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DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN SCOTTISH SCHOOLS: PERSPECTIVES FROM PARTICIPANTS RECENTLY COMPLETING THE REVISED SCOTTISH QUALIFICATION FOR HEADSHIP PROGRAMME

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Abstract

This paper analyses the experiences of the first cohort of participants graduating from the revised Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH) programme at the University of Edinburgh, in relation to the School Improvement Projects that form part of the qualification. The problematic nature of the distributed leadership approach fostered by the SQH programme is outlined, and the strategies employed to overcome these issues are explored. The implications of such tensions are discussed in relation to professional learning and more specifically, the continued development of preparation programmes for aspiring Scottish Headteachers. Further exploration within this field is recommended.

Introduction

Historically, Scotland has always had its own separate and distinctive educational system, (Bryce and Humes, 1999). The outcomes of the McCrone Committee of Inquiry, *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* (2001 – the 'McCrone Agreement'), significantly affected the conditions of service and remuneration of teachers. There were other important impacts on the profession as the management within Scottish schools became flatter, with moves to a reduced hierarchy, more participative management, and an emphasis on collegiality (MacDonald, 2004). As a consequence, there were important implications for teacher career structures and for aspirant Headteachers.

Scotland is not necessarily divorced, however, from issues impacting at an international level. Moves away from emphasis placed on the heroic individual leader (Fullan, 2005; Gronn, 2002) towards a distributed leadership perspective (Storey, 2004) which nurtures and sustains school improvement (Day et al., 2007; Harris,

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2004; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Timperley, 2005) are apparent across the international literature. In addition, there is recognition of the changing role of the Headteacher and the pressures involved in relation to multiple, and often conflicting, expectations and accountabilities which can make 'letting go' of control very difficult for Heads (Harris, 2004; MacBeath, 2005). That said, Hargreaves (in Davies, 2005: 180) represents a more contemporary view of leadership, acknowledging that: '*in a complex, fast-paced world, leadership cannot rest on the shoulders of the few'.*

This paper concurs with the perspectives of Cowie and Crawford (2007: 129) in:

> *a belief that principal preparation is a crucial aspect of school development and progression, and that programmes of preparation should have positive outcomes for those who undertake them. As academics and practitioners we invest a considerable amount of time and effort in designing, developing and delivering preparation programmes. We want our programmes to be successful and help shape the professional lives of aspiring school principals, but it is also important to be objective and hard headed and consider what difference, if any, our training and development programmes make. This is because, despite the growth of global interest in principal preparation in the past decade (Brundrett, 1999, 2001; Hallinger, 2003) pre-appointment preparation is, we believe, largely an 'act of faith'.*

The Scottish Qualification for Headship was established in 1998 and is organised and delivered by two (previously three) consortia, comprising a partnership model with Universities and Local Authorities. SQH participants are encouraged to adopt a distributed style of leadership in taking forward their School Improvement Project. Currently, SQH participants are exposed to some of the 'big ideas' within the distributed leadership literature but there is an expectation that participants ground theory in their own practice and in the contextual practice of their schools. In Course 1, leadership as distinct from management is introduced. In Course 2, participants explore the leadership styles and processes at play within their school context as part of a school analysis. In Course 4, distributed leadership as a concept is formally introduced through a presentation, a workshop activity based on progress to date with 'leading and developing people' and later, through a study session. In Course 5, participants analyse and present evidence of their ability to distribute leadership in the process of taking forward school improvement initiatives, in relation to the competences contained within the Standard for Headship. Given the feedback gathered from recently graduating SQH participants presented below, is the current

guidance provided sufficient to enable participants to ground theory into practice or, should further emphasis be placed on the complexities involved in defining distributed leadership and on the tensions inherent in distributed leadership practice?

On completion of the programme, the experiences of the first cohort of participants graduating from the revised SQH programme at the University of Edinburgh were elicited through a semi-structured questionnaire. The purpose of that questionnaire was three fold, to:

- ascertain participants' perception of the final stages of the programme itself as well as feedback on practical procedural aspects, to inform future development;
- to encourage participants to looking back over the 28 months of progression through the programme, and conceptualise the personal and professional benefits to date;
- identify any tensions encountered with regard to a distributed leadership approach along with strategies employed to overcome those tensions.

