Variabilities and Dualities in Distributed Leadership

Findings from a Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of distributed leadership, drawing from a systematic review of relevant literature commissioned by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and jointly funded by NCSL and the Open University's Centre for Educational Policy, Leadership and Lifelong Learning (CEPoLL). The concept attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices, with varying implications for organizational processes and values. The article highlights key variables that emerged from the literature review. It then elaborates one of the emergent themes—the distinction between structure and agency—and seeks to utilize this further as a means of illuminating the concept and practice of distributed leadership. In conclusion, areas for future research are identified.

KEYWORDS *agency, autonomy, structure, team-working*

Introduction

The notion of distributed leadership is one that has come to have increasing currency, both within and beyond the field of education (Gronn, 2002a; O'Neill, 2002). The concept, however, attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices, with varying—and largely unresearched—implications for organizational processes and values. This article is based on a systematic review of writing and research on distributed leadership published between January 1996 and July 2002, undertaken by the authors. The review was commissioned by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and jointly funded by NCSL and the Open University's Centre for Educational Policy, Leadership and Lifelong Learning (CEPoLL) (Bennett et al., 2003).[1]

The purpose of the article is to highlight key variables that emerged from the literature review in relation to distributed leadership. It then elaborates one of the themes which emerged—namely, the significance of the classic social scientific distinction between structure and agency as a perspective on distributed

leadership. While the duality of structure and agency has been acknowledged in approaches to understanding distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002a), the article seeks to utilize this perspective further as a means of illuminating some of the complex questions and issues that are bound up with its practice and study. Specifically, the theoretical framework of analytical dualism, developed by the sociologist Margaret Archer (1995), is used, and we suggest that it is helpful in understanding distributed leadership to delineate its structural and agential dimensions. Drawing on Bennett et al. (2003), areas for future research are identified in conclusion.

The article proceeds by:

- summarizing the methodology of the systematic review;
- providing an overview of distributed leadership, which covers elements that give some distinctiveness to the concept and discusses some of the key variable features discernible from the literature;
- addressing analytical dualism and its implications for the concept of distributed leadership;
- summarizing areas for future research.

Methodology

Bennett et al.'s (2003) systematic review comprised an extensive literature search using a wide range of possible keywords. It was anticipated that most literature related to the concept of distributed leadership would be recent, so the team initially decided to restrict the search to writings published or presented at conferences since 1988. This first search produced just under 500 citations. Bringing forward the cut-off publication date to 1996 made almost no difference. This second search was then filtered by identifying the shorter articles in journals, which were likely to be either publicizing and simplifying work presented in more detail elsewhere, or presenting anecdotal material. Having eliminated very short articles—those of five pages or less—the team then identified authors represented by multiple publications in the list. Visual scanning of the titles and dates of these publications led to the selection of one publication from each author. This reduced the number of citations to 307. Further filtering was carried out by reducing to four the number of keywords that appeared to be most closely related to the topic. These were:

- delegated leadership;
- democratic leadership;
- dispersed leadership;
- distributed leadership.

This limitation on the keywords gave us a total of 80 citations to examine further. Study of the abstracts of these citations led to 32 publications being

systematically reviewed. To carry out the review, the team developed a protocol. This was progressively refined by selecting a number of works which were read by all members of the review team. Responses to them were discussed and amendments made to the protocol until it was clear that all four members of the team were interpreting it similarly and judging their reading on comparable criteria.

In the final stage, the reviews of each researcher, including the papers that all of the team had read, were discussed and collated. Further discussions took place to draw together team members' understanding of the concept of distributed leadership and to consider the implications of the reviews for leadership practice, preparation and research. As this work was carried out, careful attention was paid to the field, and newly available work, both published and unpublished, was incorporated into the analysis. Discussions among the team also led to exploration of theoretical or conceptual ideas drawn on by the writers examined.

