Crossing boundaries and breaking barriers

Distributing leadership in schools

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iNet
INet (International Networking for Educational Transformation) is the international arm of the Specialist Schools Trust. Its mission is to create powerful and innovative networks of schools that have achieved or have committed themselves to achieving systematic, significant and sustained change that ensures outstanding outcomes for students in all settings.

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This publication
Audience
Leaders of all ages within, across and outside schools.

Aim
To explore the potential of distributed forms of leadership as a force for educational transformation and improvement; to rethink what leadership is; to redefine what form of leadership will deliver the reform of schools and school systems.

Foreword

An important aspect of iNet's work is developing leadership capacity: across the globe there is a growing shortage of high quality, innovative leaders – over 50% of headteachers/principals are due to retire before 2015. Professor Alma Harris is working with the Specialist Schools Trust to deliver leadership programmes, including Developing Leaders for Tomorrow and Aspiring Headteachers.

In this pamphlet, Professor Harris is advocating new models of leadership practice through distributing leadership. She supports Michael Fullan's view that the most 'egregious error is to search for the super leader'. Schools and school systems are changing: more schools are working together either in hard or soft federations, and a new style of leadership is required.

Professor Harris describes distributed leadership as 'collective leadership responsibility rather than top down authority … constructed through shared action and interaction'. She subscribes to the Jim Spillane 'leader plus' perspective: all stakeholders are engaged in key development and improvement work. The case study of Arden School supports her argument.

Distributed leadership does not make headteachers redundant, but gives them the responsibility for engaging others in 'the emotional work of building collaborative, trusting relationships'. This climate is essential if innovation is to succeed. Alma Harris argues for headteachers to become 'leaders of leaders'.

She is clear that distributed leadership is not a panacea. However, if there is to be sustainable school improvement, schools need to increase their intellectual and leadership capacity. Professor Harris convincingly makes the case for distributed leadership as a valuable way of doing this.
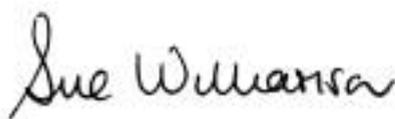
Sue Williamson, Director of Leadership and Affiliation Network, Specialist Schools Trust

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1 From the few to the many?

There are many leaders, not just one. Leadership is distributed. It resides not solely in the individual at the top, but in every person at entry level who, in one way or another, acts as a leader (Goleman, 2002:14).

In all societies there are taboos, unwritten laws and myths that go unchallenged. In the world of educational leadership the myth of the superhero leader seems to persist in the collective imagination of those writing in the field. Unlike most myths however there is some substance to the idea, as there are many accounts of charismatic leaders turning around failing schools by setting new expectations for staff and students alike. There are also numerous accounts of headteachers who, quite deservedly, are seen as the heroes and heroines in their school community because of the difference they have made to the life chances of young people. These actions become the source of media attention, research investigation and policy making, all reinforcing the message that leadership is primarily a singular rather than collective activity.

Yet for every successful story of the superhero leader there are also tales of failure. How often have we heard of a charismatic individual taking the helm of a school in the midst of much publicity, only to leave shortly after? Or of more concern, a school that reverts to previous performance once the charismatic headteacher has left? In such circumstances not only is the improvement gained quickly lost but the development work also dissipates simply because of an over-reliance on the leadership capability of one person. If you were to ask any number of strong and effective heads what happened in the school that they had just left, many would report that the

school was once again returning to previous practice and disengaging from school improvement efforts. Further, they would reluctantly admit that this stemmed from failure of succession planning and over-reliance on their leadership.

However, it is clear that schools and people never entirely return to the way they were before. Each time they rebound from a failed or terminated effort, they are more deeply disappointed, more cynical, more wounded. Each time, improvement in that school becomes more difficult to achieve.

Fullan[1] suggests that the most 'egregious error is to search for the superleader'. A comprehensive study[2] of 850 chief executives concluded: 'perhaps the most fundamental and fundamentally irrational attitude underlying the closed CEO market is belief in the charismatic authority itself… charismatic authority has always been alluring for the single reason that it avoids accountability and responsibility for outcomes.'

