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Distributed Leadership: A Developmental Process

John MacBeath, George Oduro and Joanne Waterhouse
University of Cambridge Faculty of Education

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Abstract

This paper outlines the methods and key findings of a small-scale research project that aimed to investigate the lived realities and practical implications of what has come to be known as 'distributed leadership'. The project took the form of case studies involving eleven schools (4 secondary, 2 middle and 3 primary, 2 junior/infant) within three Eastern Region local authorities (Essex, Suffolk and Hertfordshire). The schools, which were located in urban and rural settings, were purposively chosen, based on recommendations from their local authorities, as schools which exemplified distributed leadership and/or were interested in becoming more distributive in their practice. The methodology included quantitative and qualitative data collection, comprising questionnaires, shadowing procedures, interviews and workshops. This paper is derived from a full project report and highlights the findings regarding processes and phases for distribution. A taxonomy is used to illustrate six processes for distribution and a model is proposed for sustaining distributed leadership in school.

Contact

Joanne Waterhouse
University of Cambridge Faculty of Education
184 Hills Road
Tel: +44(0)1223767600
Fax: + 44 (0)1223 767602
Email: jw283@cam.ac.uk

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There is now a substantial body of literature to support the concept of *distributed leadership* as a strategy for improving school quality and assisting schools to operate as learning organisations (Bennet *et al,* 2003; Gronn, 2002; Leverett, 2002). Distributing leadership across the whole range of potential contributors to a school's effectiveness and improvement has become a central tenet within the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). This includes not only teachers' involvement in leadership but that of other staff and students too. This is what is suggested by Murphy and Forsyth (1999) in their characterisation of leadership as exercised not 'at the apex of the organisational pyramid but at the centre of the human relationships'. Nor is leadership simply to be equated with headship, as Geoff Southworth argues:

> 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)

This is a challenging notion for more traditional views and practices of school leadership. Faced with a sceptical audience it is difficult to point to a convincing body of evidence which demonstrates how leadership is actually distributed in a school, nor to point unequivocally to its effects on school learning or improvement. Despite a growing body of work on teacher leadership (for example Frost and Harris, 2003, Frost and Durrant, 2000, Gronn, 2002) and much leading practice among teachers it is hard for many to make the mental escape from a conception of leadership as what headteachers and senior managers do.

Learning from the Literature

Our study began with a systematic review of the literature on distributed leadership and organisational learning, building on the review conducted by Bennett et al (2003). Sources from largely British and American contexts were included. Key texts were Elmore(2000), Spillane et al., (2001), Gronn (2002) and Silins, Zarlins, & Mulford, (2002).

The educational literature offers a number of different terms which are akin to the notion of distribution. Terms such as 'shared leadership', 'collaborative leadership', delegated leadership', 'dispersed leadership' and 'democratic leadership' are used, in some cases interchangeably, while in others writers are at pains to make fine distinctions among this 'alphabet soup' of descriptors. Attempts to make these distinctions are helpful since, left undefined, words tend to blur meanings and allow assumptions to pass untested. Bennett and colleagues make a distinction between 'doing to' and 'doing with' others:

Distributed leadership is not something "done" by an individual "to" others, or a set of individual actions through which people contribute to a group or organisation. [...]. Distributed leadership is a group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual action. It emerges from a variety of sources depending on the issue and who has the relevant expertise or creativity.

(Bennett *et al,* 2003:3)

The key issues that we derived from the literature may be summarised as follows:

- Distributed leadership provides fertile ground for maintaining long-term commitments to the desired goals of equity. Achieving equitable outcomes for all learners is beyond the capacity of individual highly talented leaders and requires the knowledge and expertise of others in the school working with a shared sense of purpose. [...] Formal leaders, no matter how talented, cannot make the equity agenda thrive without leadership coming from others in the school (Elmore, 2000).

