Distributed Leadership: Still in the Gift of the Headteacher

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary efforts to reconceptualise the teaching profession in Scotland as seen with the Donaldson (2011) *Review of Teacher Education*, the McCormac (2011) *Review of Teacher Employment* and the GTCS (2012) *Review of Professional Standards* are aligning themselves to certain principles. Among them, is the core principle that leadership should form an integral feature of the role of every qualified teacher. Teacher leadership is premised on a distributed perspective on leadership. However, defining leadership, distributed leadership and teacher leadership proves problematic. So too does the identification of the expectations and responsibilities related to discrete and complementary roles within school hierarchies within the suite of revised professional standards.

This article takes as its focus the problematic nature of distributed leadership. It reports on a study exploring a distributed perspective on school leadership through three headteacher case studies conducted in Scottish primary schools. It draws 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 reports on six themes emerging from an analysis of the findings. The sixth dominant theme is discussed in detail. To a large extent, distributed leadership was found to be in the gift of the headteacher, actively encouraging, enabling and facilitating distributed leadership at individual and whole staff levels. Implications are drawn for educational leadership in relation to contemporary Scottish policy developments.

INTRODUCTION

Nationally, the political will for distributed leadership in schools is clear (Torrance, 2012). A number of key factors have contributed to setting a policy direction resulting in a distributed perspective on leadership becoming an established expectation for the leadership and management of Scottish schools. Globally, the emergence of distributed leadership resulted from the shift to devolve school governance (Rhodes, 1997), coupled with new public management and associated workforce reform (Giddens, 1998). Distributed leadership resonates with organisational learning within the knowledge economy (Hartley, 2010). In the UK, increased compliance together with changes to the governance of schools and a more complex headteacher role followed. In Scotland, despite a distinct educational ideology, legislation and policy milieu, the global school improvement movement, with associated devolved responsibility to schools within a compliance culture, similarly resulted in key changes to the headteacher role. Distributed leadership was heralded an elixir for the challenges besetting Scottish education such as devolved governance, the perceived leadership crisis, the inherent difficulties in school management structures, workload pressures and issues of succession planning. The search for solutions-focused research, along with the endorsement of applied research and the considerable influence of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), heavily influenced policy development in this area. Distributed leadership became normatively and aspirationally positioned. Consequently, politically approved headship preparation, promoting a distributed perspective rooted in the national Standard for Headship, utilised government endorsed discourse.

The emphasis on distributive leadership in recent HMIE parlance appears to arise from Elmore's work (e-Lead, 2008) but may in fact be rooted in concepts of distributive justice, based on the work of the philosopher John Rawls (Maiese, 2003) which included the principle of equality of opportunity (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2007). Distributive justice and subsequently, distributive leadership could be perceived as being in keeping with the democratic principles of Scotland and as such, competent (Wenger, 2000) by both government and the professional community. The policy direction and policy documents are full of the rhetoric of distributed leadership (see Torrance, 2009). It also forms the popular discourse of contemporary school education literature (Harris, A., 2009; Leithwood *et al.,* 2009a). The formal structures are in place to facilitate distributed leadership in schools, flatter management structures being designed to promote collegiate practices, but it is not clear to what effect (Hartley, 2007 and 2010).

For the most part, distributed leadership has served a political rather than an educational purpose. Having become commonly accepted, it is seldom questioned despite its lack of empirical underpinning (Harris, 2009; Leithwood *et al.*, 2009a). Its unsteady foundations can lead to tensions in the field (Torrance, 2009). Contemporary Scottish educational policy uses the terms collegiality, distributed, distributive and shared leadership interchangeably. Competing expectations emerge across various policy documents. Conceptual confusion abounds with the danger of staff *'talking past one another'* (Spillane and Coldren, 2011: 26). Clarity in definition is key since the way leadership is conceptualised affects how leadership is practised.

