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**Having the ‘presence’ and courage to see beyond the familiar: Challenging our
habitual assumptions of school leadership**

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Abstract

Leadership in education is at a critical point in relation to practice and research; intensification of work and a preference to prescribe what works contribute to the privileging of formal, individual and task-based forms of school leadership. Consequently, our ability to conceptualise school leadership practice and research beyond what has become familiar can be undermined without us realising. This paper informs a workshop that is aimed at current and aspiring school leaders and researchers of school leadership; the popularisation of distributed forms of school leadership is the focus. Issues of premature popularisation mean that distributed forms of leadership may end up being yet another ‘fad’, potentially causing us to miss what lies beyond the field of school leadership where more relational and emergent conceptualisations of distributed leadership exist. Courage will be needed to suspend dominant views and grapple with what the implications of a broader meaning of leadership means for our schools, research and education policy.

Introduction

The core purpose of school leadership is to cultivate meanings of learning, communities of learning, responsibility for learning, and have a clear focus on enabling and supporting teaching (Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, 2003; Starratt, 2003). For teachers and official school leaders this is more or less stating the obvious; the focus on schools during the 1980s and 1990s has inevitably been on management, compliance and standardisation so it is encouraging to note that learning and teaching are starting to become the focus of our gaze again in relation to school leadership (Robinson, 2006). However, I also strongly suspect this is the very gaze that teachers

and official school leaders have been striving to hold on to during the reforms of New Public Management (NPM) that swept through developed countries in the 1980s and 1990s.

Near the end of this period after having seasons of concepts like the Self-Managing School, Total Quality Management (TQM) and transformational leadership, distributed leadership emerged as one of the ways forward in the new millennium. Over the last six years distributed leadership has become increasingly commonplace and popular within the school leadership field (Harris, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2005). By drawing on 32 studies of distributed school leadership practice from 2002 to 2007 (see the Appendix), I argue that distributed perspectives of school leadership have the potential to broaden and inform our understanding of day-to-day leadership practice. However, our conceptualisation of these perspectives must not be limited to the distribution of leadership onto others and apolitical forms that do not consider the distribution of power across our school communities. We continually need to have the presence and courage to view distributed school leadership beyond what is becoming simplistic and familiar if the rhetoric surrounding it is going to be fully realised in our practice (Duignan, 2006). “Learning to see begins when we stop projecting our habitual assumptions” (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2004); therefore whether we are school practitioners, researchers or policy-makers, our ability to view school leadership beyond the norm is dependent on our willingness and ability to critically question the assumptions we have in relation to school leadership.

Distributed leadership: could it just be another fad?

During the 1980s and 1990s education policy was influenced by the three pillars of NPM reform, effectiveness, efficiency and economy, where economy in this context was doing more with less (Sachs, 2003). Though schools in general were positioned as being self-managing, they nevertheless were now also seen as providers that served the economic needs of the nation, rather than providers of education for the greater social good; education had become a commodity that served economic development and national competition in a globalised world. Consequently educational reform over the years has had the potential to standardise schools as low-trust organisations (Bottery, 2004; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003); shape and control teachers’ work (Smyth, 2001; Wright, 2001); over-emphasise line management (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003); and, reduce school leadership to a rational and technical form (Bottery & Wright, 2000).

Despite the intensification of work resulting from these reforms, principals and deputy principals in Australia and New Zealand tend to try and prevent mandatory managerial tasks from

