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# **‘Distributed Leadership: Challenging Five Generally Held Assumptions’**

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## **Abstract**

This article reports on a study exploring a distributed perspective on school leadership through three headteacher case studies conducted in Scottish primary schools. Drawing from a sequence of in-depth, semi-structured and narrative style interviews conducted with each headteacher, as well as from a semi-structured questionnaire and sociometric analysis conducted with staff, the article analyses the experiences and perceptions of headteachers. The paper finds that in practice, distributed leadership is more complex and challenging than often represented, challenging five generally held assumptions in the theoretical, policy and practice frames. Implications are drawn for educational leadership at both school and system levels.

**Keywords:** distributed leadership, leadership, management, education policy

## **Introduction**

Both nationally and internationally, distributed leadership has gained prominence in recent years, forming the popular discourse of contemporary school education literature in the search for effective models of school governance. Promoted as offering ‘empowering’ school leadership and management processes, a distributed perspective is seen as a desirable way for staff in schools to work together, constituting workforce reform (Gunter, 2008 and 2012). In a number of countries including the UK, a distributed perspective on school leadership and management has become an expectation (Gronn, 2009b).

As a concept, distributed leadership is attractive to policy makers seeking ways to involve the teaching workforce in the leadership of schools regardless of their formal role or remit (Hallinger and Heck, 2009). The positioning of leadership within the expectations of the role of every teacher makes many things possible in theory (Crowther, 2009; Frost and Durrant, 2002; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001; Murphy, 2005). However, it will be argued that such objectives do not necessarily reflect the

realities of teachers' professional aspirations, identities and practices. Beyond the theory and policy rhetoric, this paper seeks to contribute to a long standing discussion in *School Leadership and Management* as to whether or not the practice of distributed leadership lives up to its politicized aspirations.

The paper draws on the findings of empirical research using interpretative enquiry with aspects of a grounded approach to reach a depth of understanding. The overall aim of the study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of early career primary headteacher Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH) graduates in their early years of headship situating a distributed perspective on leadership in their schools, as promoted by school leadership literature, national policy and the SQH programme. Five main and one ancillary research question arose from the literature review:

- What do primary headteachers understand as distributed leadership?
- What do primary headteachers identify as the key characteristics of distributed leadership if they believe it to be embedded in the practice of their particular schools?
- To what extent, in the opinion of staff, do those characteristics currently operate in their particular schools?
- How do those primary headteachers think those characteristics have come about? (e.g. naturally and/or purposely planned for)
- What do primary headteachers (and their staff) perceive as the benefits and/or problems arising from operating a distributed perspective in practice?
- [What implications, if any, are there for leadership development with particular reference to the Scottish Qualification for Headship programme?]

Explored through three case studies, each headteacher's voice was heard through a sequence of in-depth, semi-structured and narrative style interviews. Each was able to articulate the rationale for and strategic intentions behind a distributed perspective, as well as the range of processes engaged with to purposefully take forward that perspective. The study extended beyond self-reporting as staff perceptions of school leadership and management, along with the extent to which leadership was distributed

within each school, were elicited through a 360° analysis, a semi-structured questionnaire incorporating a sociometric analysis of leadership relationships.

Working within a range of conceptual confusions, the problematic nature of distributed leadership surfaced at various points of the research process. How the headteachers made sense of a distributed perspective, their role and motivations remained prominent throughout. Far from its often simplistic presentation in the policy rhetoric and theoretical frame, distributed leadership was found to be multi-faceted, involving those in both formal and informal leadership positions, involving teaching and support staff to differing extents. In taking forward a distributed perspective, each headteacher prioritised getting to know each member of staff, building trust and communicating a vision for the school and in so doing, encouraging and enabling staff to engage in school leadership processes and practices. This was, however, by no means an uncontested area and the headteachers were aware of steering a careful course, guided by their professional values rather than a blueprint for effective practice. In so doing, each headteacher encountered a range of challenges.

Six themes emerged from an analysis across the three case study findings. Distributed leadership was found to be context specific, socially constructed, negotiated, hierarchical and to large extent, 'in the gift of the headteacher'. Indeed, the central role of the headteacher in actively encouraging, enabling and facilitating distributed leadership at individual and whole staff levels emerged strongly (Torrance, 2012a and 2012b). This paper reports briefly on those five themes before discussing the sixth. The headteachers and their staff identified a number of potential issues with a distributed perspective, linked to five generally held assumptions often held in the theoretical, policy and practice frames of reference: that every staff member is able or wishes to lead; that the leadership role of staff is legitimized simply by the headteacher's endorsement; that a distributed perspective occurs naturally and is unproblematic. Each generally held assumption is discussed in relation to the policy-practice interface.

