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Distributed Leadership in Action: Full report

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Chapter One: The Study

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Research questions

Our study, which began in September 2003 and ended in May 2004, was a small-scale research project with the aim of investigating the practical implications of what has come to be known as ‘distributed leadership’. In doing so we hoped to set the scene for future larger-scale research. 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 is involved and where does the initiative for distributed leadership lie?
- What are the processes by which leadership is distributed?
- What issues do headteachers encounter 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 sample

The project took the form of case studies involving 11 schools (four secondary, two middle and three primary, two 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 that exemplified distributed leadership or were interested in becoming more distributive in their practice.

All headteachers of the 11 selected schools were involved in the study, in most cases with between one and three other staff involved in meetings and workshops. Before the study began, 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.¹

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.

Gathering the data

Data for the study was gathered through three main tools:

- shadowing of headteachers
- interviews with headteachers and teachers
- questionnaires for teachers

Through these three tools a clearer picture of what distributed leadership looks like in the participating schools was provided.

The questionnaires

In all, 451 questionnaires consisting of 54 closed-ended items (see Appendix 1) were administered to teachers in the participating schools through their headteachers. All teachers in the 11 schools responded to the same form of questionnaires. 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. Scale X focused on how the teachers saw things in their school at that time, and Scale Y on what they saw as crucial, very important, important and not important. Scale Y is skewed towards the positive in order to make finer discriminations at the positive end given the generally desirable nature of the issues in question. Each questionnaire took about 20-30 minutes to complete.

The questionnaire served a number of purposes. Firstly, it helped us to get a clear picture of schools as they were at the outset of the project, or more accurately, schools as 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 used 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 of 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 also 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, based on our own experience and a growing literature, 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 what the headteachers would normally do during the shadowing period. We endeavoured to reduce 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 the leadership team, teachers, pupils or visitors. From this 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 (Appendix 2) were semi-structured and of two types: those with headteachers, primarily informed by issues emerging from the shadowing and those with teachers, based on issues emerging from the questionnaires. Interview sessions with each headteacher lasted between 45 and 60 minutes; those with teachers lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. The interviews 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. They 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 emphasised 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 we 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 it 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 start of the project. Participants were encouraged to consider their stories in terms of factors that had aided the distribution of leadership and factors they perceived as barriers.

The first two workshops were twilight sessions but the third workshop took place over an afternoon and included lunch. This was in response to a request from the schools for more time to discuss and learn from each other and reflected a growing confidence about the principles and practices involved. Each workshop took place in the Professional Development Centre and was attended by the LEA adviser who had supported and promoted the project.

The rationale for the study

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 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 that 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 concept of leadership as what headteachers and senior managers do.

There exists a range of possible ways in which distribution may occur but there does not exist to date a substantive body of literature to illustrate how distribution works, what its merits are and how headteachers and teachers perceive it. In the professional development of headteachers, we may be able to refer to some exemplary schools but without grounded theory to show how the process works there is a danger of empty rhetoric. The vision and the practice do not offer us a coherent picture. This lack of data provides a strong case for research that explores the issue with fine-grained description and for findings that will be of practical use to leaders and would-be leaders, making the links between the theory and the practice, and giving them greater confidence to be more adventurous in their own schools. Hopefully such grounded research will contribute to professional development and to NPQH, LPSH and other NCSL programmes in the future. This is a beginning.

Chapter Two: Distributed Leadership

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First thoughts on distributed leadership: a brief history

The idea of distributed leadership became prominent in leadership literature, Gronn suggests (2002:653), around the late 1990s while ‘the first known reference to distributed leadership was in the field of social psychology in the early 1950s’. The concept, if not the actual term has, however, a longer ancestry. As far back as 1250 BC, Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, proposed a model of distributive leadership as an alternative to Moses’ individualistic style, cautioning Moses: ‘The thing that thou doest is not good. Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee: for this thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone’ (Exodus 18: 17-18). Jethro saw the practice of distributing leadership responsibilities as a better plan for Moses in leading God’s people. He advised:

“Thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, and of hundreds, rulers of fifties and rulers of tens. And let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be that every great matter they shall bring unto thee but every small matter they shall judge so shall it be easier for thyself, and they shall bear the burden with thee.”

Exodus 18: 21 and 22.

Jethro’s model of distributing leadership responsibilities was based on the principle that ‘Great men should not only study to be useful themselves, but contrive to make others useful’ (BibleClassics.com, 2003). It implies not only a delegation of authority but the creation of an environment in which people are able to grow into leadership. While such a view of leadership may have remained implicit over the centuries it appears not to have been explicitly theorised until the latter half of the last century, when it became important in social psychology and organisational theory.

In the USA, the term was given official sanction by the Council of Chief State School Officers, asserting that educational institutions should have ‘leaders working effectively in “multiple leadership” or “distributed leadership” teams’ (2000:5). In the United Kingdom, the concept had not been given much prominence until recently when NCSL resurrected the discourse and set it as an essential principle in its school leadership development literature (MacBeath 2003, Bennett et al, 2003). NCSL, through its Research Associate Programme, has created opportunities for school leadership practitioners to explore various aspects of school leadership, with distributed leadership as a major focus.

Distributed leadership: clarifying the conceptual maze

The educational literature, including NCSL-sponsored research reports, offers a number of different terms 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. For example, Kelly (2002), reporting on her small-scale study of primary school management teams in south-west England, suggests that delegated and distributed leadership are concerned with transfer and division, while shared leadership on the other hand suggests collaborative responsibility. 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

Doing things ‘to’ others carries an implicit assumption of power and control whereas ‘doing with’ implies a different quality of distribution. It may be helpful, therefore, to make a distinction between the terms ‘distributed’ and ‘distributive’ leadership, the former denoting leadership roles as something ‘in the gift of the headteacher’, which he/she allocates magnanimously while holding on to power. ‘Distributive’ leadership, on the other hand “implies holding, or taking initiative as a right rather than it being bestowed as a gift” (MacBeath, 2004: 4). Bennett et al’s statement appears to be closer to the second of these two concepts.

‘Distributive leadership’ is the term used by the University of Chicago’s Centre for School Improvement (CSI) to denote a collaborative enterprise in order to achieve the school’s goals. Hence, one feature of the CSI’s school development initiative focuses on supporting principals to establish distributive leadership ‘where professionals with specific expertise and responsibility collaborate to strengthen teaching and learning across classrooms’ (CSI, 2001). The notion of specific expertise does appear to suggest people collaborating across specified organisational roles and leadership being given or assumed relative to knowledge, competency or predisposition. It is a basic idea which Elmore (2000) regards as essentially uncomplicated.

“The basic idea of distributed leadership is not very complicated. In any organized system, people typically specialize, or develop particular competencies, [which] are related to their predispositions, interests, prior knowledge, skills, and specialized roles [...] It is the “glue” of a common task or goal – improvement of instruction – and a common frame of values for how to approach that task – culture – that keeps distributing leadership from becoming another version of loose coupling.”

Elmore, 2000

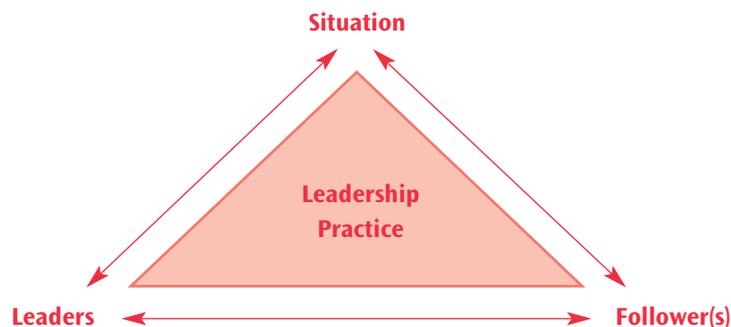
Distributive leadership, according to Elmore, takes place when people who have been appointed officially as leaders (headteachers) become committed to “building learning organizations and providing opportunities for all [...] to give their gifts, to develop their skills and to have access to leadership that is not dependent on one’s “place” in the hierarchy or formal organizational chart” (Leverett, 2002). In this sense, school leadership is a process of social distribution, a dispersed practice that is described as stretching across the whole range of contributors to a school’s effectiveness and improvement including teachers and students.

A distributed leadership study project carried out by Spillane et al., (2001) further develops this point. Out of 84 elementary school teachers involved in the study, 70 (83.3 per cent) attributed improvement in their instructional practices to the influence of their principals, 24 (28.6 per cent) ascribed their performance to the influence of assistant principals, while 67 (79.8 per cent) were reported to have identified other teachers as having shaped their instructional practices. As Hallett (2001:4) puts it, “leadership is not restricted to the school administration, as teachers may become active leaders”. In a more simplified way, the practice of distributed leadership, it is argued, is characterised by a three-tier interaction involving leaders, followers and the situation in which leadership is carried out (Spillane et al, 2001).

For Spillane and his colleagues, the appropriate unit of analysis is not leaders or what they do but the activity in which they engage. Leadership activity is constructed in the interaction of leaders, followers, and their situation in the execution of particular leadership tasks. As illustrated in Figure 1, in this view, leadership activity involves three essential constituting elements – leaders, followers, and situation. It does not reside in any one of these elements, and each is a prerequisite for leadership activity. Our perspective shifts the unit of analysis from the individual actor or group of actors to the web of leaders, followers and situations that give activity its form.