Distinctive Characteristics of Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership has a variety of meanings, and some of these meanings (explicitly or implicitly in the literature) resemble earlier notions such as collegiality. This prompts the question of whether there is a conception of distributed leadership which takes understanding of leadership further than a renaming of previous ideas. Our conclusion is that it is possible to identify elements that suggest what may be distinctive about the concept of distributed leadership. Three distinctive elements of the concept of distributed leadership can be discerned. They are not a summation of the approaches reviewed by the team, since these differ and are not capable of being reconciled into one theory. The three distinctive elements are our interpretative construction formed on the basis of the review.

Emergent Property

First, distributed leadership highlights leadership as an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals. This contrasts with leadership as a phenomenon which arises from the individual. Work by Gronn (2000, 2002a, b) is helpful in explicating and elaborating this. What is most distinctive about the notion of distributed leadership is summed up in what Gronn (2002b: 3) terms 'concertive action'. This is contrasted with numerical or additive action, which represents the aggregated effect of a number of individuals contributing their initiative and expertise in different ways to a group or organization. Concertive action is about the additional dynamic which is the product of conjoint activity. Where people work together in such a way that they pool their initiative and expertise, the outcome is a product or energy which is greater than the sum of their individual actions.

Openness of Boundaries

Second, distributed leadership suggests openness of the boundaries of leadership. This means that it is predisposed to widen the conventional net of leaders, thus in turn raising the question of which groups and individuals are to be brought into leadership or seen as contributors to it. Of itself, the notion of distributed leadership does not suggest how wide that boundary should be set. Equally, however, there are no limits built into the concept. The issue has a social and an individualized component:

- Which groups of stakeholders are counted as being in the net of distributed leadership?
- Which individuals within these groups do or should contribute to distributed leadership?

Much of the literature studied by the team examined the concept of distributed leadership in relation to teachers. However, there are other members of the school community whose roles need to be considered. In particular, what is the role of the student body in relation to distributed leadership? Work not within the body of literature falling within the parameters of the review—by Fielding (1999) and Trafford (2003) for example—strongly advocates inclusion of students in participatory processes.

Leadership According to Expertise

Third, distributed leadership entails the view that varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few. Related to openness of the boundaries of leadership is the idea that numerous, distinct, germane perspectives and capabilities can be found in individuals spread throughout the organization and its stakeholders. If these are brought together it is possible to forge a concertive dynamic which represents more than the sum of the individual contributors. Initiatives may be inaugurated by those with relevant skills in a particular context, but others will then, within a mutually trusting and supportive culture, adopt, adapt and improve them.

Variable Elements of Distributed Leadership

A number of variables emerged from the literature as important factors in understanding the development, nature and impact of distributed leadership.

Context

Some of the studies draw attention to the significance of the social contexts which frame distributed leadership in any particular group or organization.

First, there is the influence of the organization's external context. For example, the studies by Bryant (2003) and Kets de Vries (1999) draw attention particularly to the significance of the wider social and cultural context for understandings of leadership. Both of these studies investigated non-Western settings, respectively Native American and Pygmy cultures. Bryant found that in Native American perceptions leadership is not located in a person but in a community, and 'the leader' is a transient position. Everyone plays a leadership role at different times, and can make a significant contribution. Authority is specific to a particular situation, and ends when the need for it ends. An individual 'grows' into a position of leadership, s/he is not appointed to it. There is no superordinate authority or hierarchy. Accountability is to the community as a whole, not to individuals or agents of the community. The point that such studies highlight is that some contexts within which organizations are embedded may create and sustain the conditions within which distributed leadership can flourish, while others—a directive, hierarchical society for example—are likely to hinder a more distributed leadership style. Mahony and Moos (1998) raise a similar point in their comparison of the English and Danish education systems.