### **The Policy Discourse**

Distributed leadership has been positioned within national and international policy discourse, progressing a political agenda (Torrance, 2012a). It has been heralded a panacea for contemporary challenges besetting education in many countries related to devolved school governance (Gunter, 2012), the perceived leadership crisis (MacBeath *et al.*, 2009), the inherent difficulties in school management structures (Murphy, 2005), workload pressures and issues of succession planning (Gunter and Rayner, 2007; Hargreaves, 2008; Harris *et al.*, 2007; Rhodes and Brundrett, 2006). Its theoretical construction has been fundamentally artificial, to large extent serving a political rather than educational purpose. It has become yet another '*slogan or banality*', a universally accepted truth not requiring explanation or justification (Ozga and Jones, 2006: 6), providing legitimization for workforce reform, presenting policy in a pill palatable for the profession to swallow, inciting little confrontation.

Key factors have contributed to the positioning of distributed leadership. Its emergence was an inevitable consequence of the global shift to devolve school governance, coupled with workforce reform in a drive to increase the performance of education systems and economic prosperity. The belief in market mechanisms offering a way to stimulate educational improvements brought with it new public management with characteristics of performance indicators, quality assurance systems and associated standards and competencies. In the UK, increased compliance and changes to the governance of schools led to changes to the headteacher role, becoming increasingly complex. The solo, heroic, charismatic headteacher model was found to be ineffectual. Distributed leadership was positioned in the policy discourse to advance workforce reform, address the headteacher recruitment and retention crisis, and progress the school improvement agenda. It was seen as the cure to all that ailed education. Distributed leadership provided a mechanism for ensuring compliance without challenge to democratic principles, instilling electoral confidence through demonstration of action rather than longer-term reflection and strategic policy formation. In Scotland, distributed leadership was aligned to democratic principles of distributed justice and accepted as competent by the government and policy community.

The endorsement of distributed leadership has been normative and aspirational, not premised on empirical understandings (Harris, 2009; Leithwood *et al.*, 2009). Having

become commonly accepted, it is seldom questioned. Nor is the interchangeability of terms such as collegiality, distributed, distributive and shared leadership. Conceptual understanding of each is lacking. As such, it has unsteady foundations leading to tensions in the field (Torrance, 2009).

### **The Literature Discourse**

Conceptualising distributed leadership is problematic. In part, this stems from the conceptual confusion surrounding a definition of leadership itself, which is heavily contested (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999; Yukl, 2002), as is the distinction made between leadership and management (Ball, 2008; Gunter, 2012). Despite frequent references within policy, theory and practice frames, defining distributed leadership is equally problematic, hampered by a dearth of empirical studies (Harris, 2009; Leithwood *et al.*, 2009). As a concept, distributed leadership remains contested, '*often bearing little apparent relationship to what happens in schools and classrooms*' (MacBeath, 2009: 41).

A lack of clarity exists in the conceptual framing of distributed leadership with multiple and competing discourses leading to various conceptual confusions (Torrance, 2012a). Over the last decade or so, contributors to *School Leadership and Management* have explored a number of those confusions. The following are examples.

In 2003, Gronn provided a analysis of leadership asking *who needs it?*, exposing a series of key yet little recognised conceptual inadequacies in the leadership discourse. He concluded that the longer term utility of leadership was dependent upon a move away from focused and exceptional leadership to distributed forms that more accurately recognise the division of labour, acknowledging a renewed interest in distributed leadership that has been sustained since 2003.

Also in 2003, Harris examined the little explored relationship between teacher leadership and distributed leadership, identifying connections and overlaps between them as well as opportunities of and challenges to their coexistence as staff co-construct meaning and knowledge of the practice of leadership within the hierarchical organisation of schools. Across the literature, she identified three dominant positions

within which teacher leadership was perceived as either *heresy, fantasy or possibility*, depending on how leadership was perceived: located within a person, role or status; conceptually freed from the practical realities of hierarchical structures; or intentionally nurtured, supported and enable within the realities of hierarchical organisations.

In 2004, Storey critiqued a number of polarities in the leadership literature as well as problematizing the promotion of distributed leadership as an attempt to move away from the prevalent focus on the location of leadership within the headteacher role without sufficient empirical underpinning. Her English secondary school case study findings surfaced *the problem of distributed leadership* in relation to significant tensions between different and competing school leaders, particularly between the headteacher and subject leaders.

In 2005, Crawford raised and answered the question as to whether there was a *paradoxical relationship* between distributed leadership and headship. In so doing, she recognised the key role played by those in formal leadership positions in creating conditions conducive to distributed leadership. Furthermore, she guarded against the assumption that the headteacher role was redundant within a distributed perspective, identifying this as a fundamental misunderstanding both in relation to the theory and practice frames.

In 2005, MacBeath drew from the findings of a National College of School Leadership funded study involving eleven junior/infant, primary, middle and secondary schools in England. The study explored distributed leadership in context concluding that it was a *matter of practice*. In its practice, senior leaders were faced with three sets of dilemmas: trust and accountability; ‘letting go’ and ‘holding on’; maintaining a balance between command, consultation and consensus. The headteachers’ perspectives were found to be shaped by their length of time in post. Furthermore, rather than a singular representation, distributed leadership was characterised in different, potentially fluid and complementary forms: formal, pragmatic, strategic, incremental, opportunistic and cultural.

