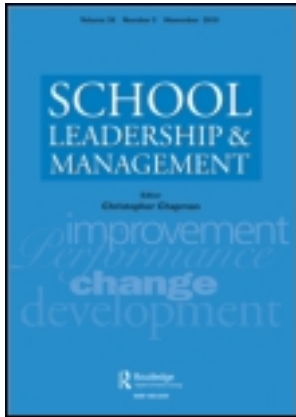


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Distributed leadership in action: leading high-performing leadership teams in English schools

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Heroic models of leadership based on the role of the principal have been supplemented by an emerging recognition of the value of ‘distributed leadership’. The work of effective senior leadership teams (SLTs) is an important manifestation of distributed leadership, but there has been only limited research addressing the relationship between this model and leadership teams in education. This article reports the findings of research conducted for the English National College, on high-performing SLTs. The research adopted a case study approach with nine English schools (four secondary, three primary and two special). The schools were defined as ‘high performing’ because they received ‘outstanding’ Ofsted grades overall, *and* for leadership and management, in inspections conducted in 2008–2009. The research shows that high-performing leadership teams are characterised by internal coherence and unity, a clear focus on high standards, two-way communication with internal and external stakeholders and a commitment to distributed leadership.

Keywords: distributed leadership; leadership teams; high performance; continuity; team unity

Introduction

Heroic models of leadership based on the role of the principal have been supplemented by an emerging recognition of the value of ‘distributed leadership’ (Gronn 2008; Harris 2010). The work of effective senior leadership teams (SLTs) is an important manifestation of distributed leadership, but there has been only limited research addressing the relationship between this model and leadership teams in education (e.g. De Lima 2008; Penlington, Kington, and Day 2008).

This article reports the findings of research conducted for the English National College,¹ on high-performing SLTs. It is grounded in a review of the literature on school leadership teams, which concluded that there is very limited empirical work connecting leadership teams and distributed leadership. The research adopted a case study approach with nine English schools (four secondary, three primary and two special). The schools were defined as ‘high performing’ because they received ‘outstanding’ Ofsted grades overall, *and* for leadership and management, in inspections conducted in 2008–2009.

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Background

Distributed leadership

Harris (2010, 55) defines distributed leadership as, ‘the expansion of leadership roles in schools, beyond those in formal leadership or administrative posts’. There are numerous normative models of leadership (Bush 2011; Bush and Glover 2003; Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach 1999) but distributed leadership is ‘the leadership idea of the moment’ (Harris 2010, 56). While participative, shared, collaborative and collegial theories are well established, distributed approaches have gained currency in the twenty-first century (Harris 2004; Spillane 2006). Harris (2010) attributes this change partly to disillusionment with individual conceptions of leadership and partly to increasing recognition that there are multiple sources of influence in schools. She adds that distributed leadership can be seen to encompass both formal and informal approaches, and vertical and lateral dimensions of leadership. The central concept is that of ‘influence’; a form of power which can be exercised by anyone in the organisation and is not confined to those holding formal leadership positions (Bush 2011, 6). Gronn (2010) argues for a ‘hybrid’ approach, connecting individual and distributed leadership. This model echoes the approach taken by the high-performing leadership teams featured in this article, as we shall see below.

Phillips (2001) argues that hierarchical and status-based leadership models are less effective in securing outcomes than consensus-based models, where the contribution of the individual member is less constrained, and members measure their contribution in terms of the climate of participation, the level of influence they can have on decisions and the processes of involvement.

There is emerging evidence that distributing leadership may have a positive impact on school and student outcomes. Leithwood et al.’s (2006) widely cited study presents ‘seven strong claims’ about successful school leadership. Two of these relate to distributed leadership:

- School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.
- Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others.

Leithwood et al.’s (2006, 12) study concludes that, ‘total leadership accounted for a quite significant 27 per cent of the variation in student achievement across schools’, much higher than the reported effects from studies of headship, suggesting that there are clear benefits from distributing leadership. These authors also note that, ‘there is no loss of power or influence on the part of headteachers when the influence of others increases’.

