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The discursive performance of leadership in schools

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Abstract

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) and the National College for School Leadership (now the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services) have been active participants in framing and shaping discourse in relation to leadership in schools in England. This paper is based upon findings from research funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-22-3610) as part of the Distributed Leadership and the Social Practices of School Organisation in England (SPSO) project. It examines how educational practitioners have engaged with these discursive framing and shaping activities. This is conducted through a particular focus upon how distributed leadership has been talked into being as part of a wider regime which seeks to manage the performance of educational practitioners and designated educational leaders.

Keywords

Distributed leadership, performativity, discourse

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Distributed leadership has emerged over the last decade as a dominant discourse in school leadership in England. Reports from the OECD (2008) have highlighted the prime importance of distributed leadership in transforming schools. The National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (abbreviated to National College) has presented distributed leadership as an officially sanctioned model of good practice and has developed training materials and a website strongly advocating the adoption of this leadership model; it has also presented distributed leadership as number five in a list of ten propositions (Hopkins, 2001). The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust has strongly endorsed distributed leadership (Harris, 2005, 2008) and Leithwood et al. (2006) in their literature search for a New Labour government project have asserted as one of their *Seven Strong Claims about School Leadership* that school leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.

These endorsements of and invocations to implement distributed leadership in schools have not gone unchallenged. There is both scepticism of the possibilities for distributed leadership in schools and a rejection of the accounts of distributed leadership as offered by its proponents. Literatures seeking to challenge normative narratives of distributed leadership typically view it largely as a fantasy masking a harsher reality in which power and control remains centralised at both local and national levels (Hartley, 2007). In this way distributed leadership acts as a sop or distraction for those disempowered by central government's educational reform agenda. Hartley (2010) further asserts that because of the 'top-down' performance management regime distributed leadership is concerned with the tactics of delegation and not strategy, and that opportunities for authentic distributed leadership based on the participation of teachers and children are strictly limited:

> At present, distributed leadership is not about the expressive dimension of the school; it is not about enabling social and emotional bonds of a community. It is mainly about accomplishing the organizational goals which comprise the instrumental tasks and targets set by officialdom. (Hartley, 2010: 281)

In a similar vein, Hatcher (2005) views distributed leadership as no more than a concession to participatory processes at the lower levels of a managerialist power structure and points to a central contradiction between government driven head teacher managerialism and distributed leadership. In contrast, other writers normatively seeking to promote distributed leadership within schools see real possibilities for distributed leadership and view them as providing fertile grounds for the development of distributed leadership practices. These radically different conceptions of distributed leadership are further complicated by the term 'distributed leadership' itself. Writers working with this concept (Bennett et al., 2003; Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2008; MacBeath, 2009; Spillane, 2006) do not necessarily

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share the same understanding of the term. Indeed, as Hartley (2007) has pointed out, it is a slippery and elastic concept.

Regardless of these conceptual difficulties and very different understandings there is compelling evidence that at a discursive level distributed leadership has emerged strongly in English schools. Penlington and Kington (2007), for example, report that *all* participants in *all* participating schools thought that leadership in their schools was distributed. This raises questions as to why as an idea it has discursively taken root within schools in England. What we mean by this is why distributed leadership has been talked into existence: thought about, talked about, designed and worked for through structural and cultural changes that relate to everyday practice about what is imagined and how what actually gets done happens. Although the research reported upon in this article seeks to offer evidence which may help to respond to such issues there are already strong explanations, the more pertinent of which are highlighted below, seeking to analyse why this concept has had such discursive purchase.