- An organization cannot flourish - at least, not for long - on the actions of the top leader alone. Schools and districts need many leaders at many levels' (Fullan, 2002)

- The days of the principal as the lone instructional leader are over. We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for an entire school without the substantial participation of other educators' (Lambert, 2002).

- Leadership that embraces collective effort, promotes a shared sense of purpose and mission, engages many in collaboration across roles, and develops organizational cultures that set high expectations for adults and children, is leadership that results in a more fertile environment for meaningful changes in the teaching and learning environment (Leverett, 2002).

While the literature suggests that distributed leadership is an indispensable ally of the learning organization, how this expresses itself in the day-to-day life of schools is more problematic and challenging.

Exploring perceptions of distributed leadership

The project sought to address the following six main questions:

- What is understood by the term 'distributed' leadership? What meanings are attributed to the term *distributed leadership* by headteachers and by other staff?
- Who are involved and where does the initiative for 'distributed' leadership lie?
- What are the processes by which leadership is distributed?
- What issues do headteachers meet with in trying to 'distribute' leadership or to create environments in which it takes place?
- What different forms may such distribution take? (For example, is it conferred, delegated, invited, assumed, by election or by subversion?
- How do people in formal leadership positions deal with the multiplicity of leadership roles within a school?

The project took the form of case studies involving eleven schools (4 secondary, 2 middle and 3 primary, 2 junior/infant) within three Eastern Region local authorities (Essex, Suffolk and Hertfordshire). The schools, which were located in urban and rural settings, were purposively chosen, based on recommendations from their local authorities, as schools which exemplified distributed leadership and/or were interested in becoming more distributive in their practice.

All headteachers of the eleven selected schools were involved in the study, in most cases with between one and three other staff involved in meetings and workshops. Prior to the 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 rapport with the headteachers and gave school staff the chance to reflect upon the project prior to giving their consent to participate. Also included in the study were 302 teachers who returned questionnaires which were administered to all teachers in the participating schools .

Data for the study were gathered through questionnaires, shadowing, interviews and workshops for validation.

The questionnaires

In all, 451 questionnaires consisting of 54 closed-ended items were administered to teachers in the participating schools through their headteachers. The questionnaire had two sections, A (with 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. The X scale 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

The questionnaire served a number of purposes. Firstly, it was to help us to get a clear picture of schools as they were at the outset of the project, or more accurately, schools as

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[1] As a way of ensuring that all the teachers in the participating schools had equal chances of participating in the study, we administered questionnaires to all the 451 teachers in the six schools. 302 responded.

they were *seen* at the outset. Secondly it helped the schools themselves to get a picture of their own self-evaluation and improvement planning by providing them with information on how the schools were seen by staff and what they expected from their schools, in particular with respect to school culture and leadership.

Shadowing

Shadowing has become an important technique through which researchers can gain at first hand impressions and information from key people involved in the work of the school. It has been use in major international projects such as the ongoing Carpe Vitam (Leadership for Learning) research and in the Student as Researchers Project in which shadowing, is defined as 'a researcher following those they are shadowing for a day, or two days or perhaps even a week to build up information, insight and crucially a sense of understanding that particular case' (Sutherland and Nishimura, 2003 p.33/ The method allows the researcher not only to observe what those they shadow actually do in the course of a day, but to get an inside view of the problems and challenges they encounter. With a degree of trust between shadower and shadowee it creates an atmosphere for reflecting upon the activities of the person being shadowed and the context in which that activity is carried out.

A major strength of this technique lies in its ability to make the researcher a 'privileged insider' by drawing him/her closer to those he/she follows and providing practical experience of life in the working environment of the shadowee. In spite of these strengths, we acknowledge that the awareness of being shadowed can be stressful to headteachers and others. It can create an artificial setting and thereby affect the typicality of what the headteachers would normally do during the shadowing period. We endeavoured to reduce the degree of its effect by explaining the purpose of the shadowing to heads, encouraging them as far as possible to ignore our presence in the school but at the same time to use us as a sounding board and confidante.