In 2007, Ritchie and Woods drew from the findings of a National College of School Leadership funded study involving eight primary and two secondary schools in England, setting out to *understand variations in the nature of distributed leadership in schools*. Similar to MacBeath (2005), they perceived distributed leadership to be complex and multi-dimensional, representing a complex mix of characteristics and actions. They identified a typology of three degrees of distribution - emerging, developing and embedded - influenced by the contextual interplay between agential and structural dimensions.

In 2008, Leithwood *et al.* reported on a review of the international literature with an emphasis placed on empirical studies, identifying *seven strong claims about successful school leadership*. Of those, two specifically pertained to distributed leadership: that for school leadership to have greater influence it needed to be widely distributed; different patterns of distributed leadership were found to be more or less effective. Recognition was however given to the evidence for those two claims not being as extensive as for other claims. Further recognition was given to the lack of systematic school leadership research leading to a lack of sufficient amount or quality of evidence to guide policy and practice.

In 2009, Murphy *et al.* explored *the role of the principal in fostering the development of distributed leadership*. Focusing on one American middle school case study, drawn from a larger longitudinal study of six case studies, their findings identified aspects of the school principal's practice focused on developing a distributed perspective on leadership requiring personal transformation and a reconceptualisation of their own leadership role in relation to the development of teachers' leadership roles. In that regard, they found that the principal worked to overcome a number of barriers of a cultural, structural and professional nature. Furthermore, the role of the school principal was found to be vital in developing and supporting teacher leadership as well as managing distributed leadership.

In 2012, Bush and Glover drew from the findings of a National College for School Leadership funded study of high performing senior leadership teams (SLTs) in nine primary, secondary and special case study schools in England. The study contributed to very limited empirical work making connections between leadership teams and



distributed leadership, finding that a key characteristic of effective SLTs was their commitment to distributed leadership. That said, a significant finding of *distributed leadership in action* was the identification of the central role of the headteacher for distributed leadership and the effectiveness of SLTs. Indeed, distributed leadership was found to be within the gift of the headteacher, a finding clearly recognised within this article, based on the findings of the study it explores.

Key voices across three broad perspectives are identifiable in the international literature, comprising a spectrum of views. At one end of the spectrum (e.g. Harris and Spillane, 2008), distributed leadership is welcomed and encouraged. At the other (e.g. Ball, 2008; Gunter, 2012), it is deeply contested and treated with suspicion, judged to represent little more than a smokescreen to provide an illusion of consultation for new-managerialist strategies. Between those perspectives, others (e.g. Gronn, 2009a and 2009b) acknowledge it is how leadership is practiced which counts and question whether the term adequately represents the realities of school practice. Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that it is the way in which leadership and a distributed perspective are conceptualized and practiced which are key.

### **Definitions Used in this Study**

Arguably, one of the main hindrances to progress within the field of educational leadership has been the lack of attention that over 60% of authors have paid to defining leadership in their work (Rost, 1991: 6). Of the definitions provided, there is significant ambiguity in the use and interpretation of the term (MacBeath, 2004), with an overly simplistic '*tendency to define leadership in terms of its effectiveness or outcome*' and to focus on '*positive outcomes*' (Spillane, 2006: 11). The working definition of leadership used for this study was that offered by Spillane and Coldren (2011: 78) who define leadership as '*a relationship of social influence*'. When leadership is located in a relationship of social influence, expertise rather than formal position forms the basis of authority (Timperley, 2009).

Similarly, few authors and researchers define distributed leadership in and for their work (Spillane and Diamond, 2007). The working definition of distributed leadership selected for use in this study was that offered by Harris and Spillane (2008: 31) who use the term '*distributed leadership perspective*' whereby multiple leaders, formally

recognized or not, engage in a wide range of leadership and management activities, where *'leadership and management play out in tandem in practice'* (Spillane and Diamond, 2007: 152-3). This model recognizes the difficulty in separating the theoretic distinctions between leadership and management in practice. It focuses on interactions in leadership practice and the influence of leadership practice on improvement. Those interactions concern *'both formal and informal leadership and the way they produce different patterns of activity'* (Harris, 2008: 31). This model also recognizes that distributed leadership has multiple realities, reflecting different ways in which leadership is stretched over leaders, followers and situation in collaborated, coordinated or collective patterns.