This suggests that, depending on the prevailing situation, leadership may be distributed so that, dependent on context, a leader may become a follower, as represented in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Leadership as a distributed phenomenon



Source: Hallett (n.d.). ‘Micro-politics, symbolic power and leadership,: the case of Chicago Public Elementary Schools, Northwestern University, Chicago.

Gronn's model of distributed leadership

Gronn (2002) suggests that 'distributed leadership' may be viewed from two broad perspectives: the numerical (or additive) perspective and holistic perspective.

The numerical or additive perspective

From this perspective, 'distributed leadership' is understood as the 'aggregated leadership behaviour of some, many or all of the members of an organisation or an organisational sub-unit' (p.655). It is additive because it is not only the headteacher's leadership that counts but also the leadership roles performed by deputy heads, substantive teachers, support teachers, members of school councils, boards or governing bodies and students.

Leadership is 'dispersed rather than concentrated', focused not only on one organisational role or at only one level, nor monopolised by only one individual. This type of leadership is based on the following premises:

- It does not necessarily give any particular individual or categories of persons the privilege of providing more leadership than others.
- It does not necessarily make assumptions about which individuals' behaviour might carry more weight with their colleagues.
- It is prompted by the awareness that more than one person counts in the differences made by organisational performance. Hence, it creates opportunity for all members of an organisation to assume leadership positions from time to time.

The holistic perspective

The holistic perspective sees leadership as a 'concertive action' (p.656). Distributed leadership is seen as an all-inclusive phenomenon that encompasses the practice of delegation, sharing, collaboration, dispersion and democratising leadership in schools. Rather than concerned with roles, its focus is on spontaneous and collaborative forms of leadership engagements that arise in the workplace and that "stretch leadership function across the social and situational contexts of the school". Leadership is evident "when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognised by others as capable of processing tasks or problems which are important to them" (Robinson, 1999:93). Gronn's holistic model is based on the following premises:

- Intuitive working relations emerge when individuals in an organisation negotiate relationships over time and come to rely on one another. In the process of negotiating their relationship, distributed leadership manifests itself in the form of shared roles.
- A variety of structural relations and institutionalised structures exist in the workplace that attempts to regularise distributed action. An example is the committee system, which organisations use as a "concertive mechanism for pooling distributed capacity and incorporating into an organisation's formal governance relations" (p.658).

Any meaningful discussion or practice of distributed leadership will benefit from reference to these insights and the additive, as against the holistic, model offers a useful conceptual and practical distinction.

Table 1 below summarises some meanings that have been assigned to these related terms. These definitions may help to find some distinctive identity for distributed leadership and its relationship to other cognate terms.

Table 1: Distributed leadership terms and related meanings

Related term	Meaning
Distributed leadership as delegation	Seen as delegation, the responsibility for distribution lies with the headteacher or senior leadership. Authority is delegated either through formal post holding or in more ad hoc ways according to the judgment of senior leaders. Responsibility is ‘distributed’ usually with an attendant implicit, or explicit, accountability.
Distributive or dispersed leadership	Dispersed and distributive leadership may be treated as synonymous with delegation but there is a nuance of difference in the terminology. ‘Dispersed’ appears to suggest leadership as an activity that can be located at different points within an organisation and pre-exists delegation, which is a conscious choice as to the exercise of power. The idea of dispersed leadership is captured by David Green’s term ‘leaderful community’, which involves a community “in which people believe they have a contribution to make, can exercise their initiative and can, when relevant to the task in hand, have followers” (Green, 2002).
Shared leadership	Shared leadership is best understood when leadership is explored as a social process – something that arises out of social relationships, not simply what leaders do (Doyle and Smith, 2001). It does not dwell in an individual’s qualities or competencies but lies ‘between people, within groups, in collective action, which defies attempts to single out ‘a leader’ (MacBeath, 2003). Deiss (1997) argues that the concept places a higher degree of importance on the roles people assume than on positions they hold. It creates avenues for individuals in an organisation to test their own assumptions and those of others rather than waiting for ideas or decisions to be handed down through the hierarchy. It is built around openness, trust, concern, respect and appreciation.
Collaborative leadership	The distinctive feature of collaborative leadership lies in its application beyond the school. Frost and Durrant (2002) view collaboration as a vital tool for building trust between the school and the outside world. This form of leadership is said to operate on the basis of ‘alliance’ or ‘partnering’ or ‘networking’. Networked learning communities, some of which are sponsored by NCSL, are an expression of collaboration across the boundaries of individual institutions. Collaborative leadership may also apply to an inter-agency context, expressed in schools’ joint work with community agencies, parents, teacher groups, and other external stakeholders.

Related term	Meaning
Democratic leadership	<p>Leadership as ‘democratic’ is by definition antithetical to hierarchy and delegation. Elsbernd suggests four defining characteristics: (i) a leader's interaction with, and encouragement of others to participate fully in all aspects of leadership tasks, (ii) widespread sharing of information and power, (iii) enhancing self-worth of others and (iv) energising others for tasks. For democratic leadership to prevail, three things are essential, argue Doyle and Smith: (a) problems and issues need to become a responsibility of all with proper chances for people to share and participate, (b) an emphasis on learning and development is necessary so that people can share, understand and contribute to what is going on, (c) open, respectful and informed conversation is central. Democratic leadership can either take the form of consultative (where a leader makes a group decision after consulting members about their willingness) or participative decision-making (where a leader makes the decision in collaboration with the group members – often based on majority rule) (Vroom and Yetton, 1973).</p>
Teacher leadership	<p>Democratic leadership implies a role for teachers as leaders. Teacher leadership symbolises distribution because it provides teachers the opportunity of exercising leadership beyond the limits of formal hierarchical leadership models within the school. It involves “not just a matter of delegation, direction or distribution of responsibility, but rather a matter of teachers’ agency and choice in initiating and sustaining change whatever their status” (Frost and Durrant, 2003: 174). Teacher leadership is understood in terms of the extent to which teachers collaborate with their colleagues (both those in formal and informal leadership positions) in carrying out leadership development tasks necessary for promoting learning among pupils within a school.</p>

While there is little to separate these various terms, they do share one common feature. All agree that leadership does not simply reside in one person. All imply the capacity of others in an organisation to be leaders or to exercise leadership. The best way of understanding the underlying concept, according to Bennett et al (2003) is to think of it “not simply as another technique or practice of leadership, but, just as importantly, as a way of thinking about leadership”, carrying the essential notion of relinquishing power and ceding control to others.

Distributed leadership and learning organisations

Distributed leadership is closely allied to the notion of the ‘learning organisation’, an idea with origins in the business, rather than the educational, world. There is, however, a compelling logic for its application in a school context in close association with concepts of distributed leadership.

One significant strand of argument for schools as learning organisations is that “we are now in the midst of an economic and social revolution in which the ‘industrial society’ is metamorphosing into the ‘learning society’ (Husen, 1986; Ball, 1993). Change on this scale is constantly challenging traditional ways of doing things and calls for fundamental new ways of thinking and acting. In coping with change, schools are now required to “adopt change strategies that provide internal stability while moving ahead” (Silins, Zarins and Mulford, 2002), seeing learning as ‘the single most important resource for organisational renewal in the postmodern age’ (Hargreaves, 1995). Increasingly, learning is seen as not limited to pupils or even to individuals but as something that is social in nature, created collaboratively through joint action and shared intelligence. The school is expected to function as “a learning organisation in order to continue to improve performance and build capacity to manage change” (Corcoran and Goertz, 1995).

In a shifting social and economic context fraught with unpredictability, the tasks and challenges of leadership become increasingly complex and beyond the scope of any single individual. The wave of changes resulting from structural, financial, curricular and technological reforms, as well as a growing demand for accountability, impact powerfully on the working lives of not only headteachers but teachers, students and all others who are directly or indirectly involved in the continuity and improvement of the school. Without the power to learn and change as an organisation and as a community of learners, schools are doomed to relive the mistakes of the past. The range of tasks suggested in the following quote illustrates the need for a form of leadership that is driven by a strategic capacity-building impulse.

“Learning organisations are organisations that employ processes of environmental scanning; develop shared goals; establish collaborative teaching-and-learning environments; encourage initiatives and risk taking, regularly review all aspects related to and influencing the work of the school; recognise and reinforce good work; and provide opportunities for continuing professional development.”

Silins, Zarins and Mulford, 2002: 24

Summary

The key issues in 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 organisation 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 organisational 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 organisation, how this expresses itself in the day-to-day life of schools is more problematic and challenging. This study sets out to address that question.

Chapter Three: Findings

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How schools staff see leadership and culture

The starting point for the project was a questionnaire distributed to all teachers in the participating schools. In total 302 teachers responded. Analysing their patterns of response raised a number of issues that needed to be further elaborated through feedback and workshop discussion.

The questionnaire had two main purposes: to provide us with insights into how school staff were thinking about leadership and school culture, and to act as a prompt for discussion with staff, helping both them and us to clarify thinking about the interface of leadership and school culture.

The questionnaire asked teachers to respond to each of the 54 items twice, once in terms of how they saw current school practice (the X scale) and then in terms of what they saw as relatively high and low priorities (the Y scale). These two scales allowed us to draw up two sets of rankings, one in terms of perceptions of current practice, the second in terms of perceived importance. A third type of analysis gave us a 'gap measure' between these two sets of responses (the real and the ideal), and allowed us to provide a priority order – from the largest to the smallest gap.

In order to generate these three sets of rankings we calculated a mean score for each of the items. So, on a four-point scale a mean of four would represent a perfect score while a mean of one would point to a problem.