Second, an organization's own internal context, in terms of both its organizational culture and its history, is significant. Brytting and Trollestad (2000) and Coad (2000) highlight the effect of a sustained culture of non-participation which can result in passivity when new participative opportunities are offered. How the internal context might be changing is also significant: a new organizational culture can be developing at the same time as a more distributed leadership style is being encouraged. For example, values such as commitment to truth and enquiry (Ayas and Zenuik, 2001) and trust (Abzug and Phelps, 1998) have been indicated as being highly important components of a culture which encourages distributed leadership. Abzug and Phelps's conceptual work led them to propose a partnership model of the kind used by professionals such as lawyers, accountants or architects to organize their work. In such models, participatory management is the norm, with the aim of creating the opportunities for individuals to pursue their own work while simultaneously promoting the profitability and reputation of the partnership as a whole. The basis of such organizations is trust rather than regulation, and leadership is exercised on the basis of status provided by the possession of what Abzug and Phelps call esoteric knowledge. The latter also provides the basis upon which individuals can receive true responsibility for the conduct of their work, be it everyday activity or strategic planning, because everyone, according to the model, can feel confident that all share in the vision for the organization. This has links to the social cultures depicted in the studies by Bryant and Kets de Vries, mentioned earlier.

Control and Autonomy

A critical examination of Abzug and Phelps's model raises the issue of the extent and limits of individual autonomy. Trust-based partnership in that model is framed within external contextual pressures (such as the need to make a profit in the case of a market context) and the presumption of internal consensus around a particular vision. This highlights the fact that the degree of control and autonomy is a major variable in distributed leadership. Distribution of leadership is concerned with how an organization constrains or enables different organizational members to take initiatives and contribute to development of policy and practice. This distribution is framed within a culture of ideas and values which attaches to different people different measures of value and recognition, and indicates where the limits are to what is open to discussion and change.

In some conceptions and manifestations of distributed leadership the emphasis is on constraints emanating from higher levels in the internal hierarchy or from the external context in which the organization is embedded. Certain goals or values are set by formally constituted leaders who are accountable for the performance of the organization (signalled through market forces or external regulating agencies), and are seen as non-negotiable. Graetz (2000: 556), for example, in case studies of three large companies undergoing change, offers a view of distributed leadership as a positive channel for change with a strong directive steer:

> Organisations most successful in managing the dynamics of loose-tight working relationships meld strong 'personalised' leadership at the top with 'distributed' leadership, a group of experienced and trusted individuals operating at different levels of the organisation . . . [ensuring] integrated thinking and acting at all levels. All three cases illustrate how, if key stakeholders are not onside, particularly at the middle and lower levels of management they act as roadblocks to change, impeding the passage of the change process to those within their span of control.

But this is not the only possible model. Brytting and Trollestad (2000), for example, on the basis of their study of company managers, propose a more participatory approach to organizational values and suggest that management's role is to create resources for mutual reflection on the values found in the existing culture. From there, the conditions for change in the organizational culture can be created from within the organization. Another example is Goodman et al.'s (2001) action research in the US. This is aimed at the transformation of internal school culture through the introduction of democratic principles and redistribution of power. Woods (2004) has attempted to delineate the nature of democratic leadership as distinct from distributed leadership, highlighting the deeper philosophical and sociological questions implicated in the former.

Where distributed leadership is towards the autonomy pole of the control/autonomy continuum, it should not to be assumed that non-negotiable

values and aims are always inappropriate. Keyes et al.'s (1999) school case study examines how a certain type of strong leadership (displayed by the principal of an elementary school in the US) can be empowering. The study found that how this principal works reflected Reitzug's (1994) Developmental Taxonomy of Empowering Principal Behaviour, which comprises:[2]

- support: creating a supportive environment for critique;
- facilitation: how the principal stimulates critique;
- possibility: how the principal makes voice possible, for example by making resources available, to turn critique into practical action.

As well as finding evidence of empowerment in the school, Keyes et al. highlight that not all ideas were open to critique. In particular the goal of inclusive schooling was not open to question.

Sources of Change and Development

The impetus for developing distributed leadership can arise from different sources. First, as Bickmore (2001) suggests, policy issues or ideas external to the formal members of an organization can provide a stimulus for rethinking leadership (external initiative). This is likely to result in a structural reorganization, although the values underpinning the organizational members' reactions to these external pressures will have an impact on this restructuring. Senior formal leaders are likely to be significant influences upon the development of such restructuring.