### **The Study and its Methods**

The study encompassed small-scale empirical research to reach a depth of understanding of how the actors within a small number of primary schools made sense of distributed leadership with a focus on three headteacher case studies. An iterative process was employed moving back-and-forth between data gathered and theory proposed (Charmaz, 2006). In that regard, the research was *'a combination of both experience and reasoning'* (Cohen *et al.*, 2006: 5). Instead of beginning inquiry in theory, the research began with experience as expressed in the lived and told stories (Charmaz, 2006; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) of the three headteachers. The three single-site case studies were conducted in sequence over a period of eighteen months with a slight overlap between the completion of one and the commencement of the next.

The study's purposive sample was selected to provide insights from a group marginalised in the limited number of empirical studies conducted to date. Primary headteachers were selected since the literature (e.g. Bell, 2007; Spillane's work) suggested key differences between the size, structures and complexity of primary and secondary schools would make it difficult to draw parallels between the sectors. All three were heads of primary schools within the same Scottish local authority having been subject to the same recruitment and selection criteria and procedures, theoretically at least. From the literature review (e.g. Day, 2009; Pascal and Ribbins, 1998) it was thought that by drawing from headteachers who had been in post for around two years, having had sufficient time to become established and begun to take

forward their perspective on leadership and management whilst still thinking through their actions and intentions, reflections on practice would be enhanced. The headteachers' ages ranged from 33 to 40 years. They were therefore themselves educated within the same education 'era' and it was thought, would have a similar historic and professional policy frame of reference. Each headteacher was known in their local authority as promoting a distributed perspective on leadership and management.

Each headteacher was a SQH graduate, having been conferred with both a Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management (PG Dip L&M) by the University of Edinburgh, and the professional award of the SQH by the Scottish Government (SG), having met the competences of the Standard for Headship (SfH) (SEED, 2005). The programme leading to the SQH is premised around critical reflection on the theory of educational leadership and management in and on work-based practice. Speculatively, the headteachers were familiar with the policy frame and had been exposed to clear expectations that SQH participants take forward a distributed perspective. In theory at least, they were considered to have an informed understanding of what a distributed perspective comprised in relation to their own practice. Prior to engagement with the study, each headteacher articulated a commitment to a distributed perspective on leadership in their schools, as promoted by school leadership literature, national policy, the SfH and the SQH programme.

The empirical methodology adopted was based on a grounded inductive-deductive model. At the preliminary stages, there was a temptation to form a hypothesis for testing. By adopting an interpretive perspective, resisting external form and structure to understand the experience of research participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2006) theory emerged from particular situations, '*grounded*' on data generated (Charmaz, 2006: 2; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Critical theory (as opposed to problem-solving theory: Morrison, 2003) followed rather than preceded the research. A detailed literature review was delayed, to avoid introducing and imposing preconceived ideas on the developing analysis (Charmaz, 2006). As such, loose theory (as distinct from hypotheses) guided the research process through '*constant comparative methods*' (Charmaz, 2006: 178), creating '*a dialogical relationship between the data and existing (literature, professional knowledge and experience) and emerging concepts*'

(Burton *et al.*, 2008: 66). The research questions themselves developed as the study progressed (Silverman, 2007), guarding against them presenting barriers to understanding.

Multi-methods were adopted generating different data sets, emphasising qualitative methods intended to elicit a depth of insight, getting at actors' understandings of a distributed perspective through the headteachers. The headteachers' voices were highlighted through a sequence of four in-depth, semi-structured interviews, one of which adopted a narrative style. In addition, the headteachers were each asked to keep a reflective diary, for a four-week duration. The study extended beyond self-reporting as staff perceptions of school leadership and management were also elicited through a 360° analysis, a semi-structured questionnaire exploring the extent to which leadership was distributed within each school. That 360° questionnaire incorporated a sociometric analysis of the leadership relationships within the school. In this way, the headteachers first reflected on their experiences and perceptions of purposefully taking forward a distributed perspective, then reflected on the experiences and perceptions of their staff, exploring different meanings and alternative perspectives. In so doing, the 'lived' performance and 'designed' organisation were explored in tandem (Spillane and Coldren, 2011). The interviews, designed to elicit flow in the headteachers' thinking, resulted in expansive narratives. Vignettes from the interviews and diaries exemplified key findings.

There were different stages to the analysis of the data. First stage analysis involved the collation and initial presentation of the data. Each of the interviews was transcribed word for word to create a series of transcripts. Responses from each school's 360° questionnaire were collated to form two versions: the whole staff view; a breakdown of responses into different staff roles. The data generated by the sociometric analysis was used to create sociograms. A huge amount of '*rich data*' was generated, '*to get beneath the surface of social and subjective life*', trawled through repeatedly by hand, to develop in-depth knowledge of the data, then identify meanings and understandings (Atkinson, 1998) forming key themes or codes for exploration (Charmaz, 2006: 14; 13). Having compiled all apposite data, a case record (Durrant and Holden, 2006 drawing on Stenhouse, 1978) was constructed for each case study, similar to Yin's (2009) conceptualisation of a case study database. Each

case record was constructed around the five research questions, the 'etic issues' or 'thick descriptions' (Stake, 1995: 20 and 2000) underpinning the study. Extracts from the interviews, key findings from the 360° questionnaire data as well as data from the sociometric analysis were drawn from to present a comprehensive picture of each case, forming the basis for the next stage of analysis within which four key themes, the 'emic issues' or 'research questions revealed by actors' (Stake, 1995: 20 and 2000), emerged for exploration within each case study. In so doing, a more considered depth of analysis was reached. The final stage of analysis involved the pulling together and analysis of findings across the case studies.

