders' own schools, with the NCETM's support providing a powerful warrant for this (Boylan et al., 2011). Unlike these two examples with a strong subject focus, the English Learning How to Learn (LHTL) Project had a more general focus on learning practices including assessment for learning. A key role in the LHTL project was the school coordinator who acted as a broker between their school and other schools in local networks and the national project and also had a leadership role within the local networks (McCormick et al., 2011). Examples like these are important arenas, not only for enabling leadership beyond the teachers' own school but also for supporting the development of teacher leadership within participants' own schools (Lieberman and Friedrich, 2007).

The NWP, NCETM and LHTL are projects that focus on specific areas of pedagogy, curriculum and teacher learning. Important, too, are networks that involve collaborations between schools on multiple issues and with multiple points of connection. Examples here include the English Education Action Zone initiative (Power et al., 2004; Simkins, 2005), Networked Learning Communities (Earl and Katz, 2007; Hadfield, 2007), Singaporean teacher networks (Tripp, 2004) and the Australian National Schools Network (Sachs, 2003). Often these types of network have a focus on teacher-led enquiry and research to support professional development and change in school and classroom practices. In the English Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) formal leadership was 6 Educational Management Administration & Leadership 6 initially identified with, usually two, headteachers as co-leaders. However, the forms of leadership that developed were more complex than this with significant levels of leadership distribution. Other staff members took responsibility for leading teams within schools, being key links between school staff and the wider network, participating and leading interschool collaborative groups and taking network leadership roles as they emerged or were designated (Earl and Katz, 2007). As with the more specific professional development examples discussed above, emergence, fluidity and the interplay of formal and informal roles were important in leadership of the NLCs (Hadfield, 2007).

A third area in which teacher system leadership manifests, and that requires further research and theorizing, concerns those roles and designations that are intended to involve interschool support. Notable examples are Advanced Skills Teachers (AST) in Australia and England (Smyth and Shacklock, 1998; Taylor and Jennings, 2004) and Senior Subject Advisers in New Zealand (Taylor et al., 2011a). In England, up till the discontinuation of the role in 2013, those designated as ASTs, recognized as expert teacher leaders, were generally expected to provide support and professional development to teachers in other schools for up to one day per week. In England, the National Strategies curriculum and professional development programme (Earl et al., 2002) developed a more informal designation of 'leading teachers' intended as a network of local subject experts in mathematics and English. The new Specialist Leader of Education designation (NCSL, 2012) can be seen in many ways as a further development of these initiatives

Educational networks and relationships that arise from collaborative projects and from temporary school to school collaborations are relatively loose. However, as discussed above, more formal school collaborations such as federations and other forms of shared governance create more sustained, long lasting and stronger network connections. In shared governance situations interschool and other extended leadership roles are most easily identified at executive level but they also create the need and opportunity for collaborative leadership at other levels in the organizational system (Chapman et al., 2010).

Studies of leadership exercised in these collaborative situations are appropriate contexts for the deployment of concepts from network theory (see Hadfield, 2007; Hadfield and Jopling 2012; McCormick et al., 2011). These can be used to conceptualize arenas of leadership activity in terms of network structures, positionality of leaders in networks and interconnection between networks. As well as to analyse the nature and strength of relationships; the modes of connection (face to face, email and so on); and the form of interactions and transactions such as brokerage, knowledge sharing and knowledge creation.