There were 24 statements specifically about leadership and management and 30 statements about culture and relationships. We have provided the full range of data in Appendices 3, 3a, 4 and 4a while here we have simply selected the highest and lowest ranking items in order to highlight how leadership, culture, and their inter-relationship are perceived by school staff.

The five statements about leadership most highly ranked were:

- Senior management promotes commitment among staff to the whole school as well as to the department, key stage or year group or year group.
- Staff have commitment to the whole school as well as to their department, key stage or year group.
- Staff take responsibility for intervening when they see something which runs against school policy.
- There is a shared vision among staff as to where the school is going.
- Staff are encouraged to take on leadership roles.

Taken together these suggest a culture of collaboration in these participating schools. Not only are senior leaders seen as encouraging a collaborative ethos but staff are seen as endorsing that commitment, sharing vision and purpose, willing to take on leadership and to take action to uphold school policy. However, what staff see as current practice and what they aspire to suggests that a genuine sharing of the vision remains a challenge to be addressed. This may be inferred from the gap measure between the X and Y scales (Table 2).

A similar gap between practice and aspiration is evident in relation to the statement ‘Staff are encouraged to take on leadership roles’. There appears to be a strong consensus that this is desirable (distributing leadership is a ‘good thing’) but less confidence in its actual practice. By contrast, responses to the item ‘Staff take responsibility for intervening when they see something which runs against school policy’ show no gap between the real and the ideal.

While this data raises more questions than it answers, it begins to be unravelled through interview and workshop discussion. These discussions reveal some ambiguity among teachers and senior managers about leadership roles but also illustrate how far a school has moved on a spectrum from a top-down to a more distributed leadership culture. Taking responsibility or intervening when you perceive something to run against school policy is also tenuously connected to leadership in the minds of some staff. It is highly dependent on context, the nature of the incident and the authority one accepts, attributes to oneself or feels empowered to exercise.

Taking the initiative to offer support to a newly qualified teacher, implementing peer observation, setting up a staff group, challenging a colleague of higher status on racist language, may derive in part from a sense of personal agency but may also because such activities are authorised or affirmed within the culture of the school. A powerful sense of agency is likely to be a reflection of opportunistic distribution or culturally. The overall data in Table 2 below conceals these differences, which tell a different story when examined at individual school level.

Table 2: Five statements with highest rating among the 24 leadership/management items and gap between current situation (X) and importance (Y)

Statements	Scale X	Scale Y	The gap
Senior management promotes commitment among staff to the whole school as well as to the department, key stage and/or year group	3.40	3.61	-0.21
Staff have commitment to the whole school as well as to their department, key stage and/or year group	3.39	3.71	-0.32
Staff are encouraged to take on leadership roles	3.30	3.38	-0.08
Staff take responsibility for intervening when they see something which runs against school policy	3.19	3.48	-0.49
There is a shared vision among staff as to where the school is going	3.18	3.65	-0.47

What we may learn about individual school cultures becomes more multi-layered in relation to the five items that were ranked lowest by school staff. These were:

- Parents are encouraged to take on leadership roles.
- Staff see the school development plan as their own creation.
- There are processes for involving pupils in decision-making.
- Pupils are encouraged to exercise leadership.
- There is a sense of shared leadership among staff.

The fifth of these statements There is a sense of shared leadership among staff provides a more stringent test on perceptions of practice and reveals a significant gap between the perceived real and ideal. Staff may share the vision and commit themselves to the school and whole-school policy but this does not necessarily imply sharing in leadership nor in shaping of the policy to which they apparently adhere. There is scepticism about wider involvement in school development planning, in a sense a reality check on distribution of leadership. Table 3 reveals consistently large gaps between practice and aspiration, most pronounced when it comes to parents and pupils. Parents are encouraged to take on leadership roles receives the least wholehearted support of any item both on scale X and scale Y. While teachers seem slightly happier to attribute leadership roles to pupils, it is apparently not reflected in practice, and the gap between scales X and Y is significant. For schools this data present a clear set of challenges to consider if leadership is to be truly more widely distributed.

Table 3: Five statements with lowest rating among the 16 leadership/management items and gap between current situation (X) and importance (Y)

Statements	Scale X	Scale Y	The gap
Parents are encouraged to take on leadership roles	2.54	2.86	-0.32
Staff see the school development plan as their own creation	2.72	3.26	-0.54
There are processes for involving pupils in decision-making	2.76	3.16	-0.40
Pupils are encouraged to exercise leadership	2.83	3.19	-0.36
There is a sense of shared leadership among staff	2.85	3.35	-0.54

Issues of school culture and belief

As a complement to leadership issues, we also posed questions about school culture, collegial relationships and values. The five items receiving the highest assent as to current practice all reflect a collegial supportive culture in which high expectations of pupils are centre stage:

- Staff believe that all pupils are capable of learning.
- Staff offer one another reassurance and support.
- Staff, by their behaviour, model for pupils the enjoyment in learning.
- If staff have a problem with their teaching they usually turn to colleagues for help.
- Staff reflect on their practice as a way of identifying professional learning needs.

High levels of agreement to these five statements appear to suggest a learning-centred culture, one of mutual support and reflective practice. As Table 4 shows, on this set of items the highest mean score was in response to the statement 'All pupils are capable of learning'. This scored highly for both scales X and Y with mean scores close the perfect 4 (3.77 and 3.73 respectively). Responses to two items suggest a high level of collegial support - 'Staff offer one another reassurance and support' and 'If staff have a problem with their teaching they usually turn to colleagues for help' - with virtually no gap between the two scales. Only on one item 'Staff, by their behaviour, model for pupils the enjoyment in learning' is there a gap that might be considered significant.

Table 4: Five highest ranking scores on scale X (satisfaction) and scale Y (importance) by mean scores and gaps between the two mean scores

Statements	Scale X	Scale Y	The gap
Staff believe that all pupils are capable of learning.	3.77	3.73	+0.04
Staff offer one another reassurance and support	3.69	3.66	+0.03
Staff, by their behaviour, model for pupils the enjoyment in learning	3.54	3.73	-0.19
If staff have a problem with their teaching they usually turn to colleagues for help.	3.47	3.51	-0.04
Staff reflect on their practice as a way of identifying professional learning needs.	3.44	3.35	+0.09

The extent to which staff themselves model learning is the only area in which practice appears to fall somewhat short of the ideal. Without further exploration and some normative point of reference, these data tell only part of the story and it is in the probing of these rather optimistic responses that underlying assumptions are revealed. For example, the story becomes more complex when we probe the shared belief that ‘all children can learn’. Beneath the easy assent to this proposition are issues of what kind of learning is valued and what kinds of learners are valued. The consensus around the proposition conceals a wide variation in how learning is conceptualised, what knowledge is of most worth and the process through which it is acquired. Implicit theories of ‘ability’ and ‘potential’ become more transparent and a culture of learning emerges as a more contested idea. This has immediate relevance for the modelling of staff learning as it is not immediately apparent to teachers what the nature of their learning is nor how is it modelled.

Although teachers apparently offer one another support, what constitutes support has to be handled with care as it may descend into collusion rather than a more critical friendship. This, and other issues, become more sharply defined when we examine the lowest ranked items. As Table 4 illustrates, staff appear much more ambivalent about challenge from their colleagues nor do they appear to see it as a high priority. Support becomes less rigorous in its connotation. Their collegiality does not appear to stretch open handedly to support staff and parents. Research and evaluation are not accorded high priority nor do they appear to typify practice.

Table 5. Five lowest ranking scores on scale X (satisfaction) and scale Y (importance) by mean scores and gaps between the two mean scores

Statements	Scale X	Scale Y	The gap
Staff engage in team teaching as a way of improving practice.	2.54	2.79	-0.25
Staff welcome opportunities to learn from parents	2.64	2.75	-0.11
Staff challenge one another and are not afraid of disagreement.	2.75	2.90	-0.15
Support staff play an important role in school planning.	2.78	3.16	-0.38
Staff carry out joint research and evaluation with one or more colleagues as a way of improving their practice.	2.80	2.97	-0.17

On three items in Table 4, the gap measure is relatively small, suggesting that research and evaluation, and learning from conflict or from parents is neither typical of practice nor a high priority. By contrast, in relation to their relationship with senior leadership the gap (as shown in Table 2) is much more marked. This is consistent with findings discussed earlier – sharing of leadership is more an aspiration than a reality.

From these selected items, tensions and paradoxes become clearly apparent. Perhaps consistency ought not to be expected given the nature of questionnaires as an instrument and, more significantly, given the ambiguities in the concepts and values being addressed. This is what makes so vital the opportunities to interview, to shadow, and to engage in workshop activities where participants from the schools engage in critical reflection and dialogue. It is through these other channels that we were able to probe with more detailed understanding what people understood by the term 'distributed leadership' and how the process of distribution worked in practice. The implications for a broader, more critical process self-evaluation become apparent.

What emerges most clearly from the exploration of questionnaire responses, and from other qualitative data (interviews, shadowing, workshop activities) is that no schools or leaders fit neatly into any one of our six models of distribution. Headteachers draw on a repertoire of response modes, or 'styles', depending on the situation in which the need for leadership is called upon.

"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."

