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What are we
learning about...?
Sustaining a network of schools

Distributed leadership within learning networks

*“ We must develop systems capable of
bringing about their own transformation ”*

David Hargreaves

Alma Harris

Distributed leadership within learning networks

In the quest for educational transformation, one thing remains clear – we need new ways of thinking about educational change and new organisational forms that make the system self-sustaining. The old ways of thinking have served to constrain system level change rather than enhance it. The focus on competition over the last decade has simply not generated the innovation and development needed within the school system. Thankfully, the standardisation movement is fast becoming a feature of an educational landscape belonging to another era. In its place is a brave, new educational order which is premised upon diversity rather than uniformity, creativity rather than conformity. This latest chapter of educational change is characterised by the emergence of networks and networked learning. □

Transforming education

Michael Fullan¹ argues that *'changing whole systems means changing the entire context in which people work'*. It is evident that the current educational context is rapidly shifting. The DfES² provides the latest endorsement of the move towards partnership and collaboration between schools. It suggests that *'confident schools want to collaborate with others in the community to drive a shared agenda for improving standards'*. Collaboration rather than accountability is now the main lever for raising educational performance at the school and system level.

“ There will be greater freedom to fashion what works locally rather than a requirement to fashion to collaborate on a range of separate defined models of national partnership. ”

DfES, 2005

The greater freedom outlined by the DfES is indeed good news for schools. It not only implies a welcome return of autonomy but also offers schools a chance to refocus their collective energies upon learning. This may seem an odd thing to propose but it is clear that in the relentless pursuit of elusive targets, attention has often shifted away from the individual learner and his or her needs.

Greater freedom also implies that there will be new opportunities for schools to work creatively, innovatively and, above all, differently. The conformity and standardisation agenda is crumbling to reveal an emerging system premised upon organisational and cultural diversity. Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink³ note that *'creativity emerges by putting disparate ideas together or by connecting different and diverse minds, or both'*. This connection can only be achieved through a structural realignment that favours lateral capacity building within and across schools and which extends into the wider community. Here collaboration and networking are the means of achieving system wide transformation.

The National College for School Leadership's (NCSL) Networked Learning Communities Programme has been one of the most ambitious attempts to achieve transformation through collaboration and networking. The evidence to date is encouraging. With over five per cent of all schools in England involved in this project, the advantages are clear. Not only do networked communities promote innovation, but they also give teachers and students a much needed voice in that process. They are highly adaptable structures that offer versatility, dexterity and the promise of knowledge transfer through collective activity.

In his latest book, *'The Wisdom of Crowds'*, James Surowiecki⁴ demonstrates the power of collective thinking and problem solving. He proposes that the imaginative and creative solutions to problems are more likely to occur where there is collective rather than individual consideration. However this does not imply a cosy or contrived consensus. Some collective decisions are more likely to be the product of disagreement and contest rather than compromise. The test of a network must be its ability to withstand and accommodate dissent without imploding or fracturing. This resilience, in part, will depend on the quality of support that operates both inside and outside the network. It will also depend on the degree of trust and professional respect nurtured within the social architecture of the network. As Hargreaves and Fink⁵ point out, *'if network cells are weak- then they will not drive improved practices but will perpetuate indifferent ones'*.

Empty networks

The above highlights an important but delicate issue, namely that collaboration is not intrinsically a good thing, in much the same way as a democracy is not inherently just. Collaboration is often equated with good or positive change and while there is a wealth of evidence to support this position, it is not de facto the case. Much depends on the type of collaboration that teachers embark upon, the purpose of collaboration and the structures that support their collaborative activity. The same is true of networking. The 'networking –improvement' equation is heavily dependent on the way in which networking is instigated, developed and supported within and across schools. Lurking in the dark shadows and recesses of Government policy is the stark but real possibility that certain types of collaboration between schools may be counterproductive to system level change:

- Contrived networks, formed for the extra resource that this generates. They subsequently dissipate when other more profitable opportunities arise.
- Cosy networks, based on friendship groups or existing partnerships that manifest the tell tale signs of inertia because powerful personal relationships dictate and restrict their activity.
- There is 'collaborative inertia' (Huxham and Vangen⁶) in which the outcomes from certain types of collaborative activity are negligible or non-existent.
- There is 'collaborative thuggery' where manipulation and political activity replace shared decision making.

