Distributed Leadership in Schools: Leading or Misleading?

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Introduction

CONTEMPORARY educational reform places a great premium upon the relationship between leadership and school improvement. The dominant message from the research base is unequivocal - effective leaders exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of students (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000).

It is for this reason that ‘leadership’ has generated an enormous amount of interest among researchers and practitioners. A vast literature on school leadership and leadership theory exists (see Hallinger and Heck, 1996). Yet, despite a substantial research base, a singular, overarching theory of leadership has proved to be elusive. While researchers in many countries continue to produce a steady stream of empirical evidence about school leadership, this endless accumulation of findings still has not produced a consensus around effective leadership practice. The sheer proliferation of leadership theories, styles or approaches presented in the literature undoubtedly contributes to the confusion. There appear to be as many perspectives on school leadership as those who research and write about it. Furthermore, it is difficult to discern exactly how alternative theoretical positions differ.

For example, the differences between ‘instructional leadership’, ‘learner-centred leadership’ and ‘pedagogical leadership’ are not entirely self-evident. They embrace similar concepts and endorse a model of leadership chiefly concerned with improving teaching and learning. But how far they adequately reflect the reality of contemporary leadership practice is also debatable, as there is a significant lack of contemporary empirical evidence supporting these particular leadership perspectives. It has been suggested that much of the literature fails to accurately reflect leadership practices in schools and has over-relied upon the accounts of headteachers to define effective leadership in action (Razik and Swanson, 2001; Owens, 2001; Morrison, 2002).

Anyone who looks at the leadership literature will find that, with a few exceptions, empirical studies of leadership practice at other levels, or from other perspectives, remain somewhat rare (Sammons et al., 1996; Harris et al., 1995; Day et al., 2000). It is for this reason that models of leadership derived from, and premised upon, the leadership practice of one person are currently under scrutiny (Foster, 2001; Goleman, 2002; Gronn, 2002; Harris and Lambert, forthcoming).

A powerful force in the quest for alternative and authentic perspectives on leadership practice is the notion of ‘distributed leadership’, which is currently receiving much attention and growing empirical support (Gronn, 2000; Spillaine et al. 2001). In their
recent review of successful school improvement efforts, Glickman et al. (2001:49) construct a composite list of the characteristics of what they term the ‘improving school’, a ‘school that continues to improve student learning outcomes for all students over time’. At the top of this list appears ‘varied sources of leadership, including distributed leadership’.

Similarly, research by Silns and Mulford (2002) has shown that student outcomes are more likely to improve where leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community, and where teachers are empowered in areas of importance to them.

In contrast to traditional notions of leadership premised upon an individual managing hierarchical systems and structures, distributed leadership is characterised as a form of collective leadership, in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively. This distributed view of leadership requires schools to ‘de-centre’ the leader (Gronn, 2002:) and to subscribe to the view that leadership 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). Distributed leadership therefore means multiple sources of guidance and direction, ‘following the contours of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture. It is the ‘glue’ of a common task or goal- improvement of instruction-and a common frame of values for how to approach that task’ (Elmore 2000:15).

This is not to suggest that is no one is ultimately responsible for the overall performance of the organisation or to render those in formal leadership roles redundant. Instead, the job of those in formal leadership positions is primarily to hold the pieces of the organisation together in a productive relationship. Their central task is to create a common culture of expectations around the use of individual skills and abilities. In short, distributing leadership equates with maximising the human capacity within the organisation.

Distributed Leadership in Practice

Two recent studies of successful school leadership have reinforced the importance of distributed leadership practice in securing and sustaining school improvement. In 1999 the NAHT (National Association of Head Teachers) in England commissioned research to identify, examine successful leadership practice in schools (Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley, Beresford, 2000). In 2001 the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) funded research that explored successful leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances (Harris and Chapman, 2002). Both studies offer a contemporary view of successful leadership and provide insights into current leadership practices in schools.

The central message emanating from both studies was that successful heads recognised the limitation of a singular leadership approach and saw their leadership role as being primarily concerned with empowering others to lead.
The NAHT research revealed that, although the heads were at different stages in their careers, of different ages, had different experiences and were working in very different situations, their approaches to leadership were remarkably similar. The evidence from this study pointed towards a form of leadership that was distributed through collaborative and joint working. The evidence showed that these successful heads led both the cognitive and the affective lives of the school, combining structural (developing clear goals), political (building alliances) and educational leadership (professional development and teaching improvement) with symbolic leadership principles (presence, inspiration) and distributed leadership practice (empowering others to lead). They were primarily transformational leaders who built self-esteem, enhanced professional competence and gave their staff the confidence and responsibility to lead development and innovation.