### **Teacher leadership, distributed leadership and system leadership**

Analysis of teacher system leadership in the above contexts extends, and can be informed by, existing theories of teacher and distributed leadership. In the USA the concept of teacher leadership embodies a well-developed tradition that has generated a significant body of empirical research. It has led to the reification of teacher leadership into identifiable teacher leadership roles or the re-designation of traditional roles such as curriculum leaders (York-Barr and Duke, 2004), as well as specific programmes to promote teacher leadership (Taylor et al., 2011b). However, many studies have shown that teacher leadership may be exercised by those with no formal role (de Lima, 2008; Fairman and MacKenzie, 2012; Harris, 2005; Sachs, 2003; York-Barr and Duke, 2004). It also appears to be a characteristic of many teacher leaders who do not have formal leadership roles that they do not describe themselves as leaders (Earl and Katz, 2007; Fairman and McKenzie, 2012; Muijs and Harris, 2006; York-Barr and Duke, 2004). In England the term 'teacher leadership' is not often used in schools (Muijs and Harris, Boylan: Deepening System Leadership 7 7 2006), and discussion of leadership in interschool collaborations has also been largely absent from literature on teacher leadership until recently (Fairman and MacKenzie, 2012).

As with teacher leadership, the vast majority of literature on distributed leadership considers distribution within the school or college organization, often taking as a starting point the type of leadership exercised within formal school or organizational leadership roles. 'Distribution' here evokes a sense of being passed out or shared across the organization by those in central leadership roles – essentially delegation of authority. This draws on more traditional concepts of leadership based on relations between leaders and followers in which power to lead is held by individuals or located within roles. Here, the concept of distributed and, by extension, teacher leadership may, seemingly paradoxically, be compatible with what has been described as strong or charismatic leadership. Such school leaders can, if they choose, exercise their authority to introduce and support distributed and teacher leadership initiatives (Woods et al., 2004). Similarly, teacher system leadership is supported by school leaders who promote and value interschool collaborations (Boylan et al., 2011; Hadfield, 2007). Thus, it is not necessarily in opposition to headteacher system leadership but may be a complement to it.

MacBeath (2005) develops a taxonomy of distributed leadership that identifies different ways in which the transfer of leadership from the top downwards may occur: formally (through roles/job description); pragmatically (through necessity or ad hoc delegation); strategically (by appointment); and incrementally (devolving greater responsibility as capacity is demonstrated). Another important, and an under-theorized, aspect of distributed leadership is that exercised or claimed by teachers through their own activity. MacBeath's taxonomy of ways distributed leadership occur is pertinent



to analysing leadership trajectories of system leaders involved in the professional development initiatives and networks discussed earlier.

### **Moral Imperatives, Identity and Activism**

Headteacher system leadership, as noted above, is identified with a sense of moral purpose (Fullan, 2004; Hargreaves, 2011; Higham et al., 2009). The argument made is that if school leaders are to lead beyond their own schools and engage in collaborations that have system-wide benefits, or be committed to improvements for all schools and learners, then the motivation for this will be ethical. A theory of teacher system leadership, similarly, needs to account for why and how teacher leaders will extend their activity or make sense of their practice in relation to the meso- and macro-systems.

Although the importance of moral purpose in teacher leadership has been recognized (for example, Day, 2000; Fullan, 1995; Hargreaves, 2011; Sachs, 2003; Yorke and Barr, 2004), this is not a prominent feature in many discussions of teacher leadership and the nature of teacher leaders' moral purposes is under-researched. However, moral imperatives and collective purposes do appear to be an important motivation to lead for teachers in studies of teachers leading curriculum and professional development projects (Hadfield and Jopling, 2012; Margolis and Deuel, 2009; Lieberman and Wood, 2002). The involvement of teacher leaders in these types of projects is often undertaken voluntarily with limited, or no, time to compensate for effort. Given this, it is clear that the motivation is, at least in part, altruistic. In researching teacher system leaders' moral purposes it is important to recognize that these will not necessarily be similar to those of headteachers. For example, the motivations of participants in both the NWP and NCETM projects are closely related to, and help to develop, specific subject professional identities and this informs and shapes the expression of moral purpose (Lieberman and Wood, 2002; Boylan et al., 2011). Further, often teachers who seek designation or deployment in teacher leadership roles do so because of strong beliefs about the importance of teaching (Taylor and Jennings, 2004).

