Distributed Leadership: The theory and the Practice

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Introduction

In a study of leadership in service organizations, Duignan (2003) advocates the need for an important shift in the meaning, perspective and scope (depth and breadth) of leadership in schools, in order to build organisational cultures that promote, nurture and support shared and distributed leadership.

There is one voice among the many in the chorus which argues that, for reasons of survival, or efficacy, even principle, the practice of investing leadership solely in individuals is no longer sustainable. A number of influential authors advocate the need for “shared leadership” (eg Lambert 2002) or “distributed leadership” (eg Hargreaves and Fink 2004) or “parallel leadership” (eg Crowther et al 2002a, 2002b). There seems to be an assumption that because leadership shared or distributed reflects a more democratic and collaborative approach, it is necessarily a “good thing”, and that once we accept this conclusion such forms of leadership are easily achieved. Is this actually the case? And what, essentially, is shared or distributed leadership?

What do we mean by shared and distributed leadership?

The National Quality Schools Framework in Australia (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003) proposes that schools with shared leadership:

- create and maintain a shared vision and goals for student development and learning;
- empower staff to share leadership for school development that responds to and manages the processes that lead to sustained improvement;
- create high expectations for students, teachers and the school, with an unrelenting focus on social, emotional and academic learning outcomes for all students;
- support and monitor professional learning through distributed leadership;
• develop and maintain high-level shared knowledge about curriculum and instruction; and
• initiate innovation through a focus on action, culture building and organisation-wide learning.

Quite a list! Where should one begin? How can an educational leader help bring this all about?

And what about the concept of distributed leadership? This has been described by Elmore (2000) as “multiple sources of guidance and direction following the contours of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture,” while Andrews and Lewis (2004) conceptualise it as a form of parallel leadership where teacher leaders work with principal leaders, in distinctive yet complementary ways, towards goals they all share. Both concepts of shared and distributed leadership in schools are so broad that they could really embrace any number of behaviours and processes. For the most part, distributed leadership is a form of shared leadership that is distributed to key stakeholders throughout the organisation. Distributed leadership will be used as a type of shared leadership in this paper and will be referred to later.

**Why do we seek to share leadership in schools?**

A range of reasons has been put forward in the literature for the pursuit of shared leadership. We have grouped them into two categories: *pull factors*, which are attractive to organisations because they yield desirable results; and *push factors*, which are characteristics of the external environment that drive practitioners to share leadership because they makes it possible for them to function (perhaps even survive) in an increasingly complex and demanding world.
Pull factors

Factors attracting organisations to opt for shared leadership are that the approach:

- actually works in practice;
- builds commitment among those involved; and
- is ethical.

It works in practice

Shared or distributed leadership has been demonstrated to contribute to improved student outcomes, increased recognition of the profession, and more effective change management. Significant research has focused on the roles of teachers as leaders influencing the outcomes of teaching and learning. The work of Darling-Hammond (1999) and Crowther (2002a & 2002b) among others, points to the central role of teachers in influencing student performance and outcomes in schooling. It has also been claimed that student outcomes are more likely to improve where leadership sources are shared and distributed throughout the school, and where teachers are empowered in decisions related to teaching, learning and assessment (Silins and Mulford 2002). In some contexts, teacher leadership has been linked to the question of the degree to which teaching has gained recognition and acceptance as a profession (Institute for Educational Leadership 2001, p6).

Shared leadership has also been found to be effective in enhancing change leadership. Pearce and Sims (2002) reported on a study that explored the behaviour of appointed team leaders (vertical leadership) versus the influence and effectiveness of those within the team (shared leadership). Shared leadership, they concluded, accounted for much of the effectiveness of change management teams. However, Elmore (2000) cautions that collaborative work by teachers will not, alone, lead to changed teacher practices and improved
learning outcomes as there must also be a clear organisational focus on large-scale change and whole-school improvement.

Another reason why sharing leadership with the group or with a number of stakeholders works in practice is because diversity actually matters in decision making (Surowiecki, 2005) He argues that diversity of people and their information helps in coming to a better decision or resolution because it actually adds perspectives that would otherwise be absent if the decision is made by one person, even by an expert, and because it takes away, or at least weakens, some of the destructive characteristics of group decision making, for example, group think. (p. 29) Not alone does Surowiecki conclude that diverse groups of individuals ‘will make better and more robust forecasts and more intelligent decisions than a skilled decision maker’, but that ‘groups that are too much alike find it harder to keep learning, because each member is bringing less and less new information to the table . . . and they become progressively less able to investigate alternatives. (p. 31) Grouping only smart people (experts) together also doesn’t work that well, he says, because they tend to resemble each other in what they can do. He recommends that it is better to entrust a diverse group with varying degrees of knowledge and insight with major decisions ‘rather than leaving them in the hands of one or two people, no matter how smart those people are.’ (p. 31) He encourages leaders when making decisions to engage with others who have different knowledge bases and perspectives because ‘the simple fact of making a group diverse makes it better at problem solving.’ (p. 30)

Sharing leadership and decision making with others in an organisation also helps build their commitment to organizational goals and processes.