### **The Findings**

The headteachers and their staff perceived a number of benefits arising from operating a distributed perspective in practice. They believed a distributed perspective impacted positively on pupils' school experience, through achieving both a faster pace of change as well as more embedded and sustainable change. Teachers felt this to be the case in particular relation to curricular matters, and to teaching, learning and assessment matters. Support staff felt this to be the case in particular relation to pupil care, welfare and pastoral concerns. Such benefits were felt to be achieved through developing a sense of community within which staff developed positive relationships, were happier or at least positive about their role and its contribution, and were motivated in that regard.

Distributed leadership was therefore seen to bring school benefits of both an operational and strategic nature. It was also perceived as bringing personal benefits to both the headteacher and staff. For the headteacher, available time was targeted more strategically to focus on capacity building, differentiating support provided to staff in leadership roles. There was also a practical element to that in, for example, encouraging staff to make fundamental decisions for themselves. In a small school setting, distributed leadership was regarded as essential. For the staff, leadership experience was perceived as developing confidence. Staff were encouraged to share knowledge and expertise in order to develop the school as a learning community (Murphy *et al.*, 2009). Many hands were also perceived to make lighter work.

Six themes emerged from and cut across the research findings. First, the context specific nature of distributed leadership emerged as a key characteristic. Both the literature review and the analysis of the findings identified that the practice of leadership (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999), distributed leadership (Louis *et al.*, 2009; Mascall *et al.*, 2009) and teacher leadership (Crowther *et al.*, 2009) were context specific. Second, the socially constructed nature of distributed leadership emerged as a key characteristic. By nature, distributed leadership was socially constructed (Spillane, 2005), an active process, involving negotiating meanings. Third, the negotiated nature of distributed leadership emerged as a key characteristic. The headteachers were aware of steering a careful course, guided by their professional values. Fourth, the hierarchical nature of distributed leadership emerged as a key characteristic. Each school had a pattern of authority, rules and procedures (Harling, 1984). As such, leadership was functioning within a clear hierarchy. Beyond the alignment of leadership simply to formal position (Harris and Muijs, 2003), that hierarchy was manifest in the language used and the structures established. Fifth, distributed leadership was to large extent found to be ‘in the gift of the headteacher’ within each of the three case studies. It was given, not taken (NCSL, 2004). The central role of the headteacher in actively encouraging, enabling and facilitating distributed leadership at individual and whole staff levels emerged strongly (see Torrance, 2012a and 2012b). Sixth, the findings challenged five taken for granted assumptions often held within the theoretical, policy and practice frames of reference, discussed below in relation to the policy-practice interface.

### ***Challenging Five Taken for Granted Assumptions***

Despite the perceived benefits arising from operating a distributed perspective on leadership in practice, the headteachers and their staff identified a number of potential problems, challenging five generally held assumptions in the theoretical, policy and practice frames of reference.

#### *Issues with Assumption 1: That Every Staff Member is Able to Lead*

Popular discourse suggests that leadership should be integral to the role of every teacher. However, the leadership literature presents a range of views as to whether all teachers are capable of a leadership role (Harris and Muijs, 2004) or not (Greenfield, 1995; Lord and Maher, 1993). A specific set of skills is often promoted (Murphy,

2005; Pellicer and Anderson, 1995). The headteachers in this study focused considerable efforts on developing the leadership capabilities of their staff, with an expectation that each would in some way contribute to school leadership (Harris, 2005). By encouraging staff to engage in leadership, the headteachers articulated taking a measured risk. That could create anxiety for them. Staff were also required to take a measured risk, trusting that their actions would be supported by colleagues and by the headteacher. That sense of trust was not always secure.

As the study progressed and the headteachers reflected on the lived reality within each school, they became more candid about the leadership abilities of staff. The headteachers differentiated their support and encouragement (Day *et al.*, 2007) in relation to each member of staff's enthusiasm and ability to engage in leadership processes and practices. Leadership was perceived as learned processes and learning required support and experience. As the first headteacher phrased it,

*...it's like teaching a child I suppose, you just respond to the need that they have at the time. So that would be the same with the staff...*

Beyond the public declarations, there was an appreciation that leadership did not come naturally to many staff, particularly since previous top-down management in each school was felt to have stifled staff leadership. The headteachers recognized that for some staff, a leadership role did not come easy and for others, it might never fully develop. Not all teachers or support staff had the confidence to lead colleagues. Some were perceived as not having the right personality or interpersonal ability (Rhodes and Brundrett, 2008). For others, personal or family circumstances meant it unrealistic to expect that they would undertake a leadership role consistently throughout their career. For others, their aspirations lay elsewhere. The findings suggested that it is unrealistic to conceive that all teachers can engage in leadership roles consistently throughout their career (Crowther, 2009).

