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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates prevalent understandings about leadership and accountability held by school leaders, and supported by artifacts such as school leadership policies, job descriptions and appraisal systems. It interrogates the inextricable relationship between leadership and accountability and the underlying assumptions inherent within dominant conceptions. Underpinning the paper is the belief that the way we talk and think about leadership and accountability, influences the way they are enacted.

The Australian research from which the paper emanates demonstrates that there are many contradictory conceptions about leadership currently in circulation. Data from principals and business officials produced the same results, reinforcing the predominance of un-theorized or under-theorized notions of what leadership is, who leaders are, how accountability should be calibrated and who should be held to account. This likely confounds and confuses efforts in practice while definitions and assumptions surrounding such common concepts as leadership and accountability are rarely put under the microscope.

Participants in the Australian research found value in being provoked to think about and express their beliefs and understandings, while being challenged to ‘re-think’ some of the taken-for-granted aspects of educational theory, practice and praxis.

The paper concludes by questioning how hegemonic conceptions and assumptions serve educational leaders and whether alternative conceptions, evident more in research and leadership literature than practice, would provide a more sustainable stance for educational institutions in dynamic and uncertain times.
INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, educational leadership is a hot topic. It is the means by and through which governments and schooling jurisdictions intend to implement educational reforms, school improvement and higher student learning outcomes or ‘standards’. These expectations of educational leaders come on top of the daily busy quotidian of schools, let alone a school’s own agenda for change and improvement or that expected by school districts. As a result, recent official policy rhetoric and educational research suggests that leadership is so complex and covers such a huge range of responsibilities that the skill sets required go beyond those found solely within an individual (e.g. Gronn, 2003; Spillane, 2004, 2006). ‘Distributed’, ‘shared’, ‘collegial’ leadership forms are increasingly referred to – with these terms often being used interchangeably. Distributed leadership – the term I will use in this paper - is endorsed by governments and educational theorists as apposite for the education context and its changing circumstances (e.g. Department of Education, 2007; Hay Group, 2006).

Distributed leadership is a team, shared approach. It implicitly embraces the understanding that one leader cannot possibly possess all the skills, knowledge, dispositions and time to lead each organizational function optimally and that a team can best provide the skills, interests and knowledge required for leading and managing the contemporary school. It is a ‘leadership at all levels’ approach (Wickens, 1995), which assumes that ‘leadership’ is performed where it resides - everywhere and by everyone - with professionals possessing differing role titles co-operating towards common goals (Starr, 2011). Distributed leadership is considered ‘good practice’ or even ‘best practice’ in many education systems (for example, Harris, 2003; Hopkins, 2001). Distributed leadership is defined in the following ways:

Distributed leadership means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture. (Elmore in Department of Education, Victoria, 2007, p. 1)

Silins and Mulford (2001, p. 7) define distributed leadership as “shared learning through teams of staff working together to augment the range of knowledge and skills available for the organization to change and anticipate future developments”. Furthermore “[a school] that operates under restrictive sources of leadership limits its ability to function as a learning organization and limits its ability to improve performance.”

Spillane (2004, p. 2) argues “[f]rom a distributed perspective, leadership practice takes shape in the interactions of people and their situation, rather than from the actions of an individual leader.” Similarly, Cunliffe (2009) argues that the word ‘leadership’ is about what people do and should be used as a verb rather than a noun – it is about actions and interactions.

Gronn (2009) refers to ‘hybrid’ leadership, referring to the fact that within organizational hierarchies, there is usually an employee at the top of the pyramid, with more power, influence and a greater say, notwithstanding the
fact that leadership is exercised throughout, and by many within, the organization.

Three other notions not mentioned in these definitions delineate comprehensive leadership ‘distribution’ or dispersal: democratic decision-making, shared accountability and collective recognition. More fully distributed leadership concerns shared, democratic decision making; tasks distributed or delegated according to skills and interests with autonomy for initiative and innovation also circulated; and people in all roles taking and sharing leadership responsibilities, accountabilities and acknowledgement. In other words, distributed leadership entails a cooperating team of people with different skill sets working together to ensure the institution is organized and managed to the best of their collective abilities to achieve the best possible outcomes.

There are various conceptions of how leadership can be ‘distributed’ (see for example, Harris, 2009; MacBeath, 2009). Generally however, if not in all cases, there is still one ‘executive’ leader who maintains ultimate authority and who will, on occasions and perhaps with others, make tough decisions and deal with pressing confidential matters that should not receive public airing. But beyond this, the ideal distributed leadership conception concerns shared, democratic decision making; tasks distributed or delegated according to skills and interests with autonomy for initiative and innovation also circulated; and people in all roles taking and sharing leadership responsibilities including teacher leaders and business leaders (see Starr 2012; Starr and Oakley, 2008).

