

Distributed leadership in practice: Evidence, misconceptions and possibilities

Alma Harris

Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Malaya, Malaysia

John DeFlaminis

Penn Center for Educational Leadership, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Management in Education
2016, Vol. 30(4) 141–146
© 2016 British Educational Leadership,
Management & Administration Society
(BELMAS)
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0892020616656734
mie.sagepub.com



Abstract

This article takes a contemporary look at distributed leadership in practice by drawing upon empirical evidence from a large-scale project in the USA. Initially, it considers the existing knowledge base on distributed leadership and questions some of the assertions and assumptions in recent accounts of the literature. The article also addresses some persistent misconceptions associated with the concept of distributed leadership and points out that certain fundamental misunderstandings still prevail. The article concludes by proposing that more evidence from practice would significantly enhance the current evidential base and that the future development of distributed leadership would greatly benefit from more input from practitioners.

Keywords

Distributed leadership, school leadership, educational innovation, school change, school improvement and transformation

Introduction

A decade ago, in the field of educational management and leadership, distributed leadership was described as the ‘new kid on the block’ (Gronn, 2006: 1). As with any new idea, it was both enthusiastically greeted by some and soundly dismissed by others. No other leadership concept, it seems, has caused so much controversy, angst and debate as distributed leadership. Yet, unlike so many other leadership fads and fashions that come and go, distributed leadership continues to be an influential idea within educational policy and practice. Whether in the guise of professional capital, collaborative networks or teacher-led reform, distributed leadership remains a resilient and inherently practical leadership concept (Hargreaves, 2016; Hargreaves and Ainscow, 2016; Harris, 2011; Harris 2013a).

Moving forward from the highly influential and seminal account by Spillane et al. (2001) that is the cornerstone of contemporary distributed leadership theory, it is clear that new perspectives, additional accounts and contemporary interpretations of distributed leadership continue to enrich the growing knowledge base (e.g. Klar et al., 2016; Spillane et al., 2015; Yuen et al., 2015). Without question, distributed leadership is now a term that is widely known and used, largely but not exclusively to describe ‘leadership that is shared within, between and across organizations’ (Harris, 2013a: 12). Although some have asserted that the absence of a neat and consistent definition of distributed leadership remains a limitation, in reality this has not hindered empirical investigation or deterred continuing interest in its practical application.

Issues of definition and impact

Inevitably, different interpretations and understandings accompany any new theory or concept, and distributed leadership has been no exception. Although it has been argued that too much conceptual overlap can lead to confusion, as with any idea, there should be some latitude to view it in alternative ways and to see it through different lenses. There are, however, certain core elements or essentials that delineate this particular leadership concept from numerous others. One of these core elements is the emphasis on leadership *as practice* rather than leadership as role or responsibility (Spillane and Diamond, 2007). In addition, distributed leadership places an emphasis on *interactions* rather than actions; it presupposes that leadership is not simply restricted to those with formal leadership roles but that influence and agency are widely shared (Harris, 2013a).

Whereas leading theorists (Gronn, 2000; Spillane et al., 2007) construe distributed leadership predominantly as a frame of analysis, other scholars take a more practical or applied view. This article draws upon this latter perspective and in so doing inevitably runs the gauntlet of further demonizing. As argued elsewhere, distributed leadership is not inherently good or bad; it is neither ‘friend nor foe’

Corresponding author:

Professor Dr Alma Harris, University of Malaya, Wilayah Persekutuan, KL 55500, Malaysia.
E-mail: almaharris@um.edu.my

(Harris, 2013b) as much depends on how it is conceptualized, understood and enacted. Those taking an applied view of distributed leadership are certainly not deluded that it is some sort of panacea, as the latter part of the article clearly outlines and illustrates.