This suggests that a second source of change towards distributed leadership may be a strong or charismatic leader within the organization ('top–down' initiative). A number of the studies examined by the team (Blase and Blase, 1999; Campbell et al., 2003; Gold et al., 2002) which offered some empirical data in support of their arguments seemed to identify the headteacher/principal as a source of the initiatives they studied. Although at first sight the concept of distributed leadership may appear to stand at odds with strong senior leadership, there is no necessary contradiction. (We return to this issue when discussing agential indicators of distributed leadership.) Indeed, the view of distributed leadership as concerted action through relationships allows for strong partnerships which at the same time entail power disparities between the partners. Whether the specific disparities involved are justifiable, and what impact they might have on the nature of the emergent leadership and its outcomes, are separate questions.

A third source for change lies in the lower levels of hierarchical organization or external groups such as local communities served by an educational institution ('bottom–up' initiative). This may occur as a response to a formal policy requirement from within the organization, or to some externally experienced pressure such as might result from the activities of a professional association.

That is, 'bottom–up' initiatives might well be linked to external and 'top–down' initiatives. Such 'bottom–up' initiatives place a pressure on senior staff to determine how to respond to what could represent a significant cultural challenge to existing or preferred leadership arrangements. Bickmore (2001) provides a good example of how simultaneous external policy demands and internal responses to these demands by staff can interact. Bickmore argues from her findings from a study of peer mediation schemes that two factors appeared to affect progress towards achieving the aim of promoting democratic citizenship: the basis on which students were selected as mediators and the extent to which they were constrained by procedures. The two are presented as manifestations of the same fundamental problem, which was the degree to which adults in the school were prepared to release students from official control. When mediators were selected because they were academically successful or well behaved, they were seen as having status among the adults but not necessarily among their peers. These schemes were less successful than those where the mediators were chosen on the basis of perceived peer status, which often involved including some badly behaved pupils.

Schemes were also more effective when the mediators were charged with solving problems they themselves identified rather than operating as an extra arm of the school system—being 'one of the intermediary steps on the way up to [the principal's] office' (Bickmore, 2001: 151). In these latter cases, the students' mediating actions were tightly constrained. In one case their teachers gave them 'scripts' to use in mediations. Student mediators were limited to dealing with issues brought to them by their peers or referred to them by teachers.

In the former cases, when mediators were seen as having a problem-solving function, rather than being used as a disciplinary arm, the staff who advised and monitored them operated in a facilitative rather than a controlling way, and the mediators became more confident, so that they started to intervene pro-actively in disputes to prevent them escalating. Further, they generated their own codes of conduct and disciplined their colleagues when they breached them, on one occasion demanding that the miscreant be removed from the list of mediators for a period. In this development of a more proactive role, the pupils were supported by the principal, who increasingly enjoined staff to relinquish some of their traditional disciplinary role and responsibilities for behaviour control to the mediators.

Bickmore's study also illustrates the importance of informal positions of leadership and the variable ways by which informal leaders are involved in the process of distributed leadership. A 'top–down' initiative may acknowledge existing informal power or leadership relationships within the community, but need not do so. In any case, it will incorporate them into the more formal leadership structures in ways seen as appropriate by the senior staff who are creating the distributive structure or culture. A 'bottom–up' initiative is more likely to derive from individuals or groups within the organization who are seen by

colleagues as having a leadership role. The success of such an initiative may depend upon an attempt to bring into line the formal and informal leaders within the organization (Silva et al., 2000). Further, it may require senior staff to adapt their leadership practice more substantially because initiatives from below may challenge their underpinning values and perceptions of good practice more than a 'top–down' approach.

Dynamics of Team Working

The literature on teams, with its emphases on collaboration, multiple and complementary strengths and expertise, and the need for all members to share a common view of both the purposes of the team and its means of working, has similarities to much of the discussion of distributed leadership (Karkkainen, 2000). In its argument that team activity can amount to more than the aggregate sum of individual action, the literature on teams sounds very similar to the argument for concertive action outlined by Gronn (2002b). Further, writers on teams frequently distinguish between formally structured teams and teams that are created on an ad hoc basis to carry out specific projects, with the ad hoc groups needing to create a consensus about ways of working. Studies suggest that both kinds of teams operate best in a certain kind of internal organizational culture: an open climate, where relationships are based on trust, mutual protection and support (Belbin, 2000; Nias et al., 1989; Wallace and Hall, 1994). Such a climate within the organization as a whole will assist ad hoc groups to create an agreed modus operandi more quickly and easily. Ideally, both intra-team and inter-team relationships will be based on networks, and will demonstrate open communication and strong shared common goals, values and beliefs. Members will tend to subordinate their own objectives to those of the group. Hall (2001: 333) compares this to the teamwork of a conductor and orchestra, which she believes exemplifies Gronn's (2000) view of conjoint agency, 'people taking shared responsibility for the successful outcomes of their joint work'.