Teachers' moral purposes are rooted in teacher identity (Lasky, 2005). Judyth Sachs (2001, 2003) proposes two categories of teacher identity based on analysis of teacher engagement in professional development and educational change projects. One is a managerial and entrepreneurial professional identity that is formed in relation to prevailing managerialist discourses of standardization and accountability. The same discourse is, unsurprisingly, influential in the educational leadership literature, including that on teacher and distributed leadership (Fitzgerald and Gunter, 2008). An alternative form of teacher identity is centered on professional learning, participation in school and teacher communities, collaboration with teachers and others, cooperative forms of professional development and organizational relationships and activism based on moral and social purposes (Sachs, 2003). The activist professional is both a practitioner champion (Hargreaves, 2003) and, as an innovator, a knowledge creator and sharer.

The activist professional, like headteacher system leaders, engages in collaboration and partnership beyond their own site for both immediate and systemic educational change. Where schools support and foster this form of teacher identity, there is the possibility of schools and teachers becoming part of a national, or, in the language used in this article, a system-wide social movement to enhance teaching and improve student outcomes (Sachs, 2003). This expands teacher professionalism from their own schools to interschool arenas and to thinking systemically. Viewing classroom teachers as systemic thinkers is unusual in the context of Anglophone countries that have experienced an era of prescription (Hopkins, 2007) and leaderism (Simkins, 2012). However, in other contexts, such as Finland, in which trust pervades the relationship between policy makers and other actors in the school system, including teachers (Hargreaves et al., 2008; Sahlberg, 2011), this is less likely to appear novel.

Synthesizing the earlier description of system leadership by school leaders (Higham et al., 2009) with the notion of the activist professional (Sachs, 2003), leads to the following description of teacher system leaders that can inform research into their practices. They are practitioner champions (Hargreaves, 2003) who: lead and share innovations and/or generate practical knowledge beyond their own school; influence improvements for student learning, achievement and welfare in other schools through collaboration with other teacher leaders; gain or inspire the commitment of others in their own and others' schools; lead the development of personal and professional learning communities that cross organizational boundaries or are networked with other learning communities; infuse their practice with moral purpose shared with others; and act with an awareness of the potential strategic impact of their own and others' practice on the wider system.

The importance of researching issues related to the personal dimensions of teacher leadership has been discussed previously (Frost and Harris, 2003). The activities involved in teacher system leadership are likely to place further demands on teachers' authority, and require new and different knowledge, including of organizational structures and networks. Further, it underlines the importance of situated understanding and interpersonal skills, in particular sensitivity to differences between situations and a micro-political awareness to act in relation to these. The teacher system leader identity includes a systemic orientation where purposes and activity are informed by and are meaningful in relation to knowledge of the wider system.

### **System Leadership from Below**

At the start of this article three meanings of system leadership were discussed. Thus far, the argument has been made that teacher system leadership is found as interschool leadership and as systemically informed leadership practice. Given teacher leaders' positioning and prevalent forms of school organization, it is unsurprising that they do not have the power to engage in strategic Boylan: Deepening System Leadership 9 9 management of resources at a system level – a feature identified as being characteristic of executive system leaders (Higham and Hopkins, 2007; Higham et al., 2009).

However, teacher leaders, like other educational leaders, do contribute accumulatively to system-wide change. Theories of distributed leadership provide one way to account for this. The theoretical roots of the concept of distributed leadership can be found in theories of distributed cognition (Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2004) and activity theory (Gronn, 2002). Understanding the distribution of leadership as akin to situated distribution of cognition considers leadership activity as constituted in the interaction of different actors involved in a particular context (Harris, 2007; Spillane et al., 2004). Gronn's (2000, 2002) perspective has similar consequences for leadership as the notion of distributed cognition has for analysis of learning; it widens the unit of analysis from a focus on individuals in roles to consider activity and practice. This theoretical understanding of leadership as distributed may be extended to consider not only the meso-systems and cross school networks discussed earlier, but also the macro system of schooling as a whole. This focuses attention on the process and activity of leading as intentional activity that either maintains the reproduction of practices or instigates or guides change in them. This perspective provides analytical tools for enquiring in to the actual effects of system leadership.