This study set out to explore the experiences and perceptions of early career primary headteachers progressing a distributed perspective on school leadership and management. How the headteachers made sense of a distributed perspective, their role and motivations remained prominent throughout, explored through three case studies. Each headteacher articulated the rationale for and strategic intentions behind a distributed perspective, as well as the range of processes intentionally engaged with to take forward that perspective. Beyond contemporary educational rhetoric, school leadership literature and policy discourse, the problematic nature of distributed leadership surfaced at various points of the research process.

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, the headteachers strove to know each member of staff, to build their trust and communicate a vision for the school and in so doing, encourage and enable staff to engage in leaderly behaviours. The headteachers were aware of steering a careful course, guided by their professional values rather than a blueprint for effective practice. Despite this, tensions and surprises arose.

CONCEPTUALIZING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

An initial attempt at a systematic review of the literature identified a dearth of empirical studies into distributed leadership, later confirmed by two edited texts (Harris, 2009; Leithwood *et al.*, 2009a). This in part explains why, although often referred to within policy, theory and practice, defining distributed leadership is problematic in itself. Much of the literature is aspirational or normative rather than based on empirical research. The various conceptions of distributed leadership evident across the literature illustrate that it is *'a contested concept embracing a wide range of understandings and often bearing little apparent relationship to what happens in schools and classrooms'* (MacBeath, 2009: 41).

Key voices across three broad perspectives are identifiable within 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 practised which counts and question whether the term adequately represents the realities of school practice.

DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS STUDY

Few authors and researchers define distributed leadership in and for their work (Spillane and Diamond, 2007). Part of the difficulty in defining distributed leadership stems from the conceptual confusion surrounding a definition of leadership itself. Essentially definitions of leadership are heavily contested (Leithwood *et al*., 1999; Yukl, 2002) as is the distinction made between leadership and management (Ball, 2008; Gunter, 2012). Of the definitions of leadership provided, *'there is a tendency to define leadership in terms of its effectiveness or outcome'* and to focus on *'positive outcomes'* (Spillane, 2006: 11) which is overly simplistic.

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). The working definition of distributed leadership selected 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, with some attention paid to the contested nature of school improvement. Those interactions concern *'both formal and informal leadership and the way they produce different patterns of activity'* (Harris, 2008: 31).

THE STUDY

Having selected specific definitions of leadership and distributed leadership, parameters were provided for data collection and analysis. Small-scale empirical research using interpretative enquiry with aspects of a grounded approach was utilised to reach a depth of understanding, with a focus on three headteacher case studies conducted in sequence between May 2009 and September 2010 with a slight overlap between the completion of one and the commencement of the next. Each case study provided an account of one headteacher's perspective on and practice of distributed leadership. As described by the first, none of the headteachers perceived their role as *'being about the heroic leader, about being the charismatic leader'*. Rather, their ideology was identified as believing all teachers have a leadership role to play.

The Study's Overall Aim and Research Questions

The study sought to explore how headteachers (and their staff) make sense of a distributed perspective in practice. 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 (SQH) programme?

The Sample

The purposive sample was selected to provide insights from a group marginalised in the limited number of empirical studies conducted to date. All three were headteachers of primary schools within the same local authority having been subject to the same recruitment and selection criteria and procedures, theoretically at least. All three were in the early years of headship. All were SQH graduates, 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 (S*f*H) (SEED, 2005). As SQH graduates, they were considered to have an informed understanding of distributed leadership. Each articulated a commitment to a distributed perspective within their own practice and the practice of their schools.

Headteachers in post for around two years were selected as the literature review suggested that there were key implications for different phases of headship and that this sample might be very productive in terms of eliciting the experiences of headteachers during a phase when they would be conscious of growing into the role and developing their leadership style(s), having had sufficient time to establish relationships with staff.

Ethical Considerations

Careful attention was paid to a number of ethical considerations concerning this study (see Torrance, 2012 for a fuller explanation). Consideration was given to: the nature of the research project itself; the context of the research; procedures adopted; data collection methods; the nature of the participants; the type of data collected; and what was done with the data, including its publication (Cohen *et al*., 2006: 49).

