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Leadership as distributed: a matter of practice

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This paper derives from a National College of School Leadership sponsored study conducted within schools in three English local authorities exploring what distributed leadership looked like in practice and how it was seen by headteachers and teachers in the 11 participating schools. On the basis of questionnaires, shadowing and workshops with representatives from the schools, six models of distribution were derived. In the final stages of the project these were tested with teachers and headteachers and further refined and published by the National College as a professional development activity. These six models from ‘formal’ to ‘cultural’ distribution may, it is argued, be seen as a developmental sequence, adapted to the context and stage of development of a school.

Introduction

What is intended and what is understood by the term ‘distributed’ leadership? What meanings are attributed to the term by headteachers, by teachers and by other school staff? This was the question which prompted our one year study (2003–2004) funded by the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) and prompted by a statement from its Director of Research:

School leadership is often taken to mean headship. Such an outlook limits leadership to one person and implies lone leadership. The long standing belief in the power of one is being challenged. Today there is much more talk about shared leadership, leadership teams and distributed leadership than ever before. (Southworth, 2002)

Our aim was to explore the practical expression of what ‘distributed leadership’ means in the day-to-day life of schools, to identify to whom this term applied, where the initiative for distribution lay, the processes through which it occurred and different forms such a process might take in differing contexts and with differing formal structures and hierarchies. Our sample was 11 schools (four secondary, two middle school, three primary and two junior/infant) within three Eastern Region local authorities (Essex, Suffolk and Hertfordshire). The schools, which were located in both urban and rural settings, were purposively chosen, based on

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recommendations from their local authorities, as schools which exemplified distributed leadership and/or were interested in becoming more distributive in their practice. Prior to commencement of the study three separate meetings were held with headteachers and other members of staff where they were briefed about the purpose of the study and the potential benefits for leadership in their schools. These forums provided opportunities for us to establish a rapport with the headteachers and gave school staff the chance to reflect upon the project prior to giving their consent to participate.

The starting point of the inquiry was with the formally designated leaders, the headteachers, with what 'distributed leadership' meant to them and how it matched their theory in action. To explore these connections we conducted semi-structured interviews, teasing out an espoused theory of leadership, followed at a later date by a day shadowing these heads, noting what they did in their day-to-day rounds; who they talked to (and didn't talk to), where they went (and didn't go), their modes of communication and decision-making and how they divided their time. With a degree of trust between shadower and shadowee it allowed ongoing conversations, reflecting on the activities of the head, the typicality of the day in question and the contextual factors which helped to explain the actions taken.

The two sets of data generated by the interviews and shadowing, theoretical practice and practical theory, provided the basis for feedback and dialogue, first on an individual basis with the headteachers and then jointly with the headteachers from the two other participating schools within each local authority.

To add a further layer of complexity to inform the dialogue we presented heads (and at a later point wider groups of staff) with data from a questionnaire which we had distributed to all teachers (including support staff in the schools that agreed to this). 451 questionnaires were distributed and 302 returned. The questionnaire had two sections, A (questions relating to school culture) and B (questions relating to leadership and management). Statements in both of these sections asked for agreement/disagreement on scales X and Y. Scale X focused on how the teachers saw things in their school at that time and scale Y on what they saw as crucial, very important, important and not important. Scale Y is skewed towards the positive in order to make finer discriminations, given the generally desirable nature of the issues in question. Each questionnaire took about 30 minutes to complete.

For headteachers, staff perceptions of current practice in leadership, consultation, decision-making and school culture provided a sometimes discomfiting challenge to their own assessments, but were none the less seen as both valid and valuable. The gap measure was seen as useful in pinpointing areas where there was clear room for improvement. These data were then shared on a wider basis with school staff. Schools that could afford the time and manpower sent up to five members of staff to workshops where teachers and headteachers working together in small groups helped us make sense of the data and to follow through on the implications for school and classroom practice.

What we learned

Data from the questionnaires provided us with a useful starting point for problematizing the issues and promoting dialogue. Questionnaire responses only acquire meaning when there is an opportunity to interrogate the data with those (or sample of those) who supplied the information and are able to both lend it a context and point to some of the dynamic interrelationships among the individual questionnaire items. This process takes us further than a statistical factor analysis, which would show which items intercorrelated but would not help us to understand why or in what circumstances.

A cluster of items statements to which staff were happy to give assent had to do with common goals, shared vision, consensus and commitment to the whole school. The most highly ranked of the 54 statements was 'Senior management promotes commitment among staff to the whole school as well as to the department, key stage and/or year group and/or year group'. This was closely related to the second most highly ranked statement, 'Staff have commitment to the whole school as well as to their department, key stage and/or year group', and to the fourth highest ranking statement 'There is a shared vision among staff as to where the school is going'.