Institutional and Spontaneous Forms of Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership may be given long-term institutional form through team structures, committees and other formal structures. Equally, distributed leadership can operate through ad hoc arrangements, such as temporary teams as indicated above or through spontaneous and improvised groups of two or more, as Gronn (2002b) has identified. Spontaneous forms represent a strong theme running through the distributed leadership literature reviewed. Fluid leadership, resting on expertise rather than position, can be exercised through changing ad hoc groups created on the basis of immediate and relevant expertise. Such fluid leadership will only be possible within a climate of trust and mutual support which becomes an integral part of the internal organizational social and cultural context. Moreover, such a climate implies a blurring of the

distinction between 'leaders' and 'followers', which has to coexist with an organization's formal accountability structure.

Conflict Resolution

Effective teams need ways of facing and resolving conflict. Distributed leadership in action also needs to acknowledge and deal with conflict. Means of conflict resolution may have to operate across a much larger arena than would be necessary in smaller departmental, pastoral or project teams. Depending on the source of the initiative towards creating an organization that demonstrates the characteristics of distributed leadership, and the degree to which senior leaders are able to 'let go' of their overarching control, such approaches to conflict resolution may be hierarchical (directed by a single leader) or more collegial (the participants themselves seeking ways of resolving conflict through dialogue).

Analytical Dualism

Analytical dualism expresses the idea that both structure and agency have distinct effects. They each have properties and powers and continuously interact. They comprise analytically separable influences upon the social world we inhabit; yet, whilst analytically distinguishable, 'can only be examined in combination': 'Unless one distinguishes between the emergent properties of the "parts" and the "people", nothing determinate can be said about their interplay' (Archer, 2000: 307).

Structure consists of emergent structural properties which exert 'powers of constraint and enablement by shaping the situations in which people find themselves' (Archer, 2000: 307). The power represented by structure refers to the construction and distribution of material and social resources (including legitimacy and authority); of ideas and values; and of patterns of social life and attitudes, all of which predate any particular moment of agency (Archer, 1995). They are the product of prior agency and the condition of current agency, the latter in turn possibly modifying structural properties which then form the conditions for future agency. Structure thus comprises the following elements, formulated in Woods (2000) in light of Archer (1995):

- institutional: concerned with organizational features, the distribution of power and resources, duties of roles, etc.;
- cultural: concerned with systems and patterns of knowledge, ideas and values;
- social: concerned with patterns of relationships and interactions and the 'climate' of these, as well as the presence and distribution of personal attitudes and values (cordial, antagonistic; high-trust, low-trust relations, etc.).

Institutional, cultural and social structures provide at any one point in time the resources for agency.

Agency concerns the actions of people. The causal powers of agency are the powers 'which ultimately enable people to reflect upon their social context, and to act reflexively towards it, either individually or collectively' (Archer, 2000: 308). These include capacities such as self-consciousness that enable people to evaluate their social context, envisage alternatives creatively and collaborate with others to bring about change. Agency by numbers of social actors in subtle, and sometimes more dramatic ways, affects and changes the structural context they begin with. For example, new cultural ideas are introduced, or different interpretations of institutional roles are created or evolve over time, thus changing the structural context (such as role expectations) faced by social actors.

At the kernel of distributed leadership as a concept is the idea that leadership is a property of groups of people, not of an individual. If distributed leadership is to be seen as distinctive from other formulations of leadership, it is, then, the first of the distinctive characteristics of distributed leadership outlined above—leadership as the product of concertive or conjoint activity, emphasizing it as an emergent property of a group or network—which will underpin it. But is it, in consequence, entirely to be viewed as structural? Leadership is, surely, concerned with agency. After all, there are numerous examples in the studies reviewed—some cited above—of agency being crucial to understanding distributed leadership. The actions of senior leaders, such as headteachers, are an example.