Headteacher, secondary school

Embedded within this statement are different modes of distribution, as delegation and as opportunistic or something ingrained within the culture of the school. This further points to leadership styles as a situational process, dependent on a range of contextual factors such as:

- factors personal to the headteacher himself/herself, for example, character, experience, confidence, length of experience in the school and experience of other schools, influence of other leaders and models emulated
- historical and cultural factors, previous incumbents of headship, legacies, organisational memories, recruitment and retention
- external pressures, the range and strength of these locally, regionally and nationally; national policies, national agencies (eg 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. It may be assumed that the most expert of heads have a capacity for reading situations and audiences and can choose their responses accordingly. However, 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.

At the outset of the project, participants frequently raised questions about the meaning of terms. They wanted to know what academics understood by 'leadership' and 'distribution'. Equally, schools expressed an awareness that amongst themselves, between and within the organisations, there was often assumed agreement that did not represent the complexities and differences represented by the understanding and perceptions of individuals.

After the questionnaire had been carried out in his school and items critically reviewed, one secondary headteacher remarked that:

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

A deputy headteacher in a primary school pointed out that:

“It (leadership) means different things to different people according to their role. And experience and training. And whether they want to take on any responsibility. Maybe it even means different things according to what the head and I want to do.”

These comments were echoed across the schools and represent an increasing awareness of terms and meanings that were a significant factor in both the development of leadership practice and in its distribution. It is not that headteachers and school staff necessarily learnt new skills or changed their practice. Rather they saw it is important, or as a first stage, to overtly consider the issues and meanings and articulate them, to oneself and to others. In promoting understanding and reflection it made action possible and potentially more effective.

Towards the end of the project in many, if not all of the schools, staff were becoming more confident to talk about leadership in action in their settings. They were more assured in recognising and assigning behaviours and skills to varying forms of leadership. Some were expressing clear ideas about how they intended to promote further and develop a more agreeable climate for innovation and creativity.

One headteacher was concerned that staff who had been given encouragement to lead were not fulfilling their potential or making the most of the opportunity. In discussion it became apparent that he was himself an instinctive, natural leader. He admitted that he had never thought through in detail the skills and behaviours he expected from others. Nor had he consciously given thought to the various ways in which leadership was distributed. With his senior leadership team they debated the issues surrounding the development of leaders in their setting. He reported after some time that he was better placed now to facilitate and lead the learning for leadership. His judgement was that the potential for a more thoughtful distribution around his school was now being realised. Complementing this, expectations of leadership held by the teachers who participated in our study raise questions about what headteachers really do at school. Knowing exactly how headteachers use their time during a school day, in our view, has direct bearing on the extent to which leadership is distributed and the distribution strategies heads adopt. Findings from our shadowing of headteachers show that their work is characterised by ‘a rapid pace of events, with their time typically being fragmented into many varied and short-term activities’ (Davies, 1987). The complexity of the interactions in which headteachers engage and the overwhelming tasks they perform during a day in the school, as we illustrate below, make the issue of distribution crucial.

The headteacher's day

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

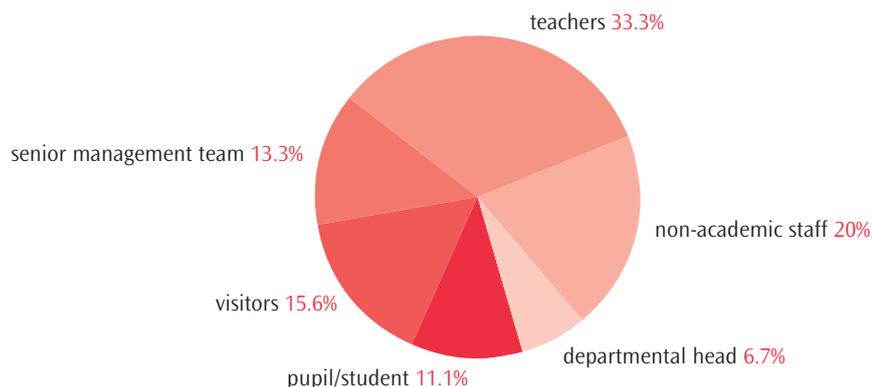
One aspect of shadowing is to note different 'role partners', who are the people with whom the head spends his or her time. A second focus is on the nature of the tasks he or she undertakes in the course of the day. These two aspects of the headteacher's work may be broadly quantified as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Exploring interactions

The interactions illustrated in Figure 2 are a composite based on all 11 heads. As such it is deceptive as individual profiles are distinctively different in the three contexts of primary, middle and secondary schools (see Figures 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3). However, the aggregated picture is nonetheless interesting, for example in the category 'visitors' it shows that while investing substantial time inward with staff, external relationships are also a significant aspect of the head's role.

Figure 2: Headteachers' interactions

% of a day's time spent with different people



Of itself, this figure tell us little about the process of distribution. Only when we opened this up for discussion with headteachers, and when taken together with other data, could we begin to fill out our understanding of what distributed leadership is and how it works. Heads were quick to point out that the picture typified in one day would not necessarily hold true for overall weekly interaction with different people in the school. For example, interactions with pupils might be relatively low on one day; on other occasions they might be quite heavily involved in teaching, covering for absent colleagues. They welcomed monitored teaching as it gave them the opportunity to spend more time with pupils. Nonetheless they did tend to agree that interactions in which they engaged themselves revealed differences from phase to phase. These are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Percentage of time spent with different people by headteachers at different school levels

	Junior/infant heads	Primary/middle heads	Secondary heads
Heads' interaction with:	% of time spent	% of time spent	% of time spent
Pupils/students	17.6	18.9	15.2
Visitors	11.8	21.6	15.2
Teachers	35.3	27.0	27.3
Non-academic staff	20.6	16.2	18.2
Departmental head	5.9	5.4	9.1
Senior management team	8.8	10.8	15.2

In view of the relatively small sample, these figures need to be treated with caution and extrapolating trends is problematic, although differences do raise a number of issues about leadership relationships by phase. For example, headteachers at junior/infant and primary/middle levels spent 17.6 per cent and 18.9 per cent of their school time with pupils respectively, while the figure for secondary heads was 15.2 per cent. Reflecting on these differences, heads attributed this mainly to the organisational differences between types of school. Infant/primary heads (at least in our sample) spent more time with learning assistants and support staff, and less time directly with pupils. Primary heads spent more time with pupils than their secondary colleagues. One secondary headteacher explained this as evidence of a leadership style that creates avenues for active involvement of teachers in leadership. Once leadership is effectively dispersed, teachers are able to attend to the needs of pupils thereby reducing the frequency and the amount of time headteachers would have to spend with pupils:

“My leadership style of granting departmental heads and teachers free hand to carry out shared responsibilities enables them to resolve most issues affecting students that would have created opportunities for me to interact with them.”

Secondary headteacher

A common feature across all schools is a headteacher's day characterised by movement from one place to another. Few heads spent time in their office. This was most characteristic of primary heads. As one head put it:

“I hardly stay in my office when school is in session because I'm very concerned about the welfare of the children. My primary aim is to ensure that every child benefits from teaching and learning [...] Even when I'm in the office, I don't shut my door.” [The open door was often referred to symbolically but in practical terms did make heads more visible and accessible and increased the likelihood of mutual interaction.]

A middle headteacher

What emerged from these discussions was the complexity and volatile nature of interactions with different people. Much of it had an ad hoc quality, responding to demand and crisis. As an example, one primary headteacher was seen chatting with one visitor (A). In the process, another visitor (B) walked towards where he was and tried to attract his attention. On seeing visitor B he interrupted his conversation with visitor A, attended briefly to visitor B and then resumed conversation with the first visitor.

Figure 2.1: Junior/infant heads interactions

% of time spent with different people

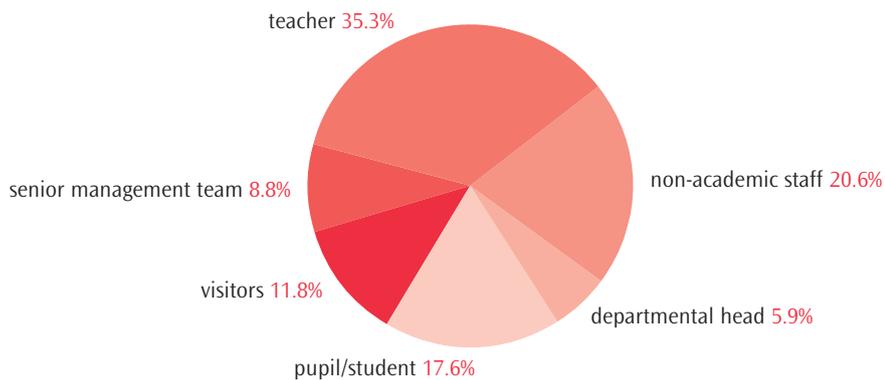


Figure 2.2: Primary/middle heads' interactions

% of time spent with different people

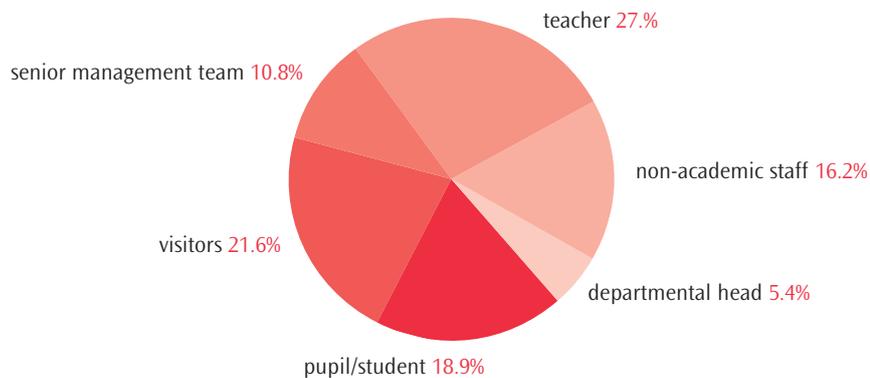
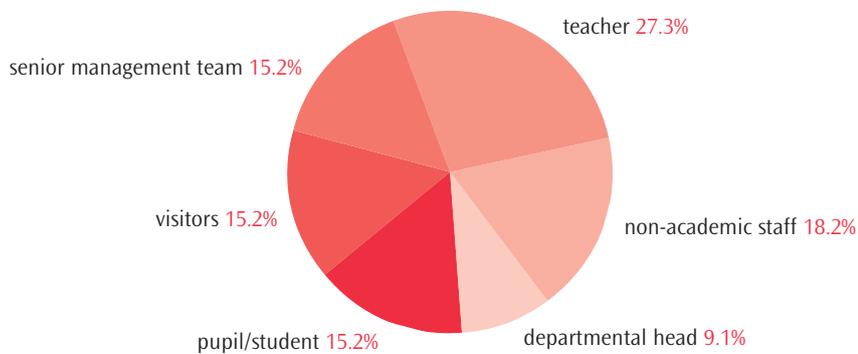