These may be seen as rather bland and wishful statements to which it is easy to give assent. They are revealing, however, of a prevailing orthodoxy in which consensus is sought and valued, where there are vision and mission statements, development and improvement plans which all staff are expected to sign up to and where the school is seen as a unit in competition with other schools locally and nationally. Contextualizing these responses reveals a social bonding, staff having to work together in face of a common threat, from OfSTED, from the DfES, from the media and from parents, seen as too easily seduced by misinformation and disinformation.

The high value placed on consensus is revealed in response to the statement 'Staff challenge one another and are not afraid of disagreement'. This is an item to which there is not only a low level of agreement with regard to current practice but also as to what is of importance. In other words, the gap measure is very small. It might be argued that intellectual bonding follows on the heels of social bonding and that low tolerance of conflict is antithetical to ownership and agency.

Further light is thrown on issues of ownership and agency when we interrogate other statements to which staff gave least assent, in the light of which the depiction of a consensual school culture and distributed leadership becomes more problematic and multi-layered. Three of the bottom ranking statements out of the 54 are 'Staff see the School Development Plan as their own creation', 'Support staff play an important role in school planning' and 'There is a sense of shared leadership among staff'. While, in a sense, these give the lie to the picture of schools as collaborative learning environments, they also refer back to the context into which these perceptions need to be placed. These perceptions are less a reflection on the quality of senior leadership than of historical and systemic factors, both of which serve as a 'lock in' to longstanding and hierarchical structures, reinforced by accountability mechanisms in which the locus for school change is located in heroic headteachers.

The structure of schools militates against distributed leadership. In my view, they're Victorian in processes and structure. Often schools don't focus on learning; they focus on control with 30 kids in a class, the bell going every hour to direct subjects; a whole series of petty roles and systems to control behaviour. The controlled structure of school activities does not help pupils to acquire the skills to succeed in a world that is flexible, adjustable, free thinking, high level of communicative skills. You're controlling them and that militates against distributed leadership. (Secondary headteacher)

It is when we come to three lowest ranked statements of all that we see how far ideas of distribution extend. The three items receiving the lowest ranking were:

- parents are encouraged to take on leadership roles;
- there are processes for involving pupils in decision-making;
- pupils are encouraged to exercise leadership.

The pride of place for the 54th of 54 items is the leadership role of parents. This statement also receives least wholehearted support of any item on the importance scale Y. Rated almost equally low was the item 'Staff welcome opportunities to learn from parents'. Taken together these two sets of responses reveal not only some scepticism as to parents as leaders but also parents as sources of learning. In other words, this suggests a more generalized attitude to parents as active partners in the education of their children. There is a reminder here of Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) exploration of the 'essential conversations' between teachers and parents, described by her as ritualized occasions to which both parties brought a sense of vulnerability and defence.

While teachers seem marginally happier to attribute leadership roles to pupils, the term 'leadership' has other connotations and does not carry immediate association with pupils. In exploring the questionnaire data participants frequently raised questions about the meaning of terms such as 'leadership'. What did this term mean to academics or, for that matter, to the range of school staff, representing a kaleidoscope of ages, experience and status. The assumed agreement in responding to questionnaire items concealed the complexities and differences that lay beneath that term. After reviewing the questionnaire data for his school one secondary headteacher became aware that as a staff they had never explored their various understandings of what leadership was.

We assume that we all know what it [leadership] means but we don't. I heard staff talking about this and there were things being said that I hadn't expected. One person said it was all about me. But we had a meeting about this last term and I thought we'd discussed it. When I think about it now we didn't discuss what we each understood by leadership.

The ambiguity in the data proved a vital catalyst for opening up discussion among staff, revealing how they came to the questionnaire statements with differing assumptions and implicit frames of reference, drawing on experience and embedding responses in specific contexts. For example, statements concerning staff's willingness to take the initiative were given high rankings on both practice and importance but

only tenuously associated in the minds of staff with leadership. Taking the initiative to offer support to a newly qualified teacher, implementing peer observation, setting up a staff group and challenging a colleague of higher status on racist language may all be underpinned by a sense of personal agency but not necessarily seen as acts of leadership.

Exploring the language of leadership and distribution brought to the surface conceptions and misconceptions, understandings and misunderstandings and many examples of dilemmas faced by senior leaders. These may be characterized as dilemmas of trust and accountability, of 'holding on' and 'letting go' and a balancing of command, consultation and consensus.

Trust and accountability

Distributing leadership is premised on trust. Trust presents the most acute of dilemmas because, while headteachers believe in the importance of trust they also feel the pressure of accountability from external sources and trusting others to deliver implies a risk for which they personally pay the price. Without mutual trust relationships and respect are compromised and mistrust exerts a corrosive influence.

