Teacher Leadership as Distributed Leadership: heresy, fantasy or possibility?

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on the issue of teacher leadership and explores various interpretations and definitions within the literature. It examines the relationship between teacher leadership and distributed leadership, focusing particularly upon the idea of activity theory. The article suggests that there are some important connections and overlaps between distributed leadership and teacher leadership. The article also discusses the possible sources of resistance to the idea of teachers as leaders in schools and explores how distributing leadership to teachers may contribute to building professional learning communities within and between schools.

Introduction

Anyone familiar with the educational leadership field will be aware of some recycling of ideas under the guise of ‘new’ leadership theory. It should be apparent to anyone reading the literature that many of the ‘new’ leadership ideas over the last decade simply contain further iterations of earlier models. For example, cultural and symbolic approaches to leadership, while considered by some to be breaking new ground, in many ways echo earlier contingency theories (e.g. Fiedler 1993). Similarly, contemporary interest in leadership and complexity theory has its roots firmly in open systems theory originating in the 1930s (Hersey & Blanchard 1969). The point is not to simply dismiss contemporary leadership theory for being derivative, for in any field the emergence of new ideas will be dependent upon existing frames of reference, but to ask some fundamental and critical questions about the origin and nature of ‘new’ ideas in the leadership field.

Most recently, the concept of ‘teacher leadership’ has emerged in England as a ‘new way of looking at leadership (e.g. Muijs & Harris 2002; Frost & Durrant 2003; Day & Harris 2003; Harris 2003). Yet the idea is far from ‘new’, for within the USA and Canada, teacher leadership is a well-known and accepted form of leadership activity. It has a very respectable academic lineage with internationally known researchers such as Little (1995) and Lambert (1998) advocating the positive relationship between forms of teacher leadership, teacher collaboration and capacity building for school improvement. As a result, the number of teacher leadership
programmes and initiatives has grown substantially in both countries, incorporating various informal and formal leadership activities (e.g. Gehrke 1991; Clemson-Ingram & Fessler 1997). To be clear about the distinction between these two terms, informal leadership constitutes classroom-related functions such as planning, communicating goals, regulating activities, creating a pleasant workplace environment, supervising, motivating those supervised, and evaluating the performance of those supervised. In contrast, formal leadership roles encompass responsibilities such as subject coordinator, head of department or head of year, often moving away from the classroom to achieve this (Ash & Persall 2000; Gehrke 1991).

Despite an extensive literature on ‘teacher leadership’ (Harris & Muijs 2002) the dominant discourse about leadership in England does not include any serious consideration of the term. Teacher leadership is either dismissed as yet another label for continuing professional development or simply rejected because of the complexities of viewing teachers as leaders within a hierarchical school system where leadership responsibilities are very clearly delineated. The fact that schools rely on a clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities presents a major barrier to the idea of teachers as leaders. Within schools, the social exchange theory of leadership still prevails. Here leaders provide services to a group in exchange for the group’s approval or compliance with the leader’s demands. The maintenance of the leader’s power and authority rests on his or her continuing ability to fulfil follower obligations. Certain variations on this theory argue that by empowering their followers leaders can increase their own power (Kouzes & Posner 1995). In this sense, the leadership process is one of facilitating the personal growth of individuals or groups, which in turn brings greater benefit to the leader. So if teachers were to be leaders, who would follow? What would the nature of the social exchange be and where would be the benefits?

In contrast, a cultural or symbolic theoretical perspective would suggest that leadership is part of the interactive process of sense-making and creation of meaning that is continuously engaged in by organisational members. Leadership therefore can only be understood in relation to shared or invented meanings within an organisation (Morgan 1986). These shared meanings represent the prevailing values, norms, philosophy, rules and climate of the organisation, in other words its culture. Taking this view, leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information and assumptions through continuing conversations. It means generating ideas together; seeking to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and creating actions that grow out of these new understandings. It implies that leadership is socially constructed and culturally sensitive. It does not imply a leader/follower divide, neither does it point towards the leadership potential of just one person. It is within this theoretical tradition that the idea of teacher leadership is most clearly located.