diminishing their focus on strategy and the leadership of learning and teaching (Cranston, Tromans & Reugebrink, 2004; Hodgen & Wylie, 2005). Mandatory tasks must still however be completed thus creating an environment in schools that is conducive to principal and deputy principal overload and excessive paperwork for teachers (Ingvarson, Kleinhenz, Beavis et al., 2005; Kane & Mallon, 2006). When these factors of role intensification for school leaders are seen alongside the intensification of work of teachers, the increase in managerial tasks brought about by the influences of NPM, accountability systems and the standardisation of work in schools, the environment has been ripe to distribute leadership across a school's professional staff. With economic pressures working against any significant increase of staffing, schools had only one way to go, distribute leadership tasks or experience further school leadership role overload (Gunter, 2001; Hatcher, 2005). In one sense, distributed leadership has had to have become popular as a means of coping with the increased intensity of managerial tasks. However, popularisation does not necessarily equate to best practice; a critical review of school distributed studies reveals that the concept is conceptually thin, not all that new and is conceptually decoupled from parallel developments in the wider leadership field, where relational forms of leadership are at the forefront of new developments (Hunt, 2004; Hunt & Dodge, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006). School distributed leadership is at risk of being another 'fad' of school reform, yet on the other hand a distributed perspective of leadership has the potential to broaden our understanding of school leadership beyond the "privileged power structures that emphasise a leader-follower dichotomy and authority, power and influence with individual organisational role" (Gunter, 2001, p. 69).

Popularisation does not equate to maturity

The initial theoretical conceptualisations of school distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000, 2002; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004) still inform most of the current research, though there is little critique of the theoretical foundations upon which these conceptualisations are established and no new empirically based substantial theorisation of the distributed leadership concept in the school leadership field. It is because of these factors that distributed leadership in terms of construct evolution is still at what Reichers and Schnieder (1990) would describe as an introductory stage, though its popularisation gives the illusion that it has been critiqued often enough to be empirically and theoretically sound (Gunter, 2005; Woods, 2004).

A critical perspective of school distributed leadership has yet to fully emerge in the field. Any categorisation of distributed leadership ought to reveal where the locus of power is situated, is it

concentrated or is it dispersed, to what extent, and why (Gronn, 2000; Hatcher, 2005). If distributed leadership is going to encompass forms of leadership that are situated outside the power that can emanate from formal hierarchical positions of authority then a wider context of power needs to be employed (Jermier & Kerr, 1997); our gaze needs to go beyond the technical and functional aspects of an organisation (Gunter, 2005; Hosking, 1988; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). Distributed leadership requires a distribution of power so that collective democracies can emerge (Hatcher, 2005), unfortunately a majority of the research to date has tended to overlook in-depth critiques of how power is situated across distributed leadership activity.

Even though distributed, shared and dispersed forms of leadership have emerged in the wider field of leadership theory (Ensley, Hmieleski & Pearce, 2006; Hunt, 2004; Parry & Bryman, 2006), the theorising and research of school distributed leadership is on the whole conceptually decoupled from these other developments. The emergence of shared leadership as a complementary alternative to the dominant view of leadership is opening up the opportunity to understand more emergent and relational forms of leadership, irrespective of whether people are in a formal organisational leadership role or not. Shared leadership is closely linked to team and group settings (Day, Gronn & Salas, 2004; Ensley et al., 2006; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Seibert, Sparrowe & Liden, 2003), a common context for day-to-day school leadership practice, and its development as a leadership construct has revealed that distributed forms of leadership are not really all that new as some assert (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). Its roots can be traced back to the works of Mary Parker Follett in the 1920s and 1930s and the works of Chester Barnard from both the 1930s and 1960s. Follett argued that leadership is a diffused property and can emerge from anywhere irrespective of position; it can exist in places beyond the obvious ones (Graham, 1995). Barnard (1938) developed the notion of the informal organisation that exists beyond formal structures and that the formulation of purpose was a widely distributed function if there was cooperation. Conceptual links to shared leadership such as these are not usually made by writers and researchers of school distributed leadership, with Peter Gronn and Kenneth Leithwood being the most notable exceptions. This conceptual decoupling from shared leadership and the lack of any real in-depth critique of power in studies of school distributed leadership, particularly from a micro-political perspective are two of the major ‘silences’ that are evident today.