Certainly one of the reasons for the groundswell of interest in new or alternative forms of leadership has been the recognition of the limitations of the heroic, charismatic leader in securing sustainable change in organisations. Undoubtedly success can be achieved with this type of leadership – but it is often short lived and sporadic. While individual leaders and their attributes do matter in leading organisations, they are no longer all that matters. In considering the issue of sustainable system-wide improvement, Michael Fullan[3] concludes: 'in a nutshell we need a critical mass of leaders at all levels of the system, particularly leaders who are working on developing leaders beyond themselves.'

It would appear that this critical mass is already taking shape. Within and across schools new models of leadership practice are emerging that fundamentally redefine what school leadership means and, more importantly, who leads.

For example, the idea of the single head running a single school is being challenged by the 'executive head' model of leadership, which is operating in several schools in England. Here a headteacher leads more than one school, the leadership teams are shared, and staff move between schools offering overarching

leadership support at all levels[4]. This lateral model of leadership is being adopted in an increasing number of schools, particularly in schools in difficult or challenging contexts where leadership support is most needed[5]. There is evidence to suggest that the 'executive head' model is proving to be particularly effective at mobilising change, development and improvement for the schools involved. It is clearly a form of leadership that implicitly crosses organisational boundaries.

The breaking or crossing of organisational boundaries will be a major feature of system wide change and reform over the next decade. A 'tipping point' is occurring in education; a major shift in the way we understand schooling is taking place. Gladwell[6], who has popularised the concept of tipping point, suggested that ideas and messages spread as viruses do, ultimately creating an epidemic. This epidemic is currently characterised by the shift towards all schools being specialist and fuelled by new forms of collaboration. Fullan[7] suggests that two competing but not necessarily mutually exclusive strategies are influencing this systemic change: networking and intelligent accountability.

In terms of networking, it is evident that we are witnessing a proliferation of collaborative possibilities. Schools can now be in federations, partnerships, networked-learning communities, primary networks and a whole range of informal and formal networks that have already existed or are being created. Almost overnight the education system has gained momentum and schools are frenetically pursuing the goal of networks and networking.

It is possible that continuing at this pace will result in system overload, as more and more schools engage in multiple partnerships and networks. Despite this risk, networking still remains a very attractive option. It promises mutual learning and knowledge creation. Most importantly, it is a symbol of system level change and improvement. However, there must be an optimum number of networks that any one school can engage in before energy is dissipated and the benefits lost. Also, it remains to be seen whether quality knowledge transfer is actually possible in complex and sometimes cluttered organisational structures.

One thing remains certain: in the foreseeable future these new collaborative arrangements between schools will dominate the educational landscape and generate considerable leadership challenges. The way in which the system is evolving will necessitate more innovative and dynamic approaches to leadership practice, as schools become more complex mini systems of change. Both lateral and vertical forms of leadership will be needed to meet the changing developmental demands of schools working together in larger, more diffuse units. Alternative thinking about leadership practice will be needed if schools are to survive and thrive in this phase of rapid system level change. It is suggested that distributed leadership offers an alternative way of thinking about leadership practice that is particularly relevant to schools as they embrace new ways of working.

A starting point

While the idea of distributed leadership is not new, it appears to be in vogue. In considering what forms of leadership best serve the more complex world of schooling, distributed leadership is centre stage. Here distributed leadership is defined quite simply as 'engaging many people in leadership activity'[8]. It is premised upon leadership as a collective rather than a singular activity or entity. Drawing on the work of Spillane[9], the idea of distributed leadership highlights the interdependence of the individual and the environment; human activity is distributed in the interactive web of actors, artefacts and the situation. Distributed leadership implies that the practice of leadership is one that is shared, and realised within extended groupings and networks. Some of these groupings will be formal, while others will be informal and in some cases randomly allocated.

Where teachers, parents, students, governors and support staff work together to solve particular sets of problems, they occupy a developmental space within the school. By their actions they are engaged in leadership practice. The point here is that distributed leadership is not restricted to any particular pattern or form of delivery. It is not premised on a specific organisational structure or set of people. Rather, it emerges

from the actions and interactions of individuals engaged in problem solving or developmental work. Leadership is the product of debate, dialogue and discussion that results in action rather than a set of leadership tasks, responsibilities or functions that someone has to undertake or is given.