Tracing, analysing and promulgating system leadership from below requires different research tools than those used to understand executive leadership. Hadfield's (2007) account of network leadership draws on concepts developed in the analysis of new social movements (Crossley, 2002). New social movements are heterogeneous networks bound by participants' shared moral purpose. This purpose may be expressed in different ways by participants in activity or in relation to specific goals related to that purpose. The shared moral purpose is frequently developed in opposition to prevailing situations. Social movements are not constant or uniform so, as in educational networks, involvement of participants will vary in terms of level of engagement and roles undertaken. Leaders in new social movements, like those instigating educational networks, have to engage in the

development of new structures, enrolling and mobilizing others into activity. Movement leaders influence identity formation through the development of meaning for others (Schneider and Somers, 2006). While a full discussion is outside the scope of this article, this potentially offers a starting point for analysis of the way in which teachers and others use new technologies and literacies such as online forums and blogs to influence others.

Leadership in complex systems and social movements is often exercised by those whose influence is greater than the authority that their formal role suggests (Schneider and Somers, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2009; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). This creates methodological challenges in assessing the effects of their activity or indeed, potentially, in identifying teacher system leaders at all. This challenge is further compounded because teacher leaders of all types appear to be resistant to identifying themselves with the term 'leader', apparently due to a concern for relationships with peers (Lieberman and Friedrich, 2007; Muijs and Harris, 2003). Therefore, paradoxically, it may be those teacher leaders who are most attuned to their relationships to the systems they are part of, who may not identify themselves as system leaders.

There is an apparent paradox between the idea of system leadership from below and the nature of some of the examples discussed above that are interventions funded by governments or where teacher system leadership is enabled or encouraged by school leaders. Here, once again, analysis of social movements is helpful. Although leadership in such movements is often emergent, to be effective it requires support of formal organizational structures that can confer legitimacy (Schneider and Somers, 2006). Further, social movement literature suggests that it is precisely a sense of being part of a larger movement that serves to legitimize and support engagement in activity (Hadfield, 2007). Here, the scope of relationality that needs to be considered extends to the wider system and other system leaders.

Although parallels such as these may be useful to elucidate features of teacher system leadership activities, the relationship between policy-supported or sanctioned programmes, as well as formal and informal roles and teacher system leadership is clearly a complex one. The material-semiotic methodology of actor network theory may support analysis here in tracing the nature of relationality and the translation of policy and programme aims by different actors (Boylan, 2010). There is need for empirical work in this area to identify the extent to which teacher system leaders, and indeed system leaders in general, make sense of their activity in relation to considerations of the macro system and the effects of their activity on it. One example of such work would be to examine the role that significant layers of activist teachers, such as those involved in subject and special interest associations and networks, have in shaping and developing curricula and practices that in turn influence policy.

The systemic influence of teacher leaders as an emergent effect of activity can be understood as constituting system leadership from below. This is a heuristic or methodological tool for considering the relationship between actors and systemic change. It points to how the actions of individuals effect change, or are intended to effect change, not only within particular parts of the system but in the system as whole. Thus, system leadership from below is intended as an analytical perspective as much as an empirical description.

However, while the focus of this argument is a theoretical one, implicit in it is the contention that, for schools to truly lead system-wide change, the collective leadership potential of all teachers, and indeed the wider school work force and students, must be recognized and developed (Hargreaves, 2011; Hopkins, 2006) and for reform to be system wide and system deep (Hopkins, 2006). It is important to acknowledge those critical voices that point to the connection between teacher and distributed leadership discourse and policy and the regulatory and performative regimes that are dominant in many education systems (Ball, 2010; Fitzgerald and Gunter, 2008; Hartley, 2010). Similar arguments have been made in relation to system leadership in the current English context

(Hatcher, 2007) and, by extension, could be made about the concept of system leadership from below. However, because the term leadership and its teacher and distributed variants are so significant in education, as increasingly is the idea of focusing on the 'system' (Pont et al., 2008), it is important to rediscover or develop notions of leadership that locate agency with teachers.