Recently, an account of the literature on distributed leadership concluded, rather pessimistically, that the impact of distributed leadership remains questionable. It stated that the gaps identified by an earlier literature review of distributed leadership (Bennet et al., 2003) remain unfilled, and point out 'the failure to both clarify the concept of distributed leadership and empirically define its application' (Tian et al., 2016: 146). These are bold assertions indeed, particularly as important parts of the contemporary international literature on distributed leadership were omitted (e.g. DeFlaminis, 2009, 2011, 2013; Hairon and Goh, 2015; Louis et al., 2013; Woods and Roberts, 2016).

There are a number of issues worth noting when contemplating how far the claims made in this review of the literature have legitimacy. First, the desk-based study by Bennet et al. (2003) was commissioned and conducted when empirical studies of distributed leadership were in relatively short supply, so the conclusion drawn about the paucity of evidence was, at that time, accurate and justifiable. Second, it is certainly true that the concept of distributed leadership has been interpreted in a number of different ways. At times, these different versions have collided, but this does not necessarily equate with an abject failure to clarify the term.

The other claim from this latest account of the literature, and of most concern, is that those working in the educational leadership and management field have failed to empirically define the application of distributed leadership. But how far is this actually true? The scope of the review of the literature conducted by Tian et al. (2016) neglected to include many empirical and practical accounts of distributed leadership – in particular, important studies from Europe, the USA and Asia. Possibly, this was because such accounts did not appear in the eight academic journals that provided the basis for the review. If so, it seems strange to denounce the lack of available empirical evidence about the application of distributed leadership when the authors did not actually go in search of such studies or, indeed, include them.

All too often, important accounts of leadership practice and application do not find their way into peer-reviewed academic journals. Busy practitioners tend to share their findings and disseminate them in other ways. Evidence of application and practice are more frequently located in research reports, case studies and teacher accounts. For those leading large research projects, academic articles are often the last set of publications to appear. Therefore, the conclusion reached by Tian et al. (2016: 159) that neither of the two research gaps identified by Bennet et al. (2003) has been 'fulfilled satisfactorily' appears not only unfounded but also imprudent.

This article deliberately moves away from claims, counter-claims and conjecture to focus upon the substantial

issue of distributed leadership in practice. It does so in a way that is both research-informed and research-based by drawing upon evidence from a major, longitudinal, research and development project in the USA (DeFlaminis, 2009, 2011, 2013). The Distributed Leadership Project (DLP) provides contemporary empirical evidence about the nature, effects and outcomes of distributed leadership in practice.

Initially, the article outlines the origins and nature of the DLP and then turns to the evidence of its effects. Subsequently, the article moves away from this particular study to consider the 'dark side' of distributed leadership practice and, in so doing, challenges some of the popular but largely misleading notions associated with this leadership idea. In concluding the article, the authors make a plea for a more eclectic view of distributed leadership, where the important research and development work of practitioners is both recognized and included.

Distributed leadership in practice

The Annenberg Distributed Leadership Project was one of the first efforts in the United States to deliberately take on the challenge of building distributed leadership capacity in a diverse set of urban schools. The City of Philadelphia, which was identified by the United States Census Bureau as having the highest levels of poverty in the 10 largest US cities, was the site for the first project. When the project began in 2004, Philadelphia was also among the largest school districts nationwide, with 190,000 students (K-12) enrolled in 263 schools. It had also been identified as one of the most socio-economically, financially and academically troubled school districts in the country. Unstable and inexperienced leadership contributed particularly to Philadelphia's woes, with nearly one out of five schools (45 across the Philadelphia public system) under the direction of a new principal.

The original project was funded by a 5-year grant from the Annenberg Foundation and was led by the Penn Centre for Educational Leadership (PCEL). It was developed to operationalize a distributed perspective on leadership within a robust intervention programme in 16 schools in Philadelphia. Its prime aim was to create a stronger leadership infrastructure to support school improvement (DeFlaminis, 2009, 2011, 2013). The DLP targeted new school leaders and their teachers in a systematic effort to build distributed leadership teams and to build leadership capacity for all Philadelphia schools. The success of the programme in Philadelphia schools led to a 4-year replication in 19 Archdiocese of Philadelphia schools in 2010, and a third replication and redesign in the York City School District in 2015. Again, this subsequent work focused on developing teacher leaders and building distributed leadership teams.