The final purpose forms the basis for this article. The aim was to confirm or contradict a growing perception that putting the rhetoric of contemporary policy into practice could often be problematic for SQH participants, to begin to understand why that might be so, and to begin to appreciate what types of support might be beneficial to aspiring Heads when taking forward a distributed style of leadership. The working definition employed by the researcher was that offered by Harris and Spillane (2007: 31) who use the term 'distributed leadership perspective' whereby multiple leaders, formally recognized or not, engage in a wide range of leadership activities. This model focuses on interactions in leadership practice and the influence of leadership practice on improvement (apposite for SQH participants progressing school improvement initiatives).

Methodology

In seeking to explore the experiences of the first cohort of participants graduating from the revised SQH programme, a semi-structured questionnaire (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2006) was sent out in August 2007 to each of the 35 participants who had recently completed the programme, all of whom were aspiring headteachers. The layout of the questionnaire was designed to be relatively brief so that completion could be relatively quick (Munn and Drever, 1995). Whilst recognising the benefits and disadvantages of this self-completed questionnaire (Bryman, 2004) as hoped, it

proved efficient (Robson, 1993) and had a relatively high return rate (Munn and Drever, 1995), as 29 out of a possible 35 completed questionnaires were returned. The questionnaire was designed to encompass mainly open-ended items with some closed items to enable quantification of responses (Bell, 1993). Eleven items were included to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of the final stages of the programme and its impact on themselves as aspiring Headteachers. For the purpose of this article, the final question provides the focus. That question sought to elicit whether participants had encountered any tensions in trying to incorporate the theory of distributed leadership into the practice of leading and managing their School Improvement Project. The wording of the question was designed to be open ended within a framework of generally understood 'SQH language'. The question itself, along with analysis of responses, can be found below under 'findings and discussion'. The two parts of that question were used to structure the findings and discussion, in relation to tensions encountered and approaches participants used to resolve those tensions.

The respondents work in contextually different urban and rural primary and secondary schools. The 35 schools are located across five Local Authorities in the South East area of Scotland and serve diverse social, cultural and economic catchments. For the purposes of the study, no attempt was made to categorise the schools or their contextual factors. This was out with the scope of the study and not thought necessary to address the study's aims.

Review of the Literature

A very brief review of contemporary Scottish policy documents would suggest that the terminology used has changed significantly since 2000. *Improving Leadership in Scottish Schools* (HMIe, 2000) is devoid of terms such as distributed leadership or collegiality. It does, however, use the term delegation throughout. In comparison, *Improving Scottish Education* (HMIe, 2006) makes no mention of the term delegation instead, using distributed leadership once and shared leadership six times. *How Good Is Our School? The Journey to Excellence (*HMIe, 2006) refers to distributed leadership once and collegiality seven times. *How Good Is Our School? 3 (*HMIe, 2007) avoids use of the term distributed leadership, referring instead to delegation once and to collegiality six times. *Leadership for Learning: The Challenges of Leading in a Time of Change (*HMIe, 2007) refers to distribu*tive* leadership eighteen times, shared leadership five times, collegiality three times and delegation three times. It is

assumed in those documents that terminology used is established or should be established in school practice – but is it? Indeed, are those terms synonymous? A much more in-depth analysis of contemporary policy documents is required within an exploration of the context they sit, including the impact of the McCrone Agreement on contemporary rhetoric.

Teacher Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has also been heavily influenced since 2000 by the outcomes of the McCrone Committee of Inquiry which endorsed initiatives already begun as part of the CPD Framework discussions and development of a 'standards' based approach to CPD. Comparison with English standards suggests that Scottish standards are less 'technicist' and based on a broader view of education and the professional role of teachers and school leaders. The revised SQH programme developed by the University of Edinburgh is designed in accordance with the revised Scottish Standard for Headship (SEED, 2005). The Standard sets out the key aspects of professionalism and expertise that the Scottish education system requires of those who are entrusted with the leadership and management of its schools, serving as the template against which those aspiring to be Headteachers may be assessed in order to determine their strengths and development needs (all of this is discussed in more detail in O'Brien and Torrance, 2006). However, the involvement of universities in Scotland ensures that although the SQH programme is set within contemporary 'good practice', programme participants are encouraged to be critical and to challenge convention (Cowie and Crawford, 2007). On completion of the programme, participants are awarded a Post Graduate Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management by the University, the Scottish Qualification for Headship by the Scottish Government, and are deemed to have met the Standard for Headship.