Beyond the broader utilization of skill and talent within a school, there are other reasons why distributed leadership may be appealing. Individuals who are part of inter-connected, inter-dependent, cooperating school cultures are more likely to achieve organizational goals, to feel more committed, motivated, appreciated, and a greater sense of belonging. Heightened ‘worker’ involvement and sense of integrated importance, influences employee retention, morale, and institutional attraction for recruits. Furthermore, distributed leadership avoids the principal being overloaded with problems and matters that can be dealt with by others. Added to this is the professional learning and development that occurs simultaneously – with leadership being learnt on the job in context and in actual practice by personnel across the school. Distributed leadership reinforces positive values such as transparency and trust.

‘Traditional’ educational leadership forms, by contrast, are characterized by:

- centralized, top-down decision making
- hierarchical structures of control and systems of power
- singular ‘individual’ responsibilities and externally assessed performance management systems
- one-size-fits-all, universal policy prescriptions and procedures
- standardized practices in an attempt to create certainty and alleviate risk
- the perpetuation of the status quo (see Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009; Lortie, 1975; Starr, 2012).
While these finer points and definitions may be debated, there is broad consensus that traditional notions of heroic, charismatic, inspirational leadership vested in a single individual – ‘the White Knight in Shining Armor’ conception (e.g. Conger & Kanungo, 1998) - are no longer accorded uncritical attention in educational research.

To discuss school leaders’ conceptions of leadership and accountability, this paper is structured into four sections. First, the research from which the paper is derived is explained. Secondly, the paper focuses on discussions about distributed leadership with principals and school business officials in this research. Thirdly, the paper will discuss the findings of the study in relation to both leadership and accountability practices. Finally the paper will canvass implications.

THE RESEARCH

This paper is based on research conducted around Australia with school principals and school business officials during 2011 and 2012. Data emerged from two separate studies. The first was a continuing study into the learning requirements of school principals. Both newly appointed and very experienced principals from across Australia were interviewed to explore each group’s perceptions about the essential learning required to conduct their role successfully. It was assumed that inexperienced principals would be able to recollect recent “steep learning curves” they had encountered in their new role, while experienced principals would possess wisdom from long experience. Principals from all levels of schooling, all schooling sectors (government, Catholic, independent), and metropolitan and rural locations were involved. Data collection occurred through intensive, semi-structured interviews with one hundred principals (some conducted face-to-face and others via telephone), and through discussions recorded as field notes. The research investigated all aspects of the principalship, but in this paper I refer specifically to perceptions about leadership and accountability.

The second study explored the leadership requirements of school business officials as Australia’s schooling systems are increasingly autonomous with authority and responsibility devolved to individual schools. In this study face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted. The two hundred and fifty respondents came from every Australian state and every sector and level of education. Again, the research covered a range of topics referring specifically to education business in general (see Starr, 2012), but here I concentrate on the findings about leadership and accountability.

The projects were an exercise in grounded theory building (Glaser and Straus, 1967). In this approach, theory emerges from the data gathered: theory is not derived deductively, but is generated through an inductive process whereby emerging research insights are analyzed and continually tested, producing further evidence and/or new theoretical insights (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Data are categorized and analyzed, with similarities and differences enabling the construction of themes and propositions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As themes emerge ‘loudly and clearly’ through the data, a theory or picture of the actual situation can be produced. Thus a recursive relationship between data collection, analysis, and theory occurs until the data is ‘saturated’ - when
similar instances appear and re-appear over and over again (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory building supports examination of individual standpoints within complex contexts. It considers the inextricability of the macro- (international and national), meso- (state and district) and micro- (institutional) connections and their effects on the experiences of individuals and groups. Real life experience is the starting point, connecting individuals with broader structural arrangements, such as global economics, government policies, national social issues and historical events. In other words, large-scale social structures affect tangible realities that are inseparable from contextualized practice or from the historicity of the period (Ball, 1994). Hence the iterative processes of developing claims and interpretations within a grounded theory approach is responsive to research situations and the multiple levels of meaning produced by the people in them (Gray, 2009).

**WHAT IS ‘LEADERSHIP’ AND WHO IS ‘ACCOUNTABLE’?**

In both studies described above the respondents – individual principals or education business leaders or small groups - were asked to define ‘leadership’. I was interested in finding how people described what they did as ‘leaders’. Some representative responses were:

- Leadership is to have a vision, model the behaviors then have others willingly follow.
- Leadership is to inspire, motivate and support others to achieve a goal.
- Leadership is the ability to influence and inspire colleagues in the fulfillment of organizational goals.
- Leadership is the ability to facilitate change in and through others.
- Leadership is the capacity to take others with you on a journey of change and improvement.
- Leadership is empowering and inspiring others to share a vision and create change for the benefit of the organization.
- A leader is a role model, source of inspiration, empowerer, teacher, listener, moral compass and inclusive.
- A leader is one who communicates with, and inspires those he/she leads. Leaders are able to make decisions, know their craft and are role models for others.
- Leadership is inspiring people to change; getting people to follow you; creating openings; getting people to do what you think is good but in a way which makes them believe they thought of it; guiding and influencing the conversation.