Despite this, studies of school distributed leadership do inform differing complementary perspectives of how we can understand day-to-day practice. Organisational distributed leadership is as an activity where leadership is distributed onto someone else. Democratic distributed leadership recognises that leadership is fluid and can emerge from anywhere within a school

community, whereas a micro-political perspective of distributed leadership brings to light, the tensions, dilemmas, silences and struggles that can be glossed over if we try to generalise and prescribe distributed leadership as a vehicle for school improvement.

An organisational perspective

Some of the studies on school distributed leadership practice tend to focus only on the official leaders and teachers of a school, with special emphasis usually being placed on the principal. From an organisational perspective principals are generally viewed as the person who could make distributed leadership work (Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss et al., 2007), they tended to have a more visible profile performing leadership functions (Camburn, Rowan & Taylor, 2003) and their day-to-day practice revealed “much about distribution and what it means in practice” (MacBeath, 2005, p. 356). However these findings need to be interpreted in the light of the respective research designs and underlying assumptions that each research team make about leadership, alternative sources of leadership were usually overlooked. Even though this was acknowledged in the studies the findings help reinforce the status quo that equates leadership with those in formal roles.

Principals in some studies were clearly positioned as the organisational transformational leader. Several accounts are provided where influence and power were situated initially with the principal before being distributed out in the form of leadership to others (Crawford, 2003; Dinham, 2005; Franey, 2002; Harris, 2002; Harris & Day, 2003; Leithwood, Jantzi, Earl et al., 2004; Leithwood et al., 2007; MacBeath, 2005; Mulford, 2005a). This has led to stages or phases being prescribed for other principals to follow as a means of distributing leadership (Franey, 2002; MacBeath, 2005) and is reflected in some of the categorisations of distributed leadership that have been developed (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Hay Group Education, 2004; MacBeath, 2005). Perhaps the most managerial form of prescribing organisational distributed leadership is evident in the study of Mayrowetz and colleagues (2007), where distributed leadership is being used as a form of work design reform where teachers are expected to become formal leaders, undertaking administrative tasks not previously carried out by them.

An organisational perspective is perhaps the most simplistic way in which to view distributed leadership. It emphasises the existing organisational structure as leadership work is passed ‘down the line’. Even though expertise is recognised as being a distributed property and it is acknowledged that a principal does not know all there is to know about leading learning

(Robinson, 2006), there is a tendency not to go deeper and analyse the distribution of power and the micro-political activity or passivity that can occur in the social, rather than the structural dimension of a school. Other studies reveal that leadership occurs outside of organisational structures if we are prepared to look for it there.

A democratic perspective

The field of school leadership is usually restricted to the realm of the principal (Cranston et al., 2004; Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann, 2002), so a democratic distributed perspective raises the issue of how formal and informal forms of leadership co-exist in a policy environment that emphasises organisational forms of leadership. Crowther and his colleagues (2002) found that principals needed to know when to step back so that individual expression could emerge from anywhere within the school. From a teacher's perspective principals are generally not aware of how crucial this is in relation to building trust; telling teachers that they are trusted is not enough, they need to be encouraged to critique school practices and have influence (Starratt, 2003). Leadership practice also occurs without the principal knowing or being involved (Spillane, Camburn & Pareja, 2007) and may even contribute to principals feeling disengaged from leadership situations (Goldstein, 2004).

A perspective of distributed leadership that is usually overlooked is one that includes students, parents and their voice. A democratic view of distributed leadership goes beyond consulting students and parents in decision-making processes to assisting them develop their own leadership voice. Both Flecknoe (2002) and Mitra (2005) highlight the positive impact of student leadership particularly in relation to learning; students learnt to become active, rather than passive members of the school (Flecknoe, 2002), teachers' perspectives of students changed, tensions decreased and teachers partnered with students as they engaged in student-voice activities (Mitra, 2005). In his case studies of three schools, Giles (2006) brought further light to leadership activity situated with parents who became actively involved in the school environment. In one school particularly where the greatest degree of ownership was experienced by the parents, the principal supported and nurtured groups of parents as "confident self-actuating leaders" (p. 274) due to a foundational, rather than a complementary approach to distributed leadership. Power was not retained by the principal in relation to trying to manage the parents; rather the parents empowered each other to become activists on behalf of their community as they collaborated with the school.