This pamphlet provides an overview of distributed leadership, in theory and in practice. It does not claim or assume to offer the definitive word on distributed leadership, but rather to explore the potential and possibilities of distributed leadership for those working with and within schools. The structure of this pamphlet is as follows. Chapter 1 describes how distributed leadership is defined, explained and understood. It explores Jim Spillane's idea[10] of the 'person plus' perspective on leadership, and makes a distinction between distributing leadership and delegation. Chapter 2 examines what distributed leadership means in practice and what form it might take in schools. A case study illuminates the ways in which distributed leadership can be generated and supported in schools. Chapter 2 also considers the role of the headteacher in a model of distributed leadership, and offers some insights and guidance on this relationship. Chapter 3 considers the boundaries that need to be crossed and barriers that need to be broken down if distributed leadership is to be meaningfully developed. It looks ahead and asks: where next for distributed leadership?

Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership offers an alternative perspective on leaders and leading in schools. It certainly does not profess to be the only alternative leadership model available or a panacea for school reform. However it does offer those who work with and within schools a different way of thinking about leadership practice. Distributed leadership implies the involvement of the many rather than the few in leadership tasks, and is premised on a collective approach to capacity building in schools[11]. A distributed perspective on leadership moves away from concentrating on those in formal leadership positions to consider those leadership practices that occur daily through informal interaction and collaboration.

Distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice; it is the result of the interactions between all those who contribute to the life of a school – the teachers, governors, classroom assistants, support staff, parents and students.

For example, tackling the issue of behaviour at a school requires more than a school policy or set of principles. It necessitates the collaboration of teachers, parents and students to explore the issue and collectively to seek a way forward. However, moving beyond the head or the leadership team to include other potential leaders in the school is just the tip of the iceberg of distributed leadership. Taking a distributed perspective on leadership essentially means looking at those who work within and with a school as a potential source of leadership. It means seeing leadership not as a set of skills or competences but as an organisational resource that can be maximised. Distributed leadership means finding and enhancing the sources of formal and informal leadership expertise within and outside the organisation.

An obvious place to look for distributed leadership in action has to be with teachers. Collectively they offer the greatest, but often untapped, leadership resource in school. Teachers tend not to see themselves as leaders unless they occupy formal leadership roles[12]. Many equate leadership with formal role and responsibility rather than individual capacity or capability. However, school development and growth are most likely where teachers are seen as leaders. A good example of this can be found in the school improvement project Improving the Quality of Education for All[13] (IQEA). This project requires each participating school to set up a 'school improvement group' (SIG), involving a cross section of some six to eight teachers, also potentially including classroom assistants and support staff. The SIG group meets regularly to work and plan together to tackle an issue or problem the school faces, or to drive forward innovation in a particular area.

Collectively SIG groups are responsible for leading the schools' improvement efforts and implementing innovation. They are primarily a catalyst and powerful agent of change and development. This way of working enables leadership to be

distributed as each teacher in the SIG group has different contacts with students, teachers and support staff. Their sphere of influence therefore is much greater than even the most effective leadership team could achieve, quite simply because of their multiple points of influence and connection.

Clearly it is possible for teachers to be leaders and for schools to set up their own form of SIG group without being in a school improvement project.

The exact structure or grouping to facilitate distributed leadership is not as important as the opportunity for shared problem solving and collective action. The structural arrangements could, for example, be within a department or a working group or through inter-school cooperation. It could be the result of two teachers working together on curriculum planning, or could emanate from a group or staff meeting to discuss assessment issues in key stage 3. The central idea is that distributed leadership is about collectively and collaboratively constructing meaning and knowledge. It should provide opportunities to reveal and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information and assumptions.

Not delegation

Critics of distributed leadership argue that it is little more than another term for delegation, as someone has to do the distributing. To think this way is to misunderstand what distributed leadership means and to confuse it with traditional, hierarchical notions of power. There is a very important distinction between distributed leadership and the routine delegation of leadership tasks.

Implicit within distributed leadership is collective leadership responsibility rather than top down authority. It is not about giving others tasks or responsibilities but recognising that leadership practice is constructed through shared action and interaction. This is what Jim Spillane[14] has termed the 'leader plus' perspective.