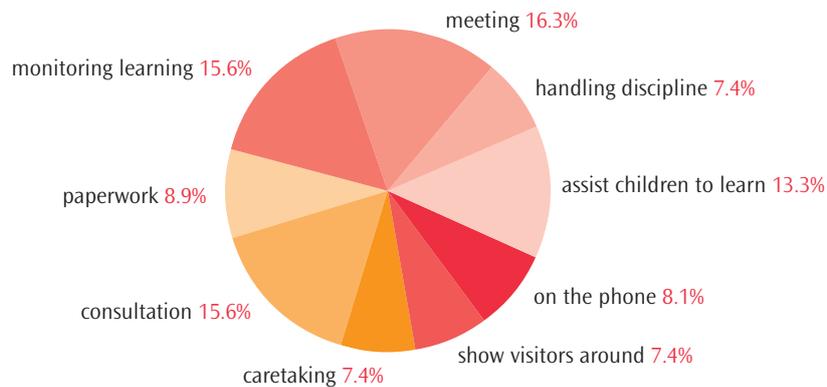
Figure 2.3: Secondary heads interactions
 % of time spent with different people



Exploring tasks

Further light is shed on these issues when we examine the nature of the tasks heads perform. As Figure 3 shows, these are varied and complex. Figure 3 presents some major activities we identified during the shadowing of the headteachers, including receiving visitors, attending meetings, handling discipline matters, monitoring teaching and learning, taking care of cleanliness issues, managing paperwork and many other incidental activities difficult to quantify because they happen at the same time, most characteristic of the head’s role.

Figure 3: Headteachers’ tasks
 % of a day’s time spent various tasks



The similarities among different phases of schools are in many respects more striking than the differences. For all heads, paperwork is a common factor, together with meetings, phone calls, consultation, visitors and basic ‘caretaking’ tasks, leaving less time for monitoring or supporting pupil learning. It is in the balance of these activities that questions of distribution arise. How driven are heads by the day-to-day demands of the school, managing across a range of imperatives? How strategic are they in planning and foreseeing eventualities? To what extent do they delegate or fail to delegate? To what extent does the culture allow opportunistic leadership by staff and pupils, relieving the headteacher of duties and reactivity? What function in a culture of distribution does the open door serve? Comparisons by phase reveal consistent factors but some clear differences too.

Table 7: Percentage of time spent on tasks by headteachers at different school levels

	Junior/infant heads	Primary/middle heads	Secondary heads
Heads’ tasks	% of time spent	% of time spent	% of time spent
Monitoring teaching	12.2	16.2	21.2
Consultation	22.0	16.2	12.1
Paperwork	12.2	8.1	15.2
Caretaking	7.3	8.1	6.1
Show visitors round	4.9	5.4	9.1
On the phone	9.8	10.8	3.0
Supporting individual/group learning	9.8	10.8	12.1
Handling discipline	4.9	5.4	6.1
Meeting	17.1	18.9	15.2

Showing visitors round, engaging in basic ‘caretaking’, handling disciplinary incidents and attending meetings appear to be fairly similar in their consumption of headteacher time. One striking difference between the basic primary and secondary schools is the time spent on telephone conversations. Heads of secondary schools appeared not to use the phone as much as those in the primary school. This is in part explained by specific roles within a secondary leadership team and by the more direct access to the head in primary schools and a lesser inhibition on the part of parents to make contact with the head. It is also a function of formal distribution in larger and more complex secondary structures and conventions.

When it comes to learning, direct involvement with pupils and ‘mediated’ engagement with pupil learning similarities and differences again emerge. Secondary headteachers spent more time on monitoring teaching (21.2 per cent) as against 12.2 per cent for primary/middle headteachers and 16.2 per cent for junior/infant heads. This is indicative of a more formal approach to performance management. Monitoring appears to be less ad hoc and opportunistic in primary and middle schools in this study. The amount of time given by secondary headteachers to support pupils’ learning is perhaps surprising, but in these schools headteachers are often found supervising or giving direct help to children who had been sent to their office or supervising classes for absent teachers, or interacting with groups of pupils during workshops activities. This one-day sample may not, of course, reflect the realities of the normal support that secondary headteachers give to individual pupils.

Figure 3.1: Junior/infant heads

% of time spent on different tasks

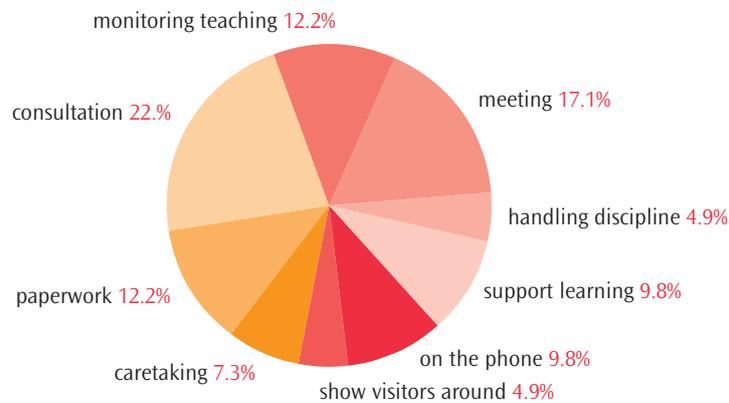


Figure 3.2: Primary/middle heads

% of time spent on different tasks

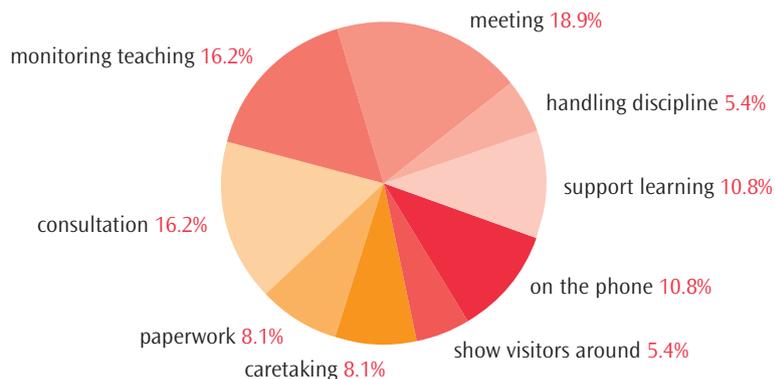
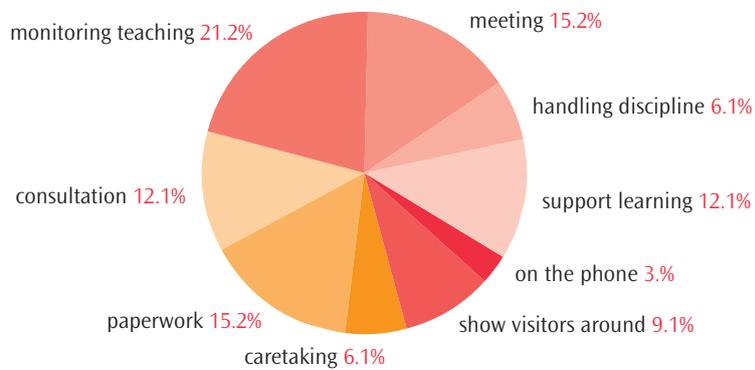


Figure 3.3: Secondary heads
% of time spent on different tasks



These pie charts were fed back to heads - in some cases individually and in some cases in groups – to assess how typical the patterns were and to raise issues as to the distribution of task and time in relation to the various stakeholders encountered in the course of a day or week. It helped headteachers to reflect critically on their priorities and to consider how, in a more distributed scenario, they might reframe the nature of their activity profile. It set the stage for the development of six differing models of how leadership is distributed, or distributes itself.

Chapter Four: Distribution Process

Chapter Four: Distribution Process

Introduction

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 through questionnaires, shadowing and interviews helped to identify 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.