¹ Fullan, M, 2004, *The Moral Imperatives of School Leadership* London, Sage

² DfES, 2005, *Education Improvement Partnerships: Local Collaboration for School Improvement and better service delivery*, London, HMSO

³ Hargreaves, A & Fink, D, 2006, *Sustainable Leadership*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco. p 163

⁴ Surowiecki, J, 2005, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, Random House

⁵ Hargreaves, A & Fink, D, 2006, *Sustainable Leadership*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco. p 163

⁶ Huxham, C & Vangen, S, 2003, *Doing things Collaboratively Realising the Advantage or Succumbing to Inertia*, Working Paper, University of Strathclyde

Undoubtedly such networks exist, all masquerading as professional learning communities and receiving both resources and acclaim as a result. Superficially they appear like any other network, but further scrutiny will expose a structural shell without substance.

In the 'Rise of the Network Society' Manuel Castells⁷ notes that *'the performance of a given network will depend on two fundamental attributes of the network: its connectedness, (its structural ability to facilitate noise free communication between its components) and its consistency (the extent to which there is a sharing of interests between the network's goals and the goals of its components)'*. Networks without connectedness or consistency can hoard knowledge, limit innovation and hold others hostage for their expertise. Wenger⁸ suggests that most community disorders are of three general types:

- 1 they do not function because of a lack of trust
- 2 there is no focus upon tangible outcomes in their early stages
- 3 they fail to install mechanisms for knowledge transfer and collaborative forms of problem solving

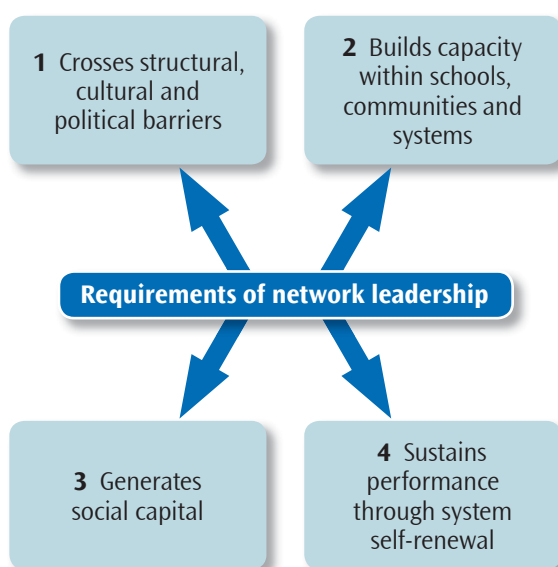
Meaningful networks, on the other hand, are based on clearly shared goals, clear ways of communicating, internal cohesion and mutual trust. Such networks function as 'learning communities', which may be a rather grand way of saying that schools learn better together than, separately. Essentially, the sum is greater than the parts. It is clear that networks of schools do not exist in isolation from the wider system. Their effectiveness therefore is not a matter of internal development alone, but also a matter of how they connect with other communities and constituencies. Schools in federations, partnerships and networks represent constellations of communities that encompass many groupings and cross many boundaries. Their power is significantly enhanced through the interconnections they make across the wider system.

To move beyond the empty and hollow, networks will undoubtedly require a particular type of leadership. New organisational forms premised on sharing, knowledge transfer and lateral communication are unlikely to thrive with antiquated forms of leadership practice. In the brave new world of school networks, autocratic forms of leadership are not going to work. The charismatic, heroic leader is the mythical by-product of an age where top-down change dominated. But the educational landscape has shifted considerably, schools are now at the helm of the educational revolution. Their interaction and

collaboration is currently transforming what we mean by 'the school', what we mean by 'learning' and how leadership is construed and understood.

