Distributed School Leadership

Evidence, Issues and Future Directions

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Introduction

The promise of sustainable success in education lies in creating cultures of distributed leadership throughout the school community (Blankstein, 2004; 211).

Without question, distributed leadership is the idea of the moment. The extension and expansion of leadership practice in schools, beyond those in formal leadership or administrative roles, is a concept gaining momentum (Hallinger and Heck, 2009). In recent years, few ideas have provoked as much attention, debate or controversy, in the field of school leadership as distributed leadership. It has sparked a renewed interest in teacher leadership, student leadership and community leadership - often overlooked in favour of more traditional conceptions of leadership (Murphy 2005). Distributed leadership has also captured the attention of policy makers, academics and practitioners. It seems that everyone has a view on distributed leadership.

Despite a great deal of writing and research activity associated with distributed leadership it still remains a rather elusive concept. Within the existing literature the idea of distributed leadership overlaps substantially with shared (Gastil 1997), collaborative, democratic (Vroom and Yago 1998) and participative (Gibb 1954) leadership. This accumulation of allied concepts means that distributed leadership has sometimes been used as a shorthand way to describe any form of devolved, shared or dispersed leadership practice in schools (Harris, 2007b). It is this ‘catch all’ use of the term that has resulted in the misrepresentation of the idea and has encouraged those in the research, policy and practitioner communities to talk
Misunderstandings about the term persist despite the best efforts of those who write about distributed leadership. One misunderstanding that prevails equates distributed leadership with shared leadership. As Spillane (2006) points out too frequently discussions of distributed leadership end prematurely with the acknowledgement that multiple individuals take responsibility for leadership...though essential this leader plus aspect is not sufficient to capture the complexity of the practice of leadership. The central point here is that collective interactions among leaders, followers and their situation are at the core of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006). Distributed leadership is essentially about the practice or enactment of leadership and reinforces the importance of interactions rather than actions. In contrast, a concentration on individual leadership is tantamount to looking at only one aspect of situation and attributing leadership to one source only.

*Origins and Meaning*

While the idea of distributed leadership can be traced back to organizational theory in the mid 1960s (Barnard 1968) and even, as far back as the Bible (MacBeath, 2008) the contemporary notion of distributed leadership, that Spillane and his colleagues have developed, has refocused attention on the potential of both formal and informal leadership to contribute to organisational change (Spillane et al 2002). Distributed leadership theory has prompted a reconsideration of the relationship between organisational resources, change and performance.

An organization may be rich in a particular resource but it is the access to that resource that is more or less affected by where one is located in the organization. Some organizational members, by virtue of their role or position and their professional affiliations may have greater access to a particular resource than others in the same organization or even sub-unit within that organization. In contrast, other organisational members, who could maximise the potential from these resources, may not have access because they do not occupy a formal position (Spillane, 2006). The implication here is that the formal leadership structure may be actively obstructing organisational performance and that informal leadership, if properly harnessed and directed, could contribute to enhanced organisational performance.
Distributed leadership helps to advance a larger agenda about optimal forms of organising and optimal ways of securing improved performance (Leithwood et al, 2009a). It is primarily concerned with the co-performance of leadership practice and the nature of the interactions that contribute to that co-performance. It lies at the extreme end of what is typically known as participatory leadership and is premised on the idea of optimal adaptability when those closest to the action are empowered to shape the organisation’s responses (Leithwood et al, 2009:6). In this model, formal leaders prompt emergent and creative actions among groups to whom leadership is distributed and those in formal leadership roles emphasise the management of interdependencies, rather than controls over process or outcomes.

Distributed school leadership is primarily concerned with the reciprocal interdependencies that shape leadership practice (Harris, 2008). A distributed perspective on leadership recognises that leading and managing schools involves multiple individuals and that the practice of leading and managing is more important than the nature of the roles and responsibilities associated with leading and managing. Using a normative rather than analytical lens, it is conceptualised as an organisation wide phenomenon in which flatter organisational structures and distribution of leadership take precedence over more formal, traditional models (Harris, 2007b).

