

UNVEILING THE RESTRICTED AND EXTENDED POSSIBILITIES OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The scope of this paper is to critically examine the opportunities as well as the fragmentations of the distributed leadership discourse and practices. In other words, this paper is both an argument for as well as a critique of the variety of forms of distributed leadership. Focusing mainly on Spillane's et al form of distributed leadership and Fullan's 'System thinkers in action', this paper has come to locate perspectives to distributed leadership on a spectrum, varying from 'extended' to 'restricted' professionalism. Thus, an array of possibilities and restrictions to professionalism emerge that may well be used as a venue for investigating distributed leadership in practice.

Keywords: Distributed Leadership, Managerialism, Models of Leadership, System Thinkers in action, Democratic Leadership.

INTRODUCTION:

This paper examines the notion of distributed leadership by delving into its variation of approaches and at the same time seeks to unpack some of the dynamics that have led to the distributed leadership perspective. However, the aim is not to offer a definite and firm answer to the question 'what is distributed leadership'. Rather, the intention of this paper is both an examination as well as a critique of the different directions that distributed leadership may take within the micro level of policy implementation as well as within the leadership discourse. Based on an extended literature review of the issue under concern, this paper is structured as follows: A first attempt is to give a brief overview of how distributed leadership has been contested and defined over the past decade by examining different key terms and ideas coined by different commentators of educational leadership and change. The main section of the paper extends the various notions of distributed leadership to the discussion of models and frameworks in a subsequent section. A final section takes up the paradoxes as well as limitations of distributed leadership and drives the conclusion to some avenues for future research.

ENTERING THE BUZZWORD OF 'DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP':

Several authors have used a plethora of terms to describe the phenomenon under question. Nevertheless, the examination of all the approaches examined here, are not to be taken as to generate firm and definite conclusions; rather the purpose is to provide only 'snapshots' about the discourse of 'distributed leadership' and its function within the institutional and organizational level.

A popular concept of leaders is that of the 'charismatic' leader (Conger and Kanungo, 1998), in that they possess certain qualities that help them to perform their leadership roles efficiently. In other words, most tend to believe that intelligence, imagination, diligence and emotional stability are among the personal traits which are inextricably bound up with effective exercise of leadership at school. However, this traditional view of principalship has come under question, and the model of the singular, heroic leader is being replaced with leadership that is focused upon teams rather than individuals and places a greater emphasis upon teacher, support staff and students as leaders (Harris, 2004). What is actually imposing the shift from one approach to the other are the challenges of the new millennium, and the excessive amount of pressure arising from the increased external demands of schools; such as the emphasis in raising standards whilst at the same time maintaining the autonomy and power of the school units.

Perhaps the most agreed point made by advocates of distributed leadership is that the term originates from the belief that the task of transforming schools, is too complex to expect one person to accomplish 'single-handedly' (Lashway, 2003), and in effect activities become widely shared within and between organizations (Harris, 2007a).

In some cases the term is used interchangeably with 'shared leadership', or 'democratic leadership' (Spillane, 2004). Therefore, consensus is apparently founded in the belief that leadership is distributed throughout the school rather than rested in one position. Beyond this core belief, however, commentators of distributed leadership offer divergent viewpoints. Some others have gone beyond the widely accepted notions of the term and called for a grass roots shift in organizational thinking that redefines leadership in terms of school-network processes aiming to create a broader base of leadership (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2006). Spillane et al (2001), offer a more far reaching view of distributed leadership; one that aims to promote 'distributed learning' as an example of 'distributed cognition', which views thinking as social, rather than an individual activity. Others such as Bennett (2003) ascribe a rational- technicist approach to distributed leadership which is aligned to a mechanistic approach of organizations. A great deal of recent writing about managing and leading schools as organizations focuses on this type of leadership emphasizing detailed task specification, routinized work, uniform procedures and consistency, and see management as oversight, ensuring that routines are correctly adhered to and procedures followed (Taylor, 1911; Fayol, 1949).

