



DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

'spaces between the pebbles in the jar'

Written and prepared by David Jackson as a 'think piece' for school leaders.

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‘spaces between the pebbles in the jar’

(David Jackson, Director of the Network Learning Group, NCSL)

Paradox: Distributed leadership is unlikely to happen if schools stay as they are. Schools are unlikely to transform themselves without distribution of leadership roles.

This ‘think piece’ explores the above paradox and its implications for capacity growth in leadership. It sets out to develop some understandings about what leadership involves when it is distributed, how schools might function and act differently and what operational images of distributed leadership in practice might look like.

Beliefs that Inform our Thinking about Distributed Leadership

In developing a distributed perspective on leadership, we moved beyond acknowledging leadership practice as an organisational property in order to investigate how leadership might be conceptualized as a distributed practice stretched over the social and situational contexts of the school.

(Spillane et al, 2001)

Distributed or dispersed leadership is central to capacity creation and to the flexibilities and adaptabilities of such new organisational forms as ‘learning organisations’ and networks. However, the realities of distributed leadership in action cannot happen if schools continue to function as they are. This section explores the implications for change in schools.

Despite more than two decades of writing about organisational learning (for example, Argyris, 1976; Senge 1990, Louis and Kruse, 1995), we still need to develop better understandings about what leadership really involves when it is distributed, about how schools might function and act in different ways, and about what the operational images of distributed leadership in action might look like (Spillane et al, 2001).

This crystallizes into some basic questions that need to be asked as a basis for debate, such as:

- What do we mean by *leadership* when we are talking about distributed manifestations?
- What are the organisational implications?
- How might distributed leadership operate in practice?
- What is the role of the designated ‘leader’ – the headteacher – in distributed contexts?

What do we mean by distributed leadership?

Leading is an enacted activity. It is a doing word. It exists only through its manifestations. It is profoundly interpersonal (can you lead without others?) and exists via direct impact upon or exchange with others, or through their perceptions and interpretations of leadership actions. When we talk with teachers about their headteachers, for example, they describe what he or she

does, how he or she relates with them or others. They are as preoccupied with what leaders do as with the rhetoric of what they say. They want to see the talk walked!

Leader-ship is more complex than leading. It is as much akin to potential energy as it is to kinetic. *Leader-ship* is about the latent as well as the currently lived and enacted expressions of leading. As metaphor, it has much in common with the notion of intellectual capital – the potentially banked and available capacity to be drawn, and the interest that can be added! As such it potentially exists very widely within an organization.

Leadership, as we have come to understand it, does not exist in a literal sense. It is an enacted variable, dependent upon interactions between leader, ‘follower’ and context. If it did exist, as a trait characteristic, independent of followership and context, then effective leaders could be assumed to be equally successful whatever the situation. The history of football management in this country tells us that this is not the case! If, then, leadership does not reside in one person and is not independent of context, what is it?

Looked at from this perspective, leadership can be seen to be located in the potential available to be released within an organisation. In essence, it is the intellectual capital of the organisation residing (sometimes dormant or unexpressed) within its members. The role of the ‘leader’ in this scenario is to harness, focus, liberate, empower and align that leadership towards common purposes and, by so doing, to grow, to release and to focus its capacity.

The logic of this argument takes us to another problem posed earlier. If leadership is a shared function, and if it only expresses itself with and through others, how is it denoted? Who ‘allocates’ it? How is it ‘distributed’? Intriguingly, when analysed in this light, growth metaphors become important – and the organisational implications are profound, because, firstly, its increase in capacity terms cannot be about key, hierarchically highly placed leaders getting better – it is not about training the few. It is about creating the spaces, the contexts and the opportunities for expansion, enhancement and growth amongst all. In fact, as will be discussed later, the old management structures are a deterrent, a debilitating frame.

Secondly – and this is a crucially important concept – it cannot be either imposed or assumed. Leadership has to be bestowed, denoted wilfully by those who are to be led. We accept leadership. We *allow* ourselves to be led, just as we allow ourselves to be coached. It is a reciprocal and dynamic relationship.