Different emphases are possible in research and theorizations of distributed leadership. Some approaches to its study and practice concentrate on the organizational structuring of leadership more than the perspectives, motives and 'theories in use' of individuals; or vice versa. This distinction was observed in comparing studies such as Harris and Chapman (2002), Spillane et al. (2001) and Goodman et al. (2001). Here we explore distributed leadership viewed as structure, and then viewed as agency.

For illustrative purposes we want to consider an aspect of leadership change as studied in Harris and Chapman's (2002) investigation of leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances. We are not suggesting that Harris and Chapman take a solely structural view; only that an emphasis on structural properties can be discerned in their analysis. Their study highlights some of the structural ways of creating movement towards a less authoritarian, more democratic approach to leadership. Distributed leadership in this formulation is created by one leader—the headteacher—so involves agency. But the point of interest here is the emphasis given to the importance of processes which progressively extend the degree to which individuals and groups within a school have the opportunity to take responsibility for aspects of its work. This can be considered as a proactive process of structural change. The headteachers in Harris and Chapman's study sought to bring about within their schools:

- a redistribution of internal institutional responsibilities (properties), for example by delegating authority to senior management teams;
- construction of a particular set of cultural ideas and norms, which encourage teachers to take risks; and
- development of social relations with certain properties, such as high trust.

A structural view of distributed leadership would conclude that the more these elements are present in an institution, the more its leadership can be said to be distributed.

The importance of cultural context, highlighted by some studies mentioned earlier, is also about the significance of structural properties. Ideas and ingrained assumptions about whom to trust, who is legitimately able to influence decisions and so on, condition the possibilities for widening the boundaries of leadership.

Spillane et al.'s (2001) emphasis by contrast is on the agency of multiple social actors. In their formulation, 'the execution of leadership tasks is often distributed among multiple leaders' (p. 25). Spillane et al. argue that distributed leadership is the process of thinking and acting in a particular situation, and that it unfolds on the basis of the perception of individual practitioners and their theories in use (Argyris and Schon, 1978). Leadership in school is to be seen as thinking and acting in a given situation so as to facilitate teaching and learning. 'Bottom–up' initiatives—seeking to extend opportunities to share leadership— highlight agency as a key factor, as does the development of spontaneous forms of distributed leadership.

In practice it is not possible to consider structure and agency in isolation from each other for long. Their interplay requires them to be understood in combination. Approaching from the perspective of analytical dualism helps to bring to the surface the need to keep in mind the structural and agential dimensions of distributed leadership, and to relate them to each other. But if distributed leadership has both structural and agential dimensions, what implications might this have?

First, in studying distributed leadership there is a need to investigate both structural indicators and evidence of agency and agential powers associated with such leadership. Structural indicators cover:

- distribution of internal institutional resources and responsibilities, which may involve formal forums where responsibility is shared (committees and formal teams) but also equally as important spontaneous or improvised groupings;
- cultural ideas and values, which encourage openness, risk-taking, mutual respect, etc;
- social relations with certain properties, such as patterns of interaction, which cross formal hierarchies, and high-trust relationships.

Agential evidence includes different aspects to do with people as social actors responding to, utilizing and shaping these structural properties. Three of these aspects are highlighted, though these are not intended to be exhaustive. There is the *lead agency*, which is often crucial. As evident above, the initiative and actions of senior leadership often play a decisive role in setting the possibilities and guiding principles, and in enabling resources (of legitimacy as well as material) to be made available to others. The importance of lead agency appears paradoxical as a component of distributed leadership. But it has to be judged in the context of structural indicators and other aspects of agency, without which it can become authoritarian (towards the controlling pole of the control/autonomy continuum). Lead agency itself may also be shared amongst several key catalysts for change, encouraging and energizing others—as was found by Goodman et al. (2001) who identified the importance of locating individuals in each school who will assume responsibility for continued facilitation and reform.