While alive to the dangers of mistrust, heads were also acutely aware of ways in which trust could be misplaced or betrayed. While working to generate trust heads also have to hold staff to account through performance monitoring, comparative benchmarking and scrutiny of attainment data which, they acknowledge, can tell a partial and misleading story and hold teachers to account for things they do not believe in. In an oppressive policy climate there is not much room for deviation or dissent. In such a policy environment trust comes with a cautious caveat.

Provided I can assemble a staff that is skilled and efficient and trustworthy, then I'll expect them to get on and do their jobs and to do them better than I can do.
(Middle school headteacher)

Distribution also implied teachers' mutual acceptance by staff of one another's leadership potential. This was seen by some heads as an important precondition of distributed leadership. Such potential, however, relied in turn on the self-confidence and self-esteem which would allow someone to see herself/himself as leading others. An infant school head commented that 'People must have high self-esteem because people need confidence to engage in distributed leadership', arguing that a climate of trust was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for teachers to believe they could truly lead others. 'People's perception about other people's initiative of new ideas is greatly essential', remarked a junior school headteacher, while another commented that a coherent staff pulling in the same direction could only function in an environment of reciprocated trust.

Coherent staff: a staff that trusts one another. Others must accept the leadership capabilities of others. I've no problem asking a newly appointed staff to lead but their colleagues need to accept him/her. (Middle school headteacher)

Those heads who have worked most successfully through this dilemma are finding the means to create more lateral learning and exchange among equals, more peer mentoring and evaluation and a fostering of mutual critique and challenge modeled by those in senior and middle leadership positions. While difficult to achieve within a hierarchical structure the intent, as described by one secondary head, is to embed a sense of reciprocity, what Leeuw (2001) has called the me-you-too principle. This distributive ethic is different from distribution as delegation, described by Rogers (1969) as symbiosis.

Symbiosis is a term used to describe a form of reciprocal relationship in which there exists an implicit give and take and a level of mutual respect. This is by definition different from the concept of 'delegation', which underpins much of thinking about distributed leadership. While delegation is expressed in 'giving' responsibility to others or allowing responsibility by structural default, symbiosis has a more organic quality.

Leadership practice, however, presents a more complex equation because trust is a multi-faceted, multi-level concept. It operates at four levels: the individual level, which may be characterized as trustworthiness; the interpersonal level (reciprocal trust); at whole school level (organizational trust); at the wider community and public level, which may be defined as social trust. Alignment across these levels is fraught with difficulty given that expectations differ and that trust may push and pull in opposing directions. When to hold on and when to let go is a leadership dilemma both in general terms as well as being highly situation specific. It demands considerable acuity in reading and interpreting the situation.

Holding on and letting go

Headteachers profess their need to be in control, on the ready to intervene and to meet the expectation that they will exert their authority to solve problems and make life easier for their staff, as well as other stakeholders. Heads admit to the anxiety of not being in charge and they worry about too much surprise.

There is however a dilemma. If you give somebody a role and responsibility and that's important to them and they do the job well, when or how far do you step back and not intervene and let them get on with the job so that in the end, the head becomes so removed from the school because you're not intervening? (Secondary school headteacher)

Being 'removed from the school' suggests a concern about becoming surplus to requirement, as one headteacher expressed it 'empowerment through absence'. Some heads admit that the dependency of others on them can reinforce feelings of being in control, enjoying an authority and identity that is respected. The exercise of too much independence on the part of others may undermine that human need to be needed.

Pushing down power is the corollary of pushing up trust (Moos, 2003) and creating what Sergiovanni (2001) describes as leadership ‘density’, measured in two ways:

- by an aggregation of leadership roles, i.e. a summary of individuals holding leadership positions (formal) and/of exercising leadership ‘without portfolio’ (informally);
- by a holistic assessment of initiatives and developments which are not easily ascribed to individuals but are embedded in the daily flow of a schools’ work.

Consultation, command and consensus

Distribution clearly implies an ability to relinquish one’s role as ultimate decision-maker, trusting others to make the right decisions. A belief in the potential and authority of others, listening with the intent to understand, negotiation and persuasion are the levers that allow trust to gain a foothold and leadership to be assumed and shared. Resolving the dilemma means having information, advice and support so as to be clear as to the difference between consultation, command and consensus. It implies making informed judgments as to when each of these strategies are appropriate, while also ensuring that there is a shared understanding among staff as to the relevance and transparency of these three leadership strategies.