The researcher's relationship to the case study headteachers led to considerable care being taken with eliciting access and informed consent. Recognition was given to the key role of gatekeepers and informants. Access to the potential sample was gained through the LA SQH coordinator (with responsibility for leadership CPD). Access to each school was gained through each headteacher. The SQH coordinator had a 'duty of care' for the headteachers and the headteachers had a 'duty of care' for their staff. Throughout the study, care was taken to ensure participants were well aware of its purpose, the intention of eliciting their views, how anonymity would be assured, that they were under no obligation to participate and, that they could opt out at any point (Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Lee, 1993). Consent was never taken for granted and was continuously sought. A progressive entry approach was adopted (Lee, 1993) where, only after having secured access at each stage, does the researcher move on to the next.

The Research Methods

The research methods for this study encompassed interpretative enquiry with aspects of a grounded approach; multi-methods emphasising qualitative methods designed to elicit depth of insight. The research was designed to ascertain how the actors made sense of distributed leadership with a particular focus on a sequence of four in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with each headteacher, one of which adopted a narrative style. The interviews, designed to elicit flow in the headteachers' thinking, resulted in expansive narratives. In addition, the headteachers were each asked to keep a reflective diary, for a four-week duration. Vignettes from the interviews and diaries exemplified key findings.

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 actual rather than the aspirational view was sought. The 'lived' performance and 'designed' organisation were explored in tandem (Spillane and Coldren, 2011).

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.

The data analysis employed an iterative process, 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. There were different stages to the data analysis. First stage analysis involved the collation and initial presentation of the data. Each interview was transcribed verbatim creating a series of transcripts. Each school's 360° questionnaire responses 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.

Different data sets were drawn from within each case study. 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: SIX EMERGING THEMES

Six themes emerged from and cut across the research findings. Distributed leadership was found to be context specific, socially constructed, negotiated and hierarchical in nature, premised on five taken for granted assumptions and, to large extent, in the gift of the headteacher. The sixth theme was dominant. The central role of the headteacher in encouraging, enabling and facilitating distributed leadership at individual and whole staff levels, was ever present.

Theme 1: The context specific nature of distributed leadership

The context specific nature of distributed leadership emerged as a key characteristic (Louis *et al*., 2009; Mascall *et al*., 2009; Spillane and Coldren, 2011). School context played a critical role in terms of school structure, staffing, norms of interaction and collaborative engagement. Each informed how the headteachers took forward their distributed perspective. Although the literature (e.g. Bell, 2007; Spillane's work) suggested that key differences between the size, structure and complexity of schools might affect the findings, the size of school in itself did not appear to make a distributive perspective more or less problematic. However, it may have affected levels of engagement by support and teaching staff. In a small school, there tended to be an assumption that all staff would engage in school leadership and that everyone would contribute to and benefit from collective effort. That said, potential restrictions were associated with a small school having only one promoted staff member who had to take care not to overburden support and teaching staff whilst trying to maintain the school improvement agenda.

Each of the headteachers reported having taken up post in schools unaccustomed to distributed leadership, having previously experienced traditional hierarchical headteachers. Over a matter of two to three years, they had purposefully sought to engage staff in leadership processes. There was no blueprint to follow and the influence of school context was ever present. Despite their experience and understanding, on appointment to headship, nothing could be taken as a given. Each headteacher had invested significant energies in understanding the school as an organization (Beare *et al*., 1989; Spillane and Coldren, 2011: 12), *'to survey the school's existing infrastructure'*, getting to know its context and culture (Busher, 2001; Fidler, 1998; MacGilchrist *et al*., 1995; Torrington and Weighman, 1989). This enabled her to begin to take forward a distributed perspective, step by step, setting an expectation and legitimizing actions (Bennett, 2001; Murphy *et al*., 2009). Gaining an in-depth knowledge and understanding of each individual staff member was also key, to identify how ready and able each staff member was to engage in leadership processes, harness that engagement (Day *et al*., 2007), and identify and circumvent obstacles in their path (Murphy *et al*., 2009).

The context specific nature of distributed leadership (Bell, 2007) led to distinct differences identified across the three schools. Perhaps more remarkable, was the other cross cutting themes which emerged.