‘It’s enabling other people to take over, to do things … It’s being able to trust other people. To be confident in your own ability to delegate tasks and know they will be done … to allow people to lead and not to try and control everything yourself.’
(Headteacher, School 10)

‘You don’t achieve things on your own. You set the way forward, lead by example, communicate what needs to be done and have to be hands on in the way you want it achieved … it doesn’t always have to be you doing the leading.’
(Headteacher, School 5)

Second Study of Successful Leadership

The second contemporary study of successful school leadership also investigated leadership practice within a group of ten schools designated by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as ‘facing challenging circumstances’. In all ten schools the research found that distributed approaches to leadership prevailed and directly influenced approaches to problem solving and decision-making. While heads’ responses to problems varied, depending on the circumstance or situation, their value position remained consistently one of involving and consulting pupils, staff and parents. Within the study, the heads saw the agency of staff and students as central to achieving the school’s purpose. The heads used a number of strategies for distributing leadership. These included involving others in decision-making; allocating important tasks to teachers and rotating leadership responsibilities within the school. They had deliberately chosen to distribute leadership responsibility to others and had put in place systems and incentives to ensure this happened. Their leadership was underpinned by a set of core personal values that included the modelling and promotion of respect (for individuals), fairness and equality, caring for the well-being and the development of students and staff.

In all cases, they remained important gatekeepers to change and development, guiding their schools in a clear and purposeful direction. Their approach to leadership was not one of ‘delegated headship’, where unwanted tasks are handed down to others. In contrast, they distributed leadership activity through a redistribution of power within the organisation, by giving those who did not occupy ‘formal’ leadership positions
responsibility for major and important development tasks. The heads adopted highly creative approaches to tackling the complex demands of implementing multiple changes. The decision to work with, and through, teams, as well as individuals, was a common response to the management of change. From the perspectives of those within the school community, teachers, parents, governors, and pupils, the overarching message was one of the heads leading their schools through primarily developing and involving others.

‘When I first came to the school, the head and SMT were considered to be the leaders, everyone else opted out. With the formulation of teams with clear targets I’ve been able to distribute leadership and to energise teachers to take responsibility for change and development.’
(Head School 7)

‘The teachers now have greater responsibility and authority for leading. The days of waiting for the head to lead on all fronts have gone.’
(SMT, School 10)

Both studies point towards an emerging model of leadership that is less concerned with individual capabilities, skills and talents and more preoccupied with creating collective responsibility for leadership action and activity. The focus is less upon the characteristics of ‘the leader’ and more upon creating shared contexts for learning and developing leadership capacity.

But how do schools achieve distributed leadership? What do formal leaders do to promote distributed leadership? It would be naïve to assume that the structural, cultural and micro-political barriers operating in schools would simply fall away to accommodate and support distributed leadership. Consequently, the difficulties of adopting models of distributed leadership in practice should not be underestimated or simply ignored.

**Distributed Leadership: Pitfalls and Possibilities**

While it would appear from the research evidence that distributed leadership can be advantageous to school and teacher development, achieving it is far from easy. Essentially, it requires those in formal leadership positions to relinquish power and control to others. The inherent difficulties in achieving this are at once immediately apparent.

Apart from the challenge to authority and ego, evidence would suggest that there are other barriers that need to be overcome to ensure that the distributed leadership operates effectively (Vail and Redick, 1993). The literature points towards ‘top-down’ management structures in schools as a main impediment to the development of distributed leadership, as they militate against teachers attaining autonomy and taking on leadership roles within the school. In schools, functions and systems are premised on maintaining the bureaucratic and hierarchical structure. A concomitant of this is that distributed leadership roles cannot successfully be imposed by management.
Wasley (1991) reiterates that teachers need to be involved in the process of deciding on what roles, if any, they wish to take on, and must then feel supported by the school’s administration in doing so.

The success or otherwise of distributed leadership within a school can be influenced by a number of interpersonal factors, such as relationships with other teachers and school management. The importance of these is evident, both with respect to teachers’ ability to influence colleagues and with respect to developing productive relations with school management, who may in some cases feel threatened by teachers taking on leadership roles. There may also, on occasion, be conflicts between groups of teachers, such as those that do, and do not, take on leadership roles, which can lead to estrangement among teachers.

Research has shown that colleagues can, at times, be hostile to distributed leadership because of factors such as inertia, over-cautiousness and insecurity. Overcoming these difficulties will require a combination of strong interpersonal skills on the part of the ‘teacher leader’ and a school culture that encourages change and leadership from teachers.

Clearly, more empirical evidence is required about the ways in which distributed leadership currently operates in schools. We need to know more about how it is developed and promoted. In particular, we need to know if, and how, it contributes to better teaching and learning processes in schools. A new project funded by the General Teaching Council and the National Union of Teachers proposes to address these questions by collecting data from schools where forms of distributed leadership are operating successfully. The project commences in October 2002 and will be primarily concerned with the ways in which teacher leadership contributes to school improvement.
References


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