Consultation is the process by which heads listen to others but hold on to the right to decide. Decision-making by consensus distributes that right to others but can, in some situations, be paralysing of leadership. Leadership by command comes easily to some, but for our 11 headteachers it was seen as troublesome because it appeared to imply something undemocratic, running at cross grain to distribution. In this primary head’s description of ‘benevolent dictatorship’ we can detect something of the struggle to reconcile consultation and consensus with command and control.

I see leadership as multifaceted and not hierarchical although in the end someone has to stand and take the difficult decisions and that’s my role at the end. My style is that I talk a lot but don’t make snap decisions. I try to talk things through in a longer term. I try to motivate people to take decisions but in the end I’m the one who is accountable, the one whose neck is on the line as it were. So I delegate much leadership but my intuitive style is somehow benevolent dictatorship. (Primary headteacher)

In workshops with headteachers and teachers we explored the ‘force field’ of factors that pushed heads back to more coercive styles, especially when trust was betrayed, when risk taking became too risky and accountability rose to the top of the agenda. The volatility of school life, the continually shifting balance in relationships and the ebb and flow of confidence and trust featured prominently in headteachers’ discourse. Such discomforts were not exclusive to heads. Teachers, whether in formal leadership positions or ‘without portfolio’, could readily identify with those same issues. They experienced a similar push and pull in relation to fellow staff,

between pupils and teachers, between teachers and support staff and in relation to the parent body.

The shadow test

How headteachers spend their day can reveal much about distribution and what it means in practice. While a day of shadowing offers no more than a glimpse into the culture of a school, it offered an agenda for follow-up discussion and provided another piece in the assembly of the jigsaw. While in shadowing the focus is on what the head is doing, it can at the same time reveal much about relationships, about language and about the culture of the school.

The leadership picture that emerged was one of initiative hampered by the tyranny of the urgent, forcing heads into a reactive position. There were resonances here with Davies (1987) description of heads' work as marked by 'a rapid pace of events, with their time typically being fragmented into many varied and short-term activities'. Paperwork, basic caretaking tasks, responding to phone calls, meetings, showing visitors round, handling disciplinary incidents and dealing with crises left little time for supporting the work of teachers or monitoring or supporting pupil learning. It is in the pattern and balance of these activities that questions of distribution arise. How do headteachers, driven by the day-to-day demands of the school, prioritize among emerging imperatives? How strategic can they be in planning and foreseeing eventualities? How can they share the burden while attempting to relieve the burden on others? One middle school head went to fetch the milk, patrol the playground and lunch hall, monitor the toilets and school buses and pick up the litter, not because there was no one else to do these things but because they were symbolic acts, as well as modeling 'from the top'.

The data we collected through questionnaires, shadowing and interviews helped to shed light on the dynamics of leadership and the cultures in which they were set. We were offered a glimpse of how individuals and groups were directed, motivated or inspired to lead. The context and history of the individual school was seen as critical in shaping teachers' views of leadership and their own role in it, while the length of time a head had been in post had a major effect on how they viewed distribution.

We came to an understanding of distributed leadership as a developing process which we describe under six headings, distribution formally, pragmatically, strategically, incrementally, opportunistically and culturally (Figure 1). Each of these represents a different way of thinking about leadership and exemplifies differing processes of distribution. Each describes a prevalent form of thinking and practice in any given school. However, it is rarely that simple, as schools evolve through different stages and exemplify different approaches at different times and in response to external events. So although we present six separate categories, these are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive. Each may be appropriate at a given time and in a given context. The most successful leadership would, we believe, convey an understanding

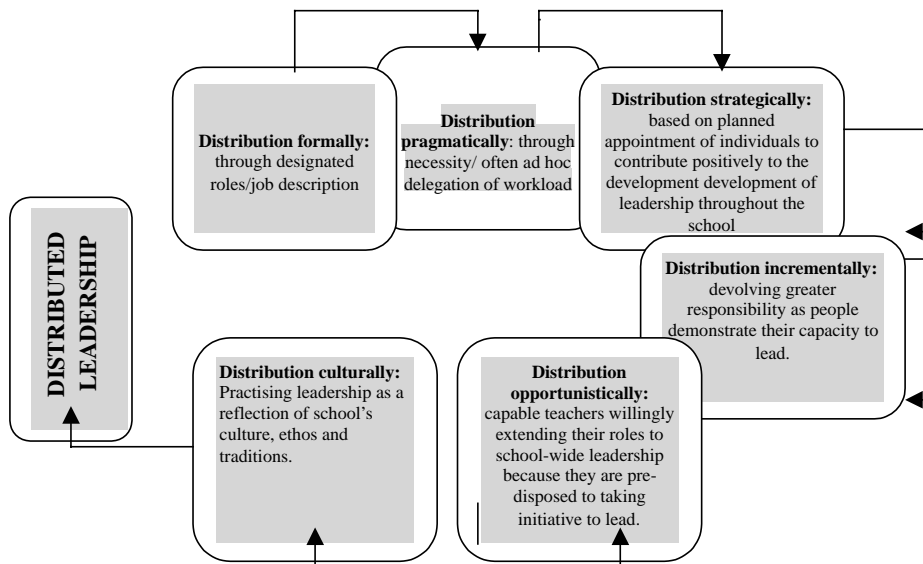


Figure 1. A taxonomy of distribution

of all of these different forms of ‘distribution’ and have the ability to operate at each level as appropriate to the task in hand.