We followed each of the headteachers for a day in their schools focusing on actions and transactions and noting the frequency of their interactions with other members of the school. We quantified the time they spent with individuals and groups of people, for example, members of management/leadership team, teachers, pupils or visitors. From these data we examined patterns of activity over the day which were then fed back to heads for verification and comment and later used as a focus for discussion with other headteachers. After the shadowing, there were opportunities to explore issues further with the headteachers, helping them to reflect on transactions or incidents that emerged from the day.

Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured and were used to explore:

- How the interviewees saw leadership, and people they saw as leaders in their schools.

The meaning that they attached to the notion of 'distributed leadership.
What they considered to be the processes through which leadership was distributed in their schools.
Whom they considered to be the initiators of distributed leadership
The nature of leadership practised by the headteachers in school.
The influence of distributed leadership on learning.
Factors that promote distributed leadership and those that hinder it.

Workshops

Workshops were a significant aspect of the research in each of the areas. There were used variously for discussion, feedback, dialogue and networking.

In Hertfordshire three termly workshops were an integral part of the research design. They were each planned as a forum for shared learning and debate and provided opportunities both to feed back interim findings and agree the next stage of the research process. The researcher's role in Hertfordshire was designed to be a combination of researcher and critical friend and the workshops were another opportunity for reflection and discussion. From the outset it was agreed that each school would be represented at the workshops and it was emphasized that a team of leaders could be identified to attend, with or without the headteacher. We considered it important that a core group should be identified in order to ensure consistency but wanted to build in some flexibility so that the practicalities of school life could be accommodated.

The initial workshop in the autumn term discussed principles and terminology and included some feedback from the baseline questionnaire. The second workshop had more detailed feedback from the shadowing activity and shared emerging findings from an early analysis of the data. The final workshop included an activity in which teachers and headteachers interrogated a sample of the data to test the developing theory. There was also time scheduled for each school to tell the story of the development of distributed leadership in their setting over the year and prior to the project beginning. Participants were encouraged to consider their stories in terms of factors that had aided the distribution of leadership and factors, which they perceived as barriers.

Throughout the course of this research project we became increasingly aware of the complexities of a model of leadership that necessarily involved more than one individual. The data we collected helped to illuminate 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.

During interviews staff members were asked about their professional histories and how their leadership knowledge and skills had developed. The context of the individual school was considered a significant aspect for many in shaping their views of leadership and their own role in it. Systems for communication and arrangements for collaboration assumed considerable importance. Differing leadership styles and approaches of the headteachers impacted on their respective organisations in different ways and were sensitive to changes

both in the internal and external context. We came to an understanding of distributed leadership in terms of a developmental process.
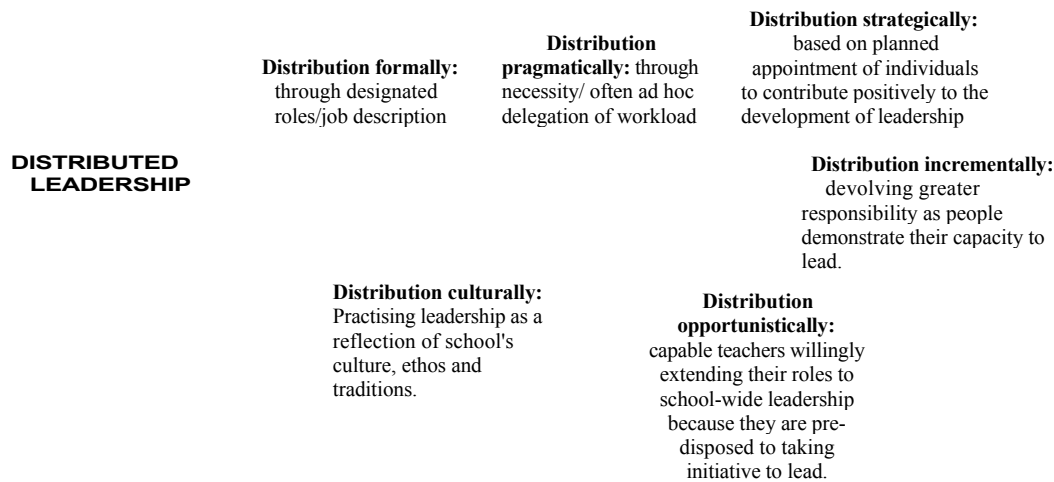
Distribution: a developmental process