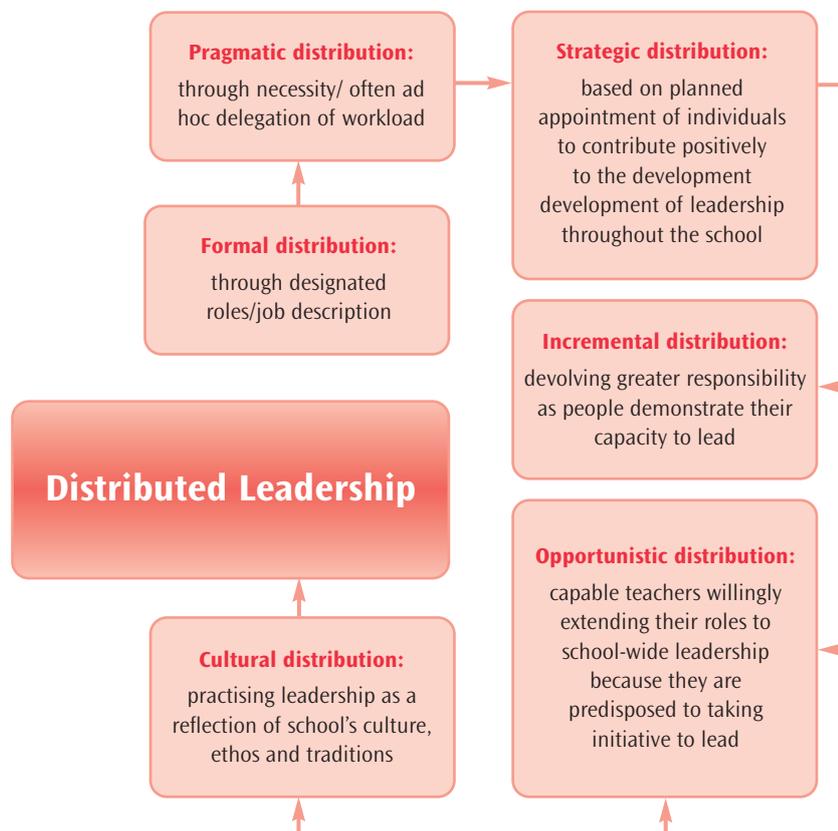
During interviews, staff members were asked about their professional histories and how their leadership knowledge and skills had developed. The context of the individual school was considered a significant aspect for many in shaping their views of leadership and their own role in it. Systems for communication 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. 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 formal distribution, pragmatic distribution, strategic distribution, incremental distribution, opportunistic distribution and cultural distribution. In Figure 6 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 in each way as appropriate to the task in hand.

Figure 6: A taxonomy of distribution



Formal distribution

Schools in England are by history and nature hierarchical. They have a single principal, in recent years called a 'headteacher'. When appointed to a school he or she comes increasingly with formal qualifications for headship, with a mandate from governors and with a set of expectations from staff and parents as well as from local authorities, government bodies and from Ofsted. 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 is constrained within the remit and boundaries of the respective designated roles of staff members.

"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 initially make little change in formal responsibilities and most heads tread warily in their first months, assessing the quality of people in 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, Year 4 leaders and a significant number of subject coordinators and I expect those people to lead."

Headteacher, middle school

Responsibility as structurally delegated carries with it an attendant expectation of delivery. It may be accompanied by recognition that others have expertise that you do not have and that when responsibility is 'distributed' in this way the headteacher's role is to 'support and provide'.

"If I give somebody responsibility, I expect them to get on with the job. Ours is a very low attaining school when based on SATS results. I've been encouraging subject co-ordinators to tell me what needs to be done. I don't know what to do in English to raise standards. There are some generic things I can do but in terms of how to teach English better, it's the English specialist's job so I distribute responsibility. If they tell me what they need then my job is to provide."

Headteacher, middle school

This formal process of distribution has the advantage of lending security, not only to staff who occupy those formal roles but also to other staff who know where they stand. Parents know who it is they should speak to on any given issue, and efficient management seems to be the key to an experience that meets the expectations of all groups of stakeholders. Such formal distribution may be a necessary precondition for any more radically developmental journey on which a school might embark.

Pragmatic distribution

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 log-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. It is captured well in Jethro's advice to Moses (Exodus 18: 17-22) referred to earlier. Jethro's advice about small and great matters determines largely what aspects of the burden may be shared and who the 'the right people' are to share that burden.

"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 school

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 and 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':

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

Headteacher, primary school

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 of 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 or 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,' one junior school headteacher remarked.

This pressure, as some headteachers argued in the course of a workshop, goes some way to explaining why teachers in the participating schools did not place any high value on their engagement in team teaching and carrying out joint evaluation with other colleagues as a way of improving their professional practice.

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 conferred within a hierarchical structure and leadership 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 from formal delegation of responsibility. The metaphor here in the following statement from a secondary head is conducting an orchestra. It suggests a harmonic quality in how different players combine their talents.

"Here we don't work to a formula ... I 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

Strategic distribution

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 about focus 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 harm 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

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

Incremental distribution

Formal, pragmatic and strategic forms of 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 towards professional development; 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. [...] I try to make people feel confident about what they can do because most people have the ability to lead. What they need is confidence.”

Headteacher, middle school

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 accepting, springs from the kind of relationship teachers establish with pupils' (p.170).

Incremental distribution is not simply instrumental, serving the purpose of school improvement or raising standards. The headteacher's emphasis in the above quote is on attitudes rather than roles. It implies a people, rather than a job, orientation, 'a bringing on of experience', which extends limits and is professionally renewing.

"I don't really think there are too many limits because at worst, what you're doing by opening up to as many people as possible the different roles, is you're bringing on experience. You're encouraging contributions and I think you're benefiting. If people feel empowered if they are contributing, if opportunities for progression, for promotion don't exist here that means they will look for it elsewhere because one would hope that there would be a level of ambition that would drive people as well and their promotion reflects well on the establishment but it also ensures a consistent supply, if you like, of fresh blood and new ideas and I think it's that that provides the life blood of an institution, especially a school."

Assistant headteacher, secondary school

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 throughout and not just a selected few."

Headteacher, secondary school

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 relationships. Central to these relationships are trust and belief.

The school is the context in which leadership can be learned, practised and tested because for pupils it will be at a premium in later life.

"[...] the children will need these leadership skills in their development, future workings 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

Opportunistic distribution

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, assumed rather than conferred. It is opportunistic rather than planned and 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 fit 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."

Headteacher, secondary school

Another headteacher adds to this:

"A lot of people exert leadership in the school having confidence to do that not because someone has told them to do that. [...] I think how I operate here is a intuitive way. I want people to be involved, I try and persuade them when there's a problem."

Headteacher, primary school

This headteacher describes himself as an intuitive leader and says, 'I'm very keen on working together and people having strength together. When we decide on something we're all behind this. '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.

Cultural distribution

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

It deserves a sixth discrete category because it switches the emphasis from leaders and leadership to a community of people working together to a common end with all the tensions and challenges that real vibrant communities display. As Gronn (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. Teamworking, 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

Cultural distribution 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 cultural distribution 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' behaviour and intentions develop into networks of social exchange.

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

Chapter Five:
Developing and Sustaining
Distributed Leadership

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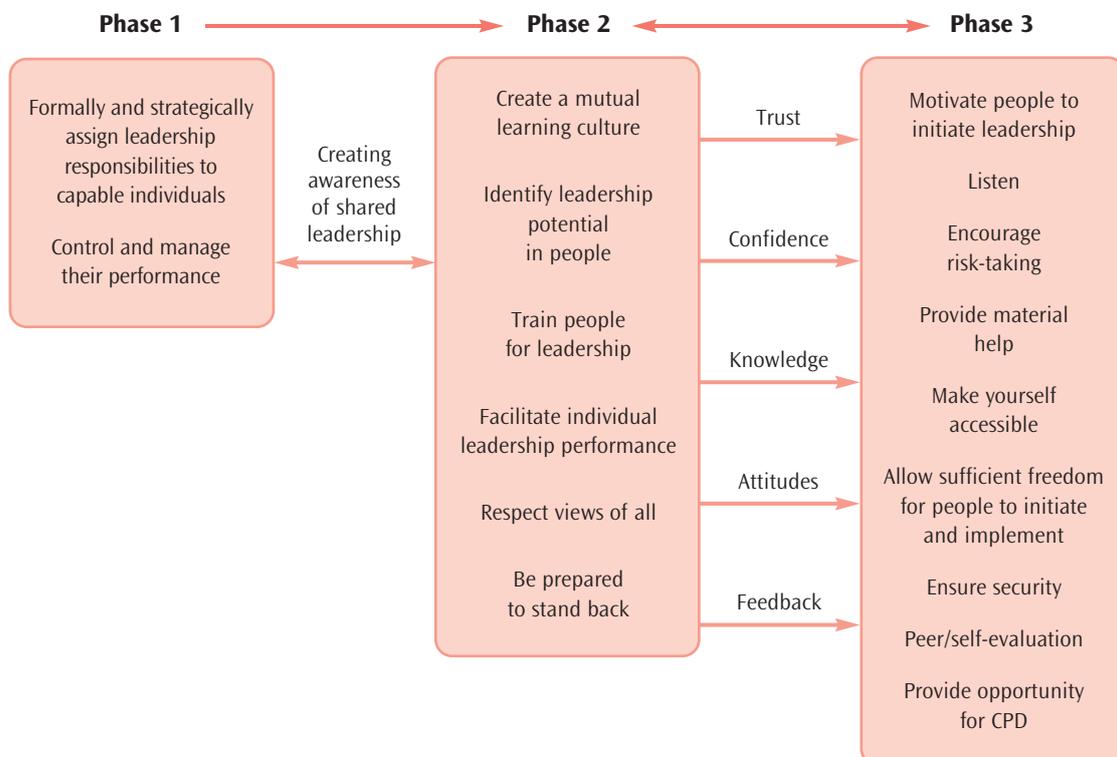
Introduction

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.