As such, and thirdly, it cannot be delegated either. One of the myths of distributed leadership is that it equates with delegation. It does not. Delegation is a manifestation of power relationships. Expansion of leadership is about *empowerment* – opportunity, space, support, capacity and growth. Jobs and tasks are ‘delegated’ (passed down a managerial structure) but leadership is invitational.

As so far described, distributed leadership capacity can be seen as being an amorphous concept. Its purposefulness (and its accountabilities) comes from tightness around values (shared beliefs), moral purpose (the urgency to act and to achieve together for higher order purposes), shared professional capital (the combined and shared and expanding knowledge-base) and the social

capital (relationships and trust). As Sergiovanni writes (2001), schools need to be “culturally tight and managerially loose. Teachers and other school workers respond much more to their values and beliefs, to how they are socialised and the norms of their work group than they do to managerial controls”.

So, *values* make leadership tight. There are, though, other key concepts to the distributed capacity dimension of leadership. One is the idea of *synergy* (discussed in Chapter 1), allowing fluidity and flexibility between people – variable leadership patterns and flexible teams. Another is *directional alignment*, moving this distributed function towards common aspirations and goals. A further one – central to the capacity definition used in this book – is *sustainability*. Yet another is *linguistic alignment* - utilising new organisational metaphors and appropriate language - distributed leadership, for example, as being ‘the space between the pebbles in the jar’.

One last concept is *wilful professional emancipation*. Distributed leadership patterns not only liberate leadership, they are emancipatory for the person in the professional. Those who work in schools give of who they are as well as what they do. The release and expression of potential through leadership creates the context for personal as well as professional realisation. Leading the growth of leadership capacity is thus an intensely human and social process – deeply emotionally and spiritually intelligent. Tending to leadership capacity is a caring and authentic business.

What are the organisational implications?

Leadership is multi-directional. It can function down an organisation, can grow up an organisation or can operate across an organisation. Whilst this concept is both basic and obvious, our current organisational and managerial norms only readily facilitate top down leader behaviours. Problems occur in both vertical and horizontal directions of travel.

Paradoxically, the most complex and difficult form of leadership for dispersed and capacity building models is that which operates down through management systems, because it then becomes entwined with power relationships and role responsibilities. It is not that leadership and power are incompatible, but, having noted earlier that leadership has to be bestowed, power (or authority) does not necessarily facilitate this – the right to lead has to be earned, granted by the followers. So, as leadership cannot be imposed, the conflation of power (managerial relationships) and empowerment (leadership relationships) proves problematic. The more hierarchical the management structures, the more the liberation of leadership capacity is likely to be stifled. This has huge implications for the organisational arrangements of schools. The more the status and worth systems of schools relate to position in hierarchy, the harder it is for distributed leadership to operate. Peter Senge (1990) argues that in learning organisations leaders have to leave their status at the door. Even more problematic, though, in hierarchically conceived structures, is for others to leave the leader’s status at the door.

Lateral leadership is equally problematic. For leadership to operate across an organisation, opportunities for collaboration between adults of different role and status levels (or even adults and pupils) need naturally to occur across and between what might otherwise be organisationally

separate and balkanised cells or units (departments, faculties, phase teams etc). Organisationally, schools find this hard.

So, if leadership cannot readily be delegated down the system (because people have to be empowered), and if opportunities to lead across the system are problematic (because of organisational barriers) then, for leadership to grow, the argument is that 'school as organisation' must adapt and reshape its practices in order to generate natural contexts for people to take responsibility in working with and through others. What is needed is the development of new organisational processes such as internal networks (DEMOS, 2001), joint workgroups (Peterson and Brietzke, 1994), study groups (Marsick & Watkins, 1994) or flexible enquiry teams (Louis and Kruse, 1995) – what Harris and Lambert (2003) call an organisational “repertoire of continuous learning interactions”.

How does distributed leadership function or operate in practice?

There is a relationship between leadership and learning. This book argues the interdependence of the two. It views opportunities for collaborative learning as being the core activity for the expansion of leadership capacity, and I would agree. The key element in the development of leadership “is the notion of learning together, and the construction of meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. Such leadership allows opportunities to surface and it mediates perceptions, values, beliefs, information and assumptions through continuous conversations” (2003).