The first explanation lies within the challenge distributed leadership presents to the model of the heroic transformational head teacher with the implicit and, at times, explicit recognition of the limits of an approach dependent upon the talents and energy of one influential and dominant individual (Spillane, 2006). Although widely critiqued both prior to and during its revival linked to the school improvement and effectiveness movement, the limits of the heroic transformational model of leadership became widely evident in England, in particular, as the endeavours of a small number of 'super heads' failed to make any significant or lasting impression upon even the measurable outcomes of schools deemed in need of improvement. In this regard distributed leadership was an obvious candidate to act as a replacement for an increasingly discredited leadership model (Gunter, 2005). Distributed leadership offered the attraction of remodelling leadership with the emphasis of leadership efforts not upon one individual but on individuals and groups more widely distributed or dispersed throughout the school. The second explanation can be discerned within ideas about the freedom and autonomy of teachers, and others positioned as followers in the heroic transformational model, in going about their work. Here one of the main appeals of distributed leadership can be found in its association with the reality of what actually goes on as well as more democratic practices in schools where teachers have greater ownership of decisions through the distribution of leadership (Gronn, 2000). Finally, distributed leadership can be seen as having the added appeal of masking or acting as a distraction from some of the harsher realities of schools organisational life (Hartley, 2007) which can be seen as arising out of the increasing centralisation of education within England and its alignment with largely economic and instrumental purposes.

So, as the above explanations demonstrate, we have some understanding of the reasons for the emergence of distributed leadership and that the term is widely recognised in schools. What we know far less about is how educational practitioners have handled distributed leadership as an officially sanctioned and marshalled intervention. In order to contribute to our understanding of this matter research has been conducted as part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project entitled Distributed Leadership and the Social Practices of School Organisation (SPSO). The SPSO project was conducted in five schools located throughout England where teachers and designated leaders were interviewed about organisational arrangements at their institutions and observed engaging in decision-making processes. Our sample was selected to include a range of school types (selective, single-sex/co-educational, size, location), positioned differently in relation to their socio-economic status and their official performance history over ten years.[1]

It is the purpose of this article to examine the performative aspects of distributed leadership as revealed through our research. This is because, although in all of the schools researched the term distributed leadership was, as had been anticipated, used relatively widely, most especially among designated senior leaders, a particular feature of this use of the term was performative in nature in the sense that those using it were seeking to convey particular meanings intended to discursively position both themselves and, in some cases, their institutions in relation to their understandings of distributed leadership. In making use of this performative lens through which to view distributed leadership we are seeking to build upon the work of those writers adopting more critical stances in relation to distributed leadership. As described above, such writers view distributed leadership as intimately linked to a wider climate of performativity (Ball, 2003) in which the performance of schools and those who work within them are tightly managed and controlled. Here the use of the term 'performative is taken as meaning the following:

> Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. (Ball, 2003: 216)

This discursive and performative representation of distributed leadership took on different forms in each of the schools, but a particular distinction was between performative uses of the term distributed leadership that were linked to largely external pressures and forces and those that were linked to largely internal pressures and forces. In order to illustrate both this distinction and the performative dimensions of the use of the term distributed leadership an account of leadership at two schools is provided largely from the perspective of the relevant head teachers.

Birch Tree School

Birch Tree School serves a socio-economically disadvantaged inner city area. It opened as an Academy

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following the closure of two local schools. Since the school was created there has been a significant turnover of staff with 25 per cent of the teaching staff and 50 per cent of the support staff remaining from the predecessor schools. The proportion of students who are entitled to free school meals is well above the national average and the neighbourhood in which the school is located and in which the vast majority of students live ranks among the lowest 250 on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation[2] reflecting the social and economic circumstances of its catchment area.

Government initiatives in England in recent years have continued to place significant pressure on schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities, most especially in terms of raising levels of student attainment in national tests. This prime indicator of the success of such schools has become even stronger since the creation of the National Challenge by the former New Labour government (DCSF, 2008). This programme places any school with less than 30 per cent of pupils gaining five A*–C including Mathematics and English at Key Stage 4 at risk of closure. Although recent inspection of Birch Tree has highlighted strengths in the leadership of the school and reports good progress in raising levels of student attainment, these pressures remain intense.