Leading networks

Let's consider what we know. We know that the education system of the future will be formed through *emergent partnerships* and networks of schools. We know that it will be a system *led by schools for schools* demanding a form of leadership that is widely dispersed within and across schools. We know that new leadership practices are already in place within the new organisational arrangements that schools are forming. Given what we know, it is suggested that there are four major requirements of leadership which can build and sustain effective learning networks:



Collectively, these four requirements present a considerable, challenge to our schools and the leaders within them. Quite simply, they demand serious rethinking about what constitutes leadership, who leads and, more importantly, they question conventional leadership solutions to contemporary leadership problems. So, what form of leadership can ensure that networks are meaningfully bridged rather than tightly bonded together?

⁷ Castells, M, 2001, *The Internet galaxy: Reflections on the internet, business and society*. Oxford University Press, Cited in Hargreaves, A. and Fink, D. (2006) *Sustainable Leadership*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco. p 163.

⁸ Wenger, E, 1998, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge University Press

Lateral agency in learning networks

In his best selling book *'Cognition in the Wild'*, Edward Hutchins⁹ talks about the forms of effective communication and learning within a large and complex organisation – a naval ship. He maps the connections and pathways of knowledge transfer and sharing between the crew members as complicated tasks are undertaken. The basic idea is that the ship functions as a learning community, collectively solving problems through shared expertise and knowledge. The interdependence of the individual and the environment means that human activity is widely distributed across a complex system. This work also emphasises the power of lateral agency. In other words, the potential for change and learning to emerge in a horizontal as well as a vertical direction.

*'It is possible for a team to organize its behaviour in an appropriate sequence without there being a global script or plan anywhere in the system. Each crew member only needs to know what to do when certain conditions are produced in the environment.'*¹⁰

The world of a school learning network and that of a naval ship both share complex social systems and the need for communication and learning to be distributed. Distributed leadership implies that the practice of leadership is one that is shared and realised within extended groupings and teams. Some of these groupings will be formal while others will be informal or randomly formed. Within school networks these can manifest themselves in the work of subject departments, cross curricular groupings, action learning sets and school improvement groups. In short, where teachers are working together to solve particular sets of pedagogical problems, they will occupy a 'leadership space' within the school and will be engaging in leadership practice.

Distributed leadership within networks can, at one level, be achieved by establishing new leadership roles such as lead learner, enquiry advocate, strand leader and programme leader. For example,

*'Hartlepool NLC invited volunteer teachers to form collaborative enquiry groups to investigate questions generated by a network-wide audit of the 'barriers to learning'. Groups of teachers were given time and space to enquire together into an aspect of their professional lives, developing an expertise to share within and across their schools.'*¹¹

One of the key characteristics of a meaningful learning network is the creation of space for those within the network to learn from each other.

*'In Pendle Small Schools Learning Community the classroom assistants who support children encountering difficulties with reading and writing have become the 'experts' in leading the network wide dyslexia friendly school programme, the key individuals, working with those children but also meeting to share, debate and develop the project.'*¹²

Distributing leadership essentially means providing the opportunity and space to distribute learning across the network.

*'Within Prudhoe, teachers meet in a termly 'learning forum'. This takes place after school, attendance is voluntary and attended by up to half of the school staff. This is a place where staff share what they have been learning from the study of their practice.. The learning forum in Prudhoe is replicated across the network both within individual schools but also between schools. A place to share the successes they have had, the difficulties they have encountered and an invitation to the others present to help, to begin to answer the next questions that are emerging. A place where distributed leadership is enacted.'*¹³

Distributed leadership means that decision making, communication and direction is provided within and across school networks. It suggests that leadership is most effective in complex systems when it is laterally distributed and shared. In this sense, distribution is a sophisticated vehicle of knowledge transfer and knowledge creation.

Distributed Leadership

In a literal and general sense all leadership is distributed. Whether formally acknowledged or not, *'all leadership is fluid and emergent rather than fixed'*¹⁴. If leadership is primarily about influence and direction then it will be felt throughout the entire organisation. If leadership can be stretched over schools' social and situational contexts¹⁵ it is automatically distributed. So if distributed leadership simply describes the scope and direction of all leadership practice, why the interest?