Distributed leadership encompasses both formal and the informal forms of leadership practice within its framing, analysis and interpretation. Inevitably, patterns of distribution will vary within; between and across schools and there will be differential organizational outcomes or effects from leadership distribution (Leithwood et al, 2006; Spillane et al, 2001 Harris, 2008). Outcomes from distributed leadership can be positive or negative. Distributed leadership is not a framework for doing leadership more effectively, it is neither friend nor foe (Spillane 2006; 10). Rather distributed leadership is a way of thinking about leadership practice, a frame for understanding leadership as interaction and thinking about how leadership might be reconfigured to make it more effective.

A Normative Interpretation

Taking a normative perspective on distributed leadership means being less concerned with the analytical potential of distributed leadership and paying more attention to how
leadership is distributed and what effect it has on organizational performance. In a normative sense, distributed leadership is essentially concerned with mobilizing leadership at all levels not just relying on leadership at the top or seeing leadership only as formal role or position (Harris, 2008:2009). It emphasizes interaction and interdependence rather than reaction and dependency. In summary.

• Distributed leadership implies broad based involvement in leadership practice where there are multiple sources of leadership – both formal and informal.

• Distributed leadership emphasises expertise rather than role – those with expertise lead and this will vary according to organisational need.

• Distributed leadership necessitates deep trust and reciprocal support among organisational members.

• Distributed leadership equates with broad based leadership practice and requires power sharing

• Distributed leadership varies according to context and there will be differential outcomes depending on the pattern or patterns of distribution (Harris, 2008)

At its core, distributed leadership reinforces the idea that leadership capacity within any organisation is not fixed but can be ‘stretched’, enhanced and extended (Spillane, 2006:3; Harris, 2007). It implies purposeful realignment of the informal and formal leadership structures, some re-defining of power and resource boundaries, plus wider decision making opportunities across the organisation. Distributed school leadership will require the removal of structural barriers to organisational improvement where they occur (including formal roles); and particularly where they deprive organisational members from accessing the resources (including power) that could most benefit organisational change and development.

However even if such barriers were removed what evidence do we have distributed leadership, will result in positive organisational outcomes? How do we know if distributed leadership is a feature of organizational change and improvement? What evidence do we
have about the influence and impact of distributed forms of leadership on schools and students?

**Distributed Leadership and Organizational Change: What We Know**

Interest in the idea of distributed leadership has undoubtedly been fuelled by associations with certain organizational benefits (Manz and Sims Jr. 1993; Burke, Fiore et al. 2003; Harris, 2008; 2007 a & b). Distributed leadership has been construed as a positive channel for change and it has been suggested that *organisations most successful in managing the dynamics of loose –tight working relationships meld strong personalized leadership at the top with distributed leadership* (Graetz, 2000: 12).

The development of leadership capacity within the school and its distribution has been shown to be a *key lever of organizational success* (Gold et al., 2002). In their review of successful school improvement efforts construct a composite list of the characteristics of the improving school defined as a school that continues to improve student learning outcomes for all students over time. At the top of this list appear varied sources of leadership, including *distributed leadership*.

Within the organizational development and improvement literature is the strongest indication yet that distributed leadership has the *potential* to positively influence organizational change (Landoli and Zollo, 2008). For schools in difficulty, focused leadership seems most useful at the ‘crisis stabilisation stage’ but the widespread distribution of leadership is associated with long term organisational recovery (Leithwood et al., 2009; Day et al., 2009). The school improvement research base has consistently underlined the importance of distributed leadership in the shape of teacher leadership. Here greater involvement of teachers in decision making has highlighted the contribution of teacher leadership to school improvement and change (Murphy, 2005; Harris and Muijs, 2004).

Crowther et al (2009) reinforce the importance of teacher leadership in securing school improvement and underscore how teacher leadership is a shared or distributed professional responsibility. Empirical work from England has also reinforced that teacher leadership has a positive influence upon students’ motivation to learn and upon their subsequent
achievement (Harris and Muijs, 2002). The evidence suggests that teacher leadership has a positive impact on teachers’ self efficacy which in turn impacts in a positive way on students’ achievement.