The leader plus perspective implies the multiple engagement of teachers, parents, support staff, students and governors in key

development and improvement work. This may occasionally involve the headteacher or the leadership team in planning or problem solving. But implicit in the distributed leadership model is the requirement that other leaders can and do take on responsibility for a whole range of leadership functions and routines. Some of these roles are already formally recognised: eg, subject coordinator, head of year, head of department. Others may have no official title but play an equally important role in formulating leadership practice within the school. The distributed leadership frame also sees students as participants in, rather than the recipients of, leadership practice. Students represent an important but unrecognised source of leadership within schools, and the emerging evidence base[15] highlights the contribution they can make to school improvement.

Person plus

Distributed leadership challenges us to think broadly and creatively about leadership. It moves us from a 'person solo' to a 'person plus', suggesting multiple leaders at multiple levels. Of course it could be argued that if leadership equates with influence, as so many studies have shown, then all leadership is inevitably distributed. Clearly, this is true to some degree but the research evidence also shows that the nature, type and form of leadership practice in schools makes a difference to their ability to develop and improve. It shows that schools have very different internal capacities to develop, grow and innovate. This capacity is heavily dependent on patterns of leadership activity.

There is increasing evidence[16] to suggest that more widely distributed patterns of leadership equate with greater potential for organisational change and development.

In short, there is greater potential for school improvement where leadership is distributed and where different perspectives are taken on certain issues or problems. In his book *The wisdom of crowds* James Surowiecki[17] argues that diversity contributes not just by adding different perspectives to the group, but also by allowing the group to make wiser decisions. This collective wisdom is released through sharing knowledge and problem solving. Peter Senge[18] argues that at

the heart of a learning organisation is a shift of mind – from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to being connected to the world. He also suggests that system change depends on sophisticated and widely distributed networks of communication or influence.

Two concrete examples that were highlighted earlier reinforce how distributed forms of leadership resonate with current system level change.

The first focuses on the growth of networks that will inevitably necessitate different leadership practices and solutions. The Primary Strategy Learning Networks in the course of the next 18 months will generate, in England, 1500 networks of approximately six primary schools. The intention is that these groupings will be the engine of change and improvement through sharing knowledge, capability and expertise. For this to work effectively, it is clear that leadership will need to be located in the organisational spaces (ie, within schools, between schools and in the larger spaces across the networks).

The second example is the establishment of different forms of federated activity across groupings of schools. The 'Federations programme' encompasses various models of partnership across many types of school, including specialist schools, beacon schools, academies and leading edge schools. Essentially federations are groups of schools with a formal (ie, written) agreement to work together to raise standards, promote inclusion, find new ways of approaching teaching and learning and build capacity between schools in a coherent manner. At the core of federated activity are new vertical and lateral co-dependent relationships where commitment to change is shared and distributed to other constituencies. Here connectivity and cohesiveness align and leadership is stretched over very different school types and school contexts.

The implication here is that these new ways of relating and working will require leadership that bridges organisational boundaries and links different structures together. It also presses us to examine current leadership practice in schools, and to judge how far current leadership practice is poised to meet the new demands of more distributed forms of leadership.

Questions

How far is leadership distributed currently in your school?

How many formal leadership roles are there? Are they effective?

Who are the informal leaders and do they have significant influence?

What would need to happen to make leadership more distributed in your school?

2 Going deeper

Good leaders foster good leadership at other levels. Leadership at other levels produces a steady stream of future leaders for the system as a whole (Fullan, 2001:10).

If distributed leadership is best understood as 'practice distributed over leaders, followers and their situation'[19], what does that practice actually look like? This section aims to explore the idea of distributed leadership in more depth, and provides an illustration of what it looks like in practice.

In essence, distributed leadership is premised on two core assumptions. Firstly, leadership is best understood by exploring leadership tasks. Secondly, leadership practice is distributed over leaders, followers and the school situation or context. Spillane[20] suggests it is stretched over individuals who have responsibility for leadership routines and that all three elements (leaders, followers and the situation) in interaction constitute leadership practice. Within schools this web of leadership will inevitably vary, but the patterns of distribution will be between the three points or constituents of leader, follower and the situation.