Southworth (2002) has recently pointed out ‘the long standing belief in the power of one is being challenged. Today there is much more talk about shared leadership, leadership teams and distributed leadership’. Interestingly though, any
substantive discussion of teacher leadership has not featured within this discussion to date. This article focuses on the potential reasons why ‘teacher leadership’ is still not a term readily used by those writing and researching about leadership practice in this country. Drawing upon an extensive review of the literature concerning teacher leadership, the paper highlights some conceptual difficulties surrounding the term through an in-depth consideration of the empirical evidence on this theme (Harris & Muijs 2002). The article argues that there are three dominant positions on teacher leadership that currently prevail—these are teacher leadership as heresy, fantasy or possibility. It suggests that teacher leadership is a form of agency that can be widely shared or distributed within and across an organisation, thus directly challenging more conventional forms of leadership practice.

What is Teacher Leadership?

It is evident from the international literature that there are overlapping and competing definitions of the term ‘teacher leadership’. The fact that there exists some conceptual confusion over the exact meaning of teacher leadership makes its pursuit of legitimacy within the leadership field much more difficult to achieve. For example, Wasley (1991: 23) defines teacher leadership, as ‘the ability to encourage colleagues to change, to do things they wouldn’t ordinarily consider without the influence of the leader’. Similarly, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001: 17) define teacher leaders as: ‘teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice’. Boles and Troen (1994: 11) contrast it to traditional notions of leadership, by characterising teacher leadership as a form of ‘collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively’.

A number of different roles have been suggested for teacher leaders that provide a clearer definition and understanding of the term. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) see teacher leadership as having three main facets:

- leadership of students or other teachers: facilitator, coach, mentor, trainer, curriculum specialist, creating new approaches, leading study groups;
- leadership of operational tasks: keeping the school organised and moving towards its goals, through roles as Head of Department, action researcher, member of task forces;
- leadership through decision making or partnership: membership of school improvement teams, membership of committees; instigator of partnerships with business, higher education institutions, LEAs, and parent teacher associations.

Lambert (1988) defines teacher leadership for school capacity building as ‘broad-based, skilful involvement in the work of leadership’. She suggests this perspective requires working with two critical dimensions of involvement—breadth and skilfulness:

1. Broad-based involvement—involving many people in the work of leader-
ship. This involves teachers, parents, pupils, community members, LEA personnel, Universities.

(2) Skilful involvement—a comprehensive understanding and demonstrated proficiency by participants of leadership dispositions, knowledge and skills.

Day and Harris (2003) suggest that there are four discernible and discrete dimensions of the teacher leadership role. The first dimension concerns the translation of the principles of school improvement into the practices of individual classrooms. This brokering role remains a central responsibility for the teacher as leader. It ensures that links within schools are secure and that opportunities for meaningful development among teachers are maximised. A second dimension of the teacher leader role focuses upon participative leadership, where all teachers feel part of the change or development and have a sense of ownership. Teacher leaders may assist other teachers to cohere around a particular development and to foster a more collaborative way of working (Blase & Anderson 1995). They work with colleagues to shape school improvement efforts and take some lead in guiding teachers towards a collective goal.