The Principal, Simon James, is very direct about being in control and running things his own way:

> *I get paid a lot of money and the reason I get paid a lot of money is because the buck stops here.* (Principal)

Such conceptions of his role are accompanied by a strong attachment to notions of distributed leadership:

> *Everybody in the building recognises that they are a leader and recognises their role in strategic leadership within the organisation ... Distributed leadership is everybody knowing that they've a place in leadership and what to do. They are guardians of the mission and ethos and that actually they are an important cog in the wheel.* (Principal)

Although Simon is clear that they are practising distributed leadership at Birch Tree, he is equally clear that there is a distinctive and strong hierarchy in place and readily admits to being a 'control freak':

> *It is impossible for me . . . not to be a charismatic hero because I can't do it. I can't not go around touching people and asking questions and dominating situations and such, because I can't do it because, actually, that's what I am.*

It can be seen from the above that Simon feels able to makes claims about distributed leadership while simultaneously making reference to his 'charismatic heroic' approach. One explanation for this can be found in his reflections upon his career as a head teacher and a distinction, crucial in this respect for Simon, between an earlier stage of his work as a head teacher in a previous school and his current work in this role. These reflections were triggered by an Ofsted inspector who pointed out to him that he was in danger of 'disempowering' staff. Simon recounts this as follows:

> *He said I haven't sat in a meeting, I haven't been anywhere where I haven't heard well Simon says Simon says, and every single meeting. I said are you telling me I'm disempowering everybody. He said no. He said I'm telling you you're going to and you've got to change ... so I spent the next one and a half years that I was there trying not be a charismatic hero. It's impossible frankly because I am one and its impossible. So I tried but what I learned from that whole experience was actually although the charismatic hero is the default position it's an incredibly useful skill if you don't abuse it and all you need to do is to make sure that you stand back ... what you do is you set up to stop the disempowering factor and to build in distributed leadership.*

Thus Simon's construction of distributed leadership emerged out of an intensely performative context, an Ofsted inspection, and was directly linked to a stated need to change that came from a source external to both Simon and the school. Simon's understanding of distributed leadership in this context is intimately associated with its capacity to act as a corrective to his tendency to dominate in his role as head teacher and also as a means of responding to the concerns raised by an Ofsted inspector. For Simon his discursive construction of distributed leadership can be viewed as one which enables him to make performative claims about both his own style of leadership and leadership as it operates at Birch Tree. He understands and accepts that there can be problems with what he terms a 'charismatic heroic' approach to leadership, but is unwilling or, as he describes it, unable to let go of such an approach. This does not, however, act as an obstacle to his willingness to lay discursive claims to distributed leadership as a means of positioning both his own leadership practices and the school's organisational arrangements. Interestingly at Birch Tree the view that distributed leadership was a useful means of characterising the way that leadership operated within the organisation was held not only by Simon but also by many other employees observed and interviewed during the course of our research.

At least part of the tensions surrounding leadership at Birch Tree can be attributed to the externally motivated factors seemingly driving the claims to distributed leadership. While all schools in England experience various degrees of pressure in relation to the Ofsted inspection regime these can be experienced in an especially heightened manner in those schools where achieving and sustaining high levels of student attainment have for whatever reason proved more elusive. The creation of new schools like Birch Tree in such contexts in the form of relatively generously resourced Academies can be viewed as adding even further to these external pressures, especially where contracts of employment for head teachers and principals are tied to demanding performance targets linked to levels of student attainment in national tests and grades received in Ofsted inspections (Gunter, 2011). It is through such performance mechanisms that officially sanctioned discourses around distributed leadership are able to travel and be sustained.

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Oak Tree School

Oak Tree is an 11–18 maintained grammar school. Accounts of the recent history of the school by longer-serving teaching staff at Oak Tree are closely associated with the former head teacher, Andrea Williams, who is widely viewed as having transformed the school. Andrea is remembered as a charismatic and commanding head acting as a pivotal figure in the transformation of the school. Although Andrea is commonly acknowledged for her key role in this respect there is simultaneous recognition, particularly among longer-serving and more senior members of staff, that this was achieved at some cost in terms of wider involvement in decision-making.