It might seem contradictory that in a model of distributed leadership the idea of followership emerges. However as Spillane[21] explains the follower dimension of leadership practice is different within distributed leadership insofar as leaders do not only influence followers but are influenced by them. Here leadership is not something done to followers. Rather, followers have their part to play in determining and shaping leadership practice. In educational reform processes generally, the influence of the follower on the eventual outcomes has been minimised. They are generally viewed as recipients in the process rather than active sources of influence on the process

itself. Similarly, when thinking about formal leadership responsibilities in schools such as head of department, head of year, etc, the mode of transmission is often assumed to be one way whereas in distributed leadership there has to be reciprocal engagement and communication.

In short, leaders, followers and the situation are part of a dynamic relationship that produces leadership practice. In his work, Jim Spillane compares distributed leadership practice to a dance where the interactions of the dancers rather than their individual actions allow us to understand what is taking place. Consequently, distributed leadership practice resides in the interactions of multiple leaders, who are the co-producers of leadership.

Distributed leadership in action

While distributed leadership has a strong theoretical basis, contemporary examples of it in action are hard to find. The operational images of distributed leadership practice are certainly emerging, but for many schools the shift from vertical to lateral forms of leadership is gradual. Undoubtedly as schools adopt and adapt to the new forces of structural changes (federations, networks, partnerships, etc) more and more examples of distributed leadership will appear. The short case study that follows gives some insight into the possibilities and potential of distributed leadership. While the school in question is a primary, the strategies used to distribute leadership are not restricted to this particular phase or school context. Arden School is a large primary school serving a socio-economically disadvantaged estate in the suburbs of a medium sized coastal city in England. The estate, from which the school draws all its students, consists largely of council-owned rented housing. There are high levels of poverty on the estate, and many single parent families. Two other primary schools serve the same catchment area. The school was performing well below the national average in terms of exam results when the head took over three years ago. In 2005 this school was identified as one of the most improved schools in the country.

The extent to which leadership is shared within Arden School is a recent development. The present head deliberately introduced a move towards more distributed forms of leadership, believing this would lead to a more dynamic school. The previous head had employed a more traditional, top-down management style: the head took the decisions, without much consultation with staff. When appointed, the new head at first employed a similar leadership style, as she explains:

'I came into a situation where the results in key stage 1 were rock bottom. This was not my ideal style of leadership, but I saw what had to be done and just had to make them do it. At the same time I have tried to gradually develop leadership skills in everyone. In the first year I had to come in and firefight, in the second year it was difficult, developing more autonomy among the staff. I kept on saying "you don't need to ask me everything; you don't need to ask permission". It's about letting go as a leader, but it's still quite hard to do that.'

From the second year onwards, the head started to adopt a more distributed leadership approach. Initially, this was achieved by putting a senior management team together to replace the two-person leadership that existed before. In addition, teacher teams were set up to lead specific developments or initiatives within the school. Along with their teaching responsibilities, every teacher was also given responsibilities within either academic or pastoral development. These cross-subject teams ensured that teachers from different key stages worked together on whole school issues.

A new coaching and mentoring programme helped develop the leadership skills of the newly constituted senior management team. Leadership training was then extended to all staff. Middle level leaders now work as mentors of new staff to help them develop into their subject leadership roles. In addition to the in-house leadership development programme, teachers were encouraged to engage in LEA activities and to work with the National College for School Leadership on their Networked Learning Communities Initiative. This external engagement with new ideas helped and encouraged teachers to innovate within their school.

Teachers led key initiatives for the school. One teacher revised the year plans and curriculum for each group. Another young teacher was engaged in an action research project on inclusion, which resulted in changes to school policy. Teams of four to five teachers deal with improvement in a variety of areas, such as English and arts. They meet to discuss curriculum and teaching and learning issues, and plan and change things when necessary. The English team, for example, produced new exemplar materials for key stages 1 and 2, which were then shared with the rest of the staff. A member of the senior management team is part of some teams, but does not lead them.

Senior managers in Arden School now attach strong importance to teacher decision-making and to staff leading initiatives. One teacher says: 'If you've been in the process of getting there, rather than someone just telling you, then… it's a far better way round it. Everybody gets behind it because everybody feels part of the decision making.'

Similarly, a member of the senior management team clearly articulates the benefit of a wider range of viewpoints: 'Having people involved (in decision making) from different backgrounds and different age groups is important, because if you have a head and a deputy who do little or no teaching, they lose touch with what's going on in the classroom. We're there to say, sorry but that's just not realistic.'