The DLP purposefully operationalized what Spillane describes as 'principal preparation programs that work to develop a distributed mind-set, helping principals to think about leadership practice and to think about it from a distributed perspective' (Spillane, 2006: 98). Evidence from

evaluations of the project has illustrated how principals and teacher leaders embraced aspects of the distributed perspective in their work. It highlighted the positive impacts of the distributed leadership work, firstly on leadership practices and secondly on building the capacity for instructional improvement (Abdul-Jabbar, 2013; Supovitz and Riggan, 2012; Yoak, 2013).

In essence, the DLP prepared principals and teacher leaders to function in distributed leadership teams in order to improve instruction and to promote higher achievement. This process was supported by leadership coaching, the school-wide development of professional learning communities and other routines focused explicitly on instructional improvement. The project provided practitioners with explicit training that stressed a reliance on conjoint processes and focused collaborative learning (Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2013a).

The continuation and replication of the DLP stemmed from positive, independent evidence of impact, confirmed by a rigorous mixed-methods cluster randomized control trial (Supovitz and Riggan, 2012). The strongest evidence of the impact of the distributed leadership teams and their work came from survey data comparing leadership teams in the DL schools relative to those in control schools. These data show statistically significant differences between the DL teams and the leadership teams in the comparison schools on a number of leadership team outcomes. These included measures of: effective team functioning; school leaders' sense of efficacy; trust levels among team members; trust levels between team members and their principal; perceptions of school influence; teacher satisfaction; and member learning opportunities (Supovitz, 2009).

There is insufficient scope in this article to fully outline the design, implementation and impact of the DLP. There are a range of publications, however, that underscore the positive effects of this intensive effort, over the long term, to influence and expand the leadership capacity of schools and to secure instructional improvement (Cole, 2008; Gravin, 2013; Riggan, 2009; Riggan and Supovitz, 2008; Supovitz and Riggan, 2012). In summary, the DLP provides a powerful and an important example of effective and lasting school level change. It highlights how, under the right conditions, distributed leadership can be a positive contributor to school transformation and improvement.

The dark side of distributed leadership

With any fashionable or popular idea, misunderstanding and misinterpretation are an unintended but inevitable consequence. For distributed leadership, once again, this has certainly been true. On the practical side, distributed leadership has been interpreted, by some, as little more than delegation by another name, and has been used to justify certain leadership approaches over others (Hargreaves and Fink, 2009). On the academic side, as highlighted earlier, the idea of distributed leadership has unleashed a wave of enthusiasm and a surge of discontent (Hall, 2013; Hartley, 2009, 2010). These clashing perspectives and interpretations, in

some cases, have served to obscure and even distort the fundamental meaning of distributed leadership.

The next section deals with some prevailing and persistent misconceptions concerning the practical application of distributed leadership or, as some refer to it, the 'prescriptive, normative paradigm' (Tian et al., 2016: 149). Here we challenge the proposition that any form of distributed leadership practice is inherently good or automatically associated with positive outcomes. In *Distributed Leadership Matters*, Harris (2013a) devotes an entire chapter to debunking this myth and this oft-quoted misinterpretation. Those writing from an empirical perspective are cautious not to over-claim the merits or benefits of distributed leadership. Tian et al. (2016) note, as others have done before, that there is always a need for more empirical verification, particularly, but not exclusively, to offset the more romanticized and idealized accounts of distributed leadership in practice. This is certainly true: like any form of leadership, distributed leadership is not inherently 'friend or foe'.

