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Educational Management Administration & Leadership 2013 41: 545

DOI: 10.1177/1741143213497635

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Educational Management
Administration & Leadership
41(5) 545–554
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DOI: 10.1177/1741143213497635
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Abstract

Distributed leadership is now widely known and variously enacted in schools and school systems. Distributed leadership implies a fundamental re-conceptualisation of leadership as practice and challenges conventional wisdom about the relationship between formal leadership and organisational performance. There has been much debate, speculation and discussion about its positive and negative aspects. This article considers the evidence. It examines the facts concerning distributed leadership. It does not claim to be a systematic review of the literature but rather draws upon the available empirical evidence to highlight what we know. The article considers the implications, arising from the evidence for those in formal leadership positions. It concludes by reflecting upon the role of the formal leader within distributed leadership and outlines some of the challenges and tensions associated with distributed leadership practice.

Keywords

Organisational improvement, organisational change, leadership practice, leadership development

Introduction

The idea of distributed leadership as leadership practice has generated substantial interest among researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. Few models of leadership, it seems, have provoked as much attention, debate, controversy or irritation within the school leadership field. While the concept of shared, collaborative or participative leadership is far from new, distributed leadership theory has provided an alternative and powerful empirical lens on a familiar theme. The seminal work of Spillane et al (2001) has provoked renewed interest in *leadership practice* focusing essentially on the interactions between leaders, followers and their situation. Distributed leadership theory reinforces that there are multiple sources of influence within any organisation and has focused particular attention on the 'leader plus' aspect of the leadership work (Spillane, 2006:3).

Considerations of what exactly constitutes effective educational leadership practice have encouraged a re-evaluation of multiple sources of influence and agency (Leithwood et al, 2009 a, b). While this shift, in part, reflects disillusionment and weariness with traditional notions of

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leadership as individual practice, often characterised as the 'great man' theory, it does not imply in any way that formal leaders are now redundant. The research evidence reinforces that without the active and full support of those in formal leadership positions in schools, distributed leadership is unlikely to flourish or be sustained (Ban Al- Ani and Bligh, 2011). Evidence from an extensive and contemporary study of highly effective schools, shows that the heads in these schools orchestrated the structural and cultural conditions where distributed leadership was more or less likely to occur (Day et al, 2011). In this respect, formal and informal leadership are not incompatible or oppositional, as some have suggested but rather are different parts of leadership practice.

Inevitably, issues of power, authority and inequality loom over distributed leadership as they do in any other form of leadership and its associated practice. The aim of those writing about distributed leadership is certainly not to discount or airbrush out these important influences or aspects. Interestingly, despite several decades of leadership research and writing, issues of race, ethnicity and gender are still not centre stage within the field (Lumby and Morrison, 2010; Coleman, 2012). Consequently, while it is acknowledged that we need more empirical studies that address such issues, as the research base on distributed leadership matures, it is anticipated that there will be more empirical evidence to focus and inform such discussion.

So what we do we actually know about distributed leadership? What does it really mean? Robinson (2008) has suggested that the nature of distributed leadership encompasses two main concepts: distributed leadership as task distribution and distributed leadership as distributed influence processes. The first of these has its roots in the theorization of leadership as the performance of particular tasks (Spillane, 2008) while the second conceptualisation emerges from the view that leadership is 'an influence process that changes how others think or act with respect to the content of the influence (Robinson, 2008; 246). It is self evident that those in formal leadership are a prime influence upon others. To varying degrees, all change flows through the head's or principal's office as this is ultimately where formal responsibility lies and ultimately where final decisions are made. As Murphy et al (2009: 4) note, 'formal leaders are in a critical position to move initiatives forward or to kill them off, quickly through actions or slowly through neglect'. As the leadership and management literature clearly shows, those with formal leadership responsibility are important gatekeepers to organisational change; they can actively encourage or aggressively prevent others from taking opportunities to lead innovation and change (Bush, 2011).

