

**Agency and leadership: Exploring the assumptions behind
conceptualizations of leadership in Canadian policy documents**

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In this study we interrogate the way leadership is conceptualized in the scholarly literature and in some Canadian policy documents and initiatives (e.g. Alberta Education, 2009) that focus on the practice of leadership in education. The literature and policies dealing with reform have tended to favour leader-centric explanations of social action and propose a leader-centric vision of school reform and improvement. For example, much recent emphasis in the educational leadership literature has been placed on the role of the school leader in improving student achievement (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008), the role of distributing leadership in improvement processes, and the central role of teacher leadership in improving schools (e.g. Reeves, 2008). This is not surprising, but we contend that the way in which leadership is being constructed presents a “danger of continuing to be trapped within the ideology of the ‘can-do’ culture... whereby agency is always considered capable of overcoming structure” (Glatter, 2006, p. 73). We argue that such a view of leadership does not reflect the challenges faced by school actors in an era of standards-based reform. In order to exemplify these tensions, we offer an analysis of the ways leadership practices have been conceptualized in key policy documents in Alberta and Ontario (Alberta Education, 2009; Ontario Institute for Educational Leadership, 2013) and suggest that they corresponds to a view of leadership as “a social and organizational technology” (O’Reilly & Reed, 2010, p. 961) that could result in “limited and tightly managed professionalism of a kind that is dangerously malleable in the face of such a powerful and dominant wider context” (Hall, 2013, p. 13).