In their book, *The Dark Side of Educational Leadership: Superintendents and the Professional Victim Syndrome*, Polka and Litchka (2008) provide valuable insights into the ways in which leaders can create professional victims. The findings illuminate the potential for bullying by those in positions of power, especially when leadership is distributed unwisely and placed in the wrong hands. Other work has similarly focused upon the negative aspects of leadership actions and behaviours, including the destructive or toxic aspects of leadership, at different levels (Blasé and Blasé, 2000; Schryns and Handsborough, 2008).

As noted earlier, some critics have called into question the motivation of those espousing distributed leadership, particularly in a normative way. Some of those critiquing distributed leadership tend to view it as a palatable way of encouraging teachers to do more work or a form of exploitative leadership. For example, in their writing, Hargreaves and Fink (2009) warn that distributed leadership could simply be another, more attractive, mechanism for delivering 'top down' policies including standardized practice. Other critics point to the ways in which distributed leadership could be wilfully misunderstood or woefully misrepresented by those in positions of authority (Bolden et al., 2009).

Those writing about distributed leadership fully acknowledge this critique and indeed have provided examples in support of it. For example, Harris (2013a) provides several vignettes of distributed leadership where those with additional responsibility and authority in schools have used it for detrimental, destructive and damaging purposes. Such examples underline how distributed leadership can go wrong, proving to be disastrous for those with formal leadership responsibilities. The empirical evidence shows that distributed leadership can be a force for positive organizational change but only under the *right conditions* (Leithwood et al., 2009). The evidence also shows that different patterns of leadership distribution result in diverse outcomes and results (Heck and Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood and Mascall, 2008). In short, distributed leadership is not a panacea; it depends on how it is shared, received and enacted.

More misconceptions

There are two further misconceptions about distributed leadership that are worth highlighting. These are: firstly, equating distributed leadership with the notion that everyone leads; and secondly, by assuming that there must be a particular distributed leadership model to follow. Let us look at the first of these. Distributed leadership essentially means that those best equipped or skilled or positioned to lead do so, in order to fulfil a particular goal or organizational requirement. Distributed leadership does not imply that everyone is a leader or that everyone leads. As highlighted already, it is clear from the evidence that not all forms of distributed leadership are enabling or impactful. As the DLP highlighted, only by carefully building the capability and capacity of certain informal leaders in a school, whether teacher leaders or middle leaders, could positive progress be made. The emphasis here is on the word ‘certain’ rather than ‘all’. The empirical evidence shows that for distributed leadership to be positively associated with better organizational performance and outcomes it has to be carefully crafted or constructed and wisely executed (Camburn and Han, 2009).

Looking beyond the field of education, there are examples from other sectors that illustrate very clearly how the best performing organizations secure a competitive advantage through shared, collaborative or team leadership (Hargreaves, Boyle and Harris, 2014). Although the term ‘distributed leadership’ may possibly be unknown to those who work outside the education sector, the evidence shows that it is one clear strategy deployed by organizations to outperform others. Evidence also shows that in high-performing businesses or sports teams, those in formal leadership roles carefully share responsibility and authority with those individuals who have the aptitude, ability and conviction to lead, at a particular time, within an organization (Hargreaves, Boyle and Harris, 2014).

A second common misconception about distributed leadership is that there is some particular model that schools need to follow, that there is some blueprint, some road map, or some definitive guide. There are principles, of course, and some guidance about the norms, strategies and approaches that seem to work most effectively, but any standardized prescription for distributed leadership should be avoided at all costs. Alternatively, it is more useful to think about the type of infrastructure or the conditions, at the school level, that would support positive distributed leadership in practice.

In this respect, Schmoker (2011) is helpful in outlining the infrastructural essentials for schools that make distributed leadership a possibility, which are: ‘reasonably coherent curricula (what we teach); sound lessons (how we teach); and far more purposeful reading and writing in every discipline, or authentic literacy (integral to both what and how we teach)’ (Schmoker, 2011). He also notes, ‘as numerous studies demonstrate, these essential elements are only rarely implemented; every credible study confirms that they are still pushed aside by various initiatives every year, in the majority of schools’ (Schmoker, 2011). To

presume, therefore, that any form of distributed leadership can simply self-combust into better organizational performance and outcomes, without such an infrastructure being in place, is just wishful thinking.