#### *Issues with Assumption 2: That Every Staff Member Wishes to Lead*

Within the policy discourse and theoretical frame, it is often implied or assumed that every member of staff wishes to lead. Even within the second case study's school, where staff were engaged in leadership roles more consistently than in the other two schools, that was not found to be the case. Indeed, the headteachers recognized

resistance on the part of a small number of staff to engage in leadership roles (Gunter, 2003; Martin, 2002). As the second headteacher expressed, some staff would '*rather not be leading*' and as the third headteacher expressed, '*there are people who don't want a leadership role*'. That finding is consistent with the work of MacBeath (2004), Murphy *et al.* (2009) and Tomlinson (2004).

Furthermore, leadership did not appear to be perceived by teachers or support staff as an integral part of their role. They expected additional time to be made available and to different extents, the headteachers agreed. Other staff could resent the resistance of colleagues unwilling to share the school leadership burden. Leadership appeared to be perceived as a 'opt in' or 'add on'. That meant staff goodwill could be withdrawn at any point, adding to the process of constant negotiation the headteachers were engaged in with staff. National and local agreements on teacher workload could be as stifling as they were enabling. Headteachers worked around such potential obstacles through their articulation of core values, rehearsal of shared vision, framing of leadership roles as affording professional development opportunities, demonstrating their own commitment and hard work, interpersonal ability and knowledge of each individual staff member.

Maintaining positive relationships was key but not easy when each headteacher was also challenging staff to constantly improve the quality of provision for pupils. There was a sense that the headteachers were maintaining a careful balance and at times, walking a tightrope. They could expect and encourage staff to lead but could not force them to do so. They found ways to involve resistant staff in more minor or operational roles, working with rather than leading colleagues. As the second headteacher articulated,

*the only thing that is for myself ... probably [the] most challenging is when you have teachers who just don't want to lead something.*

### *Issues with Assumption 3: That the Leadership Role of Staff is Legitimized Simply by the Headteacher's Endorsement*

As highlighted earlier, distributed leadership was found largely to be 'in the gift of the headteacher'. However, the headteacher's endorsement was not sufficient of itself to legitimize the leadership role of staff. In order for staff to have an influencing role,



they were required to be perceived by peers as meriting that role. Experience in itself was not enough. Expertise was prized and that expertise extended to competence in relation to supporting adults (Gehrke, 1991; Murphy, 2005).

Not every staff member perceived to be a leader by the headteacher perceived themselves to be a leader, even if they had a title such as ‘coordinator’ or a position such as chair of a working group. Not every staff member perceived to be a leader by the headteacher was perceived by peers to be one. Not every staff member with line management responsibility for other staff was perceived by those they line managed to have a leadership role or a strategic leadership role, particularly apposite with regard to the line management of support staff. Colleagues identified by peers as having an influencing role did not always reflect the assumptions of the headteachers, although on further reflection, they could explain why that influencing role had perhaps developed. Teacher leaders were required to be perceived by their peers as effective practitioners (Burton and Brundrett, 2005; Muijs and Harris, 2003; Harris and Muijs, 2004; Murphy, 2005; Snell and Swanson, 2000). Calling someone a leader did not make that person a leader. Withholding such patronage did not stop it being bestowed.

The leadership role of support staff within the semi-private spaces of the classroom appeared particularly problematic. Even when entrusted with key leadership roles within the school’s public spaces, teachers represented classroom leadership. Even, in the case of the second case study, in which teachers seemed to value the leadership role of support staff, when that role became very public, tensions surfaced.

#### *Issues with Assumption 4: That a Distributed Perspective Occurs Naturally*

Within the policy discourse and a particular section of the literature, distributed leadership is presented as naturally occurring – the tap simply needs to be switched on for leadership to flow and distribute itself across school staff. However, the reality from the perspective of the three headteachers in this study was somewhat different. If the view of each headteacher was accurate – and there was nothing in the reported lived experiences of the staff suggesting otherwise – then, on appointment, each had set about changing the leadership and management of the school from a top-down to a distributed perspective. It had taken over two years for each headteacher to reach a

stage of distributed leadership with their staff. Nothing in their descriptions would concur with the view that a distributed perspective occurs naturally. The characteristics of distributed leadership were very much purposely planned.