A third dimension of teacher leadership in school improvement is the mediating role. Teacher leaders are important sources of expertise and information. They are able to draw critically upon additional resources and expertise if required, and to seek external assistance. Finally, a fourth, and possibly the most important dimension of the teacher leadership role, is forging close relationships with individual teachers through which mutual learning takes place. Other writers have identified further dimensions of the teacher leadership role, such as undertaking action research (Ash & Persall 2000), instigating peer classroom observation (Little 1995), or contributing to the establishment of a collaborative culture in the school (Lieberman et al. 1988). The important point emanating from the literature is that teacher leaders are, in the first place, expert teachers, who spend the majority of their time in the classroom but take on different leadership roles at different times, following the principles of formative leadership (Ash & Persall 2000). Teacher leadership essentially refers to the exercise of leadership by teachers, regardless of position or designation. In summary, teacher leadership is centrally concerned with forms of empowerment and agency which are also at the core of distributed leadership theory. The relationship between teacher leadership and distributed leadership theory has not been explored in depth, yet it is clear that there is a strong resonance between the empirical terrain provided in teacher leadership literature and the theoretical perspectives provided by those writing about distributed forms of leadership (e.g Gronn 2000; Spillane et al. 2001).

Teacher Leadership and Distributed Leadership

Gronn (2000) has suggested that distributed leadership implies a different power relationship within the school where the distinctions between followers and leaders tend to blur. He puts forward a theory of action based on the idea of conjoint agency and a consideration of Engeström’s activity theory (1999). In activity theory, the
notion of activity bridges the gap between agency and structure. In Giddens’ sociological theory of action, social or organisational structures can be modified by the agency of individuals by using whatever power resources are to hand. (Giddens 1984). In activity theory, leadership is more of a collective phenomenon. As Gronn puts it: ‘the potential for leadership is present in the flow of activities in which a set of organisation members find themselves enmeshed’ (Gronn 2000: 331).

Explanations based on activity theory are particularly applicable to professional contexts such as schools because most conceptions of professionalism include the idea of autonomous judgement. Again Gronn (2000) is helpful when he says that:

In activities in which there is greater scope for discretion, examples of reciprocally expressed influence abound. In the relations between organisational heads and their immediate subordinates or between executives and their personal assistants for example, couplings form in which the extent of the conjoint agency resulting from the interdependence and mutual influence of the two parties is sufficient to render meaningless any assumptions about leadership being embodied in just one individual. (331)

Distributed leadership theory advocates that schools ‘decentre’ the leader. In this sense leadership is more appropriately understood as ‘fluid and emergent, rather than a fixed phenomenon’ (Gronn 2000: 324). It reflects the view that every person in one way or another can demonstrate leadership (Goleman 2002). This does not mean that everyone is a leader, or should be, but it opens up the possibility for a more democratic and collective form of leadership. Gronn views leadership as more of a collective phenomenon where ‘leadership is present in the flow of activities in which a set of organisation members find themselves enmeshed’ (Gronn 2000: 331).

Distributed leadership theory therefore, is particularly helpful in providing greater conceptual clarity around the terrain of teacher leadership for three main reasons. Firstly, it ‘incorporates the activities of multiple groups of individuals in a school who work at guiding and mobilising staff in the instructional change process’ (Spillane 2001: 20). Secondly, it implies a social distribution of leadership where the leadership function is stretched over the work of a number of individuals where the leadership task is accomplished through the interaction of multiple leaders (Spillane 2001: 20). Thirdly, it implies interdependency rather than dependency embracing how leaders of various kinds and in various roles share responsibility.

Whatever specific definition of teacher leadership one chooses to adopt, it is clear that its emphasis upon collective action, empowerment and shared agency is reflected in distributed leadership theory. Teacher leadership is centrally and exclusively concerned with the idea that all organisational members can lead and that leadership is a form of agency that be distributed or shared. It is fundamentally connected to Gronn’s (2000: 334) view of leadership ‘as a flow of influence in organisations which disentangles it from any presumed connection with headship’. Sergiovanni’s (2001) concept of ‘leadership density’ is also particularly helpful here. He argues that high leadership density means that a larger number of people are involved in the work of others, are trusted with information, are involved in decision making, are exposed to new ideas and are participating in knowledge creation and transfer. In such a
situation, a larger number of members of the organisation have a stake in the success of the school and all teachers are potential leaders.