The professional developmental experiences afforded by the SQH programme are contextualised within each participant's own school setting. In this way, participants integrate academic theory with contextualised personal and professional practice. The SQH programme offers a powerful model of professional learning and, as importantly, provides a medium within which aspirants can develop an image of themselves as Headteachers. Moreover, the SQH programme empowers participants through its authority and a growing confidence with use of professional language endorsed by the Scottish Executive (Reeves and Forde, 2004). For example, Cowie et al (2008: 10) found that new Headteachers who had undertaken the SQH programme highlighted,

how reading and reflection on reading confirmed inherent preferences for collegial approaches, encouraged them to behave in a collegial manner, and sometimes challenged the ways in which they managed.

Recently, the SQH programme has been recognised at international level by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007: 140; 39; 15) as being "world class", "of international significance" and as being "an outstanding and demanding programme."

Internationally, the importance of school leadership, as distinct from management (Davies, 2005; Nanus, 1992) continues to be emphasised by governments, although it is not devoid of critics (Gronn, 2003). Effective leadership is consistently identified by research as a key constituent of effective schools particularly in the UK (Gunter 2001; MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001). Within the recent educational leadership literature, there is a strong focus on leadership rather than on a sole leader within a school. Although much has been published, relatively little appears to be based on the analysis of data generated in schools (Harris et al., 2008).

Within the literature, there is a vast range of theories available as to what constitutes both effective leadership and effective management but as yet, little consensus. The definitions of leadership are arbitrary and very subjective (Leithwood et al., 2000: 5). Indeed, there is a range of theories relating to whether or not leadership can be separated from management as a discrete function (Davies, 2005: 2; Gronn, 2003). There does, however, appear to be consensus that Headteachers need to be skilled at both leadership and management functions if they are to be effective, as articulated by Day et al. (2000: 135): "*management was concerned with 'running the ship' while leadership was concerned with 'setting the course'*".

Despite the current emphasis on transformational leadership in contemporary literature – a leader able to communicate a vision which resonates with the school community and is therefore able to take others with them to 'transform' the school - there is still very little consensus on precisely what leadership is, how/if it can be developed or how important it actually is (Connolly et al., 2000: 63). This, despite an obvious and impressive will on the part of many to identify the magic ingredients essential for an effective leader (as though once identified they could be readily adopted across the board). Regardless, as Davies and West-Burnham (2003)

remind us,

> *Leadership is a fundamental social, organizational and political phenomenon. Whatever the abstractions of academic discourse, people aspire to be leaders, study to become leaders, are described as leaders and, on occasion, do actually lead… leadership is, profoundly and fundamentally, about learning and relationships.*

Within this debate runs another, centered on what constitutes distributed leadership – contrived (Brundrett and Burton, 2003 :157) or otherwise (Gronn, 2000). Is it indeed shared leadership or should we aspire to collegiality? Is distributed leadership simply a justification for delegation or abdication of responsibilities? Or, is it a strategic intention to develop a school as a learning community (O'Brien, Murphy & Draper, 2003)? It could be argued that distributed/ shared leadership is an aspect of strategic management (Middlewood in Middlewood and Lumby, 1998: 8). Hargreaves (in Davies, 2005: 181) attempts to clarify matters:

> *Distributed leadership is not delegated leadership. It is a sophisticated web of interrelationships and connections. Distributed leadership does not remove the need for strong individuals.*

Within the literature, the term distributed leadership is used loosely by many. A common view or singular definition is lacking (Duignan, 2008; Harris and Spillane, 2008). A clear distinction is generally made, however, between delegation and distributed leadership (Harris, 2004), whereby true distributed leadership relates to shared responsibility and power, rather than being task focused (Duignan, 2008). Spillane (2005) contends that distributed leadership in school contexts inevitably exists, whereas Timperley (2005) contends there is an almost inevitable existence and Gronn (2000) that its existence is likely, desirable and necessary. Although often referred to in the singular, MacBeath (2005) proposes six models and Gronn (2002) a taxonomy. The structure for distribution is explored by some researchers in different ways: formal or equally both formal and informal (Spillane, 2005) or fluid and emergent (Gronn, 2000). Although an assumption that distributed leadership is automatically a good thing is frequently implied, Harris and Spillane (2008) guard against this.

The contemporary perspective on leadership is reflected in the revised Standard for Headship in Scotland (SEED: 2005). The Standard defines the leadership

capabilities of Headteachers and views the role of the Head in terms of five 'professional actions' and three 'essential elements'. Throughout those professional actions, there is reference made to collegiality and building leadership capacity (within *'lead and develop people'*) and to delegation of tasks (within '*use resources effectively'*). However, as a professional community, are we secure with the implications of those terms on practice or, are they simply to be regarded as the professional rhetoric of our time?