A democratic perspective of distributed leadership encompasses leadership activity beyond what is 'official'. It intentionally positions all members of a school community as potential sources of leadership, thus establishing the notion of schools being leaderful already. However, espousing democratic ideals, though educationally very appealing, is not enough. If leadership practice is expected to occur from anywhere within a school community then there will ultimately arise arenas of struggle, contention and withdrawal as multiple sources of influence interact with official school reforms and structures. To support any democratic ideal there needs to be a constant engagement at a micro-political level through productive dialogue, if genuine trust is going to develop over time.

A micro-political perspective

A micro-political perspective of distributed leadership opens up the opportunity for alternative understandings to arise, especially if they question the norm. For instance the delegating of leadership onto others due to work intensification was labelled as "distributed pain", rather than distributed leadership in one study (Grubb & Flessa, 2006, p. 535). Studies that draw on a micro-political perspective also reveal the complexity and messiness of people interacting with each other; a school can be an 'arena of struggle' (Ball, 1987), and what people espouse is not always what they practice. Encouraging emergent forms of distributed leadership can be a slow painful process (Friedman, 2004) and is dependent on mutual open dialogue based on premises of trust, collaboration and collegiality (Fitzgerald, Gunter & Eaton, 2006; Friedman, 2004; Johnson, 2004). When open dialogue is not evident, conflict and mistrust can arise, particularly when an espousal of distributed forms of leadership is not carried through into practice. Storey (2004) in her account of competition between leaders in a school revealed the frailty of distributed forms of leadership once issues of boundary overlap occurred between individuals. In this case the situation was never resolved emphasising the need for dialogue in relation to power, expectations and the forming of interdependent relationships.

Micro-politics do occur within school communities, so the issue for practitioners and researchers is, do we recognise and validate its existence, or 'sweep under the carpet' the complex dilemmas, struggles and issues of stifling others. If we choose to acknowledge this 'messiness', then we are starting to move beyond the simplistic jargon of shared and distributed leadership that pervades the field of school leadership (Duignan, 2006).

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that school distributed leadership is more than distributing leadership onto others; that it needs to be conceptually linked to a theorisation of power and to parallel developments in the wider leadership field. We need to have the 'presence' and courage to see beyond what is familiar to us in relation to school leadership. Being able to challenge our habitual assumptions of school leadership starts with us being secure enough to suspend our preferred views so that we are able to learn new ways of seeing and understanding leadership as a means of developing individual and interdependent capabilities for all members of our school communities. It is not easy, not prescribed and yet can be so rewarding...it takes courage on a daily basis to carry it through.

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Appendix: Studies of school distributed leadership

Author(s)	School Distributed Leadership Study
Camburn et al. (2003)	A quantitative study of approximately 100 Elementary schools in the U.S. The study focused on the distribution of leadership to formal roles and new roles generated from 3 Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) programs.
Court (2003, 2004)	Three case studies of New Zealand primary school's co-principalship and the struggles that were experienced with the regulations that only normalised single principalships in schools.
Crawford (2003)	A 3 year case study of one primary school subject to OFSTED special measures in England.
Crowther et al (2002)	The findings of "The teachers as leaders research project, 1996-2000". Two school case studies were reported and the term parallel leadership was used to describe leadership across each Australian school.
Dinham (2005)	A study of the role of principals in producing outstanding education outcomes in State schools. 50 sites from across secondary schools in New South Wales, Australia were selected who were believed to be outstanding. Data was collected from principals, staff, students and documents.
Fitzgerald et al. (2006)	A qualitative study of 82 middle leaders from eight schools across England and New Zealand. The leadership of learning was found to exist through all levels of the schools with both formal and informal leaders.
Flecknoe (2002, 2004)	A case study of one English primary school and the development of democratic leadership amongst staff and students (2002). Further commentary in relation to challenging orthodox organisational leadership through democratic student leadership is provided (2004).
Franey (2002)	A Principal's narrative account of school improvement supported by the NCSL in England.
Friedman (2004)	A case study of the development of shared leadership in one Massachusetts urban high school.
Giles (2006)	Three case studies concerned with how principal leadership in challenging urban elementary schools in the Northeast United States facilitated greater parental involvement.
Goldstein (2004)	Study of Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) in one large U.S. urban school district. PAR had undergone a change from a principal-centred summative evaluation of teachers to a peer-based system.
Gronn & Hamilton (2004)	An investigation of co-principalship within three Australian Catholic schools. This article focuses on one of the schools where a male and female co-lead the school.
Grubb & Flessa (2006)	An examination of ten schools, most situated in California. Each case study provides an account of alternative ways of organising work that is traditionally carried out by a single school principal.
Harris & Day (2003)	Case studies of effective leadership in 12 schools in England. The research was commissioned by the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT).
Harris (2002)	Case studies of 10 schools facing challenging circumstances funded by the NCSL in England.