⁹ Hutchins, E, 1996, *Cognition in the wild*, MIT press

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Extract from annual enquiry, 2003, NCSL unpublished

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Spillane, J, Halverson, R & Diamond, J, 2001, *Towards a Theory of Leadership Practice: A distributed perspective*, Northwestern University, Institute for policy research, working article

¹⁵ Spillane, J, Halverson, R & Diamond, J, 2004, *Towards a theory of leadership practice: a distributed perspective*, Journal of Curriculum Studies, 36 (1) 3-34

There are two answers to this question. Firstly, there is increasing evidence to support a strong relationship between distributed patterns of leadership and improved student outcomes¹⁶. In short, the degree of distribution of leadership matters to student achievement. Secondly, as schools become part of more complex, extended networks different forms of distributed leadership and knowledge will inevitably emerge. So are some patterns of distribution across networks better than others? We simply do not know, but clearly we need to find out.

So what do we know about distributed leadership from the existing research base? We know that:¹⁷

Distributed leadership is	Distributed leadership is not
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● an organisational condition ● promoted but not mandated ● inclusive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● delegation ● everybody taking the lead ● dependent on particular organisational configuration

It is important to distinguish between distribution and delegation. A common misunderstanding is to assume that distributed leadership means delegating certain tasks. Not so. Distribution is not meant here in its functional sense. Rather it describes a process where distributed leadership is the by-product of shared activity, discussion or dialogue rather than the routine handing out of tasks. Distributed leadership is concerned with two things:

- 1 the process of leadership – how leadership occurs within the organisation
- 2 leadership activity – what people do with others that enhances and develops their leadership

So, distributed leadership is an organisational condition rather than a set of personal qualities. As with the naval ship, certain networks have sophisticated systems of distribution that are not superimposed on to the organisation but are instead an integral part of the way the organisation functions. Distributed leadership is a communication system and process by which the organisation learns and develops. It cannot be forced onto a network or mandated. It can be disturbed but not controlled¹⁸.

Like networking, distributed leadership is not necessarily an intrinsically good thing. It depends. It is possible for distributed leadership to be counter-productive, particularly if it is equated with the simplistic notion of everyone leading. While distributed leadership implies that everyone within the organisation has leadership capability and capacity, in practice leadership will evolve in line with the needs of the organisation. Not everyone will be leading at the same time. It will depend on context, need and capability. Also some members may engage in leadership activities more than others. Clearly, it can be engineered by offering new opportunities to lead, by generating broad based leadership and by providing the creative spaces for dialogue and discussion within the network. Inevitably distributed leadership will look different in different contexts. It will reflect the inherent diversity and variability of activity within and across networks.

In Oldham NLC distributed leadership has been deliberately orchestrated by giving teachers the time and opportunity to learn together. Two teachers were drawn from each of the schools to be trained as co-coaches. They began practicing those skills within their own schools, meeting regularly with their network colleagues to reflect upon and learn from one another's experiences. As their skill and confidence grew they formed other partnerships within their own schools, developing the capacity to co-coach other teachers.

When the network decided to introduce 'Philosophy for Children' (P4C) they expanded the co-coaching model. Two key teachers from each school were nominated to lead the development opportunities for all classroom staff. In developing their co-coaching within the network, Oldham NLC has deliberately produced a pattern of distributed leadership that has proved beneficial. It has created the leadership capacity within and across schools which will be able to implement any new future initiative.