## **Conclusion**

Leadership across educational organizations is increasingly important internationally. There is a relative lack of research on the practices and identities of system leaders whatever their status or formal role in schools. Such research requires further conceptualization of system leadership. This article has argued that, for the concept of system leadership to have analytical power, it is important to distinguish different ways that the term is used. A review of the development of its use and of the existing research and policy literature on system leadership has identified three important meanings: as a means to refer to interschool leadership beyond the actor's own school – the sites or arenas of leadership; as systemically informed leadership practice or orientation and, implicated in this, leadership identity; and, in relation to system-wide leadership, both as a description of the effects of system leadership and a policy stance that advocates leadership of the system by schools. These distinctions attend to meso, micro and macro expressions of system leadership. They are potentially valuable for future analysis of system leadership discourse and of the practice of both headteacher and teacher system leaders.

The second and central argument that has been made is that, in relation to all three meanings of system leadership, there is a need to recognise teacher leaders as system leaders. In relation to the first meaning of system leadership – interschool collaboration – there are four distinct contexts that have created opportunities or the need for teacher system leadership: subject specific and pedagogical professional development programmes and projects; interschool collaborations; teacher leader designations that involve working beyond the teachers' own school; and shared governance arrangements. Another lens for considering teacher system leadership is as an extension of theories of distributed and teacher leadership in a context where organizational boundaries are distinctions between leadership roles are increasingly blurred. Here, analytical tools drawn from the analysis of networks and similar phenomena are relevant.

One approach to understanding and researching teacher system leadership is to focus on teacher identity. The model proposed above of system teacher leadership identity and practice synthesizes descriptions of an activist teacher identity (Sachs, 2003) and the practices of headteacher system leaders (Higham et al., 2009). It highlights the importance of moral purpose as an attribute of educational leadership regardless of former role. Although there is lack of detailed research evidence about teacher leaders' moral purposes, and this is clearly a gap that needs to be addressed, they are widely recognized as important. Recognizing that teacher leaders also make sense of and inform their practices in relation to issues beyond their organization, implies that they too can have a systemic leadership orientation. More generally, the different aspects of teacher system leader identity provide a starting point for researching teacher system leadership. In addition, such research should take account of the importance of the relationship between formal and informal roles in such contexts, including the possibility of opportunistic (MacBeath, 2005) system leadership, as well as the interplay between teacher leadership and the warrant and support by provided by school leaders as well as national policy initiatives.

The third argument made in the article is in relation to the system leadership paradigm – that is the view that system-wide change should and can be led by schools. If the power to influence change is distributed across the wider educational system then this not limited to those with executive leadership roles. Therefore, attention must be paid to the way in which the collective activity of teachers can have systemic effects. This is encapsulated in the concept of system leadership from below. Here, analyses of social movements are relevant and a number of concepts and

methodological tools have been identified that are useful in this regard. Such a perspective entails a significantly different approach to understanding the activity and importance of teacher system leaders, such as Specialist Leaders of Education and other similar designations discussed earlier, than as implementers of a centrally directed school improvement agenda or one defined by headteachers.

The concepts of teacher system leadership and system leadership from below offer a complement to the concept of executive system leadership centred on the headteacher or principal. They extend theories of activist teacher and distributed leadership into interorganizational and network environments and identify moral purpose with educational leaders regardless of formal role. This deepens system leadership conceptually and, potentially, can inform a deepening of systemic leadership practice.

## **Acknowledgements**

The arguments presented in this article were informed by research undertaken as part of the National Centre for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics Impact Study (2009-2010) funded by the NCETM. Thanks are due to Mike Coldwell and Tim Simkins for discussions during the study and on drafts of the article. Also I am grateful for the comments on drafts by the following colleagues - Cathy Burnett, Guy Merchant and Andy Hobson - as well as the anonymous reviewers.