We heard accounts of personal, professional and organisational development before the onset of this particular project and throughout the duration of our work with the schools. Having time for reflection and discussion during the workshops allowed us to come to a shared understanding of how distribution worked as an evolving process. Many staff reported on ways in which they believed that leadership had become more distributed in their schools as their own awareness had increased throughout the time of the study. Distributed leadership was potentially a condition *for* change and an outcome *of* change. Increasingly it seemed that a key way to understand distributed leadership was in terms of processes.

Six ways to distribution

The following six categories which were in large part a product of these discussions represent different ways of thinking about leadership and differing processes of distribution. Any one of these may in some cases describe a prevalent form of thinking and practice in a given school. More typically though schools evolve through different stages or exemplify different approaches at different times and in response to external events. Nor are these categories discrete or watertight although we have presented them as separate. We have described these processes as distribution formally, pragmatically, strategically, incrementally, opportunistically and culturally. In Figure 1 (below) we have portrayed these as a taxonomy or continuum to suggest the flow among them and their situational character. While these are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive and while each may be appropriate at a given time and in a given context, the most successful leadership would, we believe, convey an understanding of all of these different expressions of 'distribution' and be able to operate at each as appropriate to the task in hand.

Figure 1: A taxonomy of distribution*

Distribution strategically: based on planned appointment of individuals to contribute positively to the development of leadership

Distribution pragmatically: through necessity/ often ad hoc delegation of workload

Distribution formally: through designated roles/job description

Distribution incrementally: devolving greater responsibility as people demonstrate their capacity to lead.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Distribution culturally: Practising leadership as a reflection of school's culture, ethos and traditions.

Distribution opportunistically: capable teachers willingly extending their roles to school-wide leadership because they are pre-disposed to taking initiative to lead.

* please note, this diagram got distorted when it was scanned. The arrows lead in a clockwise direction, ending in 'distributed leadership'

Distribution formally

Schools in England are by history and nature hierarchical. They have a single principal, called a 'headteacher'. He or she comes increasingly with formal qualifications, a mandate from governors and with a set of expectations from staff and parents as well as from local authorities, government bodies and OFSTED. The school is structured in terms of designated leadership and management roles through which the headteacher delegates responsibility. In many primary schools there are few, if any, teachers without some management or leadership role. Leadership is seen as giving a sense of ownership but at the same time is constrained within the remit and boundaries of the respective designated roles of staff members.

> *Well I think it's still important to have structure in leadership but distributed enough so that everybody feels that they've got ownership of something and that they feel empowered to be able to do something that's their own. I keep coming back to subject leadership. I can't talk about it in any other context really.*
>
> *(SenCo, Primary school)*

The sense of 'ownership' and 'empowerment' - two key words in the lexicon of distribution -in this model come from having a designated role within the formal structure and primarily in relation to subjects.

A newly appointed headteacher may make little change in formal responsibilities and most heads tread warily in their first months, assessing the quality of people in those leadership

positions but normally feeling obliged to accept the status quo and make explicit expectations of staff in their given 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, Yr 4 leaders and a significant number of subject coordinators and I expect those people to lead. (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 know where they stand. Parents who know who it is they should speak to on any given issue and efficient management seems to be the key to an experience which meets the expectations of all groups of stakeholders. Such formal distribution may be a necessary precondition for any more radically developmental process on which a school might embark.

