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Distributed leadership through the looking glass

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Distributed leadership is an idea that is growing in popularity. There is widespread interest in the notion of distributing leadership although interpretations of the term vary. A distributed leadership perspective recognises that there are multiple leaders (Spillane et al., 2004) and that leadership activities are widely shared within and between organisations (Harris, 2007). A distributed model of leadership focuses upon the interactions, rather than the actions, of those in formal and informal leadership roles. It is primarily concerned with *leadership practice* and how leadership influences organisational and instructional improvement (Spillane, 2006).

A distributed perspective on leadership acknowledges the work of all individuals who contribute to leadership practice, whether or not they are formally designated or defined as leaders. Distributed leadership is also central to system reconfiguration and organisational redesign which necessitates lateral, flatter decision-making processes (Hargreaves, 2007). But if distributed leadership is ‘the idea’ of the moment, why such interest?

Why the interest?

It is suggested that there are three main reasons for the current popularity of distributed leadership. Firstly, distributed leadership has normative power; it reflects current changes in leadership practice in schools. The growth of what Gronn (2003) has termed ‘greedy work’ in

schools has resulted in the expansion of leadership tasks and responsibilities. This has required leadership to be actively and purposefully distributed within the school. The model of the singular, heroic leader is at last being replaced with leadership that is focused upon teams rather than individuals and places a greater emphasis upon teacher, support staff and students as leaders (Harris, 2004).

The term ‘distributed leadership’ also has representational power. It represents the alternative approaches to leadership that have arisen because of increased external demands and pressures on schools. Many schools have restructured their leadership teams and created new roles to meet the needs of workforce remodelling, Every Child Matters and the extended schools agenda. As schools reposition and redefine themselves, distributed, extended and shared leadership practices are more prevalent. As schools engage with complex collaborative arrangements, distributed forms of leadership will be required to ‘cross multiple types of boundaries and to share ideas and insights’ (Wenger et al., 2002: 123).

In the increasingly complex world of education the work of leadership will require diverse types of expertise and forms of leadership flexible enough to meet changing challenges and new demands. There is a growing recognition that the old organisational structures of schooling simply do not fit the requirements of learning in the twenty-first century. New models

of schooling are emerging based on collaboration, networking and multi-agency working (federations, partnerships, networked learning communities, extended schools, etc.). These new and more complex forms of schooling require new and more responsive leadership approaches. New leadership approaches are needed to traverse a very different organisational landscape.

Lastly and most importantly, distributed leadership has empirical power. There is increasing research evidence that distributed leadership makes a positive difference to organisational outcomes and student learning. While the evidence base is still relatively new, the messages are consistent and encouraging. There are an increasing number of studies that highlight a powerful relationship between distributed forms of leadership and positive organisational change (Harris et al., 2007). Most recently research has shown that the patterns of leadership distribution matter within an organisation and that distributed leadership practice is more likely to equate with improved organisational performance and outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004, 2007).

Limitations and dangers

While the idea of distributed leadership is popular, there are some limitations that are worth highlighting. A first limitation concerns the fact that different terms and definitions are used interchangeably to refer to 'distributed leadership' resulting in both conceptual confusion and conceptual overlap. For example, Bennett et al. (2003) talk about 'distributed or devolved leadership' while Kets de Vries (1990) defines distributed leadership in terms of effective teamworking linked to social activity theory.

Recently, Leithwood et al. (2004: 59) have noted that 'the concept of distributed leadership overlaps substantially with shared collaborative and participative leadership concepts'. Links have also been made between distributed leadership and democratic leadership (Woods, 2004) and most recently connections have been made to teacher leadership (Harris and Muijs, 2004). This accumulation of allied concepts not only serves to obscure meaning but also presents a real danger that distributed leadership will simply be used as a 'catch all' term to describe any form of devolved, shared or dispersed leadership practice.

A second limitation resides in the implicit tension between the theoretical and practical interpretations. In a theoretical sense, distrib-

uted leadership can be located in the general area of situated and distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995). Here distributed leadership is best understood as 'practice distributed over leaders, followers and their situation' (Spillane et al., 2001: 13). A distributed view of leadership 'incorporates the activities of multiple groups of individuals in a school who work at guiding and mobilizing staff in the instructional change process'. It implies a social distribution of leadership where the leadership function is stretched over the work of a number of individuals where the leadership task is accomplished through the interaction of multiple leaders (Spillane et al., 2001: 20).