These are just a few examples of distributed leadership which are about to be discussed in the following section. The approach to distributed leadership advocated in this paper is the one which views leadership as the outcome of the interaction between the people involved and it is closer to the approach taken by Spillane et al (2001,2004,2006) who argue that school leadership practice is distributed in the interactions of school leaders, followers and their situation. In this sense practice is defined or takes form in the 'interactive web of leaders, followers and their situation'. One can understand this type of leadership better if a parallel between 'distributed leadership' and 'orchestration as practice' is made. In the case with orchestration the composer or orchestrator decides what instruments play this chord and in what register and thus notes may be placed in to another register and altered with various levels of dynamics. Hence, an account of the melody generated by the whole

orchestration, drives one to conclude that the choice of instruments, registers and dynamics as well as the interaction of all these, affect the overall tone colour. Hence, the distributed perspective of leadership should shed the focus on the leaders or partners in interaction.

MODELS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP:

The model of distributed leadership which is to be looked at first in this section is the one framed by Hulpia and Devos (2010) in their work 'Leadership as distributed: a matter of practice', where they view organizational commitment as a powerful predictor of teachers' effectiveness, hence their attempt to clarify the relation between distributed leadership and teachers' organizational commitment. In doing so, they explored the differences in the distribution of leadership in four high potential schools where teachers' organizational commitment was thought of to be high, and compared these to those of four low potential schools where teachers' organizational commitment was perceived to be low. Their research has managed to take the management literature a step further by uncovering differences in characteristics of distributed leadership and its relation with teachers' organizational commitment. More precisely, it has sought to identify an array of dimensions concerned with distributed leadership, liable to affect teachers' organizational commitment positively. These dimensions came out as differences between the two sets of schools and have been conceived by the researchers as determinants of teachers' organizational commitment. Such variables or dimensions were mapped out by the authors as follows:

- *Interaction* : as far as the data suggest, high potential schools put much emphasis on the personal interactions with teachers which they view as important in order to set directions, provide support and monitor teachers' daily practices. Moreover, the distributed leadership in the high potential schools was not restricted to a formal delegation of tasks. Conversely, in the low potential schools the leadership was vague as the distribution of leadership was limited to a strict designation of tasks, devoid of an active interaction between leaders and followers.
- *The distinction of rational/technical and cultural-process oriented dimension*: in regard with the findings of this dimension, these revealed that the rational technical dimension predominated for the low potential schools, meaning that there existed a rigid formalization and specialization of leadership roles, whereas the high potential schools were more cultural-process oriented, denoting a strong unity of shared values amongst leadership teams with positive team dynamics characterised by open expression of ideas, and cohesiveness of discussion.
- *Social interaction* This came up as an important distinction between the high and the low potential schools in that senior managers of the former invest in their visibility, approachability and direct communication with teacher leaders and teachers, whilst in the latter the personal interaction was limited.
- *Participative decision making*: the results revealed significant differences between both types of schools regarding this dimension. High potential schools promoted a form of what might be called 'extended professionalism' (Hoyle, 1974) in the sense that there was an active involvement by the teachers in matters occurring beyond the class, and therefore an awareness of their role as active players of the entire organization, meaning that they are willing to contribute beyond what is expected of them. On the contrary, teachers of low potential schools saw the new formal structures of distributed leadership as an opportunity to complain about 'futilities' and stayed entrenched in the traditional top down management style, instead of participating in broader school decisions. They performed in this way what might be called a 'restricted professionalism' (Hoyle, 1974)

A form of distributed leadership identified by MacBeath (2005) is that of *Distribution as pragmatic*: this form of leadership assumes a culture of a strong conformity to the imperatives of a high stakes environment and therefore decisions tend to be marked by 'playing it safe', meaning that there should be no room for risk taking and at the same time avoiding divergence of opinion. This form of leadership then becomes a conformist one, requiring all members who assume a leadership role to share the same values. We then come to what might be called 'contrived collegialities', a term developed by Hargreaves (2004). By the latter he means collaborative cultures which 'are hijacked by hierarchical systems of control' and hence become 'forced' or 'artificial', a prison of micromanagement which curtails teachers' room for manoeuvre (p.130).