*It builds commitment*

There are persuasive arguments for the capacity of shared leadership to build commitment. Motivated teachers participate in school improvement with greater
commitment. Harris (2002, p.2) found that shared or distributed leadership is a key determinant of the motivation of teachers. With respect to school improvement and change, she points to an extensive body of research, which confirms that strong collegial relationships, mutual trust, support and a focus on enquiry are crucial for effective improvement.

Shared leadership also promotes a sense of belonging among participants, a sense of being valued members of their school community and a deep commitment to collective action for whole-school success (Crowther et al. 2002b).

**It is ethical**

Starratt (2004) argues that there is an ethical dimension to leadership that requires formal leaders to share their leadership responsibilities with others. Above all, they should engage with teachers and other key stakeholders to take collective responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning in their school.

The core focus for educational leaders is on the enhancement of teaching and learning. This focus challenges them to be more fully aware of and present to the transformative possibilities in student learning as well as to be more proactively responsible for inviting, encouraging and supporting teachers to cultivate those deeper dimensions of learning.

The ‘bottom line’ for educational leaders is that they create and support the conditions that promote quality teaching and learning in their schools. Leadership that promotes and supports these, requires, according to Starratt (2004), a commitment to three ethics:

1. Ethic of Authenticity;
2. Ethic of Responsibility; and
3. Ethic of Presence
**Ethic of Authenticity**

Educational leaders should bring their deepest principles, beliefs, values and convictions to their work. The ethic of authenticity is foundational to educational leadership as it points these leaders toward a more self-responsible form of relationships and leadership and they should act with the good of others (e.g. students, teachers, parents) as a primary reference.

It is this engagement of the 'self' with the 'other' that provides the educational leader with a deep sense of personal and professional responsibility for what is happening to the other (especially students). In the school setting, this constitutes, according to Starratt (2004), an 'ethic of responsibility' which causes them to focus, primarily, on the core values (e.g., respect for the dignity and worth of others); the core people (teachers and students); and the core business (high quality or authentic teaching and learning).

**Ethic of Responsibility**

Educational leaders, therefore, should feel deeply responsible for the quality or authenticity of the learning for students in their schools (Starratt, 2004). They should name, challenge and change, if at all possible, inauthentic learning processes (e.g. teaching narrowly to the test).

Responsible educational leaders ensure that due deliberation is given to the circumstances, values and processes involved in creating the conditions for authentic learning, as well as listening to and caring for the persons making the decisions related to this learning. Responsible leaders have the courage of their convictions and stand up for what is ethically and morally 'right,' especially with regard to the ways in which teachers and students are engaged with learning content and processes. They get directly involved with, and are present for, others in the teaching/learning environment.
Ethic of Presence

Presence means ‘being there’, in numerous ways, for self and others. It implies a level of attention and sensitivity to the signals others send out. Are we really present to/for ourselves and others, or are we often ‘half present’ because of self interest or the distractions of other events in our lives? (Starratt, 2004) Being present demands full engagement with people, events, and things.

Educational leaders should ask what ‘being fully present’ means in relation to teaching and learning of students in their schools. It certainly means being present to injustice and to unfair expectations and demands. It also means naming and challenging ‘inauthentic teaching and learning’ conditions and processes and taking positive action to promote and support ‘authentic learning’. Educational leaders couldn’t ‘live with themselves’ personally or professionally (ethic of authenticity) unless they took responsibility for the quality of their students’ learning by naming and challenging inauthentic learning (ethic of responsibility), then engaging meaningfully with others and helping them create the conditions for authentic learning (ethic of presence). Their presence activates a deep sense of their own authenticity and that of others. Injustice offends their sense of authenticity and generates a “...response that is consistent with the person I am, the values I embrace, the lessons I’ve learned, the commitments I’ve made.” (Starratt, 2004 pp. 91-92).