Distributed leadership also features predominantly in the literature relating to professional learning communities. This literature highlights that professional learning communities make a difference to student achievement and that leadership within effective professional learning communities is widely shared or distributed (Louis and Marks 1998). Extending leadership responsibility beyond the principal is also shown to be an important lever for developing effective professional learning communities in schools (Morrisey 2000; Stoll and Louis, 2007). As McLaughlin and Talbert (2007:157) highlight redesigning leadership to support professional learning communities means not only changing the role of the principal but it also means distributing the leadership across multiple units and actors. A range of other studies (Portin 1998; Blase and Blase 1999; Hallinger 2000; Hallinger and Heck 2009) also reinforce a positive relationship between certain organizational outcomes and distributed forms of leadership practice.

**Distributed Leadership and Organisational Performance**

While the contemporary evidence base about distributed leadership is still emerging (Leithwood et al, 2009a; Harris. 2009) there are an increasing number of studies that have explored the relationship between distributed leadership and organisational performance (Leithwood 2006; Spillane and Camburn 2006; Harris 2008; Leithwood et al, 2009 b; Mayrowetz et al, 2009;Camburn and Won Han; 2009 Hallinger and Heck 2009). These studies have started to uncover some positive relationships between distributed leadership practices and organisational outcomes. Overall the majority of the studies show that the configuration of leadership distribution is important in terms of subsequent organisational impact and that certain patterns of distribution have a greater effect upon organizational development and change than others (Leithwood, 2009; Harris, 2009).

The emerging evidence also shows that distributed leadership has a greater impact upon organizational development where certain structural and cultural barriers are removed.
(Harris 2008). Schools as organizations can present considerable challenges to new practices and ways of working. Their structures can be inflexible and their cultures resistant to the adoption of different forms of operation. There appear to be three main barriers that make distributing leadership in schools difficult to achieve.

**Distance:** As schools grow and become more complex organizations through various 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 geographic separation makes it more difficult for teachers to connect. The challenge for schools therefore is to provide new, alternative, possibly ICT based solutions to break the barrier of distance and to seek alternative forms of communication.

**Culture:** Distributing leadership essentially means a shift in culture away from the *top down* model of leadership to a form of leadership that is more organic, spontaneous and ultimately more difficult to control. It means a departure 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 schools is to see leadership as an *organizational resource* that is maximized through interactions between individuals and that leads to problem solving and new developments.

**Structure:** The way schools are currently organized presents a set of barriers to distributing leadership. The structure of schooling is still dominated by compartmentalizing subjects, pupils and learning into discrete but manageable boxes. Distributing leadership implies the erosion of these artificial barriers and implies a more fluid way of schools operating. The challenge for schools is to find ways of removing those organizational structures and systems that restrict organizational learning and to create patterns of distributed leadership that are of most benefit to the organization (Harris, 2008).
Patterns of Distribution

Much of the contemporary empirical work concerning distributed leadership and organisational outcomes has focused on patterns of distribution (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood and MacRae, 2008). Findings reveal that the effects and impact of distributed leadership on the organization depends upon the pattern of leadership distribution. Leithwood et al (2006) highlight two key features necessary for successful leadership distribution. First, leadership needs to be distributed to those who have, or can develop, the knowledge or expertise required to carry out the leadership tasks expected of them. Second, the initiatives of those to whom leadership is distributed need to be coordinated, preferably in some planned way.

These two conditions for successful leadership distribution are the starting points for Locke’s (2003) “integrated model” of leadership. This model acknowledges both the reality and the virtues, in most organizations, of distributed leadership based on multiple forms of lateral (e.g., teacher to teacher) influence. Also acknowledged are the “inevitable” sources of vertical or hierarchical leadership in virtually any successful organization. Locke’s model suggests that such unplanned patterns of distributed leadership would do little to help the organization develop or grow.

Holistic or person-plus leadership (Spillane, 2006) refers to consciously-managed and synergistic relationships among some, many, or all sources of leadership in the organization. These forms of distributed leadership assume that the sum of leaders’ work adds up to more than the parts. It is also assumed that there are high levels of interdependence among those providing leadership and that the influence attributed to their activities emerges from dynamic, multidirectional, social processes which, at their best, lead to learning for the individuals involved, as well as for their organizations.

