

# Exploring educational leadership



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# Introduction

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This free course, *Exploring educational leadership*, provides a brief introduction to the field of educational leadership.

It explores the relationships between management and leadership, the scope of the field and different world views that underpin educational leadership research and practice. You will also learn about some key concepts such as agency, power and authority. You will explore the differences between concepts, models and theories, and be introduced to some questions that will help you evaluate different educational leadership theories and models.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [EE811 Educational leadership: agency, professional learning and change](#), which is the first course in the Leadership and management route within the [Masters in Education qualification](#). Studying this short course will give you a flavour of what to expect if you decide to progress to postgraduate study on EE811.

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- discuss different views of leadership
- identify key concepts related to leadership (e.g. agency, power)
- explain what 'agency' means
- explain some alternative views of 'power'
- explain the difference between a theory and a model.

# 1 The leader, educational leadership and management

There has been a tremendous amount written about being a leader, how to be a good leader, how to offer effective leadership and many other permutations of those words. We have all experienced the leadership of others in our professional and personal lives, and will have a view about which leadership actions, behaviours and strategies might be required in a given situation. In our professional lives as educators, we have also experienced being managed and may ourselves manage the work of others. However, what is meant by 'leadership', 'leading', 'administration' and 'management' can vary across organisations, situations, times and culture.

In the USA and Canada, the term 'administrator' is synonymous with 'manager', and some senior administrators will have strategic leadership responsibilities. In the UK and Australia, there has been growing recognition since the 1990s of the requirement for people in management roles to have leadership qualities. Over time the names of roles have changed to reflect the amount of leadership expected. For example, 'heads of department' in schools became 'middle managers' and then 'subject leaders', and 'senior management teams' have become 'senior leadership teams' (Gunter, 2004).

It is important to note that we are not suggesting that people are either leaders or managers, but rather that most roles are an amalgam of the two and that the proportions may vary according to the context or situation. It may not be helpful to force a distinction between leaders and managers as that narrows down the focus of attention to individuals and the ways in which roles are named and defined rather than the activities that take place. One view is that leaders work with people to change behaviours, attitudes and values, whereas managers work with a steady state within the setting, maintaining the performance of people, inanimate objects and systems (Cuban, 1988). From this perspective, for example, a subject leader may manage the resources to support a change in teaching method that they have been leading their colleagues to consider.

This course adopts a critical perspective and argues that educational leadership and management are contested concepts. For example, we can question Cuban's (1988) view that leadership and management are linked to role designations such as 'team leader' or 'lead worker' because although these people are expected to lead, others without designated titles can also show leadership. It is also important to think critically about the ways in which definitions of leadership are used at different times and in different places. This situated approach to understanding leadership means that we recognise that leadership varies with the contexts and cultures in which it operates. Leadership can involve spontaneous and/or planned activity. It can emerge in response to a situation that arises, or as a result of long-standing vision for the future. As you work through this course, you will start to develop your own understanding of leadership within your setting.

## Activity 1

Allow approximately 60 minutes

Read the three contrasting ideas below.



- 1 Leaders are 'persons who, by word and/or personal example, markedly influence the behaviours, thoughts, and/or feelings of a significant number of their fellow human beings' (Gardner and Laskin, 1995, p. 8)
- 2 Leadership is 'a process of social influence in which one person is able to enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task' (Chemers, 2000, p. 27).
- 3 Leadership is a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. Successful leaders develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values. They articulate this vision at every opportunity and influence their staff and other stakeholders to share the vision (Bush and Glover, 2003, p. 5).

Provide your answer...



A sense of the scope of the field of study is provided in Figure 1. You are not expected to be familiar with all of these terms at present, but you will return to some of them as you move through the course.

## 2 Studying educational leadership and management

Educational leadership sits within the extensive field of leadership studies, which draws from many disciplinary areas including psychology, sociology, anthropology, organisation studies, business studies and the social sciences. Over time, multiple theories of leadership have been developed, each one retaining influences from the discipline in which it originated. For example, examining the behaviours and traits of individual leaders continues to be an area of study for those drawing on a background of psychology, whereas researchers emerging from a business studies background may focus on how leaders respond to change within and around their organisations. Making sense of the multiple theoretical approaches to leadership is, therefore, challenging. This is further complicated by the commercial and policy literature which advocates particular approaches to leadership and leading which may, or may not, be drawn from empirical research.

Educational leadership is a particular area of study within this broader field of leadership. During the 1980s and 1990s, the education sector, particularly in the UK, began to engage with this range of leadership and management concepts. Additional ideas about educational leadership were developed, for example instructional, pedagogic and teacher leadership.