Theme 2: The socially constructed nature of distributed leadership

Despite their commitment, insight and postgraduate study, all three headteachers were still learning how to take forward a distributed perspective on leadership and management within the context of their current school (Louis *et al*., 2009; Mascall *et al*., 2009). Their learning was situated within the school as a learning organization (Hayes et al., 2004: Senge, 2006), sharing many features of diagnosis and design explored by Spillane and Coldren (2011). All staff appeared to be learning in context how to take a distributed perspective forward, under the stewardship of each headteacher (Anderson *et al*., 2009; Day, 2009; Hallinger and Heck, 2009; Leithwood *et al*., 2009b; Murphy *et al*., 2009).

Within each school's context, a variety of interpretations and multiple realities or actualities existed. Distributed leadership did not appear to be a single entity but rather, comprised layers and divisions, adapted in accordance to circumstance and purpose (Spillane and Coldren, 2011). Patterns of influence changed according to location of activity, the semi-private context of the classroom, or the public arena outwith the classroom. Distributed leadership was socially constructed (Spillane, 2005), an active process, involving negotiating meanings. Through distributing leadership and to a lesser extent accountability, the headteacher's role focused on influence through professional expertise and moral imperatives rather than line management authority (Bell, 2007). The headteachers were careful to articulate with staff the fundamental principles to their distributed perspective

(Harris and Lambert, 2003): the broad based involvement of staff and staff development opportunities, agency to influence and change. Regardless, more than any other colleague, staff in each school approached the headteacher for advice and support across the sociograms.

A distributed perspective was work in progress, not yet deeply embedded in school practice. Key characteristics were found to be at various stages of development. *Trust* was fundamentally important (Dinham, 2009; Louis *et al*., 2009; MacBeath, 2009; Murphy *et al*., 2009) both in terms of staff trusting the headteacher to act within a consistent, principled and supportive approach, and in terms of the headteacher entrusting staff with leadership roles through managed risk. *Focused and collective effort* developed through shared vision, purpose and direction setting, with an expectation that staff would pull together to develop a level of independence and problem solving, as well as ownership of school improvement initiatives through taking responsibility and feeling a sense of empowerment. A *conducive school culture* reflecting re-culturing (Fullan, 2001; Murphy *et al*., 2009) was designed to develop the school as a learning community with continuous staff engagement in self-evaluation, critically reflecting on practice to identify priorities for further improvement (Stoll and Fink, 1995). A *facilitative senior management's* main role was to encourage, enable and support (Murphy *et al*., 2009) requiring substantial time commitment (Leithwood *et al*., 2009b). A *developing professional identity* was necessary both for the headteachers required to appreciate leadership as an integral part of the role of staff and then work with staff to develop a professional identity incorporating leadership reflecting '*work redesign'* (Louis *et al*., 2009: 158); and for both promoted and unpromoted staff requiring a shift in their professional identities (Leithwood *et al*., 2009b; Mayrowetz *et al*., 2009; Murphy *et al*., 2009). An appreciation was needed of the *complex and multi-faceted* nature of distributed leadership, not easily defined or described, working through networks of influence representing norms of interaction (Murphy *et al*., 2009) creating patterns of influence.

Theme 3: The negotiated nature of distributed leadership

Skilled negotiation was required by each headteacher charged with aligning multiple, often conflicting and public accountabilities. Each headteacher's purpose in taking forward a distributed perspective was essentially to enhance the educational provision for pupils. A balance was sought which encouraged innovation within measured risk. In so doing, the headteachers and their staff kept things safe. Developing a cohesive approach within which staff could take forward leadership roles, lay at the heart of those efforts. As the third headteacher said, '*it really is about building community and about building activities that people feel they can lead within'*. In order to achieve that, they were focused on developing shared understandings, sharing knowledge and expertise, and learning together for school improvement.