Being fully present helps educational leaders be authentic and responsible. As Starratt (2004) reminds us:

Our presence enables others to recognize themselves in our presence to them. Our presence contributes to and enhances the human and natural energy in our surroundings. Our presence activates our authenticity and the authenticity of others. That is why this kind of presence is a virtue: it produces good.
An important understanding of the ethics of authenticity, responsibility and presence is that, ultimately, they dialogical, “... both asserting self and receiving the other.” (Starratt, 2004, p. 105). As Starratt puts it, it is “... in the dialogue that authenticity becomes moral, for it involves the negotiation of who I am in relation to the full reality of what the other is.” (p. 106)

In relation to creating the conditions for authentic learning in schools, a key implication of Starratt’s perspective is that principals, and other formal leaders, need to engage in the “... virtuous activity of dialogical authenticity, dialogical presence, and dialogical responsibility. ...” (p. 106) In other words, they need to share leadership responsibilities with others, especially with teachers and students.

**Factors which drive organisations towards shared leadership (Push)**

The factors that drive schools towards developing structures and processes for sharing leadership include the increasing isolation of principals, the increasing complexity of their work, and growing ambiguity in contemporary school operations.

**The isolation of principals**

Principals sometimes operate out of an isolationist or bunker mentality with the result that they find it difficult to share their leadership responsibilities. This can lead to the development of a dependency among the school community whereby no event is complete without the principal, and no decision proceeds without his/her involvement. Such a stance constitutes a very narrow view of leadership and can lead to some of the problems which are beginning to emerge in leadership succession and recruitment (many teachers and other school-based educators do not want to apply for the principalship).
It would seem, however, that principals should no longer rely on leadership philosophies and management practices that were developed for past conditions and circumstances and that tended to focus on the principal as the leader or manager of the school. Awareness of this reality should push principals and school communities towards a consideration of more shared or distributed approaches to leadership.

**Increasing complexity of the role of the principal**

Principals, on their own, may no longer be able lead the complex organisations that schools have become – at least in the way leadership has traditionally been exercised (Cannon, 2005). Agendas have been complicated by the drive to increased accountabilities and by the increasing diversity of the societies in which schools operate. Complexity has been driven too by a proliferation of legislative frameworks with increasingly detailed requirements. Examples include occupational health and safety, privacy, sexual harassment, child protection and the like.

Increased complexity drives those in formal leadership positions to ‘let go’ of the idea that leadership is hierarchically distributed and pushes them toward a more shared approach to leadership. In some ways, it is simply the stark realisation that no individual can possibly deal with the masses of interactions and information called on by notions of educational best practice, legislative requirements, parent and student needs, and good management practice.

To respond to the complexity of leading today’s schools, educational leaders need to create school cultures where key stakeholders, especially teachers, students and parents are invited to take responsibility for many different aspects of their school’s operations.
School operations are increasingly ambiguous and paradoxical.

We live in a messy world where complex and often paradoxical problems do not lend themselves to single or simple solutions. Also, most contemporary school-based problems constitute situations that are rich in values, dilemmas and paradoxes and they can confuse and frustrate those who have to resolve them (Duignan 2003, Duignan and Collins 2003). Educational leaders need to develop frameworks for leading in such challenging contexts. When responding to paradoxical problems. It would seem wise, as stated earlier with regard to the diversity and wisdom of groups, for formal leaders to dialogue with their professional colleagues on many of the conundrums of leadership so as to tap into their wisdom and share the responsibility for finding solutions that are practical and manageable.

We have examined the various push and pull factors which combine in different ways in different schools to move schools towards shared or distributed leadership. However, there are still powerful forces at work in most schools that work against sharing and distributing leadership.

Shared leadership in the real world

Shared or distributed leadership is not easy to establish and maintain in practice and, consequently, is not a characteristic of many contemporary schools. According to Harris (2002:p7), there are some important reasons for this, especially those related to an emphasis on individualism, privacy and idiosyncratic institutional practice in many school settings:

It [shared leadership] challenges the ‘cult of individualism’ and confronts the impulse for privacy and idiosyncratic institutional practice. Instead, it offers a model in which organisational change and improvement are a collective rather than an individual concern.
A research study on the perceptions of principals and other school leaders on the concept and practice of shared leadership in one school system (Fraser and Duignan, 2004) reported that while the rhetoric of shared leadership was prevalent in schools, there was very little evidence of its practice. Respondents (16 principals) demonstrated relatively unsophisticated understandings of what shared leadership might be, and focussed their attentions more on idealistic beliefs, values and attitudes to shared leadership which were not always matched by their behaviours.

The authors also used two separate small groups of respondents, with a particular interest in leadership, to probe this phenomenon further. The first was made up of participants in the Leaders Transforming Learning and Learners (LTLL) Project – a joint initiative of the Australian Catholic University and four NSW Catholic urban and regional school systems. Nine schools participated (5 primary and 4 secondary) each with a team of 3 or 4 members including the principal. Eighteen of the possible 38 participants responded to an on line survey.