Discussion and findings

Experience over the past three years of working with aspirant Headteachers progressing through the SQH programme would suggest that SQH participants, in taking forward a clear expectation to engage colleagues in shared leadership activities, can experience a range of tensions within their schools - but that this is not necessarily the case for all participants. Supporting evidence could be drawn from both critical incidents analysed as one of the two oral assessments for Course 4 of the programme, or from discussions contained within the reflective commentaries as one of the Course 5 assessment components. For the purpose of this discussion, however, analysis is contained to the responses from participants comprising the first cohort who have recently completed the revised SQH programme. As part of a wider questionnaire, those 35 participants were asked to respond to eleven semi-structured questionnaire items, the final question being:

> *The SQH programme is a work-based programme, drawing together theory and practice. In relation to the leadership and management of your School Improvement Project, did you encounter any tensions in trying to incorporate the theory of distributive leadership into your practice? If so, could you please elaborate on what those tension were and whether or not you were able to resolve them.*

29 out of a possible 35 participants responded. Of those 29, 22 participants provided comment. An analysis of the 22 comments received indicates that whilst four participants reported experiencing little or no tensions in drawing together the theory and practice of distributive leadership in relation to the leadership and management of their school improvement project:

"I encountered no tensions in trying to incorporate distributed leadership into my practice through leading my School Improvement project."

"The theory and practice for me seemed to weld together very naturally."

The remainder reported experiencing some and sometimes quite significant tensions:

"Managing change resistant staff proved challenging. Empowering others was also uneasy at first as I found it difficult to let go the reigns."

"I did encounter tensions because of the nature of the project – managing people to manage change. Theory is not easy to put into practice when there is embedded history regarding 'change'. The tensions were primarily to do with communication and relationships…"

Participants' perceptions of the source of tensions encountered are summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1   Tensions Encountered

Type of Tension Encountered	Responses
Issues involved in relying on others	1
Difficulties relating to 'letting go'	2
Demands on Time / Workload Related	3
Perception of 'Passing the Buck"	3
Perceptions of staff of an SQH participant within a non SMT role	3
Difficulty convincing SMT / HT with regard to 'control type' issues	5
School context / change history issues with staff resistant to or lacking confidence with change	7

Why might four of those SQH participants have experienced little or no tensions whilst others experienced some or significant tensions in drawing together the theory and practice of distributive leadership in relation to the leadership and management of their school improvement project? Much of the tension reported seems related to a

range of contextual factors (Harris, 2005; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2006), reinforcing the conception of conflicting discources:

> *"The staff were supportive and there was already a culture of distributed leadership developing in the school."*

> *"My supporters and colleagues were a great help to me here and they deserve much praise for their enthusiasm."*

> *"In a small school context this is quite difficult but I am managing to grow leadership at all levels through other projects."*

> *"…as we move towards a more distributive leadership style in school as a SMT, I predict that any new members of staff embarking on SQH or similar may find tensions less obstructive."*

In his exploration of the ways in which leadership programmes impact on leadership practice and school effectiveness, Brundrett (2008: 10) emphasises the central importance of the Headteacher in, "*providing a setting which facilitated the successful interplay of forces between programme, individual, and school context*". Moreover, Cowie (2005: 396) in discussing the work-based and partnership model advises:

> *Even exceptionally able participants may find it difficult to thrive in stagnant schools with poorly developed systems and an impoverished culture, while the converse may be true in a more supportive school environment.*

While this would (hopefully) be an extreme context, it would seem that many SQH participants working in relatively positive environments still encountered tensions with implementing a distributive style of leadership. What is equally important in the worked-based learning context the SQH programme affords, is how those participants worked to overcome tensions encountered, presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2   Means of Resolving Tensions Encountered

Strategies Used to Resolve Tensions Encountered	Responses
Use of 'other leadership styles'	1
Seeking and gaining promotion in the same school	1

Modelling a distributed leadership style	2
Support from HT / colleagues	2
Practical strategies e.g. overcoming time constraints through effective use of CPD	3
"Interpersonal Skills" (4), "Emotional Intelligence" (1), Trust (1), Diplomatic Skills (1)	7

In addition to the persistence of SQH participants and the support provided by colleagues, this suggests steadfastness in adhering to the vision and values participants held true despite adversity encountered. Some of the comments provided by those participants illuminate the rewards:

> *"However, the benefits are great as the school becomes a*
> *Learning Organisation."*

> *"The results however have been amazing and all the things that I*
> *have suggested have since become practice in school!"*

Of the twenty two respondents who provided comment relating to their experience of incorporating the theory of distributed leadership into their practice, seven made specific reference to the importance of their "interpersonal skills" in resolving tension encountered. This area seems worthy of further exploration.