¹⁶ Hargreaves, A. and Fink, D. (2006) *Sustainable Leadership*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco. p 99

¹⁷ Harris, A. 2005, *Crossing boundaries and breaking barriers: Distributing leadership in schools*, Pamphlet published by the Specialist Schools Trust www.sst-inet.net

¹⁸ Hargreaves, A & Fink, D, 2006, *Sustainable Leadership*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass

Providing the conditions for distributing leadership

Taking a distributed perspective on leadership means that it is grounded in activity (eg mutual enquiry, dialogue, partnership) rather than in position or role. Where *'leadership and organizational growth collide it is, by definition, dispersed or distributed'*¹⁹ The Oldham NLC example begins to point to the internal conditions required to allow this to occur and thrive. This necessitates the creation of time, space and opportunity for groups to meet, plan and reflect. Engaging the many rather than the few in leadership activity is at the heart of distributed leadership. By moving beyond a pre-occupation with those in leadership positions, a distributed perspective urges us to view leadership as a lateral form of agency.

Consider the following questions:

- What needs to happen at your school or network for leadership to be a more collective, shared and distributed activity?
- What challenges might distributed leadership pose and how might these be overcome?

Implications and challenges

It is clear that system transformation will not be achieved by schools acting alone. Much will depend upon the formation of *networks or federations to share knowledge, address problems and pool resources*.²⁰ Inevitably there are implications and consequences associated with distributing leadership. Three immediate challenges are as follows:

- 1 Distance** – As schools grow and become more complex organisations through various partnerships and collaborations with other schools, the issue of distance becomes an important consideration. Distance can prove to be a barrier to distributing leadership. Geographic separation can make it more difficult for teachers to connect. The challenge for schools and networks therefore, is to provide new, alternative ICT – based solutions and to generate alternative forms of communication.
- 2 Culture** – Distributing leadership essentially means a shift in culture away from the 'top down' model, to a form of leadership that is more organic, spontaneous and more difficult to control. It means a departure from a view of leadership that resides in one person to a more sophisticated and complex notion of leadership. The challenge for those in schools and networks is to see leadership as an organisational resource that can be maximised and enhanced through interactions between individuals and teams.
- 3 Structure** – The way schools are currently organised often presents a set of barriers to distributing leadership. The structure of schooling is still dominated by compartmentalising subjects, pupils and learning into discrete but manageable boxes. Distributing leadership implies the erosion of these artificial barriers and implies a more fluid way of operating. The challenge for schools and networks is to find ways of removing antiquated structures and systems that restrict organisational learning.

¹⁹ Hopkins, D & Jackson, D, 2002, *Building the Capacity for Leading and Learning*, in Harris, A et al, 2002, *Effective Leadership for School Improvement*, London, Routledge

²⁰ Caldwell, B (2005) Re-Imagining the self managing school Pamphlet published by the Specialist Schools Trust www.sst-inet.net

End piece

There is something fundamentally unruly about distributing leadership, particularly in a network setting. It cannot be controlled or constrained through the usual organisational checks and balances. It cannot be harnessed or corralled into formal roles or responsibilities. By definition it demands a free reign to create multiple centres of power based knowledge. Distributing leadership undoubtedly puts to the test the limits of an organisation, whether as an individual school or network of schools. While a constellation of schools increases the collective capacity to engage in deep learning or creative thinking, it also presents a major managerial challenge.

So where does this take us? For some, it takes distributed leadership into the realm of the abstract and away from the practical realities of schooling. For others, it offers the real possibility of looking at leadership through a new and alternative lens that challenges some strongly held views about the nature of leadership. Taking a distributed perspective breaks down the barriers between leaders and followers. It implies that leadership can be broad based, stretched and extended to meet the requirements of the network or networks it serves.

We, undoubtedly, need new forms of leadership as we step into the dynamic but un-chartered territory of networked learning. We need new ways of understanding, analysing and making sense of change. We need alternative perspectives on leadership activity. Distributed leadership offers one such perspective. It certainly isn't a panacea or blueprint for change but, unlike other theories emanating from the rather tired world of leadership research, it has an immediate resonance with practice.

Distributed leadership is already happening within and across networks. We need to learn more about the theory as it attempts to catch up with practice and more about the practice as different forms of distributed leadership emerge. Whatever the outcome, the ultimate goal is to build strong and sustainable school networks that can generate system transformation. Unless leadership is stretched across classroom, school and network boundaries then system level transformation is unlikely to be achieved. □

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