The second group was made up of 59 participants in two workshops at the Wollongong University Distributive Leadership Conference in 2006. These respondents represented primary and secondary schools, system administrators and academics. Both groups were asked to respond to a set of questions, including the following:

- How committed to sharing leadership is the average teacher?
- To what extent does the nature of an activity influence teachers’ choice to share in leadership activities?
- To what extent is this choice to share influenced by a sense that it will make a difference?
- To what extent does relationships with the principal influence this choice?
There was a high degree of consistency between the responses of the two groups. 40% rated teacher commitment to sharing leadership as neutral or negative. Over 90% indicated that participation was influenced to some degree by the area of activity in which participation was being proposed (see below). Decisions to take on shared leadership were seen as being influenced by the sense that participation would make a difference (70% of respondents). Relationship with the principal was seen as an important influence on the decision to engage in shared leadership (80% of respondents). While the number of respondents in these two inquiries is relatively small, there is sufficient consistency in the responses to warrant further investigation.

When asked to name those areas in which teachers were most likely to participate in shared leadership, respondents in the LTLL group named (in rank order):

- Curriculum
- Student welfare
- Special events/targeted activities (eg sports carnival)
- Pedagogy
- Student management
- Personal interest areas
- Social activities

Areas in which teachers were less likely to participate in shared decision making included (in rank order by respondents):

- Finance (By a long way!)
- Dealing with parents
- Management and administration
- Emotional, high stakes issues
- Strategic planning and policy development
It would seem that teachers’ attitudes to sharing in decision making have not changed greatly over the past 20 years. Bezzina (1983) found that:

Teachers were found to participate least, and to desire least participation in those decision making areas in the resource allocation subsystem. …..Greatest actual and desired participation took place in those curriculum decision making areas which were interpreted as being most directly concerned with pupils.

There could be a danger that if we focus on teachers collectively participating in the leadership of change, for example, that their importance as individuals - their anxieties, concerns, fears and frustrations – can be ignored or neglected. It is important to remember that in a change initiative that encourages teachers to take on roles as leaders and decision makers, they often have no real prior experience or preparation for this and they may be anxious or fearful of such engagement. School leaders, such as principals, need to encourage teachers to name and discuss openly their personal fears and insecurities with regard to taking responsibility for sharing leadership and decision making (Forsha, 1992). They must also encourage, support and facilitate engagement if teachers are to take joint responsibility for pedagogical and curriculum leadership in the school.

All significant change, such as developing a school culture of shared leadership and decision making, begins with self-change (Cashman 1998; Wildblood 1995). Leaders of such change sometimes tend to focus too much on the change itself, which is external to the individual, and pay too little attention to the psychological transition of ‘the self’ that individuals go through in coping with or adapting to the change (Bridges 1997). Individuals and their psychological needs and concerns should be the primary focus in any change process, because as Pendlebury et al. (1998) contend, the greatest difficulties encountered during a process of change are those that arise inside people’s heads, which may lead to them resist the change.
The perceptions of individual teachers are critical in any effort to either understand the current lack of congruence between rhetoric and reality in shared leadership or to put in place processes to increase shared leadership practice. Discussions of shared leadership need to be based on a better understanding of factors which shape teachers’ attitudes and behaviour, and of the connection between the two.

**Understanding teachers’ participation in shared leadership**

The decision to take part in shared leadership is no different in essence from any decision about behaviour. Attitude has long been recognised by social psychologists as a key driver of behaviour, and one of the most widely used models for understanding the link between human behaviour and attitude is Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) which has been progressively refined over twenty years of applications in a range of fields. (eg Ajzen, 2005). In brief, Ajzen argues that an individual’s behaviour is shaped most immediately by his/her intentions, which in turn are shaped by attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms (sense of societal expectations – what I think others expect of me) and perceived behavioural control (the extent to which I believe I am in control of my own actions).

Based on Ajzen’s work and on its application to decision making in school settings by Bezzina (1989), the following model is proposed to help explain why teachers might want to participate in shared leadership in their schools.
The application of the modified TPB to shared leadership in schools can be illustrated by the following example. A teacher finds that an opportunity is available to take part in leading a working team on improving learning in the school. Here is the type of reasoning, based on the model, that might contribute to a decision to accept the opportunity to participate.

I think that student learning will improve if I get involved, and I see this as a good thing (attitude)
My colleagues would expect me to do this (subjective norm)
I believe this is the right thing to do (personal norm)
I have the skills and knowledge to lead this group well (perceived ability)
I am being given a chance to take leadership here (perceived opportunity)
These would then generate a general disposition for the teacher to get involved followed by the specific intention to do so in this particular case.