Although not sufficient in itself, the headteachers' endorsement was key. This is consistent with the literature, proposing that teacher leadership is dependent on strong and supportive headteachers to thrive and have impact (Barth, 2001; Blegen and Kennedy, 2000; Burton and Brundrett, 2005; Bush, 2011; Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Murphy, 2005; Murphy *et al.*, 2009; Slater, 2008; Smylie *et al.*, 2002). Had different headteachers been appointed to the three schools with a different perspective on leadership, then the leadership practices in those schools might have been very different. Indeed, if new headteachers were appointed, each had reservations for the extent to which their distributed perspective would prevail. The headteachers in this study were well informed and had a particular frame of reference, helping to guide them through uncharted territory. They learned how to take forward a distributed perspective as they reflected in and on practice (Agyris and Schon, 1978; Schon, 1991). They learned with their staff and they continued to learn, drawing from participation in this study to sharpen their focus, deepen their understandings and identify next steps for the development of their distributed perspective. That process very much reflected the process of diagnosis and design discussed by Spillane and Coldren (2011).

#### *Issues with Assumption 5: That a Distributed Perspective is Unproblematic*

Within the policy discourse and a particular section of the literature, distributed leadership is presented as unproblematic (Duignan, 2008). However, in this study a distributed perspective on leadership and management was found to be problematic in a number of ways and for a number of reasons (Harris, 2007; Timperley, 2009). In the words of the third headteacher, *'distributed leadership could become a bit sticky'*.

A range of issues and tensions emerged specific to each school context, hardly surprising with the degree of boundary crossing involved (Harris, 2005; Harris *et al.*, 2007). With the first case study, there was a friction between some staff, an anxiety amongst some staff, resistance on the part of some staff to both take on a leadership role and towards members of staff who had already done so. There were tensions as

teacher identity was undergoing an apparent change. With the second case study's school, there were practical concerns with a small staff team taking on the workload of a range of leadership roles. There was also potential for friction between teaching and support staff, resistance on the part of a small number of staff to taking on a leadership role, difficulties arising from individual's personality traits, and an expectation that additional time should be given for the undertaking of leadership roles. With the third case study, the headteacher repeatedly referred to tensions related to balancing staff autonomy and her control (*'you only give people enough rope to hang themselves, and not the school'*), experienced and less experienced members of staff were treated differently in that regard. There was a dislocation between support and teaching staff, a number of staff appearing isolated in that regard. Across the case studies, there was a difference in perspective in relation to how much autonomy staff had. The first and second headteachers felt staff had more autonomy in decision-making processes than staff themselves reflected, whereas the third headteacher was well aware of the limits to staff autonomy, since full autonomy would *'just be chaos'*.

The third headteacher more than the others, explored a number of complexities and tensions inherent within a distributed perspective. Contributing to the problematic nature of a distributed perspective was a lack of consensus as to: what staff meant by leadership and distributed leadership; what it means to lead colleagues; and what expectations could reasonably be placed on senior managers, teachers and support staff.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

In contrast to the simplistic manner in which distributed leadership is often promoted in policy and theory, its practice was found to be complex and based on five assumptions presenting challenges to staff at all levels of school hierarchies. Dislocation between the policy rhetoric and the practice interface is perhaps not surprising since contemporary discourse relating to distributed leadership is not based upon evidence-based practice. Since few empirical studies have been conducted into its practice and effects, such policy could at best be described as aspirational, having normative potential, at worst prescriptive and politically driven.

It is hoped that this study contributes to a conversation about what distributed leadership might be and how it is currently operationalised in schools. Further discussion is merited as to whether ‘distributed’ is the best word to describe the lived reality of school leadership. Perhaps it is time to consider whether distributed leadership equates to *‘designer leadership’* (Gronn, 2003: 284) since it represents little more than a desirable construct rather than a robust field in itself. If it is to survive and thrive, then it will need to stand up to scrutiny. Without such discussion *“‘distributed leadership’ is in danger of becoming no more than a slogan’* (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004: 7).

At a strategic level, better informed policy discourse needs to develop, based on empirical studies drawing from a more sophisticated leadership analysis where the theory reflects more closely the lived reality. At a more operational level, clarity in the conceptualization of and associated definitions for leadership, distributed leadership and teacher leadership is required. From that, expectations and responsibilities related to discrete and complimentary roles within school hierarchies need to be articulated.

On the other hand, if as this study would suggest, the headteacher’s role is so crucial to a distributed perspective, perhaps ‘distributed leadership’ is an oxymoron. Perhaps it is time to look for adverbs that better describe leadership processes and practices. A return to debate what educational leadership is, along with its purpose, would seem sagacious. From there, a shared language could provide the medium with which to move forward. If leadership is defined as *‘a relationship of social influence’* (Spillane and Coldren, 2011: 76), then what follows is a discussion of whose influence and for what purpose? If leadership is perceived as *‘a fluid practice that changes with the situation’* (Spillane and Coldren, 2011: 32), then many things become possible. Perhaps, rather than distributed leadership, hybrid leadership (Gronn, 2009b: 17; 20; 35; 36) might provide a more accurate term, with its *‘mixed leadership patterns’* reflecting the *‘constantly shifting leadership mix or configuration’* within the *‘division of labour that operates in schools ... represent[ing] an attempt by schools to accommodate contingency’* and respond to the organisation’s *‘need for intelligence’*. Or, perhaps rather than distributed leadership, parallel leadership (Crowther, 2009: 53) would be a more accurate description, conceptualizing a *‘process whereby*