Distributed leadership and high-performing teams

Harris (2008, 2010) claims that successful schools have restructured and redesigned themselves so that leadership can be more widely shared and spread. ‘They have remodelled roles and responsibilities. They have *created new teams*, flattened structures and essentially given individuals greater responsibility and accountability for their work’ (Harris 2010, 62; emphasis added).

Katzenbach and Smith (1993, 111) examine how high performance in leadership teams is conceptualised:

The essence of a team is shared commitment. Without it, groups perform as individuals; with it, they become a powerful unit of collective performance. The best teams invest a tremendous amount of time shaping a purpose that they can own. The best teams also translate their purpose into specific performance goals ... a team strives for something greater than its members could achieve individually.

In a report on school improvement for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Pont, Nusche, and Moorman (2008, 3) stress that: 'the increased responsibilities and accountability of school leadership are creating the need for distribution of leadership, both within schools and across schools'. The distribution of leadership through SLTs is a fundamental element in professional development for a changing educational context, as noted by the National College for School Leadership (2009, 31):

The range of expertise required in leadership highlights the importance of building strong leadership teams. The most successful headteachers are sharing or distributing leadership responsibilities across their leadership teams.

The process of distribution begins with recruitment.

Recruiting leadership team members

New head teachers usually inherit an SLT and have to work initially with this group, although it is possible to make structural changes, for example, adding new staff to the SLT or changing the ways in which it operates. If a member of the SLT departs, owing to retirement or promotion, this provides an opportunity for heads to adopt a zero-based approach, not necessarily making a 'like-for-like' replacement. In particular, it provides an opportunity to consider how the distribution of leadership might be modified, and perhaps enhanced, by the addition of a colleague with specific attributes.

Hall and Wallace (1996) stress the importance of considering candidates' capacity for teamwork when recruiting new SLT members. Day et al. (2007, 111) point out the importance of recruiting compatible colleagues: 'The selection and recruitment of staff were especially important, since through these, heads ensured that new personnel would share the vision for the school'.

Establishing and developing leadership teams

Higham, Hopkins, and Ahtaridou (2007, 20), investigating leadership in schools in England for the OECD, claim that: 'day to day school leadership is usually distributed across a range of school staff with leadership teams becoming more diversified with regards to members' background and expertise'. Day et al. (2007) identified three phases of development, during which the head works with the leadership team in differing ways:

- (1) Heads prioritise restructuring the SLT and its roles and responsibilities.
- (2) Heads prioritise wider distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities.

- (3) Key strategies related to continuing the wider distribution of leadership.

This phased approach implies that effective distribution is a long-term process, not a ‘quick fix’.

Landrum, Howell, and Paris (2000) conclude that, given the complexity of leadership in schools, establishing a team capable of defining and delivering strategic change is essential. They add that no school can manage without an effective leadership team and a strong commitment to distributed leadership models. The National College for School Leadership (2009, 13) emphasises distributed leadership as an organisational principle within increasingly complex systems: ‘Success is being delivered by effective, well-led teams where leadership is distributed across an increasing variety of roles’.

Applying distributed leadership

Distributed leadership has a direct impact on team development. Penlington, Kington, and Day (2008, 73) report that head teachers viewed the development of leadership capacities within their staff team as a central part of their role. A similar approach was noted in the research conducted by Chapman et al. (2007, 7):

The principal argued that he had moved from a ‘delegated form of leadership to a distributed model’, and a member of the SLT described this shift as an increase in autonomy and trust combined with lower levels of monitoring.

High-performing teams

There is no widely agreed definition of ‘high-performing’ teams. Day et al. (2011, 175) claim that team building has a direct effect on student outcomes. GuQuing, Sammons, and Mehta (2008) show that shared values, beliefs and attitudes, notably in respect of teaching and learning, have a positive impact on student attainment. Cawelti (1999), referring to ‘turnaround’ schools in the USA, shows that teams with shared objectives develop strategic thinking, draw on complementary strengths and have a capacity to involve and enthuse colleagues at all levels. However, Fischer and Boynton (2005, 119) stress that there should be ‘no micromanagement or intrusive scrutiny from above’, as this could ‘damage group morale’.