Since her appointment as head teacher Rita Charles, a former deputy head at the school, has tried to lead the school in ways that she believes are different to those experienced by teaching staff under Andrea's tenure. Rita is strongly attached to the notion of 'opening up' the leadership of the school to involve a wider range of teaching staff. However, Rita also has strong beliefs about school leadership linked at least in part to her own prior experiences at the school:

> *The school I described when I joined all those years ago there were lots of managers but they weren't people who genuinely believed that they could inject something of themselves into it and actually make things happen that weren't somebody else's agenda.* (Rita)

Rita's discourse here is intimately tied to her remembering a recent past where, from her perspective, managers were at a distance from their work and insufficiently personally bound up with their workplace experiences. Rita's own values lead her to performatively invoke the need for a sense of personal ownership ('inject something of themselves') in management and leadership work where the relationship between leaders and their work is more intimate and personally bound. For Rita this is linked to leaders taking the initiative and assuming responsibility for work tasks, and it forms a key part of Rita's attachment to the idea of distributed leadership, a concept which she warmly embraces:

> Interviewer: *Can you tell me your understanding of the term distributed leadership?*
>
> Rita: *It's something I'm aiming for. It's a sense in which, well my interpretation would be, that once you've given somebody responsibility to take something on that you've actually left them to get on with it.*

This embracing of distributed leadership has a strong performative dimension in that Rita is clearly willing to associate both herself and her aims for the school with this concept. Rita's interpretation of distributed leadership at Oak Tree was supported by many, although not all, teachers at the school, most especially those designated as senior and middle leaders. This was commonly explained approvingly in terms of changes in leadership enacted by Rita since she had assumed the headship of the school and, in common with Rita, stressing the importance of autonomy in being a teacher and leader.

One reading of Rita's ideas about distributed leadership might highlight her desire to extend leadership beyond the narrow confines of herself as head teacher and perhaps a small group of trusted colleagues. In addition, it might also highlight the potentially empowering effects of distributing leadership in the manner described enabling teachers to take the initiative and lead on a variety of different projects. A more critical reading of Rita's ideas about distributed leadership, on the other hand, might point to distributed leadership distracting from the unequal power relations inherent in the dynamic of the working context which she describes. In particular, Rita's emphasis upon personal ownership of leadership tasks and activities might be viewed as misplaced within the context of a wider educational environment marked by top-down performance management and with little room for manoeuvre for institutions operating within this environment. Nevertheless it is our view, based upon research conducted at the school, that Rita and others at the school had strong and personal attachments to notions of what they saw as distributed leadership and that this personal and, to some extent at least, internally generated construction of this notion was an important factor in sustaining both Rita's own sense of distributed leadership at Oak Tree and a wider organisational recognition of and support for this concept. Thus in the case of Oak Tree the performative discourse of distributed leadership can be seen as being maintained primarily by both personally generated and institutionally generated notions of distributed leadership derived at least in part from internal sources.

Conclusion

As seen in the above two cases there was widespread recognition of distributed leadership within the two schools, most especially among designated leaders. Individual teachers and other employees, and most especially head teachers, participating in the research were willing to engage discursively with the notion of distributed leadership in what can be described as a performative manner. This discursive and performative representation of distributed leadership took on different forms in each of the two schools. In one school, Birch Tree, this was linked to forces external to the school, in particular satisfying the demands of an Ofsted inspection and meeting performance targets in terms of student attainments in national tests. In another school, Oak Tree, use of the term was more associated with internally generated pressures linked to individually and commonly held professional values and beliefs. In this way it can be seen that the discourse of distributed leadership has been generated and maintained both through external forces and the internal values and beliefs of practitioners in these schools. Other things remaining equal, this can be viewed as a powerful sustaining mechanism for the continued discursive and performative presence of distributed leadership in these schools that we believe has a wider significance beyond the two case study institutions. What remains far less clear is that this has been accompanied by a fundamental shift towards distributed leadership practices in schools, an issue to which future publications arising out of the SPSO project will attend.

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Notes

1. Phase 2 is focused on the decision-making process, and Phase 3 is a Q sort with all members of staff. The names of schools and research participants have been anonymised.
2. This dataset uses the Indices of Deprivation 2007 which provide a range of information including detailed breakdowns for small areas (Super Output Areas) and aggregate the summary statistics. In each case the Super Output Area (SOA) with a rank of 1 is the most deprived area and the area with a rank of 32,482 is the least deprived.

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Biography

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