Major phases of development

The model in Figure 7 portrays this as three major phases of development.

Figure 7: A model for sustaining distributed leadership in school



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. Having delegated such leadership responsibilities, the head or leadership team endeavours to build a culture of performance by controlling and monitoring the progress of tasks. As those involved in delegated leadership roles gain mastery of the principles of leading and show signs of being able to perform with or without the headteacher's supervision, the headteacher may create opportunities for them to share their expertise more broadly.

Where the need is such that it requires a specialist skill, which no member of staff readily has, the head may choose between two options. He or she may recruit someone from outside the school and delegate an aspect of leadership to them. Alternatively he or she may identify potential leaders from within the school, nurture them incrementally, perhaps providing opportunities for them to take part in training or other activities to stretch their capacity.

This may lead 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 that 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. This is effected by involving all staff in important decision-making: planning, developing and evaluating school policy. This has the advantage of making the staff see the school development plan as their own creation.

Phase 2 describes a high level of developmental activity on the part of the headteacher. It describes the creation of a culture that offers teachers an opportunity to learn from one another's practice. Its explicit purpose is to encourage a sense of collaboration among teachers and between teachers and classroom assistants, and a culture in which staff willingly use informal opportunities to discuss children's learning and then reflect on their practice as a way of identifying their professional learning needs. Leadership roles are further extended to pupils. Both headteacher and teachers recognise the need to encourage pupils to exercise leadership and structures are put in place to assist pupils to develop leadership skills. Leadership begins to be exercised more opportunistically by staff and pupils, their involvement in decision-making expands and their contribution to school self-evaluation and development planning becomes more than tokenistic.

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.

Sustaining distributed leadership will depend partly on the degree of support a school receives from the local authority or others outside the school. However great the investment in keeping motivation alive, and however good the succession planning, there seems to be a natural process of entropy, or attrition. Historically few schools have managed to continue on an improvement trajectory of maintaining good vitality. This implies a need to move beyond the school, to build alliances with other community agencies, networking with other schools and with other partners such as university colleagues. It is through strong and resilient networks that schools can draw renewed energy.

Context is a fundamental consideration in any endeavour to understand the leadership practice in an individual school. The national context weighs heavily in consideration of how different models apply within policy trends and those that gain prominence in the policy cycle. Headteachers are aware that they need to operate within the parameters of national initiatives. They recognise the need to understand and incorporate developments in ways that best support the learning of pupils and staff. Increasingly there are imperatives of increased funding opportunities, successful audits of educational practice and continuous professional development and the compliance to legislative reform. They need to be able to manage the tension between internal accountability (reciprocity) and external accountability (compliance).

In evaluating leadership and promoting self-evaluation, Ofsted is moving gradually from a concept of leadership as singular and of accountability as purely external. An Ofsted priority is to evaluate leadership practice throughout the school and at all levels. Good leadership is described as "... principled, well-established and dynamic at different levels in the school". Very good leadership is characterised by, among other things, when "leadership development is supported and encouraged through the school" (Ofsted handbook, 2003 p.115). Developing the skills and confidence to lead at department, subject, class and pupil level is considered an entitlement for professionals seeking advancement and approval. In primary schools only, a newly qualified teacher in her or his first year of teaching is not expected to take on the leadership of a subject. In small primary schools, there may be several subjects.

Workforce reform in schools, supported by government legislation, requires headteachers to remodel their workforce in ways that make best use of the skills, potential and interests of all staff. Support staff are increasingly taking on more responsibility and roles are being created for personnel other than teachers to take on 62-administrative and bursary work, for example.

The training and networking offered by NCSL and LEAs support these developments. Headteachers seeking to be judged successful and to ensure the professional development of their staff are likely to be seeking a more distributed leadership throughout their organisation. These all contribute to the dilemmas of distribution.

Chapter Six: Dilemmas in Distribution

Chapter Six: Dilemmas in Distribution

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Introduction

The 11 schools that volunteered to be involved in this project did so because they were interested in learning more about the subject and becoming more distributed in their practice. All, in one way or another, could identify tensions inherent within the concept itself and dilemmas in realising it.

Consultation, command and consensus

Consultation is the process by which heads listen to others but hold on to the right to decide. Decision-making by consensus distributes that right to others but can be paralysing of leadership. Employing leadership by command is most troublesome to heads because it appears to imply something undemocratic. In this headteacher's description of 'benevolent dictatorship' it conveys something of the struggle to resolve the need to share with the need to remain in charge.

"I see leadership as multifaceted and not hierarchical although in the end someone has to stand and take the difficult decisions and that's my role at the end. My style is that I talk a lot but don't make snap decisions. I try to talk things through in a longer term. I try to motivate people to take decisions but in the end I'm the one who is accountable, the one whose neck is on the line as it were. So I delegate much leadership but my intuitive style is somehow benevolent dictatorship. Leadership that is empathetic, that shows that I care about everyone involved in the school. Looking at the hierarchy, I'm at the top but benevolent dictatorship is about leadership that cares and is sensitive to people [...]."

Headteacher, primary school

Distribution clearly implies relinquishing at times one's role as ultimate decision-maker and trusting others to make the right decisions. Listening with the intent to understand, a belief in the potential and authority of others, negotiation and persuasion are the levers that allow trust to gain a foothold and leadership to be assumed and shared. Resolving the dilemma means having information, advice and support so as to:

- be clear about the difference between consultation, command and consensus
- make informed judgments as to when each of these strategies are appropriate
- ensure there is a shared understanding among staff as to the transparency of these styles

Directing, intervening and standing back

In distribution as we have described it culturally, the success of the head's leadership is such that he or she is no longer highly visible. Collaborative inter-dependency has replaced dependency on the head. The head is no longer needed but, as this head worries, is he no longer wanted?

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

Headteacher, secondary school

Some headteachers are aware of their need to intervene and to be in control. They admit to the anxiety of not being in charge and worry about too much surprise. The dependency of others may reinforce a head's feelings of control, authority and identity. Too much independence in others may undermine the need to be needed. If, however, a headteacher, or senior leadership team, are able to measure their school's quality and effectiveness by the 'density' of leadership this is, as Loj Tzu suggests, 'the highest power'. Density (Tom Sergiovanni's measure of distribution) may be assessed in two ways:

- by an aggregation of leadership roles, that is a summary of individuals holding leadership positions (formal) and/of exercising leadership 'without portfolio' (informally)
- by a holistic assessment of initiatives and developments which are underpinned by a quality of shared leadership, that is, cultural distribution

The harder it becomes to measure the greater distribution is embedded in 'the flow of activities' as Gronn describes it. So measures move from the quantitative to the qualitative, from summary numerical data to stories, vignettes, and illustrative exemplars of improvement or transformation.

Trust and accountability

Running through these accounts is an issue of trust. Trust presents the most acute of dilemmas because school leaders believe in the importance of trust but also feel the pressure of accountability from other than their own staff or pupils. While ‘raising standards’ is portrayed by politicians as accountability to pupils, heads do not necessarily see it in those terms. Raising standards in practice can, in their view, often disenfranchise pupils, and disenfranchise teachers too, teachers who feel that tactical approaches to raising standards distorts their work and undermines their professionalism.

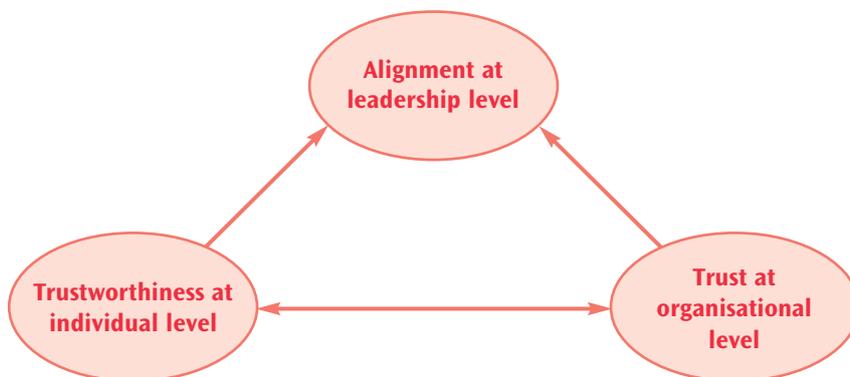
Trust emerges consistently as one of the factors favourable to the distribution of leadership, and as central to headteachers’ and teachers’ professional practice. Without mutual trust (among teachers, between teachers and pupils, between teachers and parents for example), suspicion erodes relationships. Getting people to participate in leadership and share ideas become problematic. As Rogers (1969) suggests:

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

While alive to the dangers of mistrust, heads are also aware, often through too much experience, of ways in which trust can be betrayed or misplaced. How leaders struggle with these issues is relevant to the form or stage of distribution in a school. In what we have described as ‘formal distribution’ trust would be balanced by systems of control and by what Bottery describes as ‘calculative trust’ – a considered weighing up of the measure of trust that can be allowed to any individual in any given context. This may be also be the form of trust in pragmatic and incremental distribution. Bottery’s notion of ‘professional trust’ – a confidence in the role someone is expected to fulfil – comes into play more perhaps in strategic distribution. Here trust is invested in role and status with a presumption of competence, until proved otherwise. As distributed leadership matures and evolves into ‘cultural distribution’ it would be reasonable to expect a high level of mutual trust in the school, at least among staff: what Bottery described as ‘identificatory trust’. This describes an ability and willingness to put oneself in other people’s shoes, to realise the moral imperative (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) and to treat others with integrity. This latter level of trust may be more aspirational than real but it is a goal towards which many leaders strive.