Interestingly, within this school the philosophy of distributed leadership goes beyond the teachers to include elements of student leadership as well. The school has instituted a strong student council. Elected representatives from each class have regular meetings, with a member of the senior management team present. Students feed back concerns from their peers, bring up issues and are consulted by the SMT on some matters concerning them.

Students take this process very seriously, and often lead the meetings themselves without a member of staff facilitating the process. The assistant head notes: 'Leadership here really goes right the way down. The youngest key stage 1 children participate in council meetings and report back – on simple

things. Recently we had to decide on some furniture to buy for key stage 1, and the children had a big say in that.'

As highlighted earlier, distributed perspective implies that leadership practice is formed through the interaction of leaders, followers and their situation. In Arden School this was achieved through the creation of many more opportunities to lead development work, and by multiple points of engagement. By moving beyond a preoccupation with those in leadership positions, the head was able to create a more fluid form of leadership where staff contributed to and moved between different teams.

A distributed perspective urges us to view leadership as a collective and dynamic undertaking. While this may look very different in different school contexts, the underlying principles of broad based involvement in the work of leadership remain the same.

Is the head redundant?

As this case study illustrates, a distributed perspective on leadership means that it is grounded in activity rather than position or role. This is not to suggest that headteachers or members of the leadership team are now removed from the leadership equation, as a simplistic interpretation of distributed leadership might suggest.

The headteacher is far from redundant in the distributed leadership model. He or she will play an even more critical role in ensuring that the organisation is able to engage in collective leading and learning. If building leadership capacity requires distributing leadership, the headteacher's role is more important than ever. This is because heads can empower others to lead, and they can provide the much needed energy for change and development. They may not implement the changes but they can motivate others to take responsibility for change and development. In short, they engage others in the emotional work of building collaborative, trusting relationships. Without this emotional climate for change, even the most well conceived and received innovation is unlikely to succeed.

As Goleman[22] suggests, 'great leadership works through emotions.' So no matter what headteachers set out to do – whether it's creating strategy or mobilising teachers to lead – their success depends on how they do it. It is clear that it is much more difficult to build leadership capacity among teachers than to tell teachers what to do.

Also, it is categorically more uncomfortable to be full partners with others engaged in development work than to dictate or supervise from the apex of the organisation. Even if they get everything else right, if the head fails to build positive relationships among staff and attend to the emotional life of the organisation, nothing will work as well as it could or should.

One of the main barriers to distributed leadership concerns the 'top-down' leadership model that still dominates many schools. The possibility of distributed leadership in any school will depend on whether the head and the leadership team relinquish power, and the extent to which staff embrace the opportunity to lead. In order for distributed leadership to become embedded, heads will therefore need to become leaders of leaders, striving to develop a relationship of trust with staff, and encouraging leadership and autonomy throughout the school. Fullan[23] suggests: 'What we need is leadership that motivates people to take on the complexities and anxieties of difficult change.'

To achieve this goal will require headteachers to provide:

- Empowerment and encouragement of teachers to become leaders and to provide opportunities for teachers to develop their leadership skills

- Time to be set aside for teachers' leadership work, including time for professional development and collaborative work, planning together, building teacher networks and visiting classrooms

- Opportunities for continuous professional development that focuses not just on the development of teachers' skills and knowledge but on aspects specific to their leadership role, such as leading groups and workshops, collaborative work, mentoring, teaching adults and action research.

Heads will also need to resist one major temptation when faced with the new complexity generated by distributing leadership into a formal system: reverting to traditional structures and control processes.

Distributed leadership is the most distinguishing characteristic of a high leadership capacity school. The headteacher remains central, creating the conditions in which distributed leadership can flourish and a learning community can evolve. This can only be achieved with purposeful and deliberate intervention and action. Only in the most exceptional cases do learning communities evolve without planning, support and careful nurturing.

The next section considers the relationship between distributed leadership and professional learning communities. It explores some of the barriers to distributing leadership in schools.

Questions

What type of head are you/do you work for?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current leadership style adopted by you/ the head?

How far are encouragement, time and opportunity provided for others to lead?

What could you do differently to support others in taking leadership roles?