Musselwhite (2007) argues that effective teams should work collaboratively, have the strategic picture always in mind and share common goals, but that these should be expressed in measurable terms. These data can then be used as part of the feedback process for both the individual and the team. Wallace (2002, 174) identifies five characteristics of effective teams:

- (1) Strong links between the Senior Management Team (SMT) and other staff, which win their respect.
- (2) Shared SMT purpose and core values.
- (3) SMT monitoring to ensure continuity and progression.
- (4) Demonstration to other staff that decisions are shared.
- (5) Reduction of head teacher’s isolation from staff colleagues.

Methodology

The authors were commissioned by the National College for School Leadership to conduct research on 'high-performing' schools. As noted earlier, high performance was assessed on the basis of Ofsted reports; only schools that were judged as 'outstanding' overall, and for leadership and management, were considered for inclusion in the research. Sampling was stratified, on the basis of advice from the College, and the nine case study schools were:

- Two special schools: one in London and one in the North-West.
- Three primary schools: in central London, a Southern county and the North-East.
- Four secondary schools: in London, the northern home counties, the South-West and the North-West.

The research team adopted a multi-methods approach to provide an overview of the work of SLTs in these schools. Researchers observed a meeting of the SLT at each school. They also interviewed several SLT members, plus a middle leader, classroom teacher, a member of the support staff and the chair of the governing body at each school, to secure a triangulated overview of the activities and performance of the SLT. They also scrutinised SLT documents.

The research was underpinned by the following research questions:

- What factors are important in recruiting individuals for high-performing leadership teams?
- What factors facilitate the establishment and development of high-performing leadership teams?
- What factors are important in maintaining a high level of effectiveness in the performance of SLTs?
- What are the characteristics, strategies and approaches that are critical to the effective leadership of high-performing teams? What are the potential pitfalls to be avoided?
- What are the implications of this for new head teachers?
- What are the implications of this for professional development for teams?

The full report (Bush et al. 2010) provides answers to these questions and presents the overall findings from the research. During the field work, school leaders often referred, unprompted, to distributed leadership as a contributory factor in their schools' success. This article explores this relationship, drawing on the findings from the nine case study schools.

Findings

Leadership team experience and continuity

A distinctive feature of the nine case study schools is the long service of most of their leadership team members. The implication is that effective team working takes time to develop, and that 'quick fix' solutions to inadequate team work are inappropriate. All

SLT members at primary schools M and N were internal appointments. Similarly, most members of the SLTs at the two special schools (G and R) are also long-serving.

The main distinguishing feature of secondary school P is that seven of the eight teacher members of the SLT were internal appointees, while the remaining member was known to the school through her consultancy work. At secondary school B, there is a mix of established leadership team members and newer appointments. The leadership team at secondary school Y is also stable, with a long-serving head teacher.

These nine case studies collectively provide powerful evidence of the value of stability and continuity within SLTs, enabling the development, articulation, embedding and implementation of a clear vision, focused on student learning. Effective team work and distributed leadership require mutual trust and confidence, and need time to develop and to take root.

Leadership team structures

Senior leadership team structures are influenced by two considerations:

- Distributing leadership responsibilities.
- Determining the size of the team.

Distributing leadership

The nine case studies support the notion that effective teams distribute leadership among SLT members, in ways which give them a strong collective overview of teaching and learning, and of pastoral issues. They illustrate the argument that team structures are increasingly linked to notions of distributed leadership: 'The most successful headteachers are sharing or distributing leadership responsibilities across their leadership teams' (National College for School Leadership 2009, 31).

The four secondary schools have all distributed leadership in ways that integrate academic and pastoral dimensions of their work. At school P, the core of the structure is the faculty system, linked to the five year groups. The five faculty heads are all assistant or deputy heads, who oversee year groups as well as groups of departments. Similarly, at school S, each deputy is responsible for one key stage while the assistant heads are each responsible for oversight of a year group. The position is similar at schools B and Y, where all SLT members relate to curriculum areas and also oversee a year group.