Each headteacher negotiated practical considerations. At a basic level, there was an expectation either on the part of staff, the headteacher or both, that time should be made available for non-promoted staff to take forward a leadership role (Murphy *et al*., 2009). Time was negotiated collectively through collegiate time agreements or the timetabling of staff activities, individually in response to members of staff stepping into recognised roles such as curriculum coordinators, and individually on an ad hoc basis, reflecting the middle leadership literature (Bell, 2007; Fitzgerald *et al*., 2006). It was the headteachers who had ultimate responsibility for assigning staff and through doing so, setting the conditions for staff to develop positive regard for each other's ability. And, it was the headteacher who had ultimate responsibility for the recruitment and selection of staff.

Each headteacher also negotiated strategic considerations. At a deeper level, the headteachers negotiated the focus for and parameters of leadership engagement, which could be construed as new managerialism (Gunter, 2004, 2008 and 2012). Each headteacher developed a range of strategies for engaging staff in school improvement processes and designed opportunities for collaborative engagement. She held the overview and demarcated clear restrictions. She focused her efforts on building teams and pulling

staff together, developing confidence and ability, developing a common purpose and staff ownership leading to taking more shared responsibility. Staff autonomy and collective effort sat side by side within a distributed perspective. Each headteacher made considerable effort to get to know her staff and where each teacher was on the leadership spectrum in an effort to engage them, differentiating her approach, targeting encouragement and support.

Distributed leadership overwhelmingly focused on priorities from the school's improvement plan or the headteacher's priorities providing coherence, consensus and a strategy for the use of finite resources. However, it also limited the scope for spontaneous leadership or for a grass roots change agenda promoted by current policy rhetoric. Teachers were still waiting for permission to act and then acting within agreed parameters. What did not emerge from the findings was a sense of teachers or support staff identifying for themselves through critical reflection, aspects of their practice that they identified as requiring improvement, then collaborating with colleagues to experiment with practice and identify solutions to issues identified. Rather, the headteachers were endeavouring to develop an enquiry stance with staff, focused on agreed priorities. Support staff could have a leadership role in 'whole school' areas but not within the classroom.

Theme 4: The hierarchical nature of distributed leadership

Distributed leadership was found to be hierarchical in nature. Each school had a pattern of authority, rules and procedures (Harling, 1984) within which, distributed leadership was given, not taken (NCSL, 2004). As further discussed below, distributed leadership was in the main, found to be 'in the gift of the headteacher'. 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.

The unintended language of hierarchy surfaced at various points across the case studies. The first headteacher made a clear distinction between members of the SMT and staff (*'aimed at us'*, *'we just need to watch that'*; *'as low down as a teacher or an auxiliary'*) and the positioning of the headteacher (*'my staff'*; *'I'm really proud of them, really proud of them'*). The second headteacher also referred to the positioning of her role (*'my staff'*; *'my support staff'*) and the functionality of that role (*'giving'* staff responsibility; *'allowing'*, *'encouraging'* and *'asking'* them to take on leadership roles, *'getting the best out of people'*, *'driving'* the improvement agenda). The third headteacher also referred to the positioning of her role (*'my school'*, *'my staff'*, *'my members of staff'*; *'my younger members of staff'*, *'my newer member of staff'*, *'my valued member of staff'*, *'my support staff'*, *'my support assistants'*, *'my probationer'*, *'little teacher'*, *'this girl'*). She often used terms related to power and authority (*'given up their power'*, *'dominated'*, *'manipulation'*, '*control'*, *'devious'*).

Three key layers were playing themselves out within established hierarchies: the senior management layer; the teacher layer; the support staff layer (see Torrance, 2012).

Theme 5: The taken for granted assumptions within a distributed perspective

The headteachers and their staff perceived a number of benefits arising from operating a distributed perspective in practice. The overriding benefit was a belief that a distributed perspective impacted positively on pupils' school experience. More specifically, distributed leadership was thought to lead to a faster pace of change, and subsequently to embedded sustainable change, particularly in relation to curricular matters, and to teaching, learning and assessment matters in the case of teachers, and to pupil care, welfare and pastoral concerns in the case of support staff. This, they felt, was 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.