Distribution pragmatically

Pragmatic distribution is characterised by its ad hoc quality. It is often a reaction to external events. In these circumstances headteachers may ask people to take on responsibility to ease the long jam and to spread the workload. Decisions as to who leads, when and where, are made in response to demands from government or the local authority or to neighbourhood events or parental pressures. Distribution plays an increasingly large part as pressures on schools mount and initiatives multiply.

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.
(Nursery Nurse, Primary)

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 pressured high stakes environment such decisions tend to be marked by playing it safe, avoiding risk, not courting failure by testing untried staff. Judgements are made then on those who can be entrusted with a leadership role, those who can be talked into some form of co-operation and avoidance of those who simply 'divert your energy':

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 be given leadership roles or to have 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 01 colleagues. But it is also explained in terms of pressure: 'when there's so much pressure on teachers in the school they'll definitely avoid taking leadership responsibilities', as one junior school headteacher remarked.

In his book The Responsibility Virus *Roger Martin (2002) describes a collusive process in which leaders and followers assume fixed and complementary roles. In a sense this may be seen as 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.*

'Instinctive', 'intuitive' and 'internalised', are three words used by headteachers to describe a process that they conceived of in a way quite distinctive way from formal delegation of responsibility. The metaphor here in the following statement from a secondary head is of conducting an orchestra. It suggests a harmonic quality in how different players combine their talents.

> Here we don'/ work to a formula... 1 don't work with that idea in mind. I do think that it is so instinctive and its internalised. It's like conducting an orchestra. I don't go around thinking I need to distribute this or that. I don't do that. It happens instinctively because I trust the people I work with and have confidence in them; they've got integrity, they're honest.

> *(Headteacher, Secondary school)*

Distribution strategically

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 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 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 challenges the notion that "roles within a school can be neatly packaged and farmed out to particular people" because this may be inimical to 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.

> *(Headteacher, secondary school)*

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.*
>
> (Headteacher, secondary school)

Distribution incrementally

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'.*
>
> (Headteacher, junior School)

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*
>
> (Headteacher, secondary school)

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 develops this theme:

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

People become confident when they are made to feel confident. Interpersonal relations therefore acquire a particular significance because, as one secondary head put it,

'distribution can be seen in terms of how we relate to one another ... it's about our attitudes which are more important'. Hargreaves (1975) draws attention to the influence of relationships in promoting classroom leadership: 'the creation of the appropriate classroom atmosphere, namely one that is non-threatening and acceptant, springs from the kind of relationship teachers establish with pupils' (p. 170).

Distribution incrementally is not simply instrumental, serving the purpose of school improvement or raising standards. 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 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, and 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 that lead to the development of confidence in people through appropriate interpersonal relationship. Central to this relationship is trust and belief.

Distribution opportunistically

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 natural predisposition to take a lead, to organise, 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.*
> (Headteacher, junior school)

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.

> *Until this research project, I wouldn't have given it any attention but I think that's what we need in our schools. It's distributed at every level and it's not*

delegated leadership. Equally, there 'll have to be opportunities for anybody who has ideas that Jit in with the purpose of where we're going. We've got leaders at every level whether in subject areas, whether members of our teaching assistant teams or the pupils.

(Headteacher, junior School)

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.

(Headteacher, junior School)

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, 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: *In a sense, anyone can be a leader. Leadership isn 't hierarchical. It's a process that a lot of staff can demonstrate.* (Secondary Headteacher) Opportunity may also be seen as extending to 'anyone' who grasps the opportunity to take a lead, including pupils.

It's important that pupils can have a say and that.......that they do actually feel involved as well, that it's not all just teacher-directed, it's not all coming from the teacher or the person who is at the top but that they do feel that they can have a say in it and sometimes they come up with a really good idea so it makes us think then, as adults. You know, perhaps we ought to be considering this; we ought to be taking this on board.

(Headteacher, primary school

The extension of leadership to pupils is described by one headteacher as integral to the school's purposes, the school in a sense as a laboratory for the development of their skills.