Another form of distributed leadership identified by MacBeath (2005) is that of *Distribution as strategic* : this type of leadership is driven by a discourse of school improvement emphasizing controlled accountability processes, all targeted on a longer-term goal of school improvement. In this form of leadership, people are couched in terms of team players, with their energy and expertise being distributed rather than becoming

concentrated on the hands of the few. It is a more of a systemic rather than an organic approach to leadership and some commentators reflect much of this thinking in their models of leadership. Such a model could be found in Fullan's (2006) 'System thinkers in action' who puts forward a new focus on leadership. A key factor in Fullan's notion of 'System thinkers in action' is the notion of sustainability in developing a new kind of leadership which goes beyond the success of increasing student achievement and moves towards improving organization systems. Whilst his approach might sound valuable, yet there is substantial ground to support the claim that it recasts educational practice as a multi-level marketing enterprise. This kind of leadership may prove to be detrimental for teachers' professionalism in that educational leadership is downgraded to something else other than educational and thus takes the form of 'managerialism' becoming what Hoyle and Wallace have argued: 'managerialism is leadership and management to excess, for it transcends the support role of leadership and management and in its extreme manifestation becomes an end in itself' (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005).

Unlike *Distribution as strategic*, *Distribution as incremental* manifests an evolutionary approach to leadership. The orientation of this type of leadership is more of a developmental character. In other words, the further one has gone regarding his professional development, the more improved his leadership skills become, and thus the more he is given. Like the other types of leadership listed above, distribution incrementally is not purely instrumental, in other words, it is not oriented towards increasing standards, for as MacBeath asserts "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" (p.360). It could therefore be said that it is about a form of leadership akin to what might be referred to as 'extended professionalism', an issue which will be returned to below.

Moreover, an approach to leadership with empowering effects for teachers' professionalism is that of *Distribution as opportunistic*: in this category, leadership is more bottom-up rather than top-down, meaning that leadership does not appear to be distributed, it is rather dispersed. It assumes an 'extended professionalism' coined by Hoyle (1974) denoting a form of professionalism which goes beyond classroom skills to a wider range of knowledge and skills. According to MacBeath (2005), this form of leadership is empowering for 'there is such strength of initiative within the school that capable, caring teachers willingly **extend** their roles to school-wide leadership' (p.361).

A final model of distributed leadership to be examined in this paper is that of *Distribution as cultural*: the emphasis here is on the **what** rather than the **who**. As MacBeath (2005) denotes, 'leadership is expressed in activities rather than roles or through individual initiative' (p.362). Distribution then becomes a collective concern devoid of its very meaning which presupposes the identification of leaders and followers. Moreover, it does not assume a convergence of values, but rather it opens up the space for negotiating any possible tensions that might occur, as well as the taking on of challenges that real vibrant communities display. In those organizational contexts where divergence of opinion is kept on high levels, or does not exist at all, notions of culture are accorded an instrumental function. Simply put, culture, collective learning and collaboration become the tools of management and change rather than an end in themselves (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005). The notion of a unified and shared culture is a major tenet of the managerialist ambition, for dissent, diversity of opinions and conflicts are perceived by managers as deviation instead of being viewed as the cornerstone of a democratic and inclusive organization.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: A CRITIQUE OF THE THEORETICAL FRAME:

In the light of the previous section, it is possible to argue that distributed leadership falls along a continuum. At one extreme of the spectrum is 'extended professionalism', whilst the other point of the spectrum manifests the notion of 'restricted professionalism' referred to earlier in this paper. Hulpia and Devos (2010) findings could be said to assume a distributed leadership form which falls into the 'extended professionalism' end of the continuum, for they argue for an interactive process which leads to teachers' organizational commitment. MacBeath's (2005) notion of distribution as 'strategic' and 'pragmatic' could be regarded as falling into the 'restricted professionalism' extreme, for distributed leadership here is driven by a discourse of school effectiveness and school improvement which is oriented towards increasing educational standards and success, and thus restricts the professional discretion of teachers. However, MacBeath's (2005) notions of distribution as 'incremental', 'opportunistic' and 'cultural' could be said to assume a more empowering role of the school leaders, leading to the other extreme of the pole, that of 'extended professionalism'. Along the lines of the 'extended professionalism' extreme is Spillane's et al (2001, 2004, 2006) distributed perspective. In this section I will draw primarily upon Spillane's et al. distributed perspective grounded in activity theory and distributed cognition along with Fullan's systemic approach to leadership. The aim here is to explore both the contribution

and the constraints of distributed leadership theory.