We have portrayed these as a kind of continuum to suggest the flow among them (Figure 1).

Distribution formally

English schools are by history and nature hierarchical. They have a single headteacher who, when appointed, comes increasingly with formal qualifications for headship, with a mandate from governors and with a set of expectations from staff and parents as well as from local authorities, government bodies and from OfSTED. He or she inherits a structure in terms of designated leadership and management roles through which responsibility is delegated. A newly appointed head may make little change in formal responsibilities and most new heads tread warily in their first months. They weigh up the quality of people in leadership positions but normally feel obliged, in the early stages at least, to accept the status quo and make explicit their expectations of staff in ascribed roles.

When people come into the school, they want to see the headteacher. If it's the press, they'll want to see the headteacher. That's fine, I'm glad to be the head figure. But internally, within the school, I've got a hierarchy of staff—deputy heads, assistant heads, Year 4 leaders and a significant number of subject coordinators and I expect those people to lead. (Middle school headteacher)

Responsibility as structurally delegated carries with it an attendant expectation of delivery. It may be accompanied by recognition that others have expertise that you do

not have and that when responsibility is ‘distributed’ in this way the headteacher’s role is to ‘support and provide’.

If I give somebody responsibility, I expect them to get on with the job. . . . I’ve been encouraging subject co-ordinators to tell me what needs to be done. I don’t know what to do in English to raise standards. There are some generic things I can do but in terms of how to teach English better, it’s the English specialist’s job so I distribute responsibility. If they tell me what they need then my job is to provide.
(Middle school headteacher)

This formal process of distribution has the advantage of lending a high degree of security, not only to staff who occupy those formal roles but also to other staff who, as a result, know where they stand. Parents need to know who it is they should speak to on any given issue. Stability and efficient management hold the key to a form of leadership which meets the expectations of all groups of stakeholders, a necessary precondition perhaps for any more radical distributive process on which a school might embark.

Distribution as pragmatic

Pragmatic distribution is characterized by its ad hoc quality. It is often a reaction to external events, in response to demands from government or the local authority, neighbourhood events or parental pressures. Distribution plays an increasingly large part as pressures on schools mount and initiatives multiply. Headteachers may ask people to take on responsibility to ease the logjam and to spread the workload.

I think only one person can take so much. Only one person can do so much. So therefore, distributing it to the right people helps everybody—helps the children, helps the teachers, helps everyone. It helps everybody. (Primary school nursery nurse)

In an environment of increasing demands, decisions about the ‘the right people’ is a pragmatic one, informed by a knowledge of staff capable of sharing the burden and judging how far individual capacity can be further squeezed. In a high stakes environment decisions tend to be marked by playing it safe, avoiding risk and not courting failure by testing untried staff. Judgements are made as to those who can be entrusted with a leadership role and those who can be talked into some form of cooperation, as well as avoiding those who simply ‘divert your energy’:

You’ve got to be clear about those you can trust to do a good job. If all of them, that’s great, but that’s not possible. Bring the positive ones up with you and tap their talents, talk to the negative ones if possible. If they don’t change, ignore them because they can divert your energy. (Primary school headteacher)

This view is reminiscent of two leadership aphorisms, ‘Know your people’ and ‘Don’t water the rocks’. Both imply a capacity to discern latent energy and talent and engage in an implicit, or sometimes explicit, cost–benefit analysis as to where growth is most fruitfully nurtured and where it is unlikely to bear fruit. It is frequently argued

that many staff do not wish to take on responsibility beyond their own class teaching. This is often because teachers see their job in terms of their relationship with children rather than with other adults or colleagues. However, it is also explained in terms of pressure. As one junior school headteacher remarked, ‘when there’s so much pressure on teachers in the school they’ll definitely avoid taking leadership responsibilities’.

In his book *The responsibility virus* Roger Martin (2002) described a collusive process in which leaders and followers assume fixed and complementary roles. In a sense this may be seen as staff holding on to the right to be told but also to complain. When there is a wider sense of shared leadership it may actually alleviate pressure. It may hold the clue to the difference between leadership as conferred within a hierarchical structure and leadership as arising from need and opportunity.