Sometimes the business stops with me but it can stop with someone else as well Anyone in this school who has the opportunity to be the leader at some stage might be because that is what their job says; being a teacher involves

leadership. 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

(Headteacher, junior school).

The metaphor for opportunistic leadership is 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 inter-dependent.

Distribution culturally

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 then 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 (2000) suggests, '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. Team working, leading and following, 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 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.

(Headteacher, secondary school)

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.

(Headteacher, secondary school)

The key concepts in distribution culturally are agency and reciprocity. As agency transfers from individual control to collective activity it requires a reciprocity, the 'me-too-you-too principle'. Elmore (2004) describes 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.

These "discernments" that individuals in and around schools make of each others' behavior and intentions develop into networks of social exchange. (Elmore, 2004]

It is in this context that we can begin to make sense of teacher leadership, not as tied tc status and position but as exercised individually and in concert in a culture which authorises and confirms a shared sense of agency.

Developing and sustaining distributed leadership

The six categories described may be seen as discrete or as phases in a developmental sequence. Distribution is likely to begin with delegation and move through incremental and opportunistic phases before leadership can become truly embedded in cultural mores. The model in Figure 2 portrays this as three major phases of development.

In the early stages of assuming leadership a headteacher is likely to tread cautiously, observing the formal structures and formality of the school. In coming to terms with the culture and history of the school leadership has a strong pragmatic quality. In time he or she is able to become more strategic, identifying leadership needs of the school, looking for people who have the requisite capacity for satisfying such a need and then assigning responsibilities to them.

Figure 2:
A model for sustaining distributed leadership in school
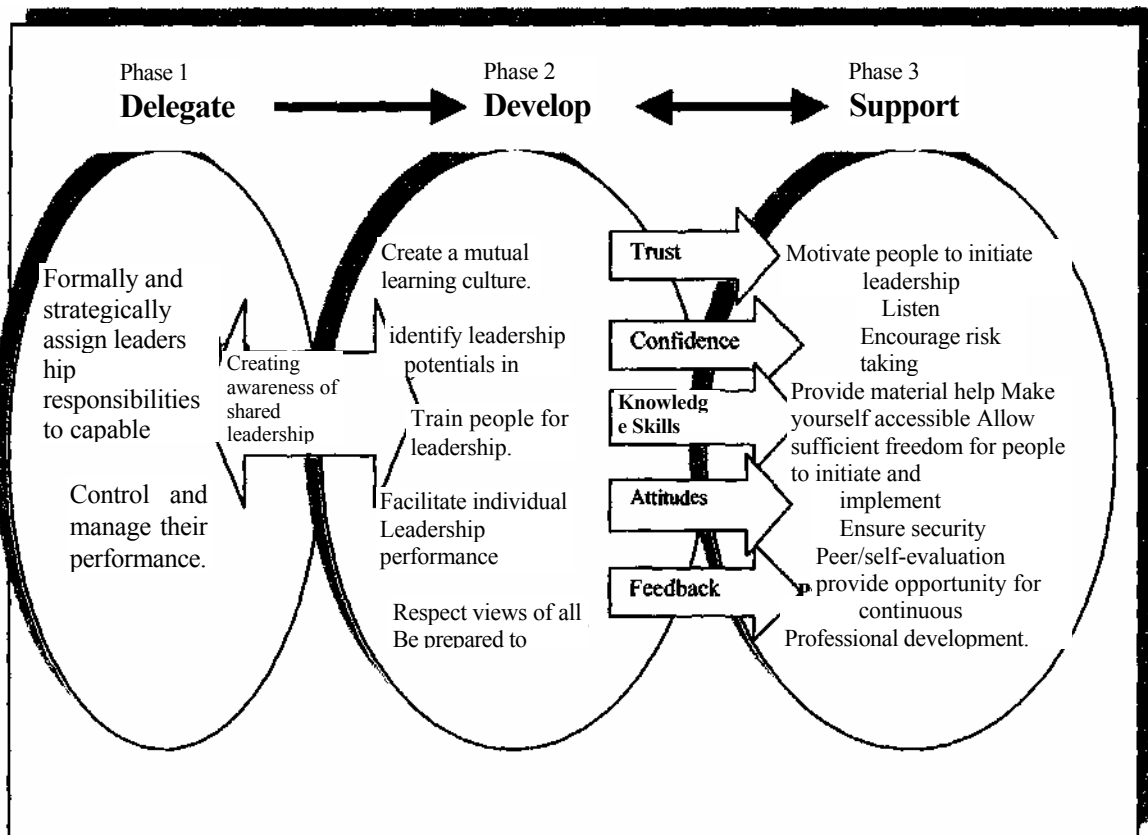
This may lead on to phase 2, in which the head widens the scope of leadership incrementally to include others who may not hold any formal leadership position in the school. Members of staff are encouraged to take the initiative or to intervene when they see something which runs against school policy. The headteacher creates an enabling environment that encourages and values innovative ideas from all members of the school -teachers, pupils, or support staff. Conscious efforts are made to establish a shared leadership and a shared vision among staff as to where the school is going.