Leadership remains a contentious area of scholarship, and in the literature, you will find competing and contradictory references to multiple leadership types, theories, styles and models.

### Activity 2

Allow approximately 30 minutes

The following animation outlines in summary the varying approaches which have been taken to understanding leadership.

As you watch the video, identify the main models of leadership it mentions and how each might be distinguished from the other.

Video content is not available in this format.





Please note: 'Unit 4.3' in the video refers to part of the Open University course not included in this OpenLearn course.

## 3 Making sense of educational leadership studies

The core purpose of educational leadership is necessarily related to the purpose of education in the setting and context in which it takes place. For example, for Swaffield and MacBeath (2013), educational leadership is 'for' learning and has moral purpose for the 'wider good' (p. 15). This purpose is linked to issues of equity and social justice, which are underpinned by our views about the ideal ways in which society should work. However, researchers and educationalists have many different 'world views' or personal preferences and beliefs about what individuals can do and the way that knowledge is developed and applied in practice. These inform the paradigm that is being adopted, which in turn shapes the research questions that are asked and the way that the activity of research is approached (the methodology).

Research paradigms that you may have heard of include positivist, interpretivist, critical/constructivist, feminist and postmodernist. We will not be going into the detail of these world views here, but as you study this course you are encouraged to think critically about a range of contrasting and contradictory ideas. To do this, it is helpful to clarify your own

world view and beliefs about how change is achieved. We hope that you will find that the ideas presented in this course challenge your thinking, and will help you to refine and develop your ideas about educational leadership and management.

To consider what a 'world view' might be, it is helpful to reflect on your own ideas about how the social world operates; how individuals can act, how human relationships create a 'real' world, and how culture and power influence our actions (the concept of ontology). Importantly, in education we also need to consider our views about knowledge, how it is developed, and how it can be shared and extended through learning and teaching. This is a view on epistemology (the study/theory of knowledge). For example, Westernised views of knowledge are often deeply embedded in the scientific tradition (explicit knowledge) whereas some Eastern concepts of knowledge are embedded in intuition and storytelling, which is a more tacit concept of knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). Importantly, in relation to both sets of views, Burgess et al. (2006) point out that 'These beliefs are basic in the sense that they must be accepted simply on faith (however well argued); there is no way of establishing truthfulness' (p. 54).