Within the international literature, there is broad consensus that the work of leaders and managers, and indeed Headteachers, involves a range of interactions with others and, that in order for those interactions to bear fruit, a leader and manager needs to be skilled at interacting with others (Slater, 2008). Could it be, that a distributed style of leadership carries with it an imperative for a Headteacher to have well developed interpersonal skills (Harris, 2005)? What then would the implications be if an aspiring Headteacher or their Headteacher supporter was not skilled in that area? If such ability is so important for Headteacher practice, why then is the emotional dimension of the role not recognised more fully (Beatty, 2000)?

Conclusion

There is currently national concern about the potential leadership crisis faced by schools across Scotland involving the high proportion of Headteachers retiring or due to retire over the next 10 years. Coupled with this, is the concern for the relatively small numbers seeking and successfully undertaking professional development opportunities afforded by the Scottish Qualification for Headship Programme. There is a political will to identify aspirant Heads, encourage them to proceed towards Headship and demonstrate competence against the Standard for Headship (either through the standard route or through alternative routes currently being piloted). If indeed aspirant Headteachers are to be identified, supported, encouraged and enabled to gain the knowledge, understanding, experience and confidence for that role, then leadership and management responsibilities must surely be distributed beyond the Headteacher and indeed beyond the senior management team. For this to be possible, Headteachers need to feel (emotional intelligence and interpersonal abilities) able to distribute/share the leadership role and associated responsibilities. If aspirant Headteachers are encouraged in this way, could we avert the potential leadership crisis that we face as a profession? If aspirant Headteachers are encouraged in this way, what support will they require as they progress through the SQH programme?

Contemporary Scottish policy documents use the terms collegiality, distributed, distributive and shared leadership interchangeably. Are those terms synonymous or do they differ significantly in concept and intention? Should they be used interchangeably? Can each term fulfil the range of aspirations for Scottish education which policy makers currently proclaim? Beyond the rhetoric of contemporary Scottish policy documents, is distributed leadership impacting on school practice (Harris, 2005) and if so, in what ways? Is distributed leadership necessarily the best way to manage schools (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris et al., 2008; Timperley, 2005) as presented in contemporary Scottish policy documents – if so, why so; if not, what tensions and factors are at play?

This paper, in keeping with others within the field of distributed leadership across the globe (Storey, 2004), has raised many more questions than it has answered. The areas it explores are each worthy of further study and indeed, I hope to do so by taking forward a part-time PhD study in this area over the next five years (proposal accepted). My proposed programme of research will focus on whether the notion of distributed leadership is a myth or actuality in Scottish schools. Given the findings of

this study, it would appear that SQH participants encounter a range of tensions in trying to take forward a 'distributed leadership perspective' (Harris and Spillane, 2007) in leading school improvement initiatives. Tensions could include *"the major structural, cultural and micropolitical barriers operating in schools"* (Harris, 2004: 19); *"the possibility of developing incoherence within an organization"* (Timperley, 2005: 410); as well as the risk of resulting in *"the greater distribution of incompetence"* (Timperley, 2005: 417); in addition to tensions experienced by staff when they are perceived differently by colleagues (Loder and Spillane, 2005) or when the Headteacher's choice of a suitable leader does not accord with teachers' (Timperley, 2005). All this, within a general recognition that tensions encountered could in part be related to a range of contextual factors (Harris, 2005; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2006) or to the developmental stage of a school.

The prime aim of the research is to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of contemporary leadership in schools through an exploration of tensions and factors at play in distributing leadership. In so doing, it is anticipated that a better understanding will develop as to how to support those aspiring to leadership, grounding theory within professional practice. This may be especially relevant to aspiring Headteachers who are not yet formally appointed leaders within their schools (Loder and Spillane, 2005; Timperley, 2005), particularly if it is to those aspirants that we need to look for the next generation of Heads, given the retirement profile of the profession and, more specifically, of Deputes.

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