*teacher leaders and their principals engage in collective action to build school capacity’.*

Hierarchy is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the formal staffing structures within schools rather than the intended consequence of the headteacher’s leadership style. However, a distributed perspective located within an established hierarchy may well explain the tensions encountered. A hybrid or parallel perspective on leadership might more accurately depict the distinct and complementary nature of and focus for formal and informal leadership roles. Perhaps it is time to reconceptualise the role of the headteacher and the purpose of educational leadership focused on direction setting, human development and organizational development. Without such reconceptualisation, headteachers seem trapped in a catch 22.

Such reconceptualisation will require a degree of good faith on the part of all involved. It will be important to ensure the focus is fixed on educational rather than performance leadership. Political processes charged with workforce reform will need to be ethically informed. Within a climate of good faith, the majority of staff within the three case studies’ schools were actively engaged to different degrees in leadership processes. Teacher leadership was found, located both in *‘helping teacher colleagues and facilitating school improvement’* (Murphy, 2005: 77). So too was support staff leadership, although this was less well understood or secure. The headteachers remained central to the different leadership processes, constantly negotiating the way forward.

## **Conclusion**

The current vogue for promoting leadership at all levels of the school organisation has clear attractions for policy makers and potentially for practitioners. However, this is by no means an uncontested position. Conceptual confusions within the distributed leadership theory and policy discourse surfaced at various points of this study, requiring continuous negotiation by headteachers, teachers and support staff. The findings suggest that if the core principle that leadership should form an integral feature of the role of every teacher is to become a reality, then much work still needs to be done to understand the practice of school leadership.

Findings from this study challenged five generally held assumptions identified within the distributed leadership paradigm: that every member of staff is able to lead; that every member of staff wishes to lead; that the leadership role of staff is legitimized simply by the headteacher's endorsement; that a distributed perspective occurs naturally; and that a distributed perspective is unproblematic. The need for further empirical research is recommended to better conceptualise leadership generally and distributed leadership specifically, leading to more sophisticated understandings. From that position, it should be possible to more accurately identify the roles of teachers at each level of the school hierarchy, recognising formal and informal leadership, with their distinctive and complementary natures. Furthermore, the dearth of studies into the experiences and perceptions of headteachers within a distributed perspective, particularly those in the early years of headship, needs to be addressed.

The theoretical construction of distributed leadership has been artificial, lacking conceptual understanding. As a consequence, '*implementation gaps*' and '*policy mess*' (Rhodes, 1997: 4) have arisen in relation to its political endorsement. In order to move forward, the policy discourse requires to be informed with new, empirically based understandings and carefully articulated, avoiding contradictory agendas. Allied to that, expectations of leadership practice of both formal and informal leaders need to be carefully articulated. Leadership, as distinct from management, has and continues to be privileged within contemporary policy discourse (Gunter, 2004 and 2005; Gronn, 2003) but there needs to be an articulate justification for such positioning, and clarity as to the locus of each role within a distributed perspective.

In the absence of sound theory, clarity of concept or agreed definition, the headteachers involved in this study were engaged in '*sense-making*' with their staff (Spillane and Caldren, 2011: 7). With all three case studies, there was a constant danger of contrived collegiality (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992; Hargreaves 1994). There was at times a thin line between actively supporting the professional development of staff and manipulation. Each headteacher remained central to how distributed leadership operated, in terms of retaining overall power and influence and the strategic control over the direction of school improvement as well as providing legitimisation to staff leadership. Given the pivotal role of the headteacher within a distributed perspective, developing better understandings of that role and the number

of contradictions that surfaced in relation to that role are also recommended. Allied to that, it would seem reasonable to suggest that school leaders at all levels need to engage in more overt discussion of their respective roles.

This study identified a range of conceptual confusions indicating that what may be called for is a return to first principles, establishing a theoretical basis underpinned by empirical understandings of what is meant by educational leadership and by distributed leadership. From that a discussion could follow as to whether or not distributed leadership is the best term to describe the practices located in schools, or, whether other terms such as parallel leadership (Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Durrant and Holden, 2006) or hybrid leadership (Gronn, 2009a and 2009b) more accurately reflect school leadership practices.

Despite the challenges, each of the three case study headteachers was articulate, highly reflective on their practice and committed to making sense of a distributed perspective on leadership and management. Their motivation was to positively impact on the quality of educational experience for pupils. To ensure that impact, they regarded staff to be the most valuable resource and expended considerable effort to support the professional development of staff. This provided a fertile environment for learning about the practice of school leadership.

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