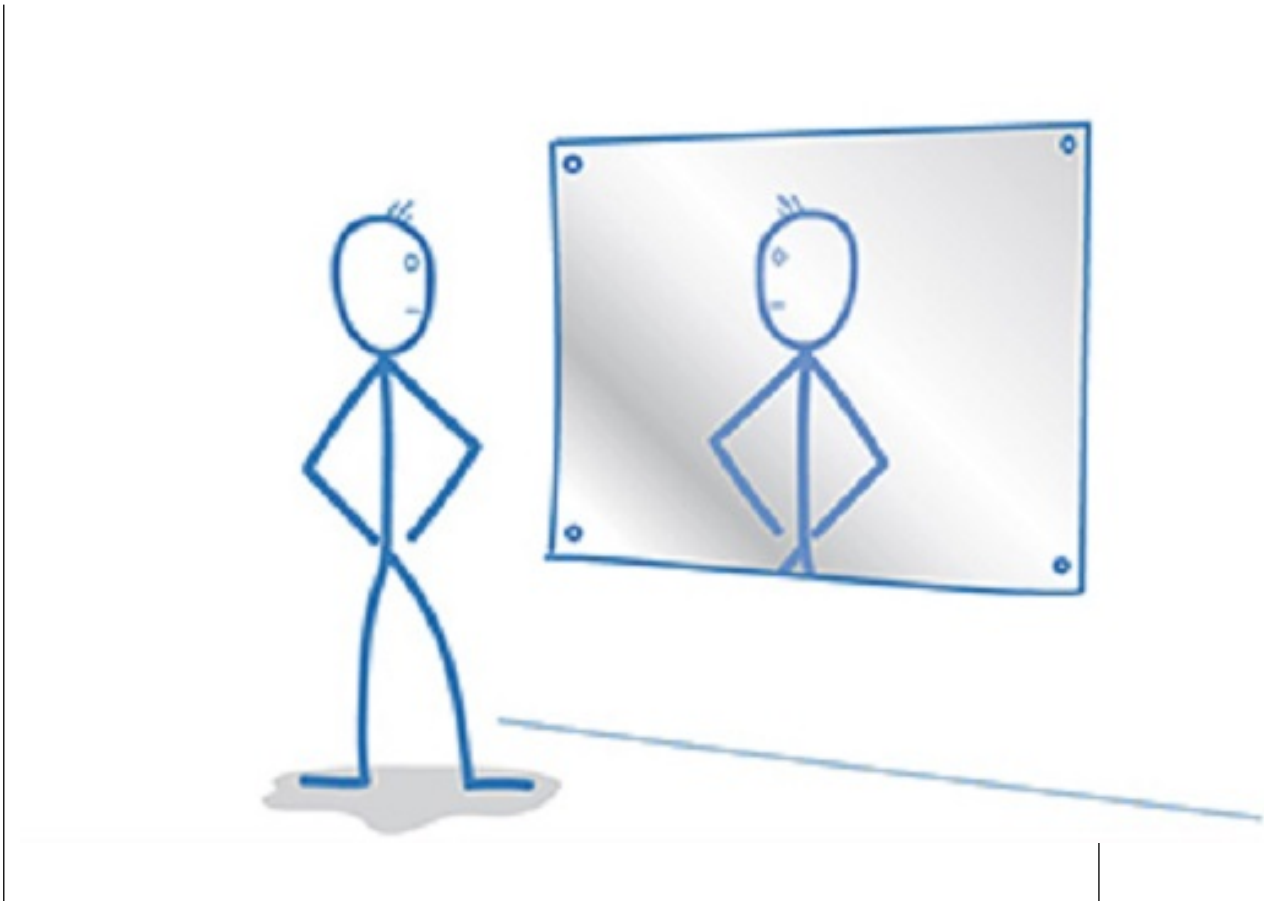
## 4 Agency

Agency is a concept that has long dominated Western thought in sociology, economics, philosophy and psychology. The agency of individuals can be defined as the 'capacity for autonomous social action' (Calhoun, 2002) and it is often contrasted with social structures that can be seen as determining human behaviour, e.g. religion, social class, economics and family.

The 'structure–agency' debate has dominated discussions in sociology since the 1970s, particularly in relation to the capacity of individuals and groups ('collective agency') to change the context (or social structures) within which they exist. Moving beyond those oppositional views, Anthony Giddens (1984) argued that individuals have the capacity for reflective thought about their actions and use this knowledge to both create and change the structures within which they live, which is known as 'structuration theory'. For Giddens (1984), structures and human agency are therefore interdependent. The concept of agency has been further developed by Archer (2000) and others. How we understand agency shapes how we understand the potential for change and autonomy for those engaged in leadership activities, which is important in the study of educational leadership. One approach to thinking about agency is that of Biesta and Tedder (2007). They propose an 'ecological' understanding of agency, where agency by individuals is understood as an achievement rather than an essential characteristic. The achievement of agency emerges from the transactions between individuals within their environment at a given time and place. This is helpful in understanding how social actions can be agentive in some situations and not others, and that an individual's achievement of agency will fluctuate over time.

Watch the following video about the importance of identity and how it relates to agency.

Video content is not available in this format.



Please note: 'Unit 2' and 'Unit 9' in the video refer to part of the Open University course not included in this OpenLearn course. Also, the reference to 'module' in this video refers to the Open University course

[EE811 Educational leadership: agency, professional learning and change.](#)

## 5 Power and authority

How we understand social structures and individual agency closely relates to the way we think that power operates in society. Stephen Lukes' (1974) theory of power is one of the best known. He examined political power and argued that there are three dimensions or faces to the exercise and understanding of power:

- a one-dimensional view, where power is explicitly evident in decision-making, for example where votes can be counted for and against a decision
- a two-dimensional view, where power is visible and also invisible to some of the community, for example decision-making and agenda setting undertaken by small elite groups
- a third dimension, where power is largely invisible and shapes agendas, perceptions and preferences, for example the power of advertising or the media more generally.

Lukes' dimensions deal with the application of power by individuals, but power is also closely tied to the notion of authority, particularly for people with leadership positions.

Max Weber (1956) distinguished between power and authority. For Weber, power is obtained and exercised through coercion, and typically without the consent of those on whom it is being exercised. Power (in this sense) is then not perceived or experienced as legitimate by those on whom it is exercised. On the other hand, according to Weber (1956), authority is exercised through consent, and the exercise of this authority is therefore seen as legitimate by those who are subordinate to this authority. Therefore, those in formal leadership positions have the authority to make decisions and set agendas, which corresponds with Lukes' ([1974] 2005) definition of the exercise of power.