The headteachers and their staff also perceived a number of potential problems linked to taken-for-granted assumptions. Indeed, the findings from this study challenge certain taken for granted assumptions often held in the theoretical, policy and practice frames of reference (see Torrance, 2013b): 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.

Theme 6: Distributed leadership was, to large extent, in the gift of the headteacher

To large extent, distributed leadership was found to be 'in the gift of the headteacher'. She was instrumental, whether through direct action or an indirect facilitative role. In that regard, the headteacher required to have knowledge and understanding of both a distributed perspective and of the school's staff.

Each headteacher paced the rate and extent of leadership distributed, maintained an overview and quality assured the process. The engagement of teachers, and indeed support staff, in leadership roles had not happened by chance (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001; Killion, 1996; Murphy *et al*., 2009; Slater, 2008). It had come about through purposeful planning on the part of the three headteachers. In each of the schools they had played a leadership role, past and present, they had pushed the boundaries of established practice, taking incremental steps to reach increasing depths of distributed leadership. As discussed in Torrance (2013a), they did so by setting clear expectations that distributed leadership would develop, encouraging staff to engage in leadership practices, modelling the processes inherent in a distributed perspective, utilising enabling processes, devising enabling strategies and developing enabling structures. They made deliberate decisions and took practical actions. They appreciated that teacher leadership needed support (Harris and Muijs, 2004; Murphy, 2005).

That said it was not necessarily easy for each headteacher to identify or articulate how the characteristics of a distributed perspective had come about - hardly surprising given that, *'how leadership is distributed and with what effect is relatively uncharted territory'* (Harris and Spillane, 2008: 32). The narrative nature of the second interview and the open-ended discussions of the third (focused on the 360° outcomes) and the fourth (focused on the sociograms) supported their reflections in that regard. This shared similarities with *'sense-making'* as described by Spillane and Coldren (2011: 7), whereby conditions were created to enable headteachers to *'switch from automatic to conscious processing'*. In so doing, the headteachers were supported through *'reflection-in-practice… to take notice of the taken-for-granted aspects of school life'* (Spillane and Coldren, 2011: 19).

All three headteachers had taken up post in schools where a top-down leadership and management style was established. It had taken around two years to reach a point on the distributed leadership spectrum. Each headteacher recognized the role they had played in developing a distributed perspective. The first acknowledged, *'I see my influence'*. The second perceived distributed leadership was *'enabled and facilitated'* by her. The third compared the headteacher's role to that of the *'queen bee'*, recognizing that *'sometimes you support the bit you don't want to see by the way you behave'*. Their influence had been key in *'always nurturing'* a distributed perspective. The headteachers appeared to be continuously negotiating their position with individual and collective staff. Leadership was still top-down, despite the rhetoric of teams and empowerment (Gunter, 2003).

The influence of the headteachers was considerable (Barth, 2001). Incremental steps were taken, building staff confidence, responding to perceived level of need. They gauged the pace of change and timing of change, collectively and for individual staff. They did so

through setting an expectation but knew that was insufficient of itself. Each headteacher identified ways in which they actively harnessed understandings of a distributed perspective as well as staff enthusiasm, engaging less confident or enthusiastic members of staff, recognizing and overcoming potential barriers to that perspective, modelling and scaffolding processes for staff. They were vigilant for opportunities to engage staff, including pitching opportunities to areas of interest. They were the gatekeepers to and facilitators of such opportunities (Murphy *et al*., 2009). They sanctioned leadership roles and provided legitimization to leadership activity. They provided staff with a safety net to minimize risk and supported staff when problems were encountered. They invested time developing staff capability, they tapped individuals on shoulders and encouraged them to step forward, they adjusted the level of expectation and support perceived to be required, to maximize the leadership potential of individual staff members. In so doing, they created a ripple effect, working towards a critical mass or tipping point.