Spillane et al (2001, 2004, 2006) are at the forefront of the theoretical work concerning distributed leadership. They develop their distributed leadership by drawing heavily upon distributed cognition and come up with four ideas : leadership tasks and functions, task enactment, social distribution of task enactment, and situational distribution of task enactment. To develop their argument they appropriate concepts from distributed cognition and activity theory so as to underscore the importance of the social context for the leadership practice. Therefore, they stress the interdependence of the individual and the environment, for they argue that human activity cannot be understood without considering how practice is distributed in the interactive web of actors, artefacts and the situation (Spillane et al, 2001). In other words they underlie the interactive component of leadership which they view as 'stretched over' the school's social and situational contexts. By this they advocate a transformational perspective on leadership with an empowering effect for teachers' practice in that it allows them to consider the managerial dimensions of leadership involved for organizational improvement. Moreover they argue that human activity is not simply a function of individual skill, role and position but stretched over people and situation. In other words, the leadership tasks are always the outcome of the collective properties of the group of leaders working together, thus leadership practice is co-enacted, thus leading to a composite which is potentially more than the sum of each individual's practice. The value of the leadership composite, rests mainly on the different professional background, knowledge and expertise that each individual carries with. Therefore, the interplay between the practices of multiple leaders is vital to considering how the practice of leading is stretched over actors.

Along the lines of a somewhat 'restricted professionalism' is Fullan's (2006) 'System thinkers in action'. Fullan coins a new thinking of distributed leadership in totally different ways than that of Spillane et al.

A key factor in Fullan's notion of 'System thinkers in action' is the notion of sustainability in developing a new kind of leadership which goes beyond the success of increasing student achievement and moves towards improving organization systems. Whilst his approach might sound valuable, yet there is substantial ground to support the claim that it recasts educational practice as a multi-level marketing enterprise. Therefore, it could be argued that the multi-level marketing approach is implicit in Fullan's definition of his proposed agenda for as he points out:

'What I call 'system thinkers in action' or the 'new theoreticians'. These are the leaders who work intensely in their own schools or districts or other levels, and at the same time connect with and **participate in the bigger picture**. To change organizations and systems will require leaders who get experience in linking to other parts of the system. These leaders in turn **must help develop other leaders with similar characteristics**. In this sense, the main mark of a school principal, for example, is not the impact he or she has on the bottom line of student achievement at the end of their tenure but rather **how many good leaders they leave behind who can go even further**. The question, then, is how can we practically develop system thinkers in action? Some do exist but **how do we get them in numbers-** a critical mass needed for system breakthrough?' (Fullan, 2006, p. 114), (my selected text bold).

As for the 'bigger picture' which Fullan talks about, this involves the eight elements which Fullan (2005) had mapped out in his previous work in order to define 'sustainability'. The eight elements which make up Fullan's notion of sustainability are the following: a) *public service with a moral purpose*, b) *commitment to changing context at all levels*, c) *lateral capacity- building through networks*, d) *new vertical relationships that are co-dependent encompassing both capacity building and accountability*, e) *deep learning*, f) *dual commitments to short-term and long-term results*, g) *cyclical energising*, h) *the long lever of leadership*. Unlike Spillanes' et al emphasis on the material and cultural fabric of each school, Fullan delineates the contours of a homogenised school culture across schools, if leaders are to be proselytised to a set of shared and common values.