Phase 3 is what one headteacher in this study described as leadership 'by standing back'. When the culture is characterised by mutual trust, self-confidence and shared goals leadership can become followership as the occasion demands. In a culture in which there is a high level of trust differences in values and working practices can be both tolerated and challenged. If phase 2 is transformational phase 3 is more about sustainability and renewal. Standing back does not imply a laissez-faire stance. It is not about maintaining the status quo but keeping its dynamic and evolving quality alive by supporting others - what has been described as 'servant leadership'. It is here that leadership is grasped opportunistically and cultures grow organically.

Leadership style can be viewed as a situational process, dependent on a range of contextual factors such as:

- Factors to do with the headteacher himself/herself, for example, personality, experience, confidence, length of experience in the school and experience of other schools, influence of other leaders and models emulated

- Factors to do with the school's history and culture, previous incumbents of headship, legacies, organisational memories, recruitment and retention

- Factors to do with external pressures, the range and strength of these locally, regionally and nationally. National policies, national agencies (e.g. DfES, OFSTED, QCA) and how one is placed to respond to them

As these factors bear upon a school at any given time the process of distribution finds differing expression. 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 necessarily constrained by a range of factors, by unpredictable events within and outside the school and the management of complexity and paradox.

Conclusion

Leadership at all levels of the school matters. Distributed leadership is not only a notion to come to grips with but can have far reaching effects on school and classroom practice. Distributed leadership is increasingly becoming the means by which schools are able to respond to emerging policies and challenging public demands. There remains a need, however, for school staff, and others who support the work of schools, to recognise its latent power, through the ongoing, rather than the more ritual, process of self-evaluation.

The inherent limitation of self-evaluation as audit review or internal inspection is that it can too easily bypass these deep lying aspects of school culture and leadership, missing internal accountability in the pursuit of external accountability. It is in the shared conversations, as we have witnessed in this project, that critical reflection and genuine self-evaluation takes place.

The distribution of leadership is ultimately a reflection of the headteacher's style and philosophy. While this is often implicit and intuitive rather than studied or systematic the headteacher's influence is pervasive, whether through conspicuous presence or conspicuous absence. While professional latitude in leading a school is constrained by external and internal structural factors, by history, convention and expectation, senior leaders employ a range of intuitive and pragmatic approaches to distribution and in many cases extend its compass more widely to include pupils and teachers 'without portfolio'. Heads in this study described themselves variously as 'facilitators', 'supporters' and 'orchestrators', 'letting go' or 'standing back', sometimes tentatively with a weather eye on those to whom they

had to render an account. Successful implementation of distributed leadership is among other things, determined by a willingness of headteachers to relinquish power. Without this willingness to let go leadership as opportunistic and cultural cannot develop.

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