Similarly, Michael Fullan (1998) offers an insight into the organizational conditions that can give rise to multiple opportunities for leadership when he writes that:

“All change is a hypothesis – a process of action, enquiry and experimentation to create a cumulative and collective knowledge about what works and how it works from within. Engaging staff in this process is a means of reculturing. This change to the ways of working - the norms, values and relationships – is a process of restructuring.There are no clear solutions. Life is a path you beat while you walk it. It is the walking that beats the path. It is not the path that makes the walk.”

Leadership opportunities such as those described - enquiry partnerships, action learning sets and study groups - generate a dialectic within schools. This model of capacity creation, which is knowledge driven, socially cohesive and purposeful, encourages the study of practice and the collaborative generation of ideas. It involves collective meaning-making in the light of emerging knowledge and understandings from enquiry. To use Linda Lambert's phrase, it is 'constructivist' (Lambert et al, 1997). It is where leadership and organisational growth collide; where knowledge-creation and the implementation of change connect, because “such leadership also creates action that grows out of these new and shared understandings. This transformative dimension (positive and purposeful change) is the core of leadership – and, by definition, it is dispersed or distributed” (Harris and Lambert, 2003).

These relationships between collaborative activity, leadership and capacity are not merely theoretical – nor generalisations from ‘outlier’ case study contexts. They have an empirical base, too. Silins and Mulford in a major study involving Australian Schools concluded that dispersed forms of leadership are characterised by, ‘shared learning through teams of staff working together to augment the range of knowledge and skills available for the organisation to change and anticipate future developments’ (2001). They further discovered a positive relationship between such forms of leadership learning and student achievement.

It follows, then, that groups of teachers, working together on collaborative enquiry or planning activity, led by someone whose leadership is not entwined with role status, provides an ‘organic’ organisational model for the expression and growth of leadership capacity. It also provides the lateral learning impetus required to break down organisational barriers and to foster cultural norms hospitable to internal networks. Knowledge-creation and knowledge-sharing are processes at the heart of the leadership of collaborative enquiry. Capacity generation is the outcome – from both the process and the products.

What is the role of the designated leader?

An earlier point was that leadership is not trait theory – leadership and leader are not the same thing. Harris and Lambert (2003) make the case that leadership is about collaborative learning that leads to purposeful change. This learning has direction towards higher aspirations and shared purposes. Yet we have also argued that organisational redesign is a pre-requisite for the development of contexts in which such leadership and learning happen naturally. It is the design change that facilitates professional engagement, and that is a tough process to lead, both because external conditions are unpropitious and because internal resistance is almost inevitable.

Everyone has both the potential and the entitlement to contribute towards leadership. The designated leader’s role in the scenario described here is partly to facilitate this entitlement. In part this means creating the organisational conditions, the climate and the support for all members to be able to contribute their latent leadership – to release both the kinetic and the potential energy of leadership. This is a subtle challenge. In part, though, it means also having the confidence of vision and the strength of will to operate against both the external and internal grain. It is the second paradox described earlier and the reason why the most advanced sites tend to have extraordinary leaders.

Leading is a skilled and complicated undertaking, but one that every member of the school community can learn in a supportive context. Leadership, after all, is democracy in action. It involves the valuing of the multiple voices that make up the lived experience of school – and in this way will inevitably begin to embrace pupil voices, too. Expressed as such, leadership is a collective endeavour and school change is a shared undertaking. The sustainable improvement journey requires the capacity that shared, inclusive and collaborative activity can bring. Leadership of this order requires the redistribution of power and authority.

Consistent with the changed forms of headteacher action outlined in the above discussion, all of the images in Joseph Murphy’s (1993, adapted) metaphors for modern school leaders have resonance:

- Headteacher as Leader
- School Leader as Moral Agent
- School Leader as Organisational Architect
- School Leader as Social Architect
- School Leader as Educator
- School Leader as Servant
- School Leader as Member of a Community
- **School Leadership as Capacity Building**

In organizations where leadership is liberated, available to all, related to collaborative processes and learning, the role of the symbolic leader (the headteacher) is, as Murphy suggests, pivotal, but not superordinate. In moving towards distributed leadership models, the leader is the critical change agent – the guardian and facilitator of transitions. Transition leadership is the new focus for transformation.