Distribution as strategic

If formal leadership adheres to structure and protocol and pragmatic leadership is ad hoc, the distinguishing feature of strategic distribution is its goal orientation. It is not about pragmatic problem solving but is focused on a longer-term goal of school improvement. It is expressed most saliently in a carefully considered approach to new appointments. These may be seen less in terms of individual competencies and more in terms of people as team players, perhaps with the potential to fulfil certain roles that are still only a gleam in the eye of the head or senior leadership team. Thinking in the longer term one head challenged the notion that ‘roles within a school can be neatly packaged and farmed out to particular people’, because this may work against sustainability.

But one of my biggest worries, and I don’t think it will ever go away, is the thought that if you give a particular specialism to any one individual, that the institution is weakened—not necessarily because of the way that individual is fulfilling that role but the consequences of that individual, for whatever reasons, not being there next year or the year after to do that. (Secondary school headteacher)

In this view distribution assumes strategic importance because when expertise becomes concentrated rather than distributed it weakens the school.

The role of examinations officer, for example, network manager—you can see that you need those positions to be filled but you don’t want the expertise to be concentrated on just one person because we would be weaker as an institution once those people leave. (Secondary school headteacher)

In their book *The wisdom of teams* Katzenbach and Smith (2003) argued that teams do not solve every problem but in most circumstances outperform groups and individuals. They illustrate how individual differences can become collective strengths. The relatively low priority given to challenge and conflict in teachers’ responses to the questionnaire point to a potential weakening of collective strength within a staff.

Distribution as incremental

Formal, pragmatic and strategic leadership tend to imply a process of delegation from the top down. As headteachers become more comfortable with their own authority and feel more able to acknowledge the authority of others they are able to extend the compass of leadership and to 'let go' more.

I think initially from top-down through delegation and as it progresses it becomes both bottom-up and top-down. People who show willingness to take some levels of initiative from any direction are really encouraged. And I love to see it really happen and that's when I become happy. I believe everyone has a role to play in the school.
(Junior school headteacher)

Incremental distribution has a pragmatic ad hoc quality, but is also strategic. Its distinctive purpose is sponsored growth. Its orientation is essentially a professional development one in which as people prove their ability to exercise leadership they are given more.

Staff who have only been in the school for a short time could also be leaders in that they show by their personality, by their vision, by their jobs, commitment, expectations and values that they have got the capacity to lead. . . . In a sense, anyone can be a leader. Leadership isn't hierarchical. It's a process that a lot of staff can demonstrate. (Secondary school headteacher)

This notion of capacity is echoed in the view that capacity is inherent in everyone, but the crucial ingredient is confidence. A middle school headteacher developed this theme:

When people come out with new ideas, I ask them if they're prepared to carry out the idea . . . I try to make people feel confident about what they can do because most people have the ability to lead. What they need is confidence.

Distribution incrementally is not simply instrumental. It is not simply to serve the purpose of raising standards. The headteacher's emphasis in the above quote is on attitudes and longer term professional development. It implies a people, rather than a job, orientation, 'a bringing on of experience' which extends limits and is professionally renewing. Where there is mutual confidence and a flow of ideas, leadership becomes fluid and its benefits extend to the youngest child.

I think everyone in this school should have the opportunity to do so [exercise leadership]; from the youngest child through out and not just a selected few.
(Secondary headteacher)

Problems arise where there is a lack of confidence. This accounts for the negative values that the teachers in our study attached to distributed leadership practices such as involving pupils in decision-making, encouraging pupils to exercise leadership, engaging in team teaching as a way of improving practice or carrying out joint research and evaluation with colleagues. Welcoming opportunities to learn from parents and challenging one another on professional issues will also be embraced by teachers if appropriate structures are put in place, leading to the development of

confidence in people through appropriate interpersonal relationships. Central to these relationships are trust and self-belief.

Distribution as opportunistic

As we move from top-down to bottom-up the emphasis in leadership shifts from what the head does to what others in the school do. In this category leadership does not appear to be distributed at all. It is dispersed. It is taken rather than given. It is assumed rather than conferred. It is opportunistic rather than planned. It suggests a situation in which there is such strength of initiative within the school that capable, caring teachers willingly extend their roles to school-wide leadership. There is a natural predisposition to take a lead, to organize, to see what needs doing and make sure it gets done.