The smaller size of the primary schools is a major factor in the structure of their SLTs. At school M, the two assistant heads share their job and they also teach a year one class. Each member of the SLT at school N has a range of responsibilities, which are clearly set out in school documents. There is also some flexibility and, 'if you need to do something, you do it' (deputy head).

Leadership team size

Distributed leadership is linked to the size of leadership teams in that larger teams can handle more responsibilities. There is a trend towards larger and more diverse

leadership teams (National College for School Leadership 2009), reflected in the experience of the case study schools.

Secondary schools S and Y have nine people in their leadership teams, while school P has seven and the smaller school B has six members. Size also influences the composition of SLTs in the primary and special schools. The small primary schools (M and N) do not hold regular meetings of their SLTs because whole staff meetings provide the opportunity to discuss key issues.

While the great majority of schools have a single leadership team, dual structures, comprising separate leadership and management teams, are preferred in some settings. Two of the case study schools (L and R) have dual SLT/SMT arrangements, with a senior management team, for operational issues, and a larger SLT, which deals with wider strategic issues. In both cases, distribution is extended for consideration of aims and strategy.

Leadership team practice

Court (2003, 34) stresses that effective leadership teams 'scheduled time together for professional dialogue' and most case study schools devoted considerable time to team meetings. At secondary school P, the SLT meets every Monday evening. The main focus of the meeting observed by the researcher was strategic, including school improvement issues, departmental reviews and budget planning. At school S, the SLT meets every Wednesday 'for strategic direction and planning' (deputy) and, briefly, every Thursday and Friday morning, 'to touch base'.

The SLT at school B meets every morning for a briefing and then twice weekly for longer meetings. One of these meetings concentrates on business matters, while the second is more strategic. At school Y, there is a weekly general SLT meeting, which tends to concentrate on business matters. Twice a term, there is a strategic meeting at a local hotel.

The overall impression at all three primary schools was of a cohesive team, committed to the child and the school, but inclined to look to the head for leadership.

The SLT at special school G meets weekly. The first 30 minutes of each meeting are devoted to strategic issues while the second part of the meeting addresses day-to-day management. The school R SMT meets three times a week but the SLT meetings, which address 'more strategic issues' (head), do not meet frequently.

The overall impression is that leadership team practice at these schools is purposeful, as suggested by Thomas (2009, 2):

Effective teams . . . have a 'clear and compelling purpose' and undertake tasks which are relevant to that purpose. They possess strong team-working skills and high levels of integrity and the head exhibits strong leadership within a team framework.

Purposes, roles and responsibilities of the SLT

Wallace (2002, 174) emphasises the importance of interpersonal relationships within teams, including shared purpose and core values, and monitoring to ensure continuity and progression. These factors are evident in most of the case study schools.

The three primary schools all have child-centred visions: ‘giving children the chance to succeed’ (deputy, school L). At school M, all members of the SLT stress the importance of working as a team, ‘a united front’ (assistant head). There are high expectations of SLT members, who each assume a number of responsibilities.

Role clarity is a key feature of both special schools. The roles of the SLT at school G were described as ‘strategic leadership’ (executive head) and ‘the day-to-day running of the school’, suggesting a mix of strategic and operational responsibilities. Participants at school R comment that the SLT focuses on strategic issues, such as looking at new initiatives, and links with outside agencies.

The SLTs at the four secondary schools have wide-ranging roles and are at the heart of school activities. Respondents at schools P and S comment that the SLT leads ‘everything’. At school B, an assistant head summed up the key purpose of the SLT as, ‘making it happen’, while the head teacher says that its central focus is ‘strategic leadership in learning and teaching’. At school Y, the SLT is regarded as ‘the main decision-making focal point of the school’ (HoD).

The overall assessment is that role clarity is central, and that individual responsibilities should be linked to the strategic aims of the school. This supports the findings from Hall and Wallace’s (1996) research, which pointed to the need for a clear understanding of individual and group roles, and careful management of team boundaries.