Consequently, it is suggested that the literature and associated empirical work on teacher leadership provides an important starting point in understanding and illuminating how distributed leadership actually works in schools. It is posited that teacher leadership provides operational images of conjoint agency in action and illustrates how distributed forms of leadership can be developed and enhanced to contribute to school development and improvement. It offers, as Gronn (2003: 14) suggests, ‘qualitatively different points of reference for understanding professional practice compared with the traditional sets of assumptions that have informed the work of previous generations of school leaders’. So why the resistance to the idea? The analysis which follows offers three different but not necessarily mutually exclusive positions.

**Teacher Leadership: Heresy?**

The literature on school leadership contains a bewildering array of definitions, theories and models. However, while constructions and understandings of the term ‘leadership’ vary in subtle and numerous ways, one simple but profound assumption prevails—that leadership equates with position or role. A preliminary glance at the research literature reveals that it is dominated by empirical studies derived from head teachers’ self-report and description. It is premised upon individual impetus rather than collective action and offers a heroic view of leadership predominantly bound up with headship. Yet one of the most congruent findings from recent studies of effective leadership is that authority to lead need not be located in the person of the leader but can be dispersed within the school in between and among people (MacBeath 1988; Day et al. 2000). Leadership can be separated from person, role and status and is primarily concerned with the relationships and the connections among individuals within a school.

While it is clear that the head as the solitary dynamic leader is inadequate for the new directions in educational reform, it still persists. As Gronn (2003) notes, the hero paradigm is premised upon leadership by an individual and reinforces the top-down nature of leadership. This means that leadership is equated with status, authority and position. Gunter (2001) argues that the top-down transmission of what is known simply serves to reinforce a model of leadership that is premised upon individual, rather than collective leadership. Gronn (2003: 2) points to the fact that while distributed practices are emerging in schools because work demands are intensifying, ‘governments are adopting leadership accountability measures that bear little connection with distributed practice’.

**Teacher Leadership: Fantasy?**

Research by Silns and Mulford (2002) has shown that student outcomes are more likely to improve where leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community and where teachers are empowered in areas of importance to them. This implies a changing view of structures away from command and control. It suggests a view of the school as a learning community chiefly concerned with maximising the achievement capacities of all those within the organisation (Gronn 2000). There are some inherent
structural and cultural difficulties in adopting this approach for some schools, and this is why, for many, teacher leadership is acceptable in principle but largely inconceivable in practice.

Firstly, distributed leadership requires those in formal leadership positions to relinquish power to others. Apart from the challenge to authority and ego, this potentially places the head or principal in a vulnerable position because of the lack of direct control over certain activities. In addition, there are financial barriers as formal leadership positions in schools carry additional increments. Consequently, to secure informal leadership in schools requires heads to use other incentives and to seek ways of remunerating staff who take on leadership responsibilities. Secondly, the ‘top-down’ approaches to leadership and the internal school structures offer significant impediments to the development of distributed leadership. The current hierarchy of leadership within both primary and secondary schools means that power resides with the leadership team, i.e. at the top of the school. As a consequence, leadership is viewed as the preserve of the few rather than the many. In addition, the separate pastoral and academic structures in schools, the subject or department divisions, and the strong year groupings present significant barriers to teachers working together. These structures militate against teachers attaining autonomy and taking on leadership roles within the school. They demarcate responsibility and can prove to be substantial barriers to teachers working together.

Finally, and most importantly, distributed leadership poses the challenge of how to distribute responsibility and authority, and more importantly, who distributes responsibility and authority? If it remains the case that the head distributes leadership responsibilities to teachers, then distributed leadership becomes nothing more than informed delegation. A distributed view of leadership ‘incorporates the activities of multiple groups of individuals in a school who work at guiding and mobilising staff in the instructional change process’ (Spillane 2002: 20). It implies a social distribution of leadership where the leadership function is stretched over the work of a number of individuals where the leadership task is accomplished through the interaction of multiple leaders (Spillane 2002). It implies interdependency rather than dependency embracing how leaders of various kinds and in various roles share responsibility. While distributed leadership does not equate with ‘delegation’, it also does not represent a form of leadership that is so diffuse that it loses its distinctive qualities. It is clear that certain tasks and functions would have to be retained by those in formal leadership positions but that the key to successful leadership resides in the involvement of teachers in collectively guiding and shaping instructional development. The inherent difficulties in achieving forms of distributed leadership in schools mean that it is desirable but for the most part considered unachievable—a fantasy.