## **References**

Bolam R (2004) Reflections on the NCSL from a historical perspective. *Education Management Administration and Leadership* 32(3): 251–267.

Boylan M (2010) 'It's getting me thinking and I'm an old cynic': Exploring the dynamics of teacher change. *Journal of Mathematics Teacher Education* 13(5): 383–395.

Boylan M, Coldwell M and Simkins T (2011) Complexity and leadership in teacher professional development: the case of the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference, 6– 8 September, 2011, London. Available at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/221007.pdf> (accessed 1st October 2013).

Ball S (2010) New voices, new knowledges and the new politics of educational research: the gathering of a perfect storm? *European Educational Research Journal* 9(2): 124–137.

Bolam R (2004) Reflections on the NCSL from a historical perspective. *Education Management Administration & Leadership* 32(3): 251–267.

Bulkley K and Hicks J (2005) Managing community: professional community in charter schools operated by educational management organizations. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 41: 306–347.

Chapman C, Lindsay G, Muijs D, et al. (2010) Governance, leadership and management in federations of schools. *School effectiveness and school improvement: An International Journal of Research, Policy and Practice* 21(1): 53–74.

Chapman C and Salokangas M (2013) Independent state-funded schools: some reflections on recent developments. *School Leadership and Management*, 32(5): 473–486.

Coolahan J (2002) *Teacher Education and the Teaching Career in an Era of Lifelong Learning: OECD Education Working Paper, Number 2*. Paris: Education Directorate OECD. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/226408628504> (accessed 1 June 2011).

Crossley N (2002) *Making Sense of Social Movements*. Buckingham: OUP.

- Day C (2000) Teachers in the Twenty-First Century: Time to renew the vision. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 6(1): 101–115.
- Day C, Møller J, Nusche D and Pont B (2008) The Flemish (Belgian) approach to system leadership. In: Pont B, Nusche D and Hopkins D (eds) *Improving School Leadership Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership*. Paris: OECD, pp.153–178.
- de Lima JA (2008) Department networks and distributed leadership in schools. *School Leadership and Management* 28(2): 159–187.
- Earl L and Katz S (2007) Leadership in networked learning communities: defining the terrain. *School Leadership and Management* 27(3): 239–258.
- Earl L, Watson N and Torrance N (2002) Front row seats: what we've learned from the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in England. *Journal of Educational Change* 3: 35–53.
- Fairman J and Mackenzie S (2012) Spheres of teacher leadership action for learning. *Professional Development in Education* 38(2): 229–246.
- Farrell C, Wohlstetter P and Smith J (2012) Charter management organizations: an emerging approach to scaling up what works. *Educational Policy*, 26(4): 499–532.
- Fitzgerald T and Gunter H (2008) Contesting the orthodoxy of teacher leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice* 11(4): 331–340.
- Fraser C, Kennedy A, Reid L and McKinney S (2007) Teachers' continuing professional development: contested concepts, understandings and models. *Journal of In-Service Education* 33(2): 153–169.
- Frost D and Harris A (2003) Teacher leadership: towards a research agenda. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 33(3): 479–498.
- Fullan M (1995) The school as learning organization: distant dreams. *Theory into Practice* 34(4): 230–235.
- Fullan M (2004) *Systems Thinkers in Action: Moving Beyond the Standards Plateau*. London: DfES Innovation Unit/NCSE.
- Fullan M (2006) The future of educational change: system thinkers in action. *Journal of Educational Change* 7: 113–122.
- Gronn P (2000) Distributed properties: a new architecture for leadership. *Educational Management and Administration* 28(3): 317–338.
- Gronn P (2002) Distributed leadership as a unit of analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly* 13(4): 423–451.
- Gronn P (2008) The future of distributed leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration* 46(2): 141–158.
- Hadfield M (2007) Co-leaders and middle leaders: the dynamic between leaders and followers in networks of schools. *School Leadership and Management* 27(3): 259–283.
- Hadfield M and Jopling M (2012) How might better network theories support school leadership research? *School Leadership and Management* 32(2): 109–121.