In thinking about power, it is important to move away from the notions of power characterised as negative and held by individuals, and to think of power as a process existing within society. For example, hegemonic power is built into the structures of society through a long-term historical and political process of consent and coercion. This results in 'normative' expectations of ways that people should behave. 'Normative' describes what should and should not be done in particular sorts of practical circumstances, and why. When people depart from normative expectations they are usually asked to explain or justify their actions. These expectations are supported by hierarchical structures in society, such as legal systems, religious and educational organisations. Normative expectations of the place in society of particular groups of people, for example women, those from a particular ethnic background, or those from a particular caste, can lead to systematic disadvantage for individuals belonging to these groups. Change can occur when individuals and groups challenge these normative expectations, but penalties and punishment can also result from challenges to those in positions of power.

## 6 Power as a dynamic social process

An alternative view of power was proposed by Foucault (1977), who argued that power in society is played out in day-to-day relationships through discourse and knowledge. The distinctiveness of Foucault's ideas lay in his rejection of traditional, hierarchical views of power (as reflected, to an extent, in the ideas of Weber), where power is perceived as being 'possessed' by certain individuals or groups who then use it to impose their will on the subordinate 'powerless'. Foucault suggested that this reified notion of power (power as a kind of object) is mistaken, arguing instead that power is best understood as being fluid and dynamic. He argued that power emerges through the interactions and relationships of groups and individuals within particular social or organisational contexts and structures.

Foucault saw power as an abstract phenomenon, which can be positive or negative, repressive or productive. Power is constantly recreated and operates through an individual 'discipline of the self'. Individuals see themselves as unique and self-directing, and make choices, but, Foucault argues, these choices are made only within the discourses and knowledge that are available to them. The ideas that prevail in particular social contexts become the dominant discourse and the common social assumptions. Power and authority reside in those who have the knowledge and the authority to make changes to the dominant ways of thinking.

One logical development of Foucault's ideas is that those with no formal authority can also exercise power in society. This is sometimes described as having social influence. Influence fits closely with Foucault's ideas of power being played out through immediate

social relationships, as individuals and groups coalesce around ideas and values presented by individuals. Rational argument, persuasion and the attractiveness of ideas are all aspects of influence. Personal charisma is also closely associated with the ways in which influence is generated between individuals. Leadership emerges as followers are attracted to the particular ideas of individuals and groups, and move to support them through agreeing with and disseminating their views. Leaders exist because the group gives them the power and legitimacy to do so.

## 7 Educational organisations

Many schools are based on historic organisational structures that shape certain aspects of their leadership. Strongly hierarchical structures tend to be very bureaucratic, with clearly articulated leadership and management layers, and clearly delineated responsibilities at each layer (Bush, 2002). Authority is derived from the power associated with particular positions within these hierarchies, and in most such organisations, tasks and policies are passed down through the layers for implementation. This notion of hierarchical power is associated with Max Weber, the founder of organisational sociology. Weber's theories offer an important way of understanding how power and authority are differentiated and exercised within organisations, and why organisations are typically structured in the way that they are.

Some, particularly smaller or more informal organisations, for example an out-of-school club, may have looser organisational or group arrangements and an approach known as 'collegiality', where all of the team are involved in decision-making (Bush, 2002). Where there is a lot of consensual decision-making, the processes can take a long time, but there is said to be a stronger sense of ownership of the decisions among the team. Leadership here derives authority from shared agreements on goals and the way in which individuals work towards a common goal, perhaps akin to the power of influence discussed earlier, or power embedded in culture and tradition, as discussed by Fairbairn-Dunlop (2014).

In practice, few organisations have distinct structures, and different leadership approaches may be practised in different parts of the same organisation. Power can work through both hierarchical authority and through discourses and knowledge-sharing between individuals. Leaders may draw their power from the authority that is linked to their place in an organisational hierarchy and/or may draw on the power associated with their expert knowledge. Those who are not in designated leadership roles may exert influence on others through the power of persuasion and interpersonal relationships, by proposing new ideas for practice or alternative ways of working.

Therefore, the institutional features of organisations and the relationships between the people within them need close attention when we are discussing leadership, as the environment of a setting may or may not facilitate particular types of learning or leadership. Billett (2006) argues that the workplace is made up of particular 'social practices that afford experiences to participate and learn' (p. 45). 'Affordances' (the support and opportunities for learning) are shaped by the way that organisations reproduce themselves, power relations within and between organisations, and the motivations and intentions of individual learners. For example, the expanding size of many educational organisations, the increase in decisions and speed of decision-making required has led to a growth in what are termed 'delegated leadership' and 'distributed leadership'. In short, delegated leadership is where the leadership of tasks is given to



people who would not normally have that as part of their role, requiring a top-down analysis of what requires doing. Distributed leadership is where people are encouraged to show leadership for tasks that they perceive as needing attention, as a result of bottom-up analysis (Woods et al., 2004).