Teacher Leadership: Possibility?

Despite the difficulties and barriers outlined in the earlier section, it is clear from the literature that teacher leadership can occur if certain prevailing conditions are in place. Evidence would suggest that it is a possibility if the school puts in place the appropriate support mechanisms and creates the internal conditions for forms of teacher leadership to flourish. These conditions are as follows. Firstly, time needs to
be set aside for teachers to meet to plan and discuss issues such as curriculum matters, developing school-wide plans, leading study groups, organising visits to other schools, collaborating with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and collaborating with colleagues. Ovando (1994) found that being freed up for teacher leadership tasks was a crucial element of success in schools where teacher leadership was being implemented. Similar findings were reported by Seashore Louis et al. (1996) in their research, where they found that in the more successful schools, teachers were given more time to collaborate with one another.

Secondly, there need to be rich and diverse opportunities for continuous professional development. The literature would suggest that professional development for teacher leadership needs to focus not just on the development of teachers’ skills and knowledge, but also on aspects specific to their leadership role. Skills such as leading groups and workshops, collaborative work, mentoring, teaching adults, action research, collaborating with others and writing bids need to be incorporated into professional development (and indeed initial teacher training) to help teachers adapt to the new roles involved (Katzenmeyer & Moller 2001).

Thirdly, one of the main areas of capacity building for teacher leadership needs to be the improvement of teachers’ self-confidence to act as leaders in their schools. For teacher leadership to become truly transformative, the literature indicates that structured programmes of collaboration or networking need to be set up to ensure that teacher leaders can fully develop their leadership potential (Gehrke 1991; Clemson-Ingram & Fessler 1997). Through collaborating with teachers in other schools, engaging in trialling new teaching approaches, disseminating their findings to colleagues and engaging in action research, the potential for teacher leadership is significantly enhanced (Darling-Hammond 1990). It has been argued that such activities help to develop teachers’ confidence and reflection on their practice (Day & Harris 2003).

Work by Little (1995) suggests that where teachers learn from one another through mentoring, observation, peer coaching and mutual reflection, the possibilities of generating teacher leadership are significantly enhanced. However, it would be naive to suggest that this will be achieved without some form of remuneration and reward in the system. While it could be argued that teacher leadership brings its own reward, through enhanced effectiveness, a sense of collegiality, improved teaching practices, etc., it will remain a marginal activity within schools unless forms of remuneration are put in place to actively encourage teachers to engage in leadership tasks. Redistributing leadership requires a careful redistribution of resources within the school without which teacher leadership will remain an ad hoc activity. Where teacher leadership does function optimally, the research base would suggest it contributes directly to the establishment of professional learning communities within and between schools.

**Teacher Leadership and Professional Learning Communities**

The literature asserts that the principle reason for teacher leadership is to transform schools into professional learning communities (Katzenmeyer & Moller 2001) and
to empower teachers to become involved closely in decision making within the school, thus contributing to the democratisation of schools (Gehrke 1991). In this sense, teacher leadership aligns itself to Sergiovanni’s (2001) notion of the ‘lifeworld’ of the school rather than the ‘systemworld’, where attention is focused upon developing social, intellectual and other forms of human capital instead of concentrating upon achievement of narrow, instrumental ends. The term ‘professional learning community’ is one that implies a commitment not only to teacher sharing but also the generation of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected. Toole & Seashore Louis (2002: 5) note that the term integrates three robust concepts: firstly, school culture that emphasises professionalism and is ‘client orientated and knowledge based’ (Darling Hammond 1990); secondly, one that emphasises learning, places a high value on teacher professional development (Troen & Boles 1992) and thirdly, one that emphasises personal connection (Louis et al. 1996).