Gronn (2002: 657) has suggested that concertive forms of distributed leadership may take three forms:

- **Spontaneous collaboration**: From time to time groupings of individuals with differing
to pool their expertise and regularize their conduct for duration of the task, and then disband.

- **Intuitive working relations**: This form of concertive distributed leadership emerges over time “...as two or more organizational members come to rely on one another and develop close working relations” and, as Gronn argues, “leadership is manifest in the shared role space encompassed by their relationship”.

- **Institutionalized practice**: Citing committees and teams as their most obvious embodiment, Gronn describes such formalized structural as arising from design or through less systematic adaptation.

The extent and nature of coordination in the exercise of influence across members of the organization is a critical challenge from a holistic perspective. When role overlap occurs in a coordinated fashion there can be mutual reinforcement of influence and less likelihood of making errors in decisions. Some elaboration and refinement of Gronn’s (2002) holistic forms of distributed leadership have been proposed by Leithwood et al, (2006):

- **Planful alignment**: This configuration is comparable to Gronn’s “institutionalized practice”. The tasks or functions of those providing leadership have been given prior thoughtful consideration by organizational members. Agreements have been worked out among the sources of leadership (principals, heads of department and teachers etc) about which leadership practices or functions are best carried out by which source. Although alignment is generally considered a good thing for organizations, positive contributions of this configuration to productivity cannot be automatically assumed.

- **Spontaneous alignment**: In this configuration, leadership tasks and functions are distributed with little or no planning, for example: the principal assumes she will be responsible for modeling values important to the school and everyone else makes the same assumption. Nevertheless, tacit and intuitive decisions about who should
perform which leadership functions result in a fortuitous alignment of functions across leadership sources. There is no significant difference in the contribution to short-term organizational productivity of this “method” of alignment, as compared with planful alignment. However, the tacit nature of decisions this method entails seems likely to reduce the flexibility and adaptability of the organization’s responses to future leadership challenges. Spontaneity offers few guarantees of fortuitous alignment.

- **Spontaneous misalignment** - This configuration mirrors spontaneous alignment in the manner of leadership distribution, as well as its underlying values, beliefs and norms. However the outcome is different or less fortuitous – misalignment (which may vary from marginal to extensive). Both short- and long-term organizational productivity suffer from this form of (mis)alignment. However, organizational members are not opposed, in principle, to either planful or spontaneous alignment thus leaving open reasonable prospects for future productive alignment of one sort or another.

- **Anarchic misalignment.** This configuration is characterized by active rejection, on the part of some or many organizational leaders, of influence from others about what they should be doing in their own sphere of influence. As a result, those leaders’ units behave highly independently, competing with other units on such matters as organizational goals and access to resources. Active rejection of influence by others, however, stimulates considerable reflection about one’s own position on most matters of concern.

Findings by Leithwood (2009b) and Mascall et al (2009) suggest that planful patterns of alignment have the greatest potential for short-term organizational change. Furthermore, planful alignment seems more likely to contribute significantly than other patterns of distribution to long-term organizational productivity. Conversely, both spontaneous
misalignment and anarchic alignment were likely to have negative effects on both short- and long-term organizational change and development.

Distributed leadership implies a different pattern of relationships - a move away from the leader-follower relationship, to a focus upon the interactions between different leaders of various types and at various levels within the organisation. The leader-follower relationship suggests a power imbalance whereas in distributed leadership all relationships are important and leadership can only be enacted if there is mutual trust and agreement about the way tasks are undertaken (Harris, forthcoming).

A distributed perspective on leadership redefines the role of followers and places them at the centre of leadership practice rather than on the receiving end. This inevitably changes the power dynamics within the organisation and the configuration of legitimate authority. Distributed leadership is premised upon social interaction which inevitably involves a shift from positional power to expert power. Using Luke’s (2005) three dimensional model of power it is suggested that distributed leadership disrupts the accepted power flow within an organisation and redefines it around expertise rather than role (Harris, forthcoming). In this model of distribution formal leaders and informal leaders share expertise and engage in mutual learning to benefit the organization.