### Activity 3

Allow approximately 1 hour

The video below introduces the North Bedfordshire Federation of Schools case study, which illustrates many of the issues that were introduced above: agency, leadership, authority and organisational structures.

Watch the video, and familiarise yourself with the case study. Notice where the issues of leadership agency, professional development and change are discussed.

Note: 'Ofsted' in this video refers to the UK government agency 'Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills'.

Video content is not available in this format.



## 8 Concepts, theories and models

So far we have introduced a range of ideas that can help you to ask questions about different theories of leadership and management. The next step is to apply and use these, and to develop some of the academic skills that will support you in thinking critically about complex ideas in educational research, and in your own practice.

Both theories and models are built up of concepts. The concept of the 'leader' in the educational research literature often contrasts the 'power of one' (Harris, 2003, p. 14) with the concept of 'leadership' in other more collegiate, shared or distributed models. In setting up this dichotomy, issues about recommendations for practice, democracy in organisational structures and how power and authority are connected to leadership all move the discussion from the theoretical to the practical. Thinking about how this may be applied to practice has political and moral implications.

John Storey, working in the field of business studies, suggests an alternative way of conceptualising the field of leadership. He describes a 'leadership constellation' (Storey, 2010, p. 20) which draws out the enduring themes and concerns of leadership research across the various theories. Storey argues that context, perceived leadership need, behavioural requirements and capabilities, and development methods are the four interrelated critical factors for considering the adequacy of any leadership theory.

## 9 Evaluating theories and models

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Theories seek to answer particular questions, and, in making theoretical claims, use particular concepts and evidence to make an explicit and logical argument. Ideally, a theory shows enough of its own working that others can follow its reasoning, be convinced by its usefulness and can deploy it in new contexts. So, although all theories are put forward at particular times and in particular places, their purpose is to have at least some degree of relevance in situations beyond the setting in which they were first crafted.

Models, on the other hand, tend to provide a framework for looking at specific issues. Models also use concepts to explain ideas but may not provide empirical evidence to support these claims. Models are underpinned by an overall world view.

Understanding how theories and models are constructed, through examining the key concepts and underlying views of the world that underpin them, can help us to deal with the variety of perspectives that exist. When trying to evaluate theories and models, we need to ask questions based around three areas:

- 1 How coherent are the ideas presented? Are the concepts explained and is the way in which the different concepts relate to each other clear?
- 2 How well do these ideas work in different nations, cultures and types of organisations (large, small, old and new)? Do they 'travel' well across space and time?
- 3 How well evidenced is this theory or model? What types of evidence are used to support it?

## 10 Educational leadership and management: contested concepts

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Rather than adopting simple definitions and models of educational leadership and management, we argue that these are contested concepts that can be challenged when you think critically. Key questions that help us to adopt a critical approach to thinking about



educational leadership are those that ask what the theories presented have to say about individual agency, power, views of knowledge and context. In adopting a critical approach to thinking, we need to closely examine the concepts used by theorists, and evaluate their ideas, evidence and underpinning world view. Even so, the relationship between educational leadership and management theory is not straightforward, and the relationship between theory and practice is also complicated.

Middlehurst (2008) outlines seven reasons why educational leadership is a contested concept. She goes on to explain that 'General theories do not provide a specific tool kit that can be applied successfully in every circumstance, and apparently well-tailored leadership competence models do not identify consistently successful behaviours or successful individuals' (p. 133). Middlehurst suggests that the relational nature of leadership goes some way towards explaining that. The article makes it clear that there is no single leadership solution or style that suits everyone and every situation, and that there has generally been a move away from a belief in the 'heroic' leader who was born with certain charismatic charms that enabled them to lead others, regardless of the situation, towards a belief that leadership can be shown by a whole range of people.

## Conclusion

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The study of educational leadership and management encompasses an extensive body of work drawing on a number of different disciplines. In this course, we have discussed the overlap and indistinct boundaries between the terms 'leadership' and 'management', and have suggested that it is not always helpful to separate the two.

In this free course, *Exploring educational leadership*, you were introduced to the concepts of agency, power and the context of education to the leadership question. These concepts are useful in thinking critically across the broad range of different theories and approaches to educational leadership.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [EE811 Educational leadership: agency, professional learning and change](#), which is the first course in the Leadership and management route within the [Masters in Education qualification](#).

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