From a distributed perspective, social interaction is a critical part of leadership practice. How formal leaders interact with others, the reciprocal nature or the practice of leadership is considered far more important than the precise leadership role or the particular leadership functions. While it is important to know what formal leaders do, and there is a vast volume of literature on this particular subject (see Leithwood et al, 2009), analysing and understanding patterns of influence gets us much closer to the actual *practice* of leadership. There are hundreds of case studies about heads and principals with associated checklists and summaries of leadership characteristics. But this does not represent the actual practice of leadership or adequately capture the inter-relationships and interactions between those in formal and informal leadership roles. In their work, Day et al (2011) reinforce the centrality of interaction and interdependence between the patterns of leadership and teaching and learning outcomes. They note 'leadership distribution was perceived to be an important influence on teaching and schools' change processes which affected, directly and indirectly, aspects of school culture and conditions. These indirectly impacted on improvement in pupil academic outcomes' (Day et al, 2011:75).

Distributed leadership implies a fundamental change in the way formal leaders understand their practice and the way they view their leadership role. Distributed leadership means actively

brokering, facilitating and supporting the leadership of others (Harris, 2013). It does not mean, as some would suggest, that everyone leads or that everyone is a leader. This is to fall back on the notion of leadership as role and responsibility where leadership is somehow divided up and handed out to others. Such misconceptions litter the various critiques of distributed leadership, as does the selective inclusion of only some of the available empirical evidence. As frequently stated by those who research this topic, distributed leadership implies a different view of organisational development, one that departs from the bureaucratic or traditional model to an interconnected and dynamic approach to innovation and change (Leithwood, 2009). Distributed leadership underlines that heads are only part of the leadership practice in any school as there are inevitably many other sources of influence and direction.

In a number of countries, distributed leadership is already featured in policy frameworks and in some cases, is being actively advocated (Wheldon, 2011). Essentially, distributed leadership at school, district and system level is increasingly being viewed as a strategic lever for building the capacity for change (Sharratt and Fullan, 2009). Looking at high performing educational systems around the world there is an emphasis on improving teacher quality through shared or collective professional learning (Harris et al, 2013). The potential relationship between distributed leadership and improved system performance has led many countries to advocate this model, albeit in different ways. For example, in England, distributed leadership underpins the new models of schooling, in particular chains of academies and federations of schools (Chapman et al, 2010). In many Scandinavian countries, distributed leadership is concomitant with the principles and practice of democratic education (Moos, 2007). In the Netherlands a leadership competency framework has been developed that reflects the principles of distributed leadership (Kruger, 2009) and in Norway successful headship is associated with distributed leadership practice (Moller et al, 2005). Finally, in Wales, distributed leadership is a key part of system wide reform and manifests itself most clearly through a national infrastructure of professional learning communities within, between and across schools (Harris and Jones, 2010; Harris, 2011). This is simply to state the facts without making any inference, assertion or assumption.

Given the widespread interest in distributed leadership, the question remains what does this imply for formal leaders in schools? What are the implications for formal leaders who may or may not subscribe to distributed leadership? In order to address this question, the article considers the definitional issues surrounding distributed leadership and explores the empirical evidence concerning the relationship between distributed leadership and organisational performance. The article concludes by exploring the implications and challenges surrounding distributed leadership for those in formal leadership roles in schools.

Definitions

The term 'distributed leadership' is often used to mean distinctively different things and such discrepancy of interpretation has allowed and indeed encouraged, researchers to *talk past each other* (Mayrowetz, 2008:425). One common misuse of the term is as a convenient descriptor for any form of shared, collaborative or extended leadership practice. This view is quite prevalent in some of the literature thus blurring its precise meaning even further. While different conceptualisations and interpretations of distributed leadership co-exist, persist and prevail as Mayrowetz (2008) argues it is crucial to inventory the multiple usages of the term 'distributed leadership' for two main reasons. Firstly, because the variation in its meaning results in misunderstanding and

misrepresentation, secondly, in order to make clearer evaluations of the connections between distributed leadership and school improvement then more precision is needed.

Seeking clarity of definition is not assisted by the positioning of distributed leadership as the antithesis of top-down, hierarchical leadership or as a component of a 'hybrid model' of leadership (Gronn, 2009) or repackaging it as layered leadership or some other variant on a theme. While distributed leadership is without question an alternative way of understanding leadership practice, it is not the simply the opposite of formal leadership or indeed any part of a hybrid or amalgam leadership approach. Distributed leadership encompasses both the formal and the informal forms of leadership practice within its framing, analysis and interpretation. It is primarily concerned with the co-performance of leadership and the reciprocal interdependencies that shape that leadership practice (Spillane, 2006:58). This co-leadership can involve both formal and informal leaders, it is not an 'either/or'.