So, while working to generate trust, at the same time heads try to convey the message that holding staff to account through monitoring, scrutiny of data and performance management can build, rather than erode, trust. To accomplish this may mean creating more lateral learning and exchange, more peer mentoring and evaluation, a greater openness to criticism and challenge, modelled by those in senior and middle leadership positions. It implies trustworthiness at the individual level, trust at the organisational level and alignment at leadership level, alignment being measured by the congruence that exists between individual trustworthiness and organisational trust.

Figure 8: Measuring the congruence between individual trustworthiness and organisational trust



Factors that promote and inhibit distributed leadership in schools

Trust arises as a key theme when we address dilemmas through examining the factors that promote and inhibit the distribution of leadership. This is the ‘force field’ or push-pull of factors that tend to be volatile and shifting, pushing leaders back to more coercive styles when trust is betrayed or risk-taking proves too risky. The continually shifting balance in relationships featured prominently in headteachers’ discourse. These push and pull factors applied to members of school leadership team, among staff generally, with pupils, between pupils and teachers, between teachers and support staff with governors and with the parent body (see Figure 7).

Promoting factors

Of all the promoting factors, trust was consistently in the foreground. It was seen as a precondition or concomitant of risk-taking and change.

“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 about a climate; high levels of communication, willingness to change and to challenge; a climate that recognises and values everybody’s opinion.”

Headteacher, secondary school

“Discussion of trust always referred back to school environment as a critical factor in encouraging adventure and removing obstacles to risk-taking. I feel there must be a safe environment where people are secured enough to venture, where they know they’ll be encouraged.”

Headteacher, infant school

This was in turn linked to teachers’ mutual acceptance of one another’s leadership potential, seen by heads as an important precondition of distributed leadership. “People’s perception about other people’s initiative of new ideas is greatly essential”, remarked a junior school headteacher, while another commented that a coherent staff pulling in the same direction could only function in an environment of reciprocal trust:

“Coherent staff: a staff that trusts one another. Others must accept the leadership capabilities of others. I’ve no problem asking a newly appointed staff to lead but their colleagues need to accept him/her.”

Headteacher, middle school

Another promoting factor cited by heads and teachers was ‘shared goals’. This refers back to issues of consensus, conflict and compromise, the latter suggesting a matter of judgement as to where consensus is possible, compromise appropriate and executive decision necessary.

“There must be a common goals and objectives in the school and people must agree to move towards the same direction. People must agree on things on which there can be compromises and those on which there can’t.”

Headteacher, primary school

Self-esteem was also mentioned as an important promoting factor. As one infant headteacher noted, 'People must have high self-esteem because people need confidence to engage in distributed leadership.' In other words, a climate of trust may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for teachers to believe they can truly lead others or take initiative singly or in a group. In our discussions with teachers some professed to being happy without leadership responsibilities, yet with further exploration there were often examples of initiatives being taken, others helped, innovations proposed. These were not seen as 'leadership', which was something they associated with formal status and felt to be a bit daunting. One of the immediate outcomes of workshops with teachers was the demystification of leadership and renewed insight into how organisations learn and improve.

Availability of resources was seen by some as a necessary precondition of distribution.

"...financial stability, because it means when resources are needed I can provide."

Headteacher, middle school

Human resources were also mentioned, without which distribution was seen as either inhibited or impossible.

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

Headteacher, middle school

Clearly good staffing, continuity and stability are crucial if leadership is to be entrusted to others; at the same time an optimum level of turnover provides new insights and energy.

Inhibiting factors

The absence of any or all of the above factors restricts the ability of schools to develop and effectively implement distributed leadership. This is reflected in views expressed by the participants and summarised in Figure 7. Heads saw the apparent apathy or resistance among teachers to sharing leadership as a manifestation of insecurity:

"If staff are given a role, they need to feel secure with that role. For example, the ICT specialist will block other members from sharing his secret garden of knowledge if that person lacks confidence."

Headteacher, secondary school

And because of overwhelming workload resulting from external pressure:

"I think it's a motive issue. Individual motives and different personal circumstances prevent some people from taking up leadership roles. When there's so much pressure on teachers in the school they'll definitely avoid taking leadership responsibilities."

Headteacher, secondary school

Structural factors were also cited as inhibiting.

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

Headteacher, secondary school

Links were also made between accountability and school structures. Heads reported difficulties in granting teachers much freedom to initiate and implement new ideas without exerting some form of control. One head argued that limitation to freedom is an unavoidable function of institutional life and is a determining factor in distribution of leadership.:

“The natural limit to freedom. I don’t think you can give total freedom to those you share leadership with. Although I do encourage leadership in the school, I feel I’m still accountable. There must be some sort of monitoring system.”

Headteacher

While headteachers in this study generally saw distributed leadership as a tool for reducing their workload and for building the school as a learning organisation, they also worried about the lack of preparedness on the part of teachers to take up leadership roles. “Distribution may fail when people aren’t prepared to take up jobs,” argued one junior school head. This is an issue of continuing professional development and underpinned by issues of recruitment, retention and promotion.

Chapter Seven: Implications for Professional Practice

Chapter Seven: Implications for Professional Practice

A number of clear messages emerge from this study.

Leadership at all levels of the school matters. Distributed leadership can have far reaching effects on school and classroom practice. It is a concept endorsed by NCSL and embedded in Ofsted inspections and through these channels has led to increasing adoption of the idea both as a benchmark for the evaluation of school leadership and as the motor of school improvement. 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. An important tool in a school's self-evaluation kit is the force field analysis, which can help a staff to identify the inhibitors and promoters of shared leadership. These have also been described as 'toxins' and 'nutrients', (Southworth, 2000), poisoning or nourishing professional life.

The inherent limitation of self-evaluation as audit review or internal inspection is that it can too easily bypass these underlying 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. Some individuals in our group of heads explicitly recognised their own power as shapers of the school ethos and relationships, and they self-consciously demonstrated how they wanted others to behave. Others acknowledged that they were leaders by virtue of their role but did not find it easy to articulate what their influence was. Some were unsure of what they actually did to 'lead' and even shy of the idea of themselves as leaders. Similarly, teachers often shared in leadership but without conscious articulation of the leadership roles they were performing. Leadership was equated with the office and the behaviour of the head, or senior leadership team. Teachers tended not to associate notions of leadership with themselves unless – even when – holding some designated promoted role. Ad hoc or intuitive leadership performed outside the classroom tended to be seen simply in terms of 'that's how things are done here'.

Where 'distributed leadership' was more explicit, it was seen predominantly in terms of subject leadership and identified in formal structures, such as designated leadership teams, heads of key stages and assistant headteacher roles. Casting in exclusively in these terms could inhibit others in non-promoted roles to see leadership as the province of others. Unwillingness to grasp one's own authority may be attributed to structural factors and a culture in which the 'responsibility virus' is allowed to multiply.

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 reach 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, opportunistic and cultural cannot develop.

However, distributed leadership is above all 'situational'. It is sensitive to time and context. Trust and reciprocity take time to grow. All of the six models we have described have their own context, place and purpose. Distribution develops in different ways, through both formal and informal processes in the school. It works both from the top down and through bottom up processes initiated by teachers and sometimes pupils. While there is little evidence in this study of parents as leaders (governing bodies apart) there is undoubtedly greater scope for their contribution to school improvement.

With our six models in mind, together with some of the tools we have used in this project, schools may be encouraged to take a more strategic, self-evaluating and self-improving approach to distributed leadership.

Some questions to consider

- 1. As headteachers adopt the language of distributed leadership it may sit uncomfortably with a more hierarchical structure and culture and what has been done historically.**
 - Where is the line drawn between 'hands off', 'standing back', and 'laissez faire'?
 - In what circumstances is it appropriate?
- 2. Headteachers speak of 'fluidity'. Leadership may be less located in the 'who' than in the 'what', arising out of activity in which people spontaneously and instinctively take the initiative.**
 - Is fluidity too risky? Is there a need for clearly demarcated roles to avoid confusion or anxiety?
- 3. Distributed leadership may be seen as close to or equivalent to democratic leadership. For any culture to work, there need to be mores, rules and sanctions, consensus around a democratic culture.**
 - In a hierarchical structure in which people are divided not only by role and status but by salary, how valid may be a teacher's claim that 'I'm not paid for that'?
- 4. In a simple, linear line management structure, the lines of accountability are clear and well understood. As the structure and culture become more complex, less stratified, and more organic, accountability becomes complex.**
 - How does accountability work when leadership is distributed?
- 5. Distributing leadership and at the same time having a coherent system of accountability relies on conditions or a climate that permits and encourages sharing. Its key element is trust.**
 - What are the different understandings of trust among teachers and pupils?
 - How can a school create and sustain trust?
- 6. Heads describe their visions of school in terms of democratic, greater freedom to choose where and when you learn, how and what you learn but they also have to respond to external pressures, eg Ofsted, and also relay some of those pressures on to their staff.**
 - How do heads manage that tension with honesty and integrity?
 - Is it possible to avoid manipulation, lack of disclosure, the 'noble lie'?
 - Can the principle of distributed leadership be effectively implemented without the head exhibiting some political and micro-political skills?

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