Robinson (2008) found that where leaders promoted and participated in teacher learning and development there was a large effect on student outcomes. In the higher achieving schools teachers reported their school leaders being more active participants in teacher learning and development. In these schools, the traditional leader/follower position had been replaced with a model where those with greatest, instructional, expertise led and advised others. In many cases but not all those with the formal leadership responsibility offered direction and were seen at the ‘leading learners’ of the school (Robinson, 2008:16). This work also found that relational trust was a key resource for school improvement and that there was a strong statistical link between improvements in relational trust and gains in academic productivity (Robinson, 2008:19).

Robinson (2008) concludes that the links between educational leadership and teaching and learning need to be substantially strengthened if the leadership literature is to offer better insights into those leadership practices that make a bigger difference to students (Robinson,
2008:22). But what is already known about distributed leadership practices and student learning outcomes?

**Distributed Leadership and Student Learning Outcomes**

Positions on the relationship between distributed leadership and student learning outcomes vary. Some writers have argued that seeking to explore this relationship is a futile exercise. They suggest that the *search for normative links between specific leadership distribution patterns and student achievement results is unlikely to yield clear guidelines for practice* (Anderson et al, 2009:135). Others have argued that distributing leadership is only desirable if the quality of leadership activities contributes to *assisting teachers to provide more effective instruction to their students* (Timperley, 2009:220).

There are already a range of studies that, to varying degrees, have touched upon the relationship between distributed leadership and student learning outcomes. There are two studies, in particular, that offer a useful starting point in plotting what is known about this relationship. The first study was undertaken by Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) in Canada and the second study was conducted by Silins and Mulford (2002) in Tasmania. Both studies focus on the relationship between distributed leadership and student outcomes as part of much broader empirical enquiry.

The findings from the Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) suggest that distributing a larger proportion of leadership activity to teachers has a positive influence on teacher effectiveness and student engagement. They also note that teacher leadership has a significant effect on student engagement that far outweighs principal leadership effects after taking into account home family background. Silins and Mulford’s (2002) work has also provided confirmation of the key processes through which more distributed kinds of leadership influence student learning outcomes. Their work concluded that *student outcomes are more likely to improve when leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community and when teachers are empowered in areas of importance to them.*

The work by Spillane et al (2001) remains the largest contemporary study that has focused specifically on distributed leadership practice in schools. This four year longitudinal study, funded by the National Science Foundation and the Spencer Foundation, was designed to
make the “black box” of leadership practice more transparent through an in depth analysis of leadership practice. The central premise of the study is that distributed leadership is best understood as distributed practice, stretched over the school’s social and situational contexts.

This research, which focused on 13 elementary schools in Chicago, found that the task of instructional improvement engaged multiple leaders and it highlighted how understanding the interplay between different leaders is crucial to understanding leadership practice. The work also underscores that the school rather than the individual leader is the most appropriate unit for thinking about the development of leadership expertise. Consequently, intervening to improve school leadership may not be most optimally achieved by focusing on the individual formal leader but may be secured through influencing the practices of multiple leaders.

Smaller scale empirical studies have also shed some light on the relationship between distributed leadership and student learning outcomes. A study of teacher leadership in England found positive relationships between the degree of teachers’ involvement in decision making and student motivation and self efficacy (Harris and Muijs 2004). This study explored the relationship between teacher leadership as defined by the degrees of involvement in decision making within the school and a range of student outcomes. The findings from this study show a positive relationship between teacher leadership and student engagement. In addition, the study found that both teacher and student morale improved where teachers were more included and involved in decision making within the school.

Contemporary research has highlighted the importance of teacher participation in leadership activities as a route to securing long term improvement. Research by Day et al (2009:17) found that substantial leadership distribution was very important to a school’s success in improving pupil outcomes. The findings from this study showed that distributed leadership was positively associated with conditions within the organisation, including staff morale, which in turn made a positive difference to student behaviour and student learning outcomes (Day et al 2009). The evidence showed that in the most improved schools
principals carefully orchestrated the nature and pattern of leadership distribution. The patterns they chose were determined by three main influences:

a) their *personal view* of leadership (e.g. need for control)
b) their own stage of *development* as a leader
c) their estimates of the *readiness of their staff* to take on greater leadership (Day et al, 2007:19).