It might not be necessarily my initiative. It might be somebody—anyone with a suggestion about something to be tried out. My job will be to support. (Junior school headteacher)

It involves a symbiotic relation in which ambitious and energetic members of staff are keen to take on leadership roles and are encouraged to do so by astute headteachers who may have recruited them with that in mind. However, this can only happen in an environment in which it is ‘safe to venture’:

People must have high self-esteem because people need the confidence to engage in distributed leadership. I feel there must be a safe environment where people feel secured enough to venture, where they know they’ll be encouraged. (Junior school headteacher)

A clarity of purpose or ‘pulling in the same direction’ was seen as a precondition for leadership as dispersed and opportunistic. Without this common direction members of staff might exert strong leadership roles at cross-purposes to the school’s mission or core values. This raises complex questions as to ‘whose values?’ and ‘whose mission or vision?’ In an opportunistic climate there is always scope for subversion and that is both a risk and strength. When values, priorities and direction are open to challenge and change they test a critical aspect of a school’s formal leadership; how it responds to divergent views and its ability to manage conflict.

Clearly, in such a regime distribution doesn’t just happen. There are structures and expectations that create and infuse a certain kind of climate. From a teacher’s perspective this climate is often invisible. It ‘just is’ or is simply ‘the way we do things round here’. From a headteacher’s point of view, however, the creation of that climate is likely to have been carefully wrought, underpinned by a value system in which leadership potential is seen to lie within everyone.

I think everyone in this school should have the opportunity to do so; from the youngest child through out and not just a selected few. The children will need these leadership skills in their development, future working etc. It helps them to listen, value what other people say and be willing to come out with their ideas and try them out and be able and willing to persuade others. (Junior school headteacher)

The metaphor for opportunistic leadership was described by one headteacher as the football team. When the ball goes out of play the nearest player runs to retrieve the ball and get it back into play. Taking a free kick or penalty is typically decided on the pitch by players opportunistically. The flow is within an overall strategy, but in the event intuitive and interdependent.

Distribution as cultural

There may seem little room left for a sixth conceptual category. When leadership is intuitive, assumed rather than given, shared organically and opportunistically it is embedded in the culture. The sixth category, however, is distinctive by virtue of its emphasis on the what rather than the who. In other words, leadership is expressed in activities rather than roles or through individual initiative. ‘Distribution’ as a conscious process is no longer applicable because people exercise initiative spontaneously and collaboratively, with no necessary identification of leaders or followers.

It deserves a sixth discrete category because it switches the emphasis from leaders and leadership to a community of people working together to a common end with all the tensions and challenges that real vibrant communities display. As Gronn (2002) suggested, ‘the potential for leadership is present in the flow of activities in which a set of organisation members find themselves enmeshed’ (p. 331).

Culture is the metaphor here. ‘Culture’ is a word to which we are so inured that we have lost sight of its metaphoric origins. Its connotations are growth in a nurturing set of conditions, seeding, grafting and cultivating ideas and practices. Teamworking, leading and following and looking after others are a reflection of the culture, ethos and traditions in which shared leadership is simply an aspect of ‘the way we do things round here’.

Sometimes we delegate leadership roles; sometimes people find themselves in situations where they assume leadership themselves. It also comes from the school’s culture where people can assume leadership roles. A lot of people exert leadership with confidence not because they’ve been told to do so but that’s the way things are done here. I try to openly and honestly deal with problems in this school with the involvement of other people. (Secondary school headteacher)

Distribution culturally sees the strength of the school as located in its collective intelligence and collective energy. In other language this may be described as social capital.

Trust, confidence, a supportive atmosphere, and support for risk taking—a culture that says you can take a risk—you can go and do it. If it doesn’t work, we learn from it. I think there’s a range of cultural issues that support distributed leadership and create a climate; high levels of communication, willingness to change and to challenge; a climate that recognises and values everybody’s opinion. (Secondary school headteacher)

The key concepts in distribution culturally are agency and reciprocity. As agency transfers from individual control to collective activity, it requires reciprocity, the ‘me-too-you-too principle’. Elmore (2004) described this as internal accountability, which exists in ‘powerful normative cultures’ built on four types of reciprocal relationship:

- *respect*, listening to and valuing the views of others;
- *personal regard*, intimate and sustained personal relationships that undergird professional relationships;
- *competence*, the capacity to produce desired results in relationships with others;
- *personal integrity*, truthfulness and honesty in relationships.

These hallmarks of a normative culture are what provides the sense of agency, the willingness to take risks, to both offer and accept leadership arising from a discerned reciprocity. It is in this context that we can begin to make sense of teacher leadership, not as tied to status and position but as exercised individually and in concert in a culture which authorizes and confirms a shared sense of agency.

These six typologies cannot be simply overlaid on any single leadership style. They are situational and heads, or other leaders, tend to adopt the strategic approach most relevant to task people and context. While it may be assumed that the most expert of heads have a capacity for reading situations and audiences and can choose their responses accordingly, in reality the breadth and flexibility of a headteacher’s repertoire is constrained by a range of factors, by unpredictable events within and outside the school, by the complexity and paradoxical nature of the world beyond the school gates. Personality, prior experience and political persuasion have all to be factored into the leadership equation and what is portrayed below as a developmental sequence may be arrested or resisted at any stage.