The SLT appointments process

Day et al. (2007, 111) stress that, when appointing staff, heads ensured that new personnel would ‘share the vision for the school and embody it in their working practices’. Appointments at the three primary schools are underpinned by two main criteria. Firstly, applicants need to share the schools’ child-centred values. The head of school M, for example, says that the first consideration in making SLT appointments is that people must be good teachers, who place children at the core. Secondly, almost all members of the SLT at all three schools have been internal appointments; a ‘grow your own’ policy.

At the two special schools, personal characteristics were seen as more important than specific skills in making new SLT appointments. The executive head of school G explained that they want, ‘someone who has a clear passion and commitment to meeting the needs of students, potential to see the bigger picture and think strategically’. The head of school R starts with what the role requires and then considers personal characteristics, for example, ‘really good with people’.

Four considerations underpin the appointment of SLT members at the four secondary schools. Firstly, the heads of schools B, P and S say that people must be good teachers, who like children and people, and have a commitment to standards. Secondly, continuity and a ‘grow your own’ policy are significant at school P, with six of the seven SLT members being internal appointments. There is a similar approach at school S, balanced by the ‘fresh approach’ brought by external appointees. Thirdly, sharing the school’s vision is important at all four schools but especially at B and Y. Fourthly, the right personal characteristics are important factors at school S, but less significant at school Y, because they ‘can be acquired’.

Participants at the case study schools regard making new SLT appointments as very important to maintaining high performance. Sharing the school’s vision and

values is more important than specific skills, and internal appointments are often preferred because the head knows whether such applicants adhere to those values or not.

High performance

The nine case study schools have all been deemed 'high performing' through the Ofsted inspection process. Almost all of them exemplify the centrality of shared values and objectives, mutual understanding and co-operative working.

Shared vision, good personal relationships and high levels of trust are significant features of the work of the SLTs at all three primary schools. The participants were pleased, but not complacent, about the accolade from Ofsted. 'We're always striving to do better' (head, school M). Another important consideration at the three primary schools is the continuity inherent in having long-serving staff at these schools. Maintaining high performance is also underpinned by warm personal relationships. Members of the SLT at school N stressed that the head 'places trust in what staff do. We have the freedom to make decisions'. This last point echoes Fischer and Boynton's (2005, 119) comment that 'there should be no micromanagement or intrusive scrutiny from above'.

Role clarity is regarded as central to high performance at both special schools. Most senior staff accepted the 'high-performing' label, and the executive head of school G said that this is partly due to 'clear roles and responsibilities'. The head of school R commented that a major factor is 'clarity of role for all staff'.

The four secondary schools were also cautious about the 'high-performing' label. The head of school P stresses that 'we look at what we can do better'. Maintaining high performance involves being 'clear about what we are trying to achieve', having an annual cycle of planning and review, and mentoring and coaching people to help them 'to reach their own solutions, to be empowered, not deskilled' (head). The SLT's attitude at school S is that 'we need to achieve more; not sitting back'. Maintaining high performance arises from a strong focus on standards.

Staff at school B also stress that there is room for improvement. The head also insisted that there is distributed leadership in the school – that members of staff were given things to do, and 'left to get on with it'. However, this approach might be described, more appropriately, as delegation, and be seen as a manifestation of management rather than leadership. Distributed leadership rested on the trust between members, and between the head and the rest of the SLT. Trust is also a key factor at school Y (head of sixth form). The head does not regard the 'outstanding' judgement as the end of a journey. Maintaining high performance arises from a culture of 'constant self evaluation' (assistant head).

Overall, participants are proud that their schools are rated 'high performing' but stress the need to keep striving to raise standards and not to be complacent about their achievements. This can be achieved by a variety of strategies, including role clarity, clear expectations, good personal relationships and a climate of trust, underpinned by a shared vision arising from staff and SLT continuity. Practice at these case study schools supports Katzenbach and Smith's (1993) emphasis on the 'fearless pursuit of performance', but within a framework of warm personal relationships.