Moreover, one of his perennial concerns is the transformation of organizational cultures towards 'collaborative cultures of inquiry'. The vocabulary he uses to define the latter, implies a managerialist approach to culture. By drawing on Perkins's (2003) notion of collaborative cultures of inquiry, Fullan (2006) points out that the latter 'alter the culture of learning in the organization away from dysfunctional and non-relationships toward the daily development of culture that can solve difficult or adaptive problems' (p.119). Therefore, it could be argued that Fullan's elements of sustainability ranging from element b) to e) seem to adopt what Hoyle and Wallace (2005) have called 'unreflective instrumental approach' to culture for the later in this case is used merely as a slogan to justify a range of directive practices. Thus, the notion of networking across school system cultures could be viewed as a manipulated symbol hijacked by hierarchical symbols of control in that 'culture' is not seen as a property emerging from competing values relating to teachers' daily practices, but rather it is instrumentally

manipulated for the creation of a particular type of leadership the values of which do not indicate the pursuit of appropriate educational values.

As far as the sixth element is concerned, whilst Fullan acknowledges the importance for a commitment to long-term results, yet he overrides those for he singles out short-term progress as a corrective action by which severe problems can be predicted and solved. In addition he views short-term results as a means to build trust with the public or shareholders for longer-term investments. It seems to be the case that trust in Fullan's thinking of 'System thinkers in action' is used as a means for financial gain. Such form of trust could be considered as unproductive for educational professionals, for it is used by leadership networks to inculcate their fellow leaders in the values of the technical culture of policy implementation.

As for the seventh element, Fullan has coined the term 'cyclical energizing' to denote the energy levels required for leaders in achieving sustainability. He perceives the performance of the educational leader as that of an athlete whose energy needs to be consistently replenished after a point of overuse. He sees collaborative cultures as conducive to this aim for as he states, the latter push for greater accomplishments and they avoid the debilitating effects of negative cultures. Thus, it is possible to argue that Fullan's proposal for an element of 'cyclical energizing' captures educational practitioners as human resources rather than 'resourceful humans', to use Bottery's words (2000, p.58), in that the premises upon which Fullan's argument is based presume capacity building by means of training teachers in the same systematic way that elite athletes do. Therefore, it could be argued that Fullan's sustainability strategizing promoted via 'System thinkers in action' mirrors the thinking as well as the developmental processes of multi-level marketing. Just as in multi-level marketing the work is done at the bottom of the pyramid, while those at the top reap most of the reward, so could be the case with 'System thinkers in action' for 'networking' is captured as the main instrument of organizational success.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS:

This paper has sought to examine several models of distributed leadership. As noted at the beginning, the aim was not to give a definite answer to 'what is distributed leadership', rather by discussing an array of different perspectives to distributed leadership it has managed to locate these on a spectrum. The continuum of distributed leadership ranging from 'extended' to 'restricted professionalism' could be used as a venue for the conduction of future empirical research. Another aim of this paper has been the exploration of challenges and paradoxes placed upon leaders and educators. Therefore, to achieve this aim, two different perspectives were picked up and critically examined, that of Spillane's et al and Fullan's.

Following the critique of the aforementioned forms of distributed leadership which can be located in the 'restrictive professionalism' extreme, I would argue that more empirical evidence is needed about the practice of distributed leadership. Distributed leadership should not only be used as a theoretical frame through which we examine and produce analytical dimensions as to define leadership in new ways. The dearth of empirical evidence regarding distributed leadership has been pointed by several commentators during the past decade, hence little effort has been sought for the conduction of research which would examine distributed leadership in practice. The links to empirical evidence should become more clear in investigating the **what** and **how** of practicing distributed forms of leadership. While not denying the value and importance of the theoretical frames, the latter would be further developed if this was tested through empirical inquiry and examination. This would mean that the theories such as the ones examined and discussed in this paper, could be used to investigate whether they contribute not only to students' outcomes, organizational development and change, but also to teachers' professionalism. As Harris (2007b) has argued, 'to gain any insight into the relationship between distributed leadership and organizational development requires delving into other sources of empirical evidence' (p.319). As there are global forces which rapidly enter into the educational milieu, and thus new modes of schooling are emerging, with one such mode being the development of extended schools, the challenges for leaders and educators created are extended too, so the need for empirical evidence of those extended demands.

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