There are the *capacities for participating in leadership* (particular agential powers). These include confidence to play a part, and a ready faculty for creativity which enables envisioning of alternative possibilities. The question is how many people, and which people, have and are encouraged to express these capacities. Then there is the *practice of leadership*, which concerns the incidence and distribution of actions by organizational members and stakeholders that represent participation in leadership.

Second, change must be informed by a critical appreciation of both of these dimensions of distributed leadership. There is some evidence in the studies examined that distributed leadership in practice is strongly dependent upon circumstances. Situational analysis, by leaders and would-be leaders, of the institutional, cultural and social contexts that characterize an organization in its current condition is a crucial starting point. In other words, understanding existing structural opportunities and constraints is essential. Change towards distributed leadership must, at the same time, be concerned with agency. For example, encouraging and nourishing capacities for participating in leadership are essential components of such change. All of these considerations have implications for the development of opportunities open to staff at all levels and other groups within and outside the organization. It points to the importance of, for instance, the broadest participation in situational analyses and in development of capacities for contributing to and sharing leadership.

A single model of distributed leadership cannot be constructed as its structure and practice will be influenced so much by what is possible and appropriate in different contexts. A case study of a school which involves teachers, students and the community in the celebration and practice of creativity (Jeffrey and Woods, 2003) offers examples of what some of the structural and agential properties relevant to distributed leadership can look like. For example, at that school there is a deliberate ambiguity of role within the traditional school hierarchy. The researchers quote as examples a teaching assistant—'No one's

really ever sure who's the teacher, who's the helping mum, who's the teaching assistant, or even who's the head'—and a parent—'You just wander in and you're met by somebody in wellies who's been mucking out sheep, and you don't know who's who' (Jeffrey and Woods, 2003: 129). The point the study makes is that the school has developed an institutional and cultural structure in which roles, whilst present, are not so relevant and constraining as in more traditional organizations. The study appears to suggest that role ambiguity is not threatening in this particular context. Other examples given are students taking over the role of teacher, for example in relation to visitors (pp. 115–16). The research evidence in the study also points to a pattern of interaction (the third of the structural properties listed above) in which there is a high degree of informal vertical interaction, across the authority divides that comprise the formal hierarchy. The regularity of this makes it not an occasional and unusual happening but a feature of how the school operates—and hence structural.

Examples of agential powers are also apparent in the school. Staff report being inspired by the school's culture, comparing it with the demoralization they felt in other school contexts, and being empowered to adapt and appropriate external constraints such as the national curriculum (Jeffrey and Woods, 2003: chapter 3). This culture empowers parents and instances are given of how the everyday operation of the school (the role ambiguity for example) acts to make them feel that their voice and contributions are valued (p. 129). Evidence is offered too that the capacity and confidence to be critical extend to students (p. 108).

Future Research

Future research needs to encompass the interplay of the structural and agential dimensions of distributed leadership, though this does not preclude framing research questions in terms that begin with one or the other. Amongst the recommendations for future research which arise from the team's review (Bennett et al., 2003) are the impact on distributed leadership of structural variables, such as:

- the social and cultural context: It is important to establish the impact of situational constraints and circumstances on successful strategies of development and systems maintenance. Amongst the variables that some contingency theories identify as significant in the situational context of leadership are the autonomy of 'followers' and the distinctions amongst the latter (between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' for example) (Horner, 2003: 29). Some of the subtleties of distributed leadership in practice can be analysed in terms of contingency theories and illuminated through lines of research suggested by these.
- forms of leadership: This includes the impact of different ways of institutionalizing formal leadership roles as part of a distributed leadership

style and, alongside and interacting with these, the role of informal leadership; as well as the practice and challenges of spontaneous and ad hoc forms of distributed leadership which characterize the idea of fluid leadership highlighted above and the dynamics of team-working.