A developmental process?

In the early stages of assuming leadership a headteacher is likely to tread cautiously, observing the formal structures and formality of the school. Coming to terms with the culture and history of the school also implies a pragmatic quality. In time he or she is able to become more strategic, identifying the leadership needs of the school, looking for people who have the requisite capacity for satisfying such a need and then assigning responsibilities to them. Having delegated such leadership responsibilities, the head or leadership team endeavours to build a culture of performance by controlling and monitoring the progress of tasks. As those involved in delegated leadership roles gain mastery of the principles of leading and show signs of being able to perform with or without the headteacher’s supervision, the headteacher may create opportunities for them to share their expertise more broadly.

Where the need is such that it requires a specialist skill which no member of staff readily has, the head may choose between two options. On the one hand, he or she may recruit someone from outside the school and delegate an aspect of leadership to

them. Alternatively, he or she may identify potential leaders from within the school, nurture them incrementally, perhaps providing opportunities for them to take part in training or other activities to stretch their capacity. This is where distributed leadership enters a second phase, characterized by a widening of the scope of leadership to include others who may not hold any formal leadership position in the school. Members of staff are encouraged to take the initiative or to intervene when they see something which infringes the values of the school. The head works with others to create an enabling environment, one that encourages innovative ideas from all members of the school, teachers, pupils and support staff. Conscious efforts are made to establish a shared leadership and a shared vision among staff as to where the school is going. This is effected by involving all staff in important decision-making: planning, developing and evaluating school policy, helping staff to regard the School Development Plan as their own creation.

This second phase describes a high level of developmental activity on the part of the headteacher. It describes the creation of a culture that offers teachers an opportunity to learn from one another's practice. Its explicit purpose is to encourage a sense of collaboration among teachers and between teachers and classroom assistants and a culture in which staff willingly use informal opportunities to discuss children's learning, reflecting on their practice as a way of identifying their professional learning needs. Leadership roles are further extended to pupils. Headteacher and teachers hold in common the need to encourage pupils to exercise leadership and structures are put in place to assist pupils to develop leadership skills. Leadership begins to be exercised more opportunistically by staff and pupils. Involvement in decision-making expands and pupils' and teachers' contributions to school self-evaluation and development planning becomes more real than tokenist. The importance of teachers learning from and with other teachers is underlined in a study in the USA (Spillane *et al.*, 2001). Out of 84 elementary school teachers involved, 70 identified their principal as influential in their practice, but an almost equal number (67) identified other teachers as having been the major influence on their classroom practice.

Phase 3 is what one headteacher in this study described as leadership 'by standing back'. This does not imply a *laissez-faire* stance, rather it involves maintaining the dynamic by supporting others; what has been described as 'servant leadership' (Greenleaf, 1997). When the culture is characterized by mutual trust and self-confidence leadership can become followership as the occasion demands. Where there is a high level of trust, differences in values and working practices can be both tolerated and challenged. Heads in this study described themselves variously as 'facilitators', 'supporters' and 'orchestrators', 'standing back', often tentatively, but always with a weather eye on those to whom they had to render an account.

However great the investment in keeping motivation alive and however good the succession planning, there seems to be a natural process of entropy or attrition (Fink, 1999). Historically, few schools have managed to continue on an improvement trajectory or maintain a high level of vitality (Gray, 2000). Sustaining distributed leadership, therefore, depends in part on the degree of support a school receives from

the local authority, from critical friends (Swaffield, 2002) and from other agencies outside the school. For leadership this implies a need to move beyond the school, to build alliances with other community agencies and through strong and resilient networks draw renewed energy.

Towards the end of the project in many of, if not all, the schools staff were becoming more confident to talk about the leadership in action in their own school and classroom settings. They were more assured in recognizing and assigning behaviours and skills to varying forms of leadership. Some expressed clear ideas about how they intended to further promote and develop a climate more receptive to risk taking, innovation and creativity. One headteacher who was concerned that staff who had been given encouragement to lead were not making the most of the opportunity came to recognize that as an instinctive, natural leader he had never thought through the skills and behaviours he expected from others. Nor had he consciously given thought to the various ways in which leadership could be shared more widely. After discussion with his senior leadership team they now felt better placed to facilitate learning for leadership and, in his judgement, a more thoughtful distribution of leadership around the school was already being realized.

For the research team the project afforded us new insights into what distributed leadership means in the real world of schools. For headteachers and teachers who participated in the project reflection and theorizing of their own practice gave renewed impetus to improving their schools and a conceptual register for telling their school improvement story.

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