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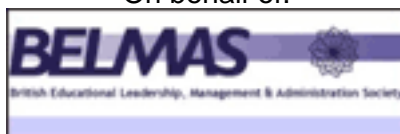
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# Distributed Leadership: The Model of Choice in the 21st Century

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**Tony Bush**

Distributed leadership has become the normatively preferred leadership model in the 21st century. Gronn (2010: 70) notes that ‘there has been an accelerating amount of scholarly and practitioner attention’ accorded to this model. An important starting point for understanding the phenomenon is to uncouple it from positional authority. Leadership may arise anywhere in the organization and is not confined to formal leaders. The motivation for distribution arises partly from the growing recognition that principals and other senior leaders are overloaded, particularly in education systems with high levels of decentralization to the school level. Hartley (2010: 27) argues that ‘its popularity may be pragmatic: to ease the burden of overworked headteachers’. However, its attraction goes beyond this instrumental motive to recognition of the merits of pooling all the expertise available to the organisation.

This issue of the Journal brings together four articles in a special section on distributed leadership. In the first article, Alma Harris, one of the leading writers on this theme, provides an overview of the evidence base on distributed leadership. She comments that it implies a fundamental re-conceptualization for those in formal leadership roles, especially the headteacher. She notes that interactions between people are more important than the precise nature of leadership roles. She shows that there is evidence of beneficial effects on schools of wider leadership distribution. She reviews several studies which suggest a link between distributed leadership and enhanced student outcomes. She argues that ‘the hope of transforming schools through the actions of individual leaders is quickly fading’ and concludes that those in formal leadership positions should ‘create the conditions where leadership capacity is built, supported and sustained in a purposeful way’.

While Alma Harris broadly endorses distributed leadership, Helen Gunter is more sceptical, arguing that it is a way of encouraging teachers to do more work, a form of disguised managerialism (Fitzgerald and Gunter, 2006). In the second article in this issue, Helen, David Hall and Joanna Bragg present a mapping framework to analyse knowledge production and distributed leadership in schools. Drawing on what they describe as ‘our map of the literatures’, they locate texts within a four-part conceptual framework; functional-descriptive, functional-normative, critical, and socially critical. They imply that the ‘considerable investment’ in the principal as transformational leader has failed, because the job of principal is too big for one person. This led to the alternative of distributed leadership, supported by notions of deep leadership and leadership density. They conclude that the ‘historiography of the field remains immature’ and that more needs to be done to critique the realities of everyday practice in democratic schools.

The third article, by Jacky Lumby, links distributed leadership to notions of power. She claims that the former’s persistence suggests that it serves some important functions. She criticizes the ‘evangelical’ flavour of much writing on distributed leadership, for example in National College publications. She examines the ways in which power may be distributed and notes the central role of the head teacher in this

process. She argues that the literature is 'littered with contradictions', for example in rejecting hierarchical leadership and in acknowledging its persistence. She concludes by suggesting that the notion of staff willingly committing to an increased workload may be little more than emancipatory rhetoric.

In the fourth article, Kay Fuller applies the concept of distributed leadership to extended services provision in England. Extended services comprise multi-agency 'wraparound' childcare, beyond the formal school day. She joins Gunter in commenting on 'a managerial approach to distributed leadership' and on the prescriptive approach to shared leadership. Drawing on interviews with parents and leaders in six school-based extended service clusters, she notes that the professional 'power brokers' largely determined the leadership engagement of families and the community. She concludes that 'distributed leadership is insufficient in itself to extend meaningful leadership opportunities for children, young people and families.

Marietjie Oswald and Petra Engelbrecht, in the fifth article, explore leadership in two contrasting primary schools in South Africa. Drawing on cultural-historical activity theory, they examine the perceptions of teachers, parents, learners and principals about aspects of leadership in communities reserved for 'coloured' people in the Western Cape under the apartheid regime. The authors conclude that the two principals 'held the power' in their respective schools, a model unchanged from the apartheid era, and argue that distributed leadership would help the schools to move from dependency to agency and enablement.

In the sixth article, Farraj Alsaedi and Trevor Male provide a rare contribution to the limited literature on school leadership in Kuwait, by examining the attitudes of school principals to transformational leadership and globalisation. They report on reforms in the Kuwaiti education system and the need for transformed leadership behaviours to achieve these reforms. Drawing on interviews with a convenience sample of eight school principals in Aljhra City, the authors show that principals recognised the need to display transformational leadership and appeared to be ready to engage with them.

Mike Collins, in the next article, provides an 'insider' perspective on the English national succession planning strategy. He notes that the National College promoted local solutions for the national challenge of what he describes as the 'looming shortage' of headteachers. He examined College documents, and accounts of local responses written by the National Succession Consultants. He claims that the range of individuals and organisations involved in succession planning constitutes 'a complex adaptive system', with each element operating autonomously while 'constantly interacting'. He concludes that local solutions are 'inevitable' but that a common understanding of the problem is required to achieve the widely shared goal of having good headteachers in every school.

The final paper, by Linda Evans, examines the attitudes of the 'led' to the role of professors as academic leaders. Drawing on more than 1200 survey responses, and interviews with a small sub-sample, she suggests that the picture of professorial academic leadership is 'far from rosy', with 'predominantly negative perceptions' by the respondents, as a result of 'unmet expectations'. She concludes that these negative perceptions, whether accurate or not, constitute a problem for university leaders and managers.

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