While bringing different leadership concepts together under a new label may be intellectually satisfying and convenient, in reality it only serves to cause further confusion and to encourage mis-interpretation. As Leithwood et al (2009:13) point out 'there seem to be little to be gained in continuing to debate the merits of informal versus formal leadership, the important point is that they co-exist and inter-relate and this interrelationship has an associated positive relationship with improved organisational performance'. From a distributed perspective, it is the nature, form and the impact of leadership practice that matter most of all. Knowing if, how and in what way distributed leadership practice influences organisational performance is much more important than fueling a redundant debate about informal versus formal leadership practice.

It is important however to recognise that distributed leadership is not devoid of controversy or critique. Writes like Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008), Hargreaves and Fink (2009), Hartley (2009 and 2010) and Lumby (2013) have called into question the motivation of those espousing distributed leadership, particularly taking a normative stance. In their collective view, distributed leadership is little more than a palatable way of encouraging gullible teachers to do more work, a way of reinforcing standardisation practices, a way of reinforcing the 'status quo'. Instead of being a more democratic form of leadership, Hargreaves and Fink (2009) warn that distributed leadership could simply be another, superficially attractive, mechanism for delivering top down policies. These are important notes of caution.

Simply advocating distributed leadership without adequate consideration of exactly what is being distributed is much more than a matter of ideological point scoring, it has real implications for those working in schools. It is *whether and how* distributed leadership influences organisational performance that matters most of all. Consequently, it is important to look at the evidence before making any assertion, assumption or claim about distributed leadership or indeed affording it any inherent negative or positive power. It is not and cannot be inherently insidious or dangerous. As with any form of leadership, it is how that leadership is used or misused that is critical. Distributed leadership cannot be friend or foe, without subscribing to anthropomorphism, so let's return to empirical fact.

Recent evidence shows that high performing organisations in very different sectors, engage in distributed leadership practice in a carefully managed and strategic way (Hargreaves and Harris forthcoming; Hargreaves et al, 2011). Such organisations build lateral and vertical teams premised upon shared leadership and reciprocal accountability. The evidence also shows that the way that leadership is enacted and shared within an organisation will influence its outcomes. Much also depends upon whether those in formal leadership roles provide the opportunities for others to fulfil and realise their full leadership potential.

As highlighted earlier, the patterns of leadership distribution matter if improved organisational performance is the aspiration. In their empirical work, Leithwood et al (2009) identified that under the right conditions purposeful or planned leadership distribution can impact positively on school performance. This purposeful or planned distribution however cannot take place without the involvement and direction of the head or principal. Similarly, other evidence points towards the importance of 'principal directed' approaches to distributed leadership where the formal leader is the catalyst for distributed leadership practices within the school (Hulpia and Van Geer 2011). It remains the case that, without the active support of the formal leaders within schools, purposeful or planned distributed leadership is unlikely to self-combust or happen randomly.

The two central messages from the empirical base are first that some patterns of distributed leadership are more likely to contribute to positive organisational change than others and second, that formal leadership plays a pivotal role in creating the conditions where purposeful and focused leadership distribution is more likely to occur. The centrality of formal leadership in effective leadership distribution is further reinforced by Day et al, (2011). This research study found that the most effective heads actively and continually restructure, re-formulate and re-designed their organisation and widely distribute leadership. The study also highlighted that distributed leadership was associated with greater involvement in leadership practice which in turn was associated with better organisational performance and outcomes.

As noted earlier, a transatlantic research study of high performing organisations in sport, business and education, underlines the importance of lateral and vertical collaboration in securing and sustaining exceptional performance (Hargreaves and Harris, 2010; Harris and Hargreaves, 2013). The evidence showed that the most effective leaders, albeit in very different sectors, actively created and nurtured distributed leadership as a deliberate strategy for improving organisational performance. It showed that the way leadership is distributed explains much of its subsequent effect on organisational outcomes and that the nature and extent of the distribution is dependent upon those in formal leadership roles. These findings are consistent with the broader empirical evidence about distributed leadership and organisational development.

