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The Purpose of the Study

The term “distributed leadership” has become widely used in writing and talking about school leadership in the last two or three years. However, is it clear what the term means? What research has been undertaken into its practice and impact? This project set out to examine how far there was a shared meaning of the term, and to review empirical studies of distributed leadership in action.

The Nature of the Study

The study comprised a review of research and writing that related to distributed leadership and related conceptualisations of leadership. An extensive search of literature led us to concentrate on four concepts - delegated, democratic, dispersed and distributed leadership - and to select for detailed study articles and books that related to these. The review covered the period January 1996 to July 2002.
Key Findings

1. We found little agreement as to the meaning of the term “distributed leadership”. Instead, we found a number of different interpretations of leadership which shared some characteristics that could be drawn together into a possible understanding of the term.

2. There were almost no empirical studies of distributed leadership in action, although we found some empirical studies that related to the various interpretations we explored. In particular, there are no empirical data on the effectiveness of distributed leadership, in terms of pupil or student achievement.

3. It is best to think of distributed leadership not simply as another technique or practice of leadership, but, just as importantly, as a way of thinking about leadership. If we understand it in this way, it challenges many current assumptions about the nature of leadership and the community within which it occurs.

In the rest of this summary, we will report on:

- the characteristics we identify that link together the views of leadership we studied and may be called distributed leadership
- the aspects of leadership and its context that we believe should be considered when thinking about distributed leadership
- some implications of our study for professional development and research.
What Makes Up Distributed Leadership?

We identified the following characteristics that linked together the articles that drew on the four definitions of leadership we studied.

1. Distributed leadership is not something “done” by an individual “to” others, or a set of individual actions through which people contribute to a group or organisation. Rather, it is what Peter Gronn calls “an emergent property of a group or network of individuals”, in which group members “pool” their expertise. This “concerted action” of people working together takes place within a pattern of interpersonal relationships, and brings about a situation in which the amount of energy created is greater than the sum of the individual actions. Distributed leadership, then, is group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual action. It emerges from a variety of sources depending on the issue and who has the relevant expertise or creativity.

2. Distributed leadership suggests that many more people are involved in the leadership activity than might traditionally be assumed. The group within which the “concerted” leadership action develops should not be limited to a small number of people with formal senior roles. The writing we reviewed raised the question of the “boundaries of leadership”, ie which individuals or groups should be involved in leadership activity within an organisation or section of it, and gave no clear answer to the question. However, it clearly called into question the traditional attachment of leadership roles exclusively to posts such as head of department or assistant headteacher.

Related to this was another question, potentially even more contentious. What are the boundaries of the community within which leadership is distributed? Whilst most of the literature we reviewed discussed distributed leadership in relation to the teaching staff, or, in the case of non-educational writing, professional staff, there are other members of the school community too. In particular, should the pupil or student body be drawn into the leadership group?

3. Distributed leadership sees varieties of expertise being widely distributed across many people. Drawing many people into the potential leadership group makes it possible for initiatives to be developed from all over the organisation, and then adopted, adapted and improved by others in a culture of support and trust.
Issues for Analysis when Considering Distributed Leadership

These three characteristics of distributed leadership raise a number of important issues when considering its development and practice.

1. Control vs. autonomy
   
   In some views of distributed leadership, goals and values are set as official, non-negotiable statements by senior staff who are formally accountable to outsiders such as governing bodies or school districts. Other views emphasise greater autonomy for those who contribute to leadership, sometimes including the ability to review and, perhaps, amend the school’s official value statements. From this perspective, non-negotiable values would result from organisation-wide decisions and not be externally generated givens.

2. Organisational structure vs. individual action
   
   Some views of distributed leadership emphasise the organisational structuring of leadership, whereas others place greater emphasis on the perspectives, motives and what are sometimes called the “theories in use” of the organisation’s members. In our view, both need attention. However, developing distributed leadership may require an initial emphasis on structural change, especially in externally generated or top-down initiatives (see point 4 below).

3. The social and cultural context
   
   This is very significant. It can act in a positive way to create and sustain the conditions for distributed leadership to flourish - or have a negative influence. The cultural history of an organisation is a major factor, with the potential to create circumstances in which attempts to generate more participation or values of trust and co-operation result in apathy or even resistance from the staff or members of the community involved. Wider societal values are also a significant part of the context, a point which we were able to draw from studies concerned with non-Western cultures. Implicitly, this raises the question of whether distributed leadership is possible in a hierarchically ordered society.

4. External vs. internal sources of change
   
   Several sources can generate an impetus towards developing distributed leadership. External pressures and policies might generate structural change, although the extent to which this leads to distributed leadership will be affected by the underlying values of the school community. Top-down initiatives from senior formal leaders such as a charismatic headteacher or principal might lead to the development of distributed leadership. This may appear to be a contradiction, but if we see distributed leadership as concerted action through relationships then this allows for stronger and weaker partners in those relationships, and for differences in power between members. It does not assume that top-down initiatives mandate distributed leadership into existence. Bottom-up initiatives from within the organisational community, often in response to policy requirements or the activities of a professional association, can also generate a climate within which distributed leadership develops. Such initiatives put pressure on senior staff to decide whether to respond to such cultural change or to hold to existing arrangements.
5. **Positional vs. informal leadership**

Distributed leadership includes leadership initiatives involving those in formal positions of leadership (positional) and others (informal leadership). Top-down initiatives may recognise informal power relations in the organisation, but are likely to incorporate them into the formal structure in some way. Bottom-up initiatives are more likely to derive from individuals and groups who are seen as leaders by their colleagues, and who work through informal networks of relationships. They may require senior staff to adapt their practice more significantly in order to align the informal and formal leadership arrangements successfully. This is because bottom-up initiatives are more likely to challenge what senior staff view as the key values of the school and what is seen as “best practice” than top-down initiatives do.