At a strategic level, the headteachers understood that in order to capitalize on the influence exerted by leaders and followers, it was vital staff had an understanding of the direction set for school improvement and the underpinning school vision and values (Senge, 2006). On appointment, each headteacher had prioritised developing such understanding with their staff. Thereafter, they had set about developing what Spillane (Spillane and Coldren, 2011: 40; Spillane *et al*., 2011) would term organizational tools and routines, contributing to the *'situation'* or environment, by framing staff interactions and creating infrastructures for distributed leadership.

Organizational tools enabled organizational routines to function. All three case study headteachers utilized the collegiate time agreement in the way they thought best to engage staff and focus their efforts. The first case study headteacher had a public list of all staff, each having been assigned a leadership role. The second case study headteacher had drawn up a formalised timetable which enabled support staff to have non-contact time for progressing leadership roles, making much use of the title 'co-ordinator' to raise the profile of informal leaders in committees and groups charged with making important decisions. The third case study headteacher had focused on developing policies in which all staff had a vested interest, starting with the resources policy perceived as safe, functional, non-confrontational and resulting in quick wins. Having carefully modelled the process of policy development, she moved on to other gradually more challenging policies.

Organizational routines were evident in each school designed to pull staff together and focus their collective efforts on improving learning and teaching. All three case study headteachers sought and developed strategies for collaborative school improvement, putting in place structures such as committees and working groups. They emphasized the role of CPD and the professional development review process. They made purposeful use of the different stages of the school improvement planning process. They intentionally engaged teaching and to a lesser extent support staff in on-going self-evaluation processes. The first case study headteacher had established an extended management team and leadership group. The second case study headteacher had a sophisticated set of processes for on-going self-evaluation and made extensive use of coordinator roles at school and cluster levels. The third case study headteacher had developed design briefs to support and guide the progression of school improvement initiatives and had been fully supportive of the principles behind the 'staff huddle', meetings at which it was not felt necessary for management team members to attend.

CONCLUSION

The current policy drive to reconceptualise the teaching profession in Scotland may well be suspended from a 'shoogly peg' (see Torrance and Humes, 2013). In order for the aspiration that every teacher across Scotland should perceive leadership to be centrally located within their role and then enact that leadership role, a distributed perspective requires to be firmly established in all schools. That was not the finding of this study.

Despite their informed understandings of distributed leadership and commitment to a distributed perspective within their own practice and the practice of their schools, the headteachers in this study were still thinking through and learning about a distributed perspective in practice similar to Kinder's (2010: 17) perspective of learning *as sense-making occur[ing] in a specific sociocultural context'.* Despite their commitment, a distributed perspective did not develop naturally, nor easily. It was purposefully planned for and continuously supported by each headteacher. It involved the balancing of multiple and competing accountabilities leading to variance in the practice of distributed leadership. It also involved the development of teacher professional identity to encompass a school leadership role.

The findings of this study suggest that it is the way in which leadership and a distributed perspective are conceptualized and practised which are key. Each of the headteachers was articulate, highly reflective on their practice and committed to making sense of a distributed perspective on leadership and management. They had learned hard lessons along the way. They articulated tensions related to their intentions to engage staff, which could be interpreted as knowing how to elicit the best efforts of their staff, 'new managerialist' strategies or even manipulation.

If distributed leadership is still 'in the gift of the headteacher' then the findings convey an important message for policy makers and for headteachers and staff in schools charged with taking forward such policy. Contemporary policy discourse relating to distributed leadership in Scottish schools is not based upon evidence-based practice gathered from research conducted in Scotland. It is based on policy from other countries perceived to be similar to Scotland without recognition of key social context or workforce reform differences. Since few empirical studies have been conducted into the practice of distributed leadership and its 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 how distributed leadership is currently operationalised in schools. If the core principle that leadership should form an integral feature of the role of every qualified teacher is to become a reality then much groundwork needs to be covered. 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 complementary roles within school hierarchies need to be articulated, within the suite of revised professional standards. The paradox of distributed leadership residing within hierarchical career and management structures is potentially problematic for both policy discourse and school practice (Hartley, 2010).

Without secure foundations, it is difficult to conceive of how the policy drive to involve every teacher in school leadership can become a reality. 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.

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