Internal relationships

Wallace (2002, 174) argues the need for strong links between the SLT and other staff, 'which win their respect' and 'reduce the headteacher's isolation from staff colleagues'. This issue was a central theme of the research and most of the case study schools appear to have given considerable attention to developing and maintaining good links with other staff. Participants from all three primary schools report good links between the SLT and the school staff. School L's head says that 'by acknowledging when people are working hard, they will go the extra mile'. The head of school M says that the school has 'a shared vision based on the individual child'. The class teacher of school N claimed that 'the head has the support of the staff'.

At school R, there is a great deal of informal, day-to-day communication between SMT/SLT members and teaching and support staff: 'I think we know about everything' (class teacher). The situation was different at school G, where both the 'acting' assistant head and the class teacher suggested that communications between the SLT and the staff could be improved.

Secondary schools provide a tougher communication challenge because many more staff and stakeholders are involved. At school P, SLT offices are spread around the school to facilitate interaction and 'our doors are open'. The classroom teacher says that the SLT is at the 'forefront' of school life. The head at school S has her office close to the staff room, to encourage personal relationships and avoid isolation. The acting deputy says that the SLT has a 'hand on' role in relation to parents, students and staff. The links between SLT members and the wider staff at school B appear to be very good. The SLTs, and the head teacher in particular, were regarded as approachable, and there is an open door policy. At school Y, each year group relates to a member of the SLT. Staff also stated that they felt comfortable approaching any member of the SLT, particularly the head teacher.

Hall and Wallace (1996) showed the dangers of SLTs being seen as remote from the rest of the school, and eight of the nine schools appear to have worked hard to ensure cohesion. Only school G's SLT seems to need to improve its communication with other staff.

SLT unity

While much of the literature assumes a 'harmony' model, where team members work collaboratively to achieve clearly articulated objectives, the reality is that teams may also experience disagreement, leading to conflict. Cranston and Ehrich (2005, 81), for example, refer to several factors that may impair team effectiveness:

Failure to recognise systems, such as sufficient notice of meetings and agenda; tensions between people who do not feel valued or feel that others are preferred; individual or group micro-political pressures; defensive behaviour and power struggles, are mentioned as detractors from team effectiveness.

This warning implies that unity is a signature feature of high-performing teams, and there was widespread agreement that the SLTs at all three primary schools are united. The assistant head at school L claims that 'decisions are made as a team . . . and staff work together'. At school M, an assistant head comments that 'we work in a united

way'. The head of school N claims that her role 'is to make people confident to make decisions, to empower people and give opportunities to everyone'.

Similarly, the two special schools appear to be united. At school G, one of the heads of school and the deputy head said that 'we have a very united front'. The SMT and SLT of school R also appear to be united. The main reasons for this appear to be 'each member's deep commitment to the school' (head), their commitment to the students (SLT member) and their respect for the head (DH).

The position is very similar in the four secondary schools. The head of school P says that SLT members are very individual people but 'they talk the same story'. One assistant head adds that there are different opinions but, once consensus is reached, there is 'no public disagreement'. One associate head at school S notes that there is 'frank and open' dialogue in the SLT but then a 'Cabinet' approach once the decision has been made. Similarly, at school B, more than one respondent referred to 'cabinet rules', meaning that full and frank discussion was acceptable among the SLT, but that a united front was to be presented to the school. Within school Y, there was agreement, within and outside the SLT, that the team appears united to other staff, although there can be lively debate within the team.

The overarching message from the research is that the SLT, as individuals and as a group, must present a united front even where this masks tensions within the team. Most of the case study schools appear to be genuinely unified, although this may be partly presentational. However, there is unanimity that any differences that do arise should not become evident outside the SLT.

SLT leadership

Leadership of SLTs provides a test for the normative shift away from solo leaders towards distributed leadership. The case studies all show that head teachers retain a central role in team leadership, notably in drawing up agendas, chairing meetings and providing the school's vision and sense of direction. As reflected in much of the literature (e.g. Bush 2011; Gronn 2010; Harris 2010), distributed leadership depends heavily on heads' willingness to share power.