Johnson (2004)	A study of how five school leadership teams in South Australia countered the politics of managerialism.
Leithwood et al. (2004)	A 4 year study of 10 schools where data was collected over 354 days across the schools. The study focused on the sources and distribution of leadership in relation to the large-scale literacy and numeracy reform initiatives in England.
Leithwood et al. (2007)	A study of patterns of leadership distribution in 4 elementary and 4 secondary schools based in the same Canadian education district. Data was collected through interviews of 67 staff at the district and school level.
Lingard et al. (2003)	A discussion of the findings from the data collected from 24 schools during the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS). Leadership was one of the issues studied in the research.
Lumby (2003)	A discussion of two research projects of colleges throughout England that highlights the challenges that can arise with a distributed perspective of leadership.
MacBeath (2005)	An exploration of what distributed leadership looked like from the perspective of principals and teachers in 11 schools. The study was sponsored by the NCSL, England.
Maxcy & Nguyen (2006)	Case studies of two Texan schools that are used to critique distributed leadership frameworks.
Mayrowetz et al. (2007)	An examination of distributed leadership reform that is being implemented across 24 States in North America through State Action Education Leadership Projects (SAELP) funding. An earlier sample of 6 schools is used to inform the article.
Mitra (2005)	A three year qualitative study that broadens the concept of distributed leadership to include student voice. The study took place in one Californian high school.
Møller & Eggen (2005)	Secondary school leadership analysed from a distributed perspective with the data originating from the Norwegian part of the “Successful School Leadership Project”. The fieldwork was based in 3 schools and included data from interviews and observations over a week.
Mulford (2005b), Mulford & Silins (2003)	Findings of ‘The Leadership for Organisational Learning and Student Outcomes (LOLSO) project from 3,500 year 10 students and 2,500 teacher/principal questionnaires conducted in half of the secondary schools in South Australia and all of the secondary schools in Tasmania.
Scribner et al. (2007)	A social distributed leadership study of two teacher teams that focused on the specific artefact of talk in one Missouri secondary school.
Spillane (2005) , Spillane et al (2003) & Spillane et al (2004)	Findings from “The Distributed leadership Project”. A 5 year study of leadership practice in 13 of Chicago’s elementary schools.
Spillane et al (2007)	A study of 52 principals’ day-to-day work from south-eastern United States. Data was collected through logs, questionnaires, observations and interviews.
Storey (2004)	A detailed case study of how competition between leaders in one English secondary school revealed the frailty of espousing distributed leadership at a rhetoric level.
Timperley (2005)	New Zealand Government sponsored professional development for literacy leaders in 7 schools across 4 years. The analysis of data was <i>stretched over</i> (Spillane, 2006) the interactions of the principal, literacy leader and teachers.
Wallace (2002)	A study of senior management teams in primary schools. Findings are presented from questionnaires returned from 65 principals across England and Wales and from four subsequent case studies of senior management teams.