Possibilities

So what are the future possibilities for distributed leadership and where will the new evidence come from? This final section proposes that practitioners are critically important in the development of new knowledge about distributed leadership. Unquestionably, more empirical research work is needed, and here researchers will make their contribution, but evidence about the actual *practice* of distributed leadership is also urgently needed. Those working within and alongside schools therefore have an important role to play in contributing to the knowledge base by providing grounded examples of distributed leadership in action.

The DLP has exemplified the potential for distributed leadership to contribute to authentic school improvement, school transformation and change. Consequently, going forward, there is a real possibility that the on-going discussion and debate about distributed leadership will reside at the interface between practice, research and theory. Ultimately, any future accounts of distributed leadership should belong to those best placed to judge and evaluate the real benefits and true limitations. Entrusting the idea of distributed leadership to those who enact and practice it in schools would seem not only timely but also an important step forward in the next phase of its development.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

References

- Abdul-Jabbar M (2013) *Distributed leadership and relational trust: Bridging two frameworks to identify effective leadership behaviors and practices*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Bennett N, Wise C, Woods PA and Harvey JA (2003) *Distributed Leadership: A Review of Literature*. National College for School Leadership, UK.
- Blase J and Blase J (2000) Effective instructional leadership: Teachers’ perspectives on how principals promote teaching and learning in schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 38(2): 130–141.
- Bolden R, Petrov G and Gosling J (2009) Distributed leadership in higher education: Rhetoric and reality. *Educational Management Administration Leadership* 37(2): 257–277.
- Camburn E and Han SW (2009) Investigating connections between distributed leadership and instructional change. In: Harris A (ed.) *Distributed Leadership: Different Perspectives*. The Netherlands: Springer Press, 25–45.