- Hargreaves A, Hala'asz G and Pont B (2008) The Finnish approach to system leadership. In: Pont B, Nusche D and Hopkins D (eds) *Improving School Leadership Volume 2: Case Studies On System Leadership*. OECD, pp. 69–110.
- Hargreaves D (2003) *Education Epidemic: Transforming Secondary Schools Through Innovation Networks*. London: Demos.
- Hargreaves D (2011) *Leading a Self-Improving School System*. Nottingham. NCSL. Available at: <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/10429/1/download%3Fid%3D154604%26filename%3Dleading-a-self-improving-school-system.pdf> (accessed 30 October 2012).
- Harris A (2003) Teacher leadership as distributed leadership: heresy, fantasy or possibility? *School Leadership and Management* 23(3): 313–324.
- Harris A (2005) Teacher leadership: more than just a feel-good factor? *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 4(3): 201–219.
- Harris A (2007) Distributed leadership: conceptual confusion and empirical reticence. *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 10(3): 315–325.
- Harris A and Townsend A (2007) Developing leaders for tomorrow: realizing system potential. *School Leadership and Management* 27(2): 167–177.
- Harris A, Brown D and Abbott I (2007) Executive leadership: another lever in the system? *School Leadership and Management* 26(4): 397–409.
- Hartley D (2010) Paradigms: How far does research in distributed leadership 'stretch'? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 38(3) 271–285.
- Hatcher R (2008) System leadership, networks and the question of power. *Management in Education* 22(2): 24–30.
- Higham R (2010) Federations and system leadership. In: Hargreaves A, Lieberman A, Fullan M and Hopkins D (eds) *Second International Handbook of Educational Change*. New York: Springer, pp. 725–739.
- Higham R and Hopkins D (2007) System leadership: mapping the landscape. *School Leadership and Management* 27(2): 147–166.
- Higham R, Hopkins D and Matthews P (2009) *System Leadership in Practice*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Hopkins D (2006) A short primer on system leadership. Paper presented at OECD Activity on Improving School Leadership, international conference: *International Perspectives on School Leadership for Systemic Improvement*, 6 July. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/37133273.pdf>
- Hopkins D (2007) *Every School a Great School: Realizing the Potential of System Leadership*. Maidenhead: OUP/McGraw-Hill.
- Hoyles C (2010) Creating an inclusive culture in mathematics through subject-specific teacher professional development: a case study from England. *Journal of Mathematics and Culture* 5(1): 44–61.

Jackson D and Temperley J (2007). From professional learning community to networked learning community. In: Stoll L and Louis K (eds) *Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, Depth and Dilemmas*. Maidenhead: OUP/McGraw-Hill, pp. 45–62.

Lasky S (2005) A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 21(8): 899–916.

Leithwood K, Jantzi D, Earl L, et al. (2004) Strategic leadership for large-scale reform: the case of England's national literacy and numeracy strategy. *School Leadership and Management* 24(1): 57–79.

Lieberman A and Friedrich L (2007) Teachers, writers, leaders. *Educational Leadership* 65(1): 42–47.

Lieberman A and Pointer Mace DH (2009) The role of 'accomplished teachers' in professional learning communities: uncovering practice and enabling leadership. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 15(4): 459–470.

Lieberman A and Wood D (2002) Untangling the threads: networks, community and teacher learning in the National Writing Project. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 8(3): 295–302.

MacBeath J (2005) Leadership as distributed: a matter of practice. *School leadership and management* 25(4): 349–366.

Margolis J and Deuel A (2009) Teacher leaders in action, motivation, morality and money. *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 8(3): 264–286.

Matthews P, Moorman H and Nusche D (2008) Building leadership capacity for system improvement in Victoria, Australia. In: Pont B, Nusche D and Hopkins D (eds) *Improving School Leadership Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership*. Paris: OECD, pp. 179–213.