Evidence

The empirical evidence about distributed leadership is located in a number of different research fields and intellectual traditions. Studies that offer insights into distributed leadership are located in the literatures pertaining to school improvement; organisational change; teacher leadership and school leadership (Harris, 2011). This research terrain is diverse drawing upon various methodological traditions and positions. However, despite the broad and miscellaneous nature of the evidential base, there are some consistent messages about distributed leadership and organisational development that are worth noting. The work of Spillane et al (2001; 2006; 2011) has shown that it is perfectly possible to research distributed leadership practice. This rich and detailed empirical work continues to provide the basis for much of the contemporary evidence about the nature and effects of distributed leadership practice (Spillane, 2006; 2011, Spillane and Coburn, 2011).

In addition, there are a growing number of studies that have started to focus attention explicitly on the potential impact of distributed leadership upon teaching and learning processes and outcomes (Leithwood et al, 2009). These studies provide emerging evidence about the nature, form and impact of distributed leadership practices in schools. Studies by Camburn and Han (2009), Hallinger and Heck (2009) and Mascall and Leithwood (2009) highlight a positive relationship between distributed leadership and certain types of student learning outcomes. In addition, there

is increasing evidence of a positive relationship between leadership distribution and improved organisational outcomes (Harris, 2011b; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). This evidence shows that that broad based involvement in leadership enhances teachers' self-efficacy and motivation (Day et al, 2011) and generates a much higher commitment among teacher to the organisation and organisational performance (Hulpia and Van Geer, 2011; Harris and Muijs, 2009).

Evidence about high performing organisations reinforces that the formal leaders utilise all the available talent within the organisations (Harris and Hargreaves, 2012). This is a deliberate strategic action. The empirical evidence also shows that high performing organisations create new teams, generate flatter structures and essentially give individuals greater responsibility for their work. Through this organisational redesign the formal leaders create opportunities for others, with the appropriate expertise, to lead and to take responsibility for critical aspects of change and development. The evidence also reinforces that distributed leadership has the *potential* to positively influence organisational outcomes and individual performance but only under the right conditions (Harris 2011; Landoli & Zollo, 2008).

In their extensive research, Hallinger and Heck (2009) explored the impact of system policies on the development of distributed school leadership and school improvement. Their quantitative analysis and results support a positive relationship between distributed leadership and the school's capacity to improve. They conclude that distributed leadership is an important co-effect of school improvement processes. Their subsequent study (Heck and Hallinger, 2010) examined the effects of distributed leadership on school improvement and growth in student math achievement in 195 elementary schools in one state over a 4-year period. Using multilevel latent change analysis, the research found significant direct effects of distributed leadership on change in the schools' academic capacity and indirect effects on student growth rates in math.

More recent empirical evidence shows that distributed leadership is positively correlated to the certain conditions within the organisation, including staff morale, which in turn relates positively to student behaviour and student learning outcomes. This study concluded that there is a connection between increased distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities and improved organisational outcomes (Day et al, 2011: 234). It was also noted that the most effective heads progressively and selectively distributed leadership over time and that the nature of this distribution was determined by the school's phase of development, the readiness of staff, the levels of trust and the head's own training, experience and leadership capability. But what exactly are the implications of this empirical evidence for school leaders?

Implications

There is an important distinction between observation and prescription. The leadership field is already replete with formulaic solutions and neat check lists of advice that fail to deliver all they promise. The remainder of this article will therefore offer a few observations and reflections about the role of formal leaders within distributed leadership and will consider the challenges that face those who choose to engage with and embrace this particular leadership approach.