One of the themes from the review is that distributed leadership does not provide a model for how to share leadership, but requires choices to be made concerning matters of educational value and perceived rights to participation. In the case study of the creative school (Jeffrey and Woods, 2003), the community values of the school positively extend involvement to parents, and the structure of the former influences the agency of the latter. Virtually all of the studies we reviewed which researched schools and colleges limited their focus to the teachers. Enhancing the possibilities for distributed leadership entails raising awareness that choices on the boundaries of leadership and on the scope of participation (questions and issues open for distributed initiative) are part and parcel of that change. Research in educational settings is needed in order to illuminate how in practical terms these choices are made, as well as the ways in which different potential participants in leadership are included or excluded and how they respond to and shape opportunities for shared leadership. Understanding how such choices are made involves understanding sources of change towards distributed leadership, which is a further area for research—how the source of the impetus for change affects both structure and agency within distributed leadership.

Developing from this point, it would be desirable to compare distributed leadership in practice across a variety of differently conceived school communities. The practice and impact of distributed leadership in schools where the boundary of leadership is widely drawn would be of particular interest. Cultures of distributed leadership that included within their community non-teaching staff, or the students in the school, might be hypothesized to be different from those which limited the distribution to the teaching staff. There is an absence of comparative evidence on this.

A sound research base is needed on which to assess the effectiveness of distributed leadership strategies in enhancing positive educational experiences, learning and educational achievement. There is an absence of data on this. Harris and Chapman (2002) identified democratic, distributed and other leadership characteristics that they associated with improving schools in challenging circumstances. However, their work was not focused primarily on distributed leadership. Further research studies are necessary to establish sufficient empirical data to give us confidence about which forms of distributed leadership may have significant positive educational consequences, and whether this benefits disadvantaged as well as advantaged students. Such studies would need to be conducted in a variety of internal and external contexts. This would throw light on how these shape the nature and consequences of distributed leadership. They should include 'softer' measures of educational outcome, such as

creativity and positive self-esteem, as well as quantitative measures of educational attainment.

Finally, in addition to these substantive areas of research, we suggest that there is a strong case for examining the methodologies that might be appropriate for researching into distributed leadership. In particular, it is important to consider how replicatory and longitudinal studies can be designed and undertaken in ways that can allow the attribution of cause and effect, or sound inferences concerning influence, on the basis of robust data. Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) demonstrated how a quantitative replicatory study can be undertaken into leadership effectiveness. More fine-grained qualitative studies are difficult to replicate, and generalizing from their data is more problematic, but they do have distinct advantages, such as the insights they are able to give to interacting influences, the effects of cultures, the impact of contextual factors and participants' perceptions of their powers (or lack of powers) as agents. Distinctive to the notion of distributed leadership as concertive action is the challenge of undertaking research into it as an emergent property of interacting individuals and gaining insight into the dynamics which operate between or stretch across individuals. Innovative ways of doing this and applying it to leadership studies, drawing on anthropological and ethnographic techniques, are needed.

Concluding Remarks

The rise of the concept of distributed leadership represents an important shift in perspective on leadership. It gives recognition to a fact of life apparent to many working at the sharp end in organizations—namely, that leaders at the organizational apex are not unique sources of change and vision; nor do they act necessarily as single figures coaxing, persuading, inspiring or directing followers towards the 'sunny uplands' of organizational success. However, the shift in perspective begs questions about what may or may not appear in the leadership terrain from this new vantage. Do we see autonomy and genuine empowerment more widely spread, or the same leaders applying constraint and controls in new ways? Do the boundaries of leadership expand to include and encourage previously excluded groups, such as students in the case of some of the schools in Bickmore's (2001) study; or, do the boundaries expand only to assimilate the marginalized as dependent leaders, subject to a colonial centre? Does leadership attach itself to the best expertise for the issue in hand, or are other social or hierarchical factors more influential in distributing the power to initiate and shape action? Questions such as these suggest that distributed leadership is a concept that needs to be applied and researched with a keen, critical eye.

Notes

1. The full report of the review (Bennett et al., 2003) is available from the NCSL's website: www.ncsl.org.uk.

2. Keyes et al. (1999: 215) also extend Reitzug's taxonomy as a result of the study, to include what they term the principal's spirituality, which 'grounds, supports, and defines the critical actions of support, facilitation, and possibility in building an inclusive community'.

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