Distributed Leadership: Meaning, Application and Critique

Tony Bush
The University of Nottingham, UK

Many adjectives are used to describe leadership and their relative popularity and perceived significance has changed over time. According to Hallinger (1992), managerial leadership was the dominant model in the 1960s but this had shifted to instructional leadership in the 1980s and to transformational leadership by the 1990s. Leithwood et al (1999) identified six leadership models, on the basis of their analysis of four leading leadership journals, including EMAL. These include moral, participative and contingent leadership as well as the three approaches discussed by Hallinger. It is beyond the scope of this editorial to address all these models but, significantly, distributed leadership does not appear in their typology. This is because it is very largely a 21st century phenomenon. Participative leadership suggests recognition of the importance of shared approaches, in contrast to the dominance of solo leadership in most of the 20th century. However, it is the distributed model which has attracted most attention, from academics and practitioners, since the start of the millennium.

This journal has played a prominent part in disseminating research on distributed leadership, in clarifying its meaning, and in exploring its impact on practice. Gronn (2010) notes that ‘there has been an accelerating amount of scholarly and practitioner attention’ accorded to this model and EMAL reflects this focus in the many articles it has published on distributed leadership since 2000. This special virtual issue brings together 12 of the most important papers which collectively provide an overview of the origins, meaning, strengths and limitations of distributed leadership.

The first EMAL paper on this theme, by Peter Gronn, was first published in 2000. The title’s suffix is ‘a new architecture for leadership’ and Gronn asks ‘why have commentators only just begun to accord explicit recognition’ to this model? He adds that ‘distributed leadership is an idea whose time has come’ because of the ‘dawning realisation’ that the long ‘preoccupation with visionary champions is flawed’. He was right to make this judgement as the many subsequent papers on this theme attest.
BELMAS has made an important contribution to the debate about this model. Its 2002 conference, in Birmingham, featured two keynote papers on distributed leadership, both of which were subsequently published in EMAL. The first of these, by Alma Harris, was described in part, as an ‘exploration’ of this concept. Her argument, that ‘distributed leadership concentrates on engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organisation, rather than seeking this only through formal position or role’, is widely accepted as a defining feature of this model.

The second keynote paper at the Birmingham conference was by Jacky Lumby and focused on understanding and applying distributed leadership to the further education sector in England. She notes that senior college managers’ intention is to ‘support a style of leadership which is distributed’ but she also points to the need to understand the relationship between delegation and distribution, a perennial problem in researching and theorising this model.

Another important step in defining and understanding distribution was a paper commissioned by the former National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in 2002 and published in EMAL in 2004. Philip Woods, Nigel Bennett, Janet Harvey and Christine Wise conducted a systematic review of the literature and identified three ‘distinctive characteristics’ of this model. The first is that it is an ‘emergent property’, arising from a group or network of interacting individuals. This notion of interactions, rather than actions, can be seen as a central feature of distribution. The second characteristic is ‘openness of boundaries’, meaning that the locus of leadership is or should be, widened. The final feature links leadership to expertise rather than to formal position, a significant contrast to traditional solo models.

Philip Woods and Peter Gronn collaborated in a 2009 paper which considered the links between distribution and democracy. This is an important distinction because democratic principles can be seen to underpin the rationale for all forms of shared leadership. These authors argue that ‘distributed leadership needs to be interrogated critically from . . . a concern with building organisations that are more democratic’. This is a normative view, of course, but one that is likely to be supported by many EMAL readers.

Much of the debate about distributed leadership has focused on schools but it has also been applied to other educational contexts. I have already discussed Jacky Lumby’s paper on
further education and the next two papers in this virtual special issue both relate to higher education. The first of these, by Richard Bolden, Gregory Petrov and Jonathan Gosling, based on research in 12 UK universities, argues that higher education is not well suited to managerialism and ‘top down’ leadership because of a ‘deep-seated’ desire for collegiality and academic freedom. They make an important distinction between ‘devolved’ and ‘emergent’ leadership, with the latter arising through bottom-up and horizontal approaches. However, they conclude that this concept is ‘not a successor to individual leadership’ in higher education.

The second higher education focused paper, by Sandra Jones, Marina Harvey, Geraldine Lefoe and Kevin Ryland, examines distributed leadership in Australian universities, through action research. They note the need for a ‘new approach to leadership that goes beyond individual control and management bureaucracy to embrace more sharing and collaboration’. They conclude that there is a need to develop a context for leadership ‘based on trust rather than regulation’ but caution against the use of a prescriptive definition of distributed leadership that fits all contexts.