Through the liberation of leadership in this way, a premium will also be placed upon alignment and common purpose. Highest order alignment comes from shared values, beliefs and purposes. Designated leaders (headteachers) in such schools will enact and live out the values, both as leader and follower. They will take seriously their own learning – educational, pedagogical and interpersonal. They will be coach and facilitator, social architect and community builder.

Such leaders, then, will design the organisational architecture, they will nurture the social capital that facilitates distributive leadership and collaboration - a social capital built on trust and 'co-dependency'. Trust relationships in turn allow open engagement and knowledge sharing. Such leaders will also unite the school around shared values and higher order purposes. They will be articulate in mobilising values-identification and alignment and in articulating and re-affirming beliefs. They will "disseminate eloquence" (Karl Weick, 1976) and will hold people accountable to shared value commitments. They will have the moral courage progressively to re-structure their schools around the twin strands of higher order purpose and the values of the school. It follows that in organisations seeking to learn together in this way, school leaders give away power, distribute leadership and support others to be successful.

Such leaders are unusual people and it is an improbable aspiration to ask twenty four thousand headteachers to do this alone. As Linda Lambert says, "We cannot save education one school at a time" (Lambert and Harris, 2003)!

Small steps forward.

There is a huge potential role in this area for the National College for School Leadership in England. In addition to inheriting and developing three national training programmes, the College has been pursuing an innovative agenda compatible with the vision explored in the pages that follow. Early research on capacity building (Hadfield, 2001, Hopkins and Jackson, 2002) has been well received, as have the programmes arising from it. Team leadership research has in turn informed the development of the potentially influential 'Leading from the Middle' programme (www.ncsl.org.uk). The New Visions for Early Headship programme is designed to develop leaders who understand the relationship between leadership and learning, who value

the role of enquiry and knowledge creation and who appreciate the contribution of reflective and reflexive learning to personal and organisational development.

However, schools are not currently well designed for either capacity creation or distributed leadership. Some are weak on the foundation conditions - turbulent, under strain, riven by conflicting pressures. Others are rendered incoherent by the forces of external change, the reform agenda and the expectations of multiple accountabilities. Some schools are inarticulate about shared values, unclear about the beliefs that unite them. Most (secondary in particular) have structures designed when stability, efficiency and the management of stasis were the expectations. They are unsuited to a context of multiple change and creativity. Distributed leadership, the unifying component of capacity, requires flexible organisations, metabolisms rather than structures, purposeful permutations of teams and collaborations - and widely available opportunities for leadership. Few schools currently function comfortably in that kind of way.

Nor are schools presently structured in ways that facilitate the natural growth of leadership or lateral learning. Predominantly, leadership is locked into management structures. If we are to achieve distributive leadership models, we must therefore re-design the internal social architecture of schools and the external context within which they operate. Such re-design will need to normalise collaborative learning – within and between schools – by which means leadership can be more widely available and unrelated to role status.

In response to this, in 2002 NCSL launched a national initiative entitled Networked Learning Communities. It invited groups of schools (between six and sixteen) to submit collaboratively written proposals to form networks, broadly around the theme of developing interdependent professional learning communities. Each had to commit to proposals within five levels of learning - pupil, adult, leadership, organizational and school-to-school – in turn supported by enquiry processes and a commitment to learning on behalf of one another. The NLCs are intended to provide a context for shared exploration of the ideas presented in this book, based upon two hypotheses. The first is that schools and school leaders need to model the collaborative learning processes beyond their school that they are seeking to develop within it. The second is that it is easier to build capacity, coherence, sustainability and leadership density together than it is alone.

Distributed leadership also requires shelter from external pressures and accountabilities – and leaders who will deflect, interpret and energise by being opportunistic, optimistic and aspirational in the interpretation of public expectations. Schools can do this better and can be stronger together, rather than alone.

Good theory demands the respect of being put to the test of practice. By this I mean not just seeking to implement the ideas in individual outlier locations, but also seeking to develop models that can begin the process of taking the ideas and aspirations to scale. Networked Learning Communities are seeking to do that, building leadership capacity on an ambitious scale and using school-to-school collaboration to problem-solve some of the challenges, paradoxes and inhibitors outlined in this think piece.

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