Leadership practices in the most improved schools were widely distributed and the relationship between vertical and horizontal leadership was porous and inter-changeable.

Research that has focused explicitly on the relationship between distributed leadership and instructional change has found some evidence of a positive relationship (Camburn and Won Han, 2009). Research into the America’s Choice program explored the outcomes of distributed leadership by drawing upon extensive evidence from the programme. A core design feature of the program is the requirement to distribute leadership responsibilities to teacher leaders in schools, and this distribution of leadership in turn, is intended to act as a key lever for instructional change. The study concluded that distributing leadership to teachers can positively support instructional change, under the right conditions, which in turn can contribute to improved student outcomes.

In their recent work, Mulford and Silns (2009:23) have identified the significant school and teacher-level factors that foster student academic achievement, student social development and student empowerment. They highlight the importance of teachers’ perceived capacity building that had three dimensions:

- Firstly, a trusting climate and empowerment refers to the need for the principal and leadership team to look for ways to make the decision making processes of the school transparent and inclusive, facilitating involvement of interested staff and demonstrating valuing of staff by celebrating their achievements.

- Secondly, a shared school vision requires the principal to set aside time to identify with teachers the school’s goals, develop and articulate a vision to guide the school,
then, periodically re-affirm, review and monitor the school’s progress against school goals and vision.

• Thirdly, principals need to ensure school structures that support experimentation and initiative and to reinforce their value by providing a forum for open professional exchange where mistakes as well as successes promote learning. Such learning must be supported by relevant, accessible and regular professional development.

This study supports the general finding that effective principals influence student outcomes indirectly through teachers’ work with students in their classrooms and school. It also reinforces that principals of successful schools involve teachers in the leadership processes of the school in order to increase the school’s capacity for leadership and learning (Silins & Mulford, 2004).

In their work, Hallinger and Heck (2009) have explored the impact of system policies on the development of distributed school leadership and school improvement. The research synthesized the results of a series of analyses of empirical data on distributed leadership and school improvement. The results support a positive relationship between distributed leadership and the school’s capacity for improvement. Their study adds to a growing body of empirical research that finds positive effects of distributed leadership on school improvement processes and outcomes.

Mayrowetz et al, (2009) urge researchers to provide further explanation as to why distributed leadership can end in positive results for schools and students (p191). A few years ago it would have been unwise to attempt research that focused exclusively and directly on the impact or outcomes of distributed leadership (Leithwood et al, 2009:281). The definitional, operational and empirical platform was simply not robust enough. Now there is a clearer conceptualization and operationalization of distributed leadership practice. Empirical work has also started to map its direction and influence. There is now increased research intensity focused on leadership outcomes and effects. This is the strongest signal yet, that school leadership is viewed as a central component of system wide reform, in many countries.

**Future Directions and Implications**

In the struggle to transform educational systems, one thing is abundantly clear - we need new organisational forms and new approaches to leadership if we are to succeed. The
promise of system transformation is unlikely to be fulfilled or realised if we remain wedded to models of leadership suited to a previous age. This is not to suggest that traditional, hierarchical models of leadership have not served us well, they have, but as the world is changing, so must schools and so must our conceptions of school leadership. It is becoming increasingly apparent that in a world of global networks, we face issues for which ‘top down’ leadership is inherently inadequate (Senge, 2006:12).

Contemporary attempts at large scale reform are running into difficulty (Mckinsey, 2008). Models of school transformation premised on standardisation, accountability and top-down leadership are showing diminishing returns on investment. Governments are seeking alternative models, different approaches and new strategies for transforming their schools and school systems. The limitations of top-down reform to secure lasting change are well known, as are the pitfalls of locally driven but uncoordinated change. Both are insufficient to produce the step change required to raise the performance of school systems dramatically and irrecoverably (Fullan, 2008). So what does distributed leadership have to offer?