3 Crossing boundaries and breaking barriers

Capacity building creates intellectual capital by emphasizing the development of knowledge, competence, and skills of parents, teachers and other locals in the school community (Sergiovanni, 2001:48).

Take a look at the average secondary school and ask yourself how far distributed leadership is a real possibility. The hierarchical divisions and the 'egg crate' compartmentalisation of subjects tend not to be the most promising location for a lateral, dynamic and ultimately democratic form of leadership.

Put several schools together and the challenges are immediately increased, several fold. While a constellation of schools increases the collective capacity to engage in deep learning or creative thinking, it can also present a fortress of conformity that may be difficult to permeate, let alone change.

Yet it is worth doing. A distributed perspective offers a framework for thinking about leadership differently, and for breaking through entrenched positions or comfortable conformity. It does not mean that everyone has a hand in every leadership function or routine. The distribution will depend on the type and size of school, its developmental stage and its context.

The distribution of leadership can occur by design, default or desperation.

It can occur by design[24] through the decisions of formal or informal leaders. So for example, as in the case of Arden School highlighted earlier, the headteacher actively decided to give colleagues more leadership responsibility. The formation of new leadership opportunities, positions and responsibilities is one

way of securing a more distributed approach to leadership. The creation of new structures and groupings, such as the SIG group in IQEA or the working group on attendance, will enable teachers and others to take on leadership responsibilities and this will result in more distributed forms of leadership.

However, leadership is not always distributed through the rational actions and forward planning of those in formal leadership positions. As Hargreaves and Fink found[25], at times teachers can and do fill in leadership gaps: they see things that need to be done and do them. In other words, distributed leadership takes place by default rather than design. Through necessity or serendipity teachers, often with others, take the lead in solving problems and undertaking important developmental work.

Such intuitive ways of working are common in schools as people get to know each other and seek to problem solve together. For example, a teacher shares her negative experiences of using interactive whiteboards with another, and together they produce materials and guidance that all teachers can adopt and adapt to aid their classroom teaching.

Sometimes creativity and innovation result from less favourable or trusting circumstances. Here distributed forms of leadership emanate from desperation rather than design or default. Where unanticipated events pose a problem for the school it can result in what Peter Gronn[26] has termed 'spontaneous collaboration'. A school suddenly finds its results plummeting, or there is a surge in bad behaviour in the lunchtimes or negative media attention about the exclusion of a particular child. Such incidents can throw a school into a crisis demanding immediate action. In such cases the old forms of decision making and leadership are superseded by more distributed forms, where groups get together to problem solve and plan a course of action to offset the crisis. The net result is an abrupt and powerful shift in the distribution of leadership within the school.

With schools working more closely together, it is likely that we will see many examples of distributed leadership by design and

default. Brian Caldwell[27] talks about the 'new image of the self-managing school' as being one in which schools cannot achieve transformation by acting alone or operating in a line of support from the centre of the school system, to the school, to the department, to the classroom. The success of the school, Caldwell suggests, depends on its capacity to join networks or federations to share knowledge, address problems and pool resources. This requires leadership, he argues, that is distributed across schools in networks and federations as well as within schools across programmes of teaching and learning. In this sense, distributed leadership is not only a new way of looking at leadership practice: it also implies crossing boundaries.

Boundary interactions

Distributed leadership implies sustained boundary interactions. It requires the frequent crossing of boundaries to create deep expertise inside the organisation and to secure the constant renewal of learning. Most schools are not designed to encourage boundary interactions; teachers are mostly rewarded for focusing on their own classroom, subject or department. Crossing boundaries in order to maximise learning requires the organisation to build trust and to look for alternative ways of transferring knowledge. While distributed leadership may be central to the formation of communities of practice and the generation of new knowledge, there are also significant challenges. Essentially there are three main barriers to distributing leadership in schools: distance, culture and structure.

Distance: As schools grow and become more complex organisations through partnerships and collaborations with other schools, the issue of distance makes it more difficult for teams to meet and problem solve. The physical space and distance can be a barrier to distributing leadership as the geographical separation makes it more difficult for teachers to connect. The challenge for schools is to provide new, alternative ICT based solutions to the barrier of distance and to cross the boundaries through alternative forms of communication.

