

Developing Distributed Leadership in Schools through Arts-based and Embodied Activities

Arts-based and Embodied Methods of Leadership Development: A Brief Introduction



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This document explains briefly why we believe developing distributed leadership in schools through arts-based and embodied activities is important.

Arts-based and embodied activities and why they are helpful in developing and strengthening distributed leadership

The practice of distributed leadership is challenging. It involves blurring of boundaries between positional and non-positional leadership. Distributed ways of leading pose significant challenges, not least to the emotions, identities and self-awareness of those involved in change. New kinds of knowledge, awareness and capabilities are needed for co-leading change in ways that are collaborative and best able to foster learning, and where relationships are more fluid than in traditional conceptions of leadership. This involves nurturing affective and aesthetic capabilities. These include:

- attention to feelings
- habits of reflection
- sensitivity to the aesthetics of the context of leadership practice
- the capacity to be adaptable about traditional status and authority relationships
- emotional awareness and empathy in communicating and working with others

- ethical sensitivities
- openness to the creative possibilities of reflecting on both feelings and thinking, both heart and mind
- willingness to try out new ideas and practices that emerge from reflection and enhanced awareness.

All of this requires new ways of developing leadership.

Traditional leadership development, which concentrates on cognitive capabilities, is inadequate. By itself, it is unable to nurture the affective aesthetic capabilities required and to assure that the leadership talents of all stakeholders are harnessed and developed.

To address this inadequacy, innovative approaches are needed that embrace the creative and aesthetic learning power of arts-based and embodied methods. These draw from advances in neuroscience and from what we know about taking part in arts-based activities such as performance, the creation of visual imageries and creative writing and expression.

Embodied learning is integral to these activities when used in leadership development. Neuroscience highlights the role of the body in cognition and social engagement and explores how quality of awareness is linked to certain dynamics of neural activity and is thus an embodied process.

Aesthetic awareness and distributed leadership

Aesthetic awareness is a key concept in embodied learning. It involves openness to the affective and creative aspects of our selves and others, to the interrelationship of cognitive and bodily experience and to how aesthetic qualities of the self, others and the environment can enrich and foster ethical sensibilities.

Facilitated by arts-based and embodied activities and opportunities for reflection, aesthetic awareness has the potential to act as a transformational bridge between experience and learning.

Research on arts-based and embodied methods of leadership development suggests the different ways in which they enhance aesthetic awareness and capacity for distributed leadership – for example, by:

- enhancing capabilities such as relational sensitivity (including willingness to engage with and be receptive to others), skills in listening and noticing, and coping with unfamiliarity and complexity
- fostering alternative forms of learning in which planned activities of noticing and reflection are used to support analysis and critique, leading to openness to new ideas and to challenging pre-conceived ideas and accepted solutions
- contributing to self-review activities which support the articulation of authentic values and development of tailored, individual, leadership development programmes



- enhancing the ability to be pro-active and innovative and take an active part in distributed leadership, by increasing capabilities (such as relational sensitivity),
- appreciation of leadership as an emergent, relational process, and self-awareness in the context of leadership practice.

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Further information on the project is available here: <https://www.herts.ac.uk/cel/enables-arts-based-and-embodied-leadership-development>

Centre for Educational Leadership
School of Education
University of Hertfordshire
Hatfield
UK

Project co-ordinator: Philip Woods (p.a.woods@herts.ac.uk)
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