Writers like Lakomski (2005) have long questioned whether ‘leadership’ is the correct label or descriptor for the type of activity or influence that is considered to drive organisational change. She challenges the premise that leadership is a natural entity or essence within the organization, proposing instead that leadership is a distraction from exploring the real workings of organizational practice. Her work calls into question whether our taken for granted understanding of leadership...squares with how leaders and organizations really work given what we know about human cognition and information processing (Lakomski 2005)) It has reiterated that leadership is a label that is applied to organisational behaviour which could just as easily be labelled as something else.

If we accept that leadership is the ‘right label’ then it is important to ask what exactly are we labelling. There is still a powerful association between leadership and certain behaviours, traits and characteristics (Fullan 2006) The romantic notion of the ‘hero leader’ is still one that prevails and persists despite of countless examples of organisational vulnerability and dependency from this form of leadership practice. While it may seem superficially attractive to policy makers, it would seem short-sighted and indeed unwise to base system wide
reform upon this type of leadership alone. As Hargreaves and Fink (2006:95) argue in a complex, fast paced world, leadership cannot rest on the shoulders of the few’. It is their contention that sustainable leadership is distributed leadership that ultimately stays centred on learning.

Distributed leadership is characterised by two properties—interdependence and emergence. First, the joint performance of leadership is determined by the interactive influences of multiple members in the organisation. Second, these interdependent roles are constantly renegotiated and defined by the changing needs of the organisation. Together, the dynamic interactions form the basis for developing knowledge creating systems and the ability to secure organisational change (Zheng and Faerman, 2005). As highlighted earlier, there is evidence to suggest a correlation between multiple leadership functions and sustained school improvement (Day et al, 2007 & 2009). The dynamic model outlined by Hallinger and Heck (2009) begins to validate the viability of a set of key leadership processes that can be linked to school and student improvement. More specifically, the findings support the active building of professional and leadership capacity in schools as a route to improved organisational outcomes (Murphy et al, 2009; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000).

So what are the implications for schools and school leaders? First, it is clear that the task of building professional capacity and distributed leadership requires principal support and the leadership of both principals and teachers in securing and sustaining school improvement (Day et al, 2009). Greater distribution of leadership outside the formal structure requires intervention on the part of those in formal leadership roles (Leithwood et al, 2009a:279). In short, distributed leadership necessitates some orchestration.

Second, the evidence suggests that some patterns of distribution are more effective than others; so this has to be factored into any re-alignment of formal and informal leadership relationships in schools. How leadership is distributed is more important than whether it is distributed. Third, schools will need to move away from a ‘leader-follower’ relationship to a model where expertise is the driver of change and this may require different leaders at different times. More fluid patterns of interaction will arise from new professional relationships based upon expert power and mutual agency rather than power or ‘top down’ direction.
Finally, it is important not to fall into the trap of believing that any form of distributed leadership is inherently good. It depends. Distributed leadership is certainly not a panacea, those who write about it are clear that it is not a basis for prescription or prediction (Fletcher and Kaufer, 2003; Harris, 2009). Yet, the evidential base that links distributed leadership to positive change and transformation in schools and school systems cannot be ignored. The main challenge is to use this evidence to enquire into the forms of leadership practice that can result in the most positive organisational outcomes.

In our efforts to improve the life chances of all young people, in all settings, we undoubtedly need to think differently about schools as organizations. It is questionable how much longer schools can remain as they are in the face of rapid, unprecedented and relentless technological change along with a generation Y who already see the world very differently. It is questionable how far school leadership can retain its familiar contours and patterns as the demands upon those in formal leadership position move beyond what is tenable and humanly possible. We urgently need different ways of thinking about leadership practice in our schools and alternative models of school leadership. Distributed leadership may not be the answer but at least it offers a place to start.

About the Author

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Alma’s research work has focused upon organizational change and development. She is internationally known for her work on school improvement, focusing particularly on ways in which leadership can contribute to school development and change. She has published 23 books and 72 articles in refereed journals. Her work has been published in such leading journals as Leadership and Policy, Journal of Educational Administration and the British Journal of Educational Research. Alma is committed to working with schools in the most challenging circumstances and has published extensively on the subject of improving schools in difficulty.


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