The application of this framework to our current understanding of shared leadership it yields some interesting outcomes. It addresses squarely the reality of low uptake of shared leadership by addressing the idea of change from the ‘inside out’ as identified by writers such as Pendlebury (1998) and Cashman (1998). It also provides a better understanding of the attitudes, dispositions, intentions and likely motivations of individuals, such as teachers, toward participating in processes outside their comfort zones. While it is important to also focus on collective and group dynamics related to participation in shared leadership and decision making (e.g., building a culture of trust that is free from fear and encourages risk taking and shared learning), the anxieties, fears, intentions and motivations of individuals are important considerations if the rhetoric of shared leadership and decision making is to become a reality in our schools.

The model indicates that teachers have to be convinced that their engagement in shared leadership will produce outcomes that they value. Thus, as was seen in the surveys described earlier, teachers will value participation in leadership in some areas of school life more than others. They are more likely to seek a leadership engagement if the reasons are focused on the improvement of students’ learning. They need to believe that they have the ability to take on the shared responsibilities being called for, and they need to believe they will genuinely be given the opportunity to exercise leadership if they choose to participate.

Of the various factors in the model, the leadership literature has tended to focus most on this issue of making available opportunities for teachers to share in leadership. Interestingly, of the various factors in Figure 1, when Bezzina (1989) added perceived opportunity to Ajzen’s earlier model in his study of teacher
participation in decision making, it turned out to be the least significant predictor of behaviour. This could suggest that there is a need for a different approach to both the theory and the practice of shared leadership in schools.

By and large the literature has taken a strongly organisational and group-based focus on shared approaches to leadership. Where consideration has been given to the decision making of the individuals involved, it has been without the benefit of an organising framework. If we genuinely wish to encourage teachers’ participation in shared leadership, this initial application of the model would suggest we need to address not only organisational factors and opportunities, but also the shaping of teachers’ beliefs, attitudes and intentions through providing experiences of shared leadership that they perceive to make a difference for students; build on their shared norms and individuals personal norms; and encourage and support them to develop a sense of their efficacy and capability in shared leadership approaches.

Conclusion

This paper was prompted by a desire to explore the apparent gap between the rhetoric of shared leadership and its reality in schools. It has demonstrated that, at least in part, the difficulties arise out of overly simplistic understandings of the meaning and purposes of shared leadership and the dynamics of its implementation.

An exploration of the range of meanings which can be attributed to notions like shared, distributed and parallel leadership showed that there is probably a need for greater clarity about what we mean by them if we are to try to come to terms with their practice. What is it precisely that we are seeking to share? How do we structure opportunities for sharing? How can we develop the conditions in which teachers will seek opportunities to participate in shared leadership? How can we
acknowledge the range of individual differences among the members of a school staff, and harness these to release the real benefits of sharing?

There are strong arguments (described here as “push” and “pull” factors), which might be expected to predispose schools to move towards greater sharing of leadership. However, the forces for change operate most strongly on the person of the principal, and not so strongly on the other members of staff for whom shared leadership is often perceived as taking on additional responsibilities, which may or may not align with their personal beliefs, values and norms.

Adding to the complexity is the fact that leadership can be exercised in many arenas in the school, for example, leadership in pedagogy and curriculum; community leadership; leadership of a special function, such as a sporting event; or financial leadership. Each of these areas calls for different skills and abilities, appeals to different interests and will, likely, attract different people to participate in different ways. Studies in related areas as well as two small projects reported here, demonstrate that there are clear differences in teacher preparedness to participate in different areas of shared leadership and decision making.

Understanding the motivators of individual behaviour is a challenge, which has been addressed by social psychologists over many years. An adaptation of a significant theoretical framework from this field (Ajzen, 2005; Bezzina, 1989), highlights the level of sophistication that needs to be brought to an understanding of why teachers will (or will not) engage in shared or distributed leadership. The framework presented in this paper provides a focus on those elements of school culture most likely to promote increased sharing of leadership, thereby maximising the likelihood of real outcomes from increasing the engagement of a number of key school-based stakeholders in a shared approach to leadership and decision making. This should have the added effects of developing a shared sense of the importance of collegiality; enhancing the teacher skill base in decision making; promoting a sense of self efficacy among teachers and others.
involved; and providing greater opportunities for sharing, preferably in areas that match the interests and capabilities of teachers.

If we genuinely believe that shared leadership is a practical and ethical necessity in today's schools, then we need to engage with its dynamics in more sophisticated ways than have been the practice to date. Understanding the individual dynamics of teacher choice can also make a significant additional contribution to progress in this direction.

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