- Cole RP (2008) *The distributed leadership experiment: First year impacts on school culture, teacher networks, and student achievement*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.
- DeFlaminis JA (2009) *The design and structure of the building distributed leadership in the Philadelphia School District Project*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.
- DeFlaminis JA (2011) *The design and implementation of the Annenberg Distributed Leadership Project*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana.
- DeFlaminis JA (2013) *The implementation and replication of the distributed leadership program: More lessons learned and beliefs confirmed*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Gravin T (2013) *Memo Re: Terra Nova Data for Philadelphia Catholic Schools Participating in the PCEL Distributed Leadership Program*. Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA.
- Gronn P (2000) Distributed properties: A new architecture for leadership. *Educational Management Administration Leadership* 28(3): 317–338
- Gronn P (2006) The significance of distributed leadership. *Educational Leadership Research* 7, <http://slc.educ.ubc.ca/eJournal/Issue7/index7.html>.
- Hairon S and Goh JW (2015) Pursuing the elusive construct of distributed leadership. Is the search over? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 43(5): 693–718.
- Hall D (2013) The strange case of the emergence of distributed leadership in schools in England. *Educational Review* 65: 467–487.
- Hargreaves A (2016) The place for professional capital and community. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* 1(1).
- Hargreaves A and Ainscow M (2015) The top and bottom of leadership and change. *Phi Delta Kappan* 97(3): 42–48.
- Hargreaves A, Boyle A and Harris A (2014) *Uplifting leadership: How organizations, teams, and communities raise performance*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Hargreaves A and Fink D (2009) Distributed leadership: Democracy or delivery? In: Harris A (ed.) *Distributed Leadership: Different Perspectives*. The Netherlands: Springer Press, 181–193.
- Harris A (2011) System improvement through collective capacity building. *Journal of Educational Administration* 49(6): 624–636.
- Harris A (2013a) *Distributed Leadership Matters: Perspectives, Practicalities, and Potential*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Harris A (2013b) Distributed leadership friend or foe? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 41(5): 545–554.
- Hartley D (2009) Education policy, distributed leadership and socio-cultural theory. *Educational Review* 61(2): 139–150.
- Hartley D (2010) Paradigms: How far does research in distributed leadership ‘stretch’? *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership* 38: 271–285.
- Heck R and Hallinger P (2010) Testing a longitudinal model of distributed leadership effects on school improvement. *Leadership Quarterly* 21: 867–885.
- Klar HW, Huggins KS, Hammonds HL and Buskey FC (2016) Fostering the capacity for distributed leadership: A post-heroic approach to leading school improvement. *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 19(2): 111–137.
- Leithwood K and Mascall B (2008) Collective leadership effects on student achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 44(4): 529–561.
- Leithwood K, Mascall B, Strauss T, et al. (2009) Distributing leadership to make schools smarter: Taking ego out of the system. In: Leithwood K, Mascall B and Strauss T (eds) *Distributed Leadership According to the Evidence*. London: Routledge.
- Louis KS, Mayrowetz D, Murphy J and Smylie M (2013) Making sense of distributed leadership: How secondary school educators look at job redesign. *International Journal of Educational Leadership & Management* 1(1): 33–68.
- Polka WS and Litchka PR (2008) *The Dark Side of Educational Leadership: Superintendents and the Professional Victim Syndrome*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Riggan M (2009) *An analysis of team behavior in the Distributed Leadership Project*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, San Diego, CA.
- Riggan M and Supovitz J (2008) *Evaluating the Annenberg Distributed Leadership Project*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, New York, NY.
- Schmoker M (2011) *Focus: Elevating the essentials to radically improve student learning*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA.
- Schyns B and Hansbrough T. (2008) Why the brewery ran out of beer: The attribution of mistakes in a leadership context. *Social Psychology*, 39(3): 197–203.
- Spillane JP (2006) *Distributed Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane JP, Camburn EM and Stitzel Pareja A. (2007) Taking a distributed perspective to the school principal’s workday. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 6(1): 103–125.
- Spillane JP and Diamond JB (2007) A distributed perspective on and in practice. In: Spillane JP and Diamond JB (eds) *Distributed Leadership in Practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 146–166.
- Spillane JP, Halverso R and Diamond JB (2001) Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher* 30(3): 23–28.
- Spillane JP, Harris A, Jones M and Mertz K (2015) Opportunities and challenges for taking a distributed perspective: Novice school principals’ emerging sense of their new position. *British Educational Research Journal* 41(6): 1068–1085.
- Supovitz JA (2009) *Distributed leadership evaluation memo*. Consortium for Policy and Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.
- Supovitz J and Riggan M (2012) *Building a foundation for school leadership: An evaluation of the Annenberg Distributed Leadership Project, 2006–2010*. Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.
- Tian M, Risku M and Collin K (2016) A meta-analysis of distributed leadership from 2002 to 2013: Theory development,

- empirical evidence and future research focus. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 44(1): 146–165.
- Woods PA and Roberts A (2016) Distributed leadership and social justice: Images and meanings from across the school landscape. *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 19(2): 138–156.
- Yoak E (2013) *Learning for leadership: Understanding adult learning to build school leadership capacity*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Yuen JHP, Chen DTV and Ng D (2015) Distributed leadership through the lens of activity theory. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, doi: 10.1177/1741143215570302.

Author biographies

Alma Harris is currently Director of the Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Malaya, Malaysia. She

was previously Pro-Director (Leadership) at the Institute of Education, UCL. Professor Harris is currently directing a comparative research study exploring leadership preparation and development across seven education systems. [#7systemleadershipstudy].

John DeFlaminis is currently the Executive Director of the Penn Center for Educational Leadership at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. He also directs the Distributed Leadership Project which has been replicated in over 40 schools in 3 major school districts in the past 12 years. Prior to Penn, John was a K-12 teacher and educational administrator (including a Superintendent of Schools for 17 years) for more than 35 years.