A professional community, therefore, is one where teachers participate in decision making, have a shared sense of purpose, engage in collaborative work and accept joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work. Simply changing the organisational arrangements within schools will do little to promote pedagogical improvement. Consequently, attention must be paid to building an infrastructure to support collaboration and creating the internal conditions for mutual learning. This infrastructure provides a context within which teachers can improve their practice by developing and refining new instructional practices and methods. It has been argued that creating supportive structures, including a collaborative environment, is the ‘single most important factor’ for successful school improvement and ‘the first order of business’ for those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Eastwood & Louis 1992: 215). The findings from teacher leadership literature highlight how collegial relationships promote inquiry-orientated practice and generate an environment of continuous improvement. This effectively relinquishes the notion of structure as a means of control, viewing it rather as ‘a vehicle for empowering others’ (Lambert 1998).

Much more is now known about the conditions under which teachers develop, to the benefit of themselves and their pupils. The problem remaining is how to build learning communities within schools for teachers and pupils. Schools need to build a climate of collaboration premised upon communication, sharing and opportunities for teachers to work together. This can only be achieved by relinquishing models or approaches to leadership which actively prevent teacher-led development work in schools. As Frost and Durrant (2003: 3) note, ‘it is not a matter of delegation, direction or distribution of responsibility but rather a matter of teachers’ agency and their choice in initiating and sustaining change’. Hence the principle of teacher leadership is at the core of building professional learning communities in schools quite simply because it is premised upon teachers working in collaboration to learn with and from each other. Investing in the school as a learning community offers the greatest opportunity to unlock leadership capabilities and capacities among teachers.

Leithwood et al. (1999: 116) argue that ‘leadership’ does not take on new meaning just because the word ‘teacher’ is put in front of it; for them it entails ‘the exercise of influence over the beliefs, actions and values of others as is the case with
leadership from any source’. While one might agree, the implications arising from putting the word ‘teacher’ in front of ‘leadership’ are much more significant than signalling, or not, a possible change in meaning. The implications are more far-reaching implying a fundamental redistribution of power and influence within the school as an organisation. This ‘distributed form’ of leadership has important repercussions for the way in which organisational change is understood, enacted and secured. It implies that teachers have the agency to lead change and to guide organisational development and improvement. For those in formal leadership positions or for those with more conventional views of leadership this is not just an issue of semantics.

Coda

Gronn (2000: 333) proposes ‘distributed leadership is an idea whose time has come’. With the continued focus on transforming education through building professional learning communities within schools, it would seem that teacher leadership is also an idea that is particularly timely. While some initial work is under way [1], more work is required to explore distributed forms of leadership, including teacher leadership, in much more depth. If we are serious about building professional learning communities within and between schools then we need forms of leadership that support and nourish meaningful collaboration among teachers. This will not be achieved by clinging to models of leadership that, by default rather than design, delimit the possibilities for teachers to lead development work in schools.

A comprehensive review of the literature on headship and principalship has pointed towards the paucity of evidence linking leadership at this level to improved student outcomes (Hallinger & Heck 1996). Other research has similarly suggested that distributed forms of leadership among the wider school staff is likely to have a more significant impact on the positive achievement off student/pupil outcomes than that which is largely or exclusively top down (e.g. Gronn 2000: Spillane et al. 2001). Quite simply, we cannot continue to ignore, dismiss or devalue the notion of teacher leadership as a form of distributed leadership—to do so is to knowingly invest in forms of leadership theory and practice that make little, if any difference, to the achievement of young people.

NOTE

[1] For further details on the GTC/NUT funded project on ‘Teacher Leadership’ go the www.gtc.research.org.uk or contact alma.harris@warwick.ac.uk

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