The special 40th anniversary issue of the journal, published in 2012, featured a discussion of the distinction between solo and distributed leadership, by Megan Crawford. She notes that ‘distributed leadership can be seen as part of a wider discussion of shared leadership’. She claims that this idea ‘has been seized upon by schools and policy-makers’ and comments that ‘the normative appeal of it appears undimmed’. While it is undoubtedly an attractive idea, it has not displaced solo leadership and has also led to some trenchant criticisms, as the papers discussed below illustrate.

David Hartley ponders the popularity and argues that there is no ‘conclusive evidence’ that it has a direct causal effect on student achievement. He claims that ‘the reason for its popularity may be pragmatic, to ease the burden of over-worked headteachers’. The need to allocate work to teachers and other staff could just as easily be captured through the established management notion of delegation but distribution appears to be a ‘softer’ and more acceptable concept. This connects to Bolden et al’s point about the differences between devolved and emergent approaches (see above). The former might be difficult to distinguish from delegation while the latter may reflect a greater measure of distribution. Hartley also notes the problems involved in adopting distributed approaches when the state’s agenda is dominant, as in 21st century England. ‘Bureaucracy remains the way
forward for those whose agenda is maximising efficiency and minimising trust . . . distributed leadership resides uneasily' within this policy framework.

The next paper, by Jacky Lumby, explores the relationship between distributed leadership and power. She begins by noting that ‘the concept of distributed leadership has swept through the theory and practice of educational leadership’ and become the ‘theory of choice for many’ and a ‘widely prescribed practice’, notably by the NCSL. Lumby’s critique relates to the distribution process and she comments that much of the literature refers to senior authority figures ‘allowing’ or ‘permitting’ distribution, conceived in this way as ‘one-dimensional power’. She regards many depictions of distributed leadership as ‘utopian’, and warns readers not to underestimate its power to enact inequality.

The last of these critical papers is by Helen Gunter, Dave Hall and Joanna Bragg. They provide a taxonomy of knowledge production, asking key questions such as ‘what is known?’, ‘how is it known?, ‘who knows?’ and ‘why is it known?’. They also raise ‘serious questions about the rush to acclaim, and make claims for and about, distributed leadership’. They note that much of the literature is normative, featuring ‘mutual citation’ to support the view that distribution improves practice. They conclude that analysis of this concept requires a shift away from ‘ritual embalming’ towards a more thorough engagement with the literature.

The final paper in this special issue, by Meng Tian, Mika Risku and Kaija Collin, builds on the Woods et al paper, discussed earlier, to provide a meta-analysis of distributed leadership from 2002-2013. They conducted a systematic review of the literature, drawing mainly from eight leading journals, including EMAL, and identified 85 papers for further investigation, several of which are included in this compilation. They note that 53 of these relate to the conceptualisation of distributed leadership and 32 to its application. In the former category are sub-groups modelling DL, comparing it with similar concepts, and questioning it. The papers on application include those seeking to establish a link between distribution and student outcomes. They conclude that further research is required to explore distributed leadership from an organisational perspective and through the notion of individual agency. I hope that this virtual issue serves to help researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to improve their understanding of distributed leadership as a mode of analysis and to adopt a critical perspective on its value as a guide to improved practice. There are three overarching messages from this important body of literature. First, more work is required to examine how distributed leadership is defined and understood. In particular, to what extent is DL
‘emergent’, and potentially available to all educational stakeholders, rather than being in the gift of formal leaders and hence perhaps indistinguishable from delegation? Second, a much clearer distinction is required between normative and evidence-based literature. Several papers in this issue refer to the attraction and popularity of distribution but this may mean that difficult questions are avoided in adopting and introducing it, especially if it is encouraged by official agencies such as the former NCSL. More research is required to establish whether leadership in educational organisations is appropriately labelled as ‘distributed’ or whether alternative terms more accurately capture leaders’ actions and interactions. Third, caution is required about claims that distributed leadership is a panacea for school improvement. Over the past 30 years, similar optimistic statements have been made about other leadership approaches, notably collegiality, transformation and instructional leadership, only for them to be de-emphasised or displaced as a subsequent model comes into fashion. Distributed leadership is worthy of inclusion as one model which may help our understanding, and perhaps also the practice, of leadership but adopting a single approach, however popular, is limited. Contingent leadership, where approaches are customised to the context and the problem requiring attention, remains the sensible and pragmatic response.

References