The primary school heads chair all SLT meetings, but other members of the group lead on particular items. A number of participants at school L spoke about distributed leadership: 'It's distributed leadership or collegial leadership' (head). Similarly, an assistant head at school M commented that 'the head does lead, but it's very much a team'. At school N, several participants discussed distributed leadership.

The two special schools operated in different ways. There is a shared model at school G, with the heads of school taking turns to chair SLT meetings. However, the deputy head said that the executive head 'is a much more powerful figure than you might think. [It is] democratic but there is a subtle hierarchical force'. In contrast, the head of school R chairs all SMT and SLT meetings, when he is present. One of the deputy heads described the SMT/SLT leadership style as 'a mixture of directive and democratic'.

The secondary school heads chair all meetings, when they are present. At school P, the governing body chair comments that there is 'distributed leadership'. The male associate head of school S notes that others used to chair but the head was not comfortable with this, suggesting a residual reluctance to 'over distribute'. At school B, the head says that 'the ultimate decision is mine'. However, it appears that there is a

distributed form of leadership in the school. Once SLT members had earned the trust of the head, they were expected to ‘get on with it’, without interference from the head teacher. At school Y, leadership was seen as distributed throughout the school; middle leaders felt able to take on tasks and make decisions without ‘checking every little detail’ (T1).

The case study evidence shows that the heads retain a powerful role despite the rhetoric of distribution. This supports Gronn’s (2010) concept of ‘hybrid’ leadership, combining solo and distributed elements.

The role of the head in team leadership

It is apparent from the literature, and the case studies, that the head retains a decisive role in school leadership. Given the accountability frameworks within which schools operate, this is inevitable and the head’s judgement about the extent and nature of distributed leadership is usually pivotal.

The head of primary school L says that ‘I have to be the facilitator and creator of a united team’ but she adds that she has to be prepared to take tough decisions; ‘an iron fist underneath a velvet glove’. There was strong support for the head and the approach she has fostered in terms of involving all staff and encouraging them to take individual responsibility. The head of school M says that her role ‘is to give support to others and to help them improve. I believe in teamwork’. At school N, the head claims that her style ‘is to make people confident to make decisions. It’s to empower people. There is totally distributed leadership at all levels in the school’.

Special school G has an executive head, who describes the leadership of the team as being ‘led by a triumvirate – the three heads’, while she regards her own role as providing an ‘overview’. The head of school R provides a very strong lead: ‘He’s the leader – *definitely* but he allows others to have their say’ (assistant head).

The head of secondary school P says that he ‘can see the whole picture’, for example, looking at post-16 participation rates after 2013, making budgetary plans and assessing changes in the locality. The assistant head comments that he has ‘extraordinary vision’. The head of school S says that she knows what is happening in every aspect of the school. She pulls together that knowledge and makes sure that the team responds. The other SLT members comment on the head’s ‘passion’ and ‘vision’. At school B, it is clear that the head leads ‘from the top’ but this manages to be forceful without being overbearing, and staff report complete support for her. Respondents at school Y made the point that the head was very supportive. The head claimed that her role was more of an overview.

These vignettes suggest a strong focus on solo, and charismatic, leadership in most case study schools. The heads are highly regarded and have evidently contributed strongly to the school’s ‘outstanding’ ratings. There are elements of ‘distribution’ in these schools but this is within the gift of the head rather than being institutionalised.

Conclusion

Distributed leadership is strongly advocated in the literature (e.g. Harris 2010), and there is emerging evidence that a distributed approach leads to enhanced student outcomes (Leithwood et al. 2006). SLTs can be regarded as a vehicle for the

implementation of distributed leadership. The nine case studies provide fascinating insights into the operation of SLTs in high-performing schools. While distributed leadership was often mentioned by case study participants, most of these schools appear to offer a more nuanced approach, mixing solo and team leadership in a manner consistent with Gronn's (2008, 2010) 'hybrid' model.