Culture: Distributed leadership essentially means a shift in culture away from the top down model to a form of leadership that is more organic and spontaneous – and more difficult to control. It means departing from a view of leadership that resides in one person to a more sophisticated and complex notion of leadership as a distributed property. The challenge for those in schools is to see leadership as an organisational resource that is maximised through interactions between individuals and teams that lead to problem solving and new developments.

Structure: The way schools are currently organised presents a set of barriers to distributing leadership. The structure of schooling is still dominated by compartmentalising subjects, students and learning into discrete, manageable boxes. Distributed leadership implies the erosion of these artificial barriers and schools operating in a more fluid way. The challenge for schools is to find ways of removing those organisational structures and systems that restrict organisational learning.

Questions

Looking at these three barriers in relation to your own school: to what extent do they restrict organisational learning?

What are you doing, or what might you do, to overcome these barriers?

What do you see as the major challenge for schools in distributing leadership?

Where next?

This distributed view of leadership, it has been suggested, offers a frame for studying leadership practice in which 'every person at entry level, in one way or another, acts as a leader'[28]. It offers practitioners a different way of thinking about leaders and leadership, which enables them to stand back and think about exactly how and in what form leadership can be maximised within their school.

Like any view of leadership, distributed leadership inevitably frames leadership in certain ways and offers particular lenses on practice. However, as a framework for thinking about leadership in schools it focuses 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.

Taking the analytical rather than the prescriptive stance, distributed leadership provides a powerful frame for revealing the complexity of leadership practice. For example, it allows us to ask important questions such as: what are the different models of distributed leadership practice operating in schools? What is the relationship between different types of distribution? How does leadership practice differ in settings where the dominant leadership approaches reflect autocratic rather than democratic approaches? In this sense the core unit of analysis is leadership practice, not the leader or the leadership role. The important point is that leadership practice encompasses not only the actions of individual leaders but also the wider processes of cause and effect.

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 presents the likelihood that followers may actually be co-producers of leadership through their interactions with leaders and others. Moreover it raises the possibility that, collectively, followers could have a greater influence over leadership practice than those in formal leadership positions in schools. A situation of coordinated or collective distribution where leadership is stretched over several people working interdependently does not imply or necessitate any embedded power relationship. Therefore teachers, students, parents and support staff may be contributing to and shaping leadership practice far more than those who occupy formal leadership roles.

In conclusion, three conditions and three cautions are offered.

Three conditions

The three conditions represent the fundamental principles of distributed leadership:

- Distributed leadership means focusing on the **practice** of leadership – which is more important than the function or outcome

- Distributed leadership means paying attention to the **interactions** between people – these are just as important as the actions they undertake

- Distributed leadership means acknowledging that **situation** shapes and influences the form that distributed leadership takes in schools – it may vary according to the context.

Three cautions

The three cautions guard against the misuse and misinterpretation of the term:

- Avoid moving from description to prescription: distributed leadership is essentially a way of analysing leadership practice – **it is not a blueprint**

- Resist reducing distributed leadership to a low level set of competencies – distributed leadership **is not a checklist**

- Do not assume that distributed leadership, in itself, is an assurance of improvement: much depends on the context and situation – distributed leadership **is not a guarantee**.

If distributed leadership is not to join the steadily rising pile of redundant leadership theories, it must resonate with those who work with and within schools. This can only be achieved with the co-operation of those who are keen to explore a different world view of leadership. As Fullan[29] concludes: 'from a system perspective, the single answer to the question of how to increase the chances for greater sustainability is to build a critical mass of developmental leaders who can mix and match, and who can surround themselves with leaders across the system as they spread the new leadership capacities to others.'

It is difficult to see how this can be achieved without more distributed forms of leadership.

While distributed leadership is not a panacea or blueprint for change, it is a way of rethinking current leadership practice. It means holding up a mirror to schools to reflect leadership in a new and challenging way. Inevitably this will bring tensions and anxieties as boundaries will be crossed and barriers broken. But if we are serious about sustainable school improvement, surely this is a risk worth taking?

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This pamphlet by Professor Alma Harris poses a number of questions for all educators to consider within their own school, federation or network. It is the first in a series of iNet pamphlets focused on leadership, and supports the Trust in working with schools to develop the next generation of school and school systems leaders.

iNet, International Networking for Educational Transformation, is the international arm of the Specialist Schools Trust.

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