In a practical or normative sense, the chief concern is *how* leadership is distributed, by whom and with what effect (Harris, 2008). It is concerned with how we maximise the potential of distributed leadership for organisational improvement and transformation. The key questions are whether, how and in what form distributed leadership contributes to school improvement. Do we have evidence to show that lateral, less hierarchical staff structures result in notable gains in student performance? Inevitably, these questions move us very quickly into the realms of *prediction*, *prescription* and *application* – focusing primarily on *how* leadership is distributed and which patterns of distribution are the most effective or influential.

If one takes an extreme view it could be argued that, in a theoretical sense, distributed leadership offers little more than an abstract way of analysing leadership practice. In a practical sense, it could be contended that it is nothing more than shared leadership practice. All leadership is inevitably distributed in some way; we know that, but how leadership is distributed and with what effect is relatively uncharted territory. The evidence base suggests that there is something powerful and important about distributed leadership. It suggests that school redesign is unlikely unless patterns of leadership practice are dramatically altered and flattened. It highlights that multi-agency, multi-school and multi-phase working is simply not possible without the reconfiguration of leadership as practice rather than role.

How to use it?

At a theoretical level, distributed leadership is an *analytical* frame for understanding leadership practice. Spillane et al. (2004) argue that the distributed perspective can serve as a *tool* for school leaders by offering a set of constructs that can be harnessed to frame diagnoses and inform

the design process. In this respect, distributed leadership can serve as both a diagnostic and design tool that offers a lens on leadership practices within schools and between schools. It offers schools the opportunity to stand back and think about exactly how leadership is distributed and the difference made, or not made, by that distribution.

The analytical frame galvanises attention towards leadership *as practice* rather than leadership *as role*; it focuses attention on the complex interactions and nuances of leadership in action. It offers an alternative and potentially illuminating way of tracking, analysing and describing complex patterns of interaction, influence and agency.

Distributed leadership also poses some critical questions for schools:

- How is leadership distributed in my school?
- Is this pattern of distribution optimum?
- How is distributed leadership practice developed and enhanced?
- How do we extend leadership distribution to parents, students and the wider community?
- What difference is distributed leadership making?

The important point to grasp here is that distributed leadership is not necessarily a good or bad thing: it depends. It depends on the context within which leadership is distributed and the prime aim of the distribution. Flattening the hierarchy or delegation of leadership does not necessarily equate with distributed leadership, nor does it automatically improve performance. It is the nature and quality of *leadership practice* that matters.

So where does this take us? For some, it takes distributed leadership into the realm of the abstract and away from the practical realities of schooling. For others, it offers the real possibility of looking at leadership through a new and alternative lens that challenges the tacit understanding of the relationship between 'leaders and followers'. It suggests that 'followers' may actually be a key element in defining leadership through their interactions with leaders. Moreover it raises the possibility that leadership has a greater influence on organisational change when leadership practice is purposefully distributed or orchestrated.

Where next?

Despite the growing enthusiasm for distributed leadership within the research community, it is clear we need to know much more about its

effects and influences. Leithwood et al. (2004) suggest that there is an *urgent need to enrich the concept with systematic evidence*. A number of research projects are currently underway that are gathering this systematic evidence. However, if distributed leadership is not to join the large pile of redundant leadership theories it must engage teachers, headteachers, support staff and other professionals. It must be put to the test of practice. This can only be achieved with the cooperation of those keen to explore a different world-view of leadership and with the enthusiasm to redesign and reconfigure schooling.

Distributed leadership is not a panacea or a blueprint or a recipe. It is a way of getting under the skin of leadership practice, of seeing leadership practice differently and illuminating the possibilities for organisational transformation. This is not without its risks, as it inevitably it means holding up the looking glass to schools and being prepared to abandon old leadership practices. For those genuinely seeking transformation and self-renewal, this is a risk well worth taking.

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