Harris (2004, 13) comments that the literature is not clear on 'the exact form' that distributed leadership takes. She asks two key questions about the nature of distributed leadership:

- How is leadership distributed?
- Who distributes leadership?

A third question can also be asked:

- What is distributed?

In this concluding section, we draw on the research findings to address these questions, in the context of successful school leadership teams.

What is distributed?

Harris (2004, 19) distinguishes between distributed leadership and 'delegated headship', where tasks are imposed upon people in the organisation. This is a key distinction and it is important to recognise that leaders may use the term 'distributed leadership' as it is more 'acceptable' than delegation. However, where specific tasks are required of someone, by a more senior person, this may just be delegation. Hartley's (2010, 271) comment that the popularity of distributed leadership 'may be pragmatic; to ease the burden of overworked headteachers' suggests, at best, a modified version of delegation. In contrast, distribution implies sharing responsibility for decision-making, for example, within leadership teams, and enabling staff to lead on certain activities, without tight accountability mechanisms.

Chapman et al. (2007) report that one of their case study schools had moved from delegation to distribution. The difference between these two approaches was stated to be enhanced autonomy and trust combined with reduced monitoring. This distinction is also central to the present research. Several SLT members referred to the significance of trust in facilitating distribution. This enabled heads to empower other staff to lead on certain issues, without excessive reporting or intrusion. The case study evidence suggests that distribution is inherent in SLT roles and responsibilities and not simply in the gift of the head teacher.

How is leadership distributed?

Harris (2004, 20) claims that a 'top down' approach to distributed leadership 'is possible' but Phillips (2001) argues that hierarchical and status-based leadership models are less effective in securing outcomes than consensus-based models. Court (2003, 34) stresses that effective leadership teams 'scheduled time together for professional dialogue' and most case study schools devoted considerable time to team meetings. These meetings provide the main opportunity for shared leadership,

partly in reaching agreement, or ‘consensus’, about strategic issues, and partly in enabling leaders to report on the activities for which they have responsibility.

The case studies show that distribution is more likely where there are high levels of trust and shared values. These characteristics have developed over a considerable time in the case study schools, where continuity is deemed to be very important. These heads know their teams well, have confidence in them and allow their co-leaders to exercise responsibility without intrusion. This also seems to lead to a high degree of cohesion, based around shared values and good inter-personal relationships. However, heads retain considerable residual power, as the next section demonstrates.

Who distributes leadership?

Despite the rhetoric of distribution, it is clear that the head has the central role in deciding what is distributed and how distribution is accomplished. As Thomas (2009, 2) suggests, heads exhibit ‘strong leadership within a team framework’. The case study heads were instrumental in drawing up agendas, chairing meetings and providing the school’s vision and sense of direction. The two special schools illustrate this point well. The executive head of school G was said to have ‘a subtle hierarchical force’ while the leadership style of the head of school R was seen as ‘a mixture of directive and democratic’. These successful schools illustrate Gronn’s (2010) concept of ‘hybrid’ leadership, combining solo and distributed elements.

Overview

The experience of the nine schools shows that distributed leadership is used in different ways, and to varying extents, reflecting the diverse complexity of school organisation, and the nature of the relationships between heads and their colleagues, especially SLT members. This also reflects the cultural aspects of schools, as outlined by Spillane (2006) and De Lima (2008). As school contexts vary significantly, it is not possible to present a ‘blueprint’ for effective distributed leadership, but the nine case studies all provide examples of how this may contribute to high performance.

Despite the contemporary focus on distributed leadership, heads retain a central role, not least because of the accountability framework within which schools operate. ‘Distributed leadership resides uneasily within the formal bureaucracy of schools’ (Hartley 2010, 282). The growth in the size of SLTs testifies to the demanding, and increasing, leadership and management load in most schools. It is no longer possible for heads to lead all aspects of their schools. Distributing leadership is essential not only to ensure that all leadership activities are handled competently but also so that the collective talents and experience of all SLT members are deployed to best effect. Heads need to find an appropriate balance between solo and distributed leadership.

Note

1. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors, not the National College for School Leadership.

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