McCormick R, Fox A, Carmichael P and Proctor R (2011) *Researching and Understanding Educational Networks*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Muijs D and Harris A (2006) Teacher led school improvement: teacher leadership in the UK. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 22(8): 961–972.

NCSL (2012) System leadership prospectus. Available at: <http://www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege/docinfo?id%176721andfilename%system-leadership-prospectus.pdf> (accessed 30 October 2012).

Pont B and Hopkins D (2008) Approaches to system leadership lessons learned and policy pointers. In: Pont B, Nusche D and Hopkins D (eds) *Improving School Leadership Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership*. Paris: OECD, pp. 253–274.

Pont B, Nusche D and Hopkins D (eds) (2008) *Improving School Leadership Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership*. Paris: OECD.

Power S, Whitty G, Gerwitz S, et al. (2004) Paving a 'third way': a policy trajectory analysis of education action zones. *Research Papers in Education* 19(4): 453–475.

Robinson S (2011) Primary headteachers: new leadership roles inside and outside the school. *Education Management Administration & Leadership* 39(1): 63–83.

Sachs J (2001) Teacher professional identity: competing discourses, competing outcomes. *Journal of Educational Policy* 16(2): 149–161.



- Sachs J (2003) *The Activist Teaching Profession*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Sahlberg P (2011) *Finnish Lessons: What can the World Learn From Educational Change in Finland?* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Schneider M and Somers M (2006) Organizations as complex adaptive systems: implications of complexity theory for leadership research. *The Leadership Quarterly* 17: 351–365.
- Simkins T (2005) Leadership in education: ‘What works’ or ‘what makes sense’? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 33(1): 9–26.
- Simkins T (2012) Understanding school leadership and management development in England retrospect and prospect. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 40(5): 621–640.
- Smyth J and Shacklock G (1998) *Re-Making Teaching: Ideology, Policy and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Spillane J (2006) *Distributed Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane J, Halverson R and Diamond J (2004) Towards a theory of leadership practice: a distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 36(1): 3–34.
- Stoll L, Moorman H and Rahm S (2008) Building leadership capacity for system improvement in Austria. In: Pont B, Nusche D and Hopkins D (eds) *Improving School Leadership Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership*. Paris: OECD, pp. 215–251.
- Taylor C and Jennings S (2004) *The Work of Advanced Skills Teachers*. Reading: CfBT
- Taylor M, Goetze J, Klein E, et al. (2011a) Changing leadership: teachers lead the way for schools that learn. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27(5): 920–929.
- Taylor M, Yates A, Meyer L and Kinsella P (2011b) Teacher professional leadership in support of teacher professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27(1): 85–94.
- Tripp D (2004) Teachers’ networks: a new approach to professional development of teachers in Singapore. In: Day C and Sachs J (eds) *International Handbook on the CPD of Teachers*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, pp. 191–214.
- Uhl-Bien M and Marion R (2009) Complexity leadership in bureaucratic forms of organizing: a meso model. *The Leadership Quarterly* 20(4): 631–650.
- Uhl-Bien M, Marion R and McKelvey B (2007) Complexity leadership theory: shifting leadership from the industrial age to the knowledge era. *The Leadership Quarterly* 18(4): 298–318.
- Wood D and Lieberman A (2000) Teachers as authors: the National Writing Project’s approach to professional development. *International Journal of Leadership in Education Theory and Practice* 3(3): 255–273.
- Woods P, Bennett N, Harvey J and Wise C (2004) Variabilities and dualities in distributed leadership: findings from a systematic literature review. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 32(4): 439–457.
- Wright N (2001) Leadership, ‘bastard leadership’ and managerialism: confronting twin paradoxes in the Blair education project. *Educational Management & Administration* 29(3): 275–290.
- York-Barr J and Duke K (2004) What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research* 74(3): 255–316.