Evidence highlights how those occupying formal leadership positions are increasingly recognizing the limitations of existing structural arrangements to secure organisational growth and transformation (Fullan, 2001; 2006, Chapman et al 2010). As a consequence, many heads and principals are actively restructuring, realigning and redesigning leadership structures, responsibilities and processes in their school. As school systems become more complex, diffuse and networked, the talents of the many rather than the few will be required to respond to quickly shifting and changing

contexts (Muijs et al, 2011). Multiple sources or points of leadership will be needed to ensure that the individual organisation or entire system has sufficient leadership capacity to be responsive to unpredictable change (Marchionini and Moran, 2012). Considering what we know about distributed leadership and organisational change, formal leaders in the future will need to take greater responsibility for routinely re-designing and re-structuring their schools in order to maximise the capacity to lead innovation and improvement. They will need to focus primarily on cultivating; creating and supporting patterns of distributed leadership practices that are most likely to result in improved organisational performance (Mitchell and Learmond 2010).

One thing is absolutely clear; formal leaders acting alone will not achieve school and system transformation. Meeting the educational needs of the 21st century will require greater leadership capability and capacity the ever before within, between and across schools. It will demand that formal leaders concentrate their efforts on developing the leadership capability and capacity of others, both in their school and other schools. But distributed leadership is not simply about creating more leaders. The steady accumulation of more and more leaders does not equate with distributed leadership. The issue is not one of increasing the numbers of leaders but rather one of increasing leadership quality and capability.

The 'so what' of distributed leadership is the recognition that the core task of the formal leader is to support those with the expertise to lead, wherever they reside within the organisation. It is to judge when this expertise is needed for the development of the organisation and to engage this expertise in an authentic and respectful way. The main challenge for formal leaders who want better performance and better outcomes is to actively build the leadership capacity within their organisation, so that productive change and continuous improvement can become a real possibility. To build the leadership capacity within their school, formal leaders need to harness the collective will, skill and leadership of all those in their organisation in a carefully sequenced way so that the organisation, as a whole, benefits (Harris, 2011a).

As the evidence shows, exceptional organisational performance is not a random event; instead exceptional performance is achieved through careful planning, design and 'discipline' (Collins and Hansen, 2011). It requires organisational alignment, mutual understanding and flexibility, rather than rigidity, prescription or coercion (Harris and Hargreaves, 2012). For formal leaders seeking improved organisational performance and better outcomes the challenge is to create the conditions where professional knowledge and skills are enhanced, where effective leadership exists, at all levels, and where the entire organisation is working interdependently in the collective pursuit of better outcomes.

But there are some challenges. Distributed leadership implies shifts in power, authority and control. Research by Arrowsmith (2012) provides some warning signals about distributed leadership from head-teachers who felt an acute sense of personal accountability and responsibility for the school's performance. Ultimately, those at the apex of the organisation will be judged based on the performance of their organisation. This is a real tension and dilemma for those leaders who feel the weight of responsibility squarely on their shoulders, alone. But as highlighted earlier, this is no different from other sectors and organisations where individual responsibility and distributed leadership practice are not mutually exclusive. Another challenge concerns the extent of the distribution of power and control. There are some emerging examples where 'distributed leadership' has been used to undermine formal authority and to negate the influence of the head (Harris, 2013). There is a 'dark side' of distributed leadership, as with any form of leadership, if power, influence and authority are misused or abused. While such examples are rare, it presents a real challenge for those in formal leadership roles wishing to engage in distributed leadership practice.

It signals the need to maintain a balance of control so that no individual or group can undermine, disrupt or derail the efforts of formal leaders to move the organisation forward.

One final challenge concerns the importance of building relational trust so that distributed leadership is authentic and is not simply delegation by another name. Successful distribution of leadership depends upon the firm establishment of mutual trust –this is the glue that makes all highly effective organisations perform at the highest level. In their research findings, Day et al (2011) reinforce that trust is essential for the progressive and effective distribution of leadership. They note that building and sustaining trust is a critical feature of highly effective school leaders and that without the ability to nurture trusting relationships the potential to improve organisational performance will be dramatically reduced.

In an era of greater accountability and ever more stringent measures of performance those in formal leadership roles in schools face a demanding and some would argue daunting task. In the pursuit of better outcomes for all young people, whatever their background, there are difficult decisions to make and many potential trades-offs to be considered. Distributed leadership does not guarantee better performance; it is not a panacea for success, it does not possess any innate good or bad qualities, it is not friend or foe. Much depends on how leadership is distributed and the intentions behind it. If distributed leadership is to make any difference at all, one thing is clear- those in formal leadership positions have a substantial and integral role to play in making it happen.

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