6. **The significance of the literature on teams**

Much of this literature emphasises how the individual members of a team must share a common understanding of its aims and ways of working. This resonates with our reading on distributed leadership, and in particular with Gronn’s emphasis on distributed leadership as concertive action through relationships. All teams need to establish a common sense of purpose and agreed ways of working if they are to be successful. Teams operate best in an open climate, with both intra-group and inter-group relations based on mutual trust and open communication in a supportive organisational climate.

7. **Institutional vs. spontaneous forms of distributed leadership**

Team structures and committees can create a long-term, institutional form of distributed leadership. However, a strong theme of the literature we studied emphasised fluid leadership, resting on immediate expertise rather than position and exercised through ad hoc rather than formally constituted groups, which may have to exist alongside them. Once again, this emphasises the need for relationships built on trust and mutual support. It also blurs the distinction that runs through conventional literature on leadership between “leaders” and “followers”.

8. **Conflict resolution**

Just as effective teams need to have ways of facing and resolving conflict, so distributed leadership in action needs them. However, these may need to operate across far wider areas than formal departmental or task-related ad hoc teams. The nature of these means of conflict resolution will vary depending on the source of the distributed leadership initiative and the extent to which senior leaders are able to “let go” of their overall control.
Summary of Characteristics and Issues

We suggest that distributed leadership involves:

- seeing leadership as an outcome of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships (an emergent property of the group) rather than just individual action.

- trust and openness as a basis of interpersonal relationships.

- “letting go” by senior staff rather than simply delegating tasks.

- extending the boundaries of leadership, not just within the teaching community but to other communities within the school, creating a team culture throughout the school.

- not mandating it into existence but growing it through the concerted action of groups through their interpersonal relationships.

- recognising expertise rather than formal position as the basis of leadership roles within groups.

- seeing leadership as fluid rather than located in specific formal roles or positions, blurring the distinction between “leaders” and “followers”. 
Some Implications for Professional Development in Leadership

A number of implications follow from this study for professional development in school leadership. Many of them are already being addressed to some extent by CPD providers, especially through long courses and programmes, but it is appropriate to lay them out here.

1. The scope and reach of leadership programmes and professional development should be extended beyond even middle leaders. They should cover, as a minimum:
   • basic ideas in leadership and management
   • working in teams, including conflict resolution
   • identifying the community of leadership, including diverse participants from many levels of a hierarchy, including students and members of the school’s external community
   • the role of informal leadership alongside and interacting with formal leadership
   • the importance of creating a school culture that supports distributed leadership, and how this might be developed

2. More opportunities are needed for groups, teams and whole school communities to be the focus of professional development programmes. Because distributed leadership defines leadership as an emergent property existing in relationships within a community rather than actions of individuals, all members of the community must be involved in professional development related to it.

3. A crucial dimension of this must be the development of strong teamwork skills on an organisation-wide basis. An important part of this is for senior staff to understand and promote a different, more fluid definition of both “leadership” and “followership”, especially in their perception of more junior colleagues.

4. Leadership development needs to attend to issues of organisational culture and cultural change, so as to create a context in which distributed leadership can be embedded. This strengthens the need for substantial professional development programmes for whole-school communities, as well as for individuals. Whole-school improvement interventions may be a good starting point for such activities.

5. Although there is little empirical evidence of what constitutes “best practice” in distributed leadership, there is some to suggest that it is highly dependent on circumstances. Professional development to assist individuals to analyse accurately the nature of situations in which leaders find themselves will be an essential part of a distributed leadership development programme.

6. Distributed leadership requires choices and priorities to be made concerning not only the mechanics or structures of its operation, but also, crucially, concerning the boundaries of the leadership community and the degrees of autonomy and control within it. These are fundamentally values issues, and discussion of these should form a central part of a comprehensive professional development programme in distributed leadership.
Some Implications for Research into Distributed Leadership

A programme of research into distributed leadership needs to explore the following issues.

1. What leadership practices appear to contribute to developing and sustaining distributed leadership?

2. What are the social and cultural contexts that permit effective distributed leadership?

3. How do schools cope with the development of spontaneous and ad hoc distributed leadership?

4. What sources of change are most likely to generate distributed leadership?

5. How does distributed leadership operate within different boundaries of leadership, and what factors influence the feasibility and impact of extending distributed leadership both within and beyond the teaching community?

6. How do the distributed leadership and traditional leadership-as-individuals perspectives relate to student and pupil achievement? This last is perhaps the crucial research question, but first we need to be clear about how distributed leadership is understood, and to be able to verify that claims to practice distributed leadership are true representations of what is practised.