In one instance a member of a focus group decided to consult a search engine and found:
Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. (Northouse, 2007, p. 3)

These sorts of sentiments about leadership were heard repeatedly. In a nutshell, in the minds of the majority of Australian school leaders interviewed, leadership is about inspiring, motivating, influencing, facilitating change, while gaining and supporting followers. The responses are normative, instrumental and deterministic. Leadership, as represented in these responses, is imbued with individual visionary power, charisma and infinite wisdom about what needs to happen and how, while being able to motivate and inspire others to create change towards the vision. These understandings are hegemonic in that they appear in much literature on leadership and they appeal to general leadership conceptions perpetrated, for example, by the media – especially when referring to political leaders during election campaigns.

Hence the strong contention here is that contradictory notions about leadership are circulating in education systems at the current time. School leaders’ predominantly traditional or conventional views about leadership are reinforced, and perhaps influenced by, those operating systemically, at the same time as the notion of ‘distributed’ leadership is gaining high prominence in research and educational leadership theory.

To more clearly illustrate how traditional leadership presumptions still hold significant sway systemically – even though there appears to be wide endorsement of distributed leadership forms in educational literature - I quote below directly from over twenty recent job descriptions for Australian school principals. (I have chosen principals because they are located at the apex of the formal school leadership pyramid, which assists my argument at this juncture.) The ‘leader’ being sought for the principalship is quite an extraordinary individual, who has:

- a compelling character and essential ability through words and actions to communicate effectively and inspire all sections of the school community to the highest possible standards of excellence
- proactive leadership skills; who identifies problems before they are seen, and rectifies them before they become a problem
- competence in judgment and team building; the ability to identify deficiencies in programs and plan strategies to overcome them
- the ability to provide advice to the Council on the determination and development of policy appropriate to the strategic and operational needs of the college
- the ability to develop and implement strategies for the future positioning and well being of the school
- personal integrity, strong moral values, a ‘robust’ personality to nurture organizational spirit with the ability to set high expectations for others through role modeling appropriate behaviors and attitudes
- the capacity to meet key performance indicators that are negotiated on an annual basis as part of the principal’s accountability and performance review process with the Board of Governors
- the ability to build and maintain a teaching and non-teaching staff body of the highest standard; the ability to appoint, professionally appraise, counsel and terminate the services of academic and general staff
• a good knowledge about policy and legislation affecting education and the legal and political context
• the ability to develop and implement systems which ensure appropriate student learning outcomes
• the ability to demonstrate compliance with statutory requirements placed on the School by Government
• the ability to develop and implement short, medium and long term strategies to achieve the mission and implement the policies of the Council
• the capacity for setting direction - having a vision is one thing, but being able to clearly articulate a path to get there and take the College with you is another
• the ability to develop structures and processes that ensure the effective, efficient and timely realization of goals, objectives and targets as part of the planning and accountability framework determined by the Governors.

Beyond the institution, there are hopes that the leaders would:
• promote the school locally, nationally and internationally
• participate in educational debates within the state and the nation
• play an active role in the wider educational community.

Surprisingly, only one school mentioned the requirement to have:
• a genuine interest in, and understanding of, young people and their education.

It is clear that position descriptions and appointee characteristics incorporate traditional assumptions about leadership and leaders (Starr, 2006). The hopes and aspirations embedded in these statements implicitly embrace a conception of leadership embodied in one super-capable, multi-skilled, extraordinary individual who has all the answers (sometimes before the problem is even evident!) - a person who is effective not only within the institution but whose influence stretches beyond its boundaries to include state and national (and even international) responsibilities. This is a very tall order indeed. The leader must be inspirational, a role model, an arbiter, a capacity-builder and a compliant system supporter. S/he must ensure the commitment and dedication of others; have insights and foresight; and achieve a vision (alongside myriad other minor requirements that were too numerous to mention for this example).

Role descriptions conflate the role of the education leader (Gronn, 2002), who is the legal authority, the chief incumbent, and the courageous, intrepid, trailblazing frontrunner. Leadership as implicitly outlined in these statements, is not a distributed notion. Traditional conceptions and definitions still abound.

The school leaders interviewed in the two studies were also asked how their performance was appraised, by whom and through what measures. The research found that similarly, that very traditional conceptions and assumptions about leadership are embedded within accountability procedures; particularly those associated with individual performance
appraisal systems in schools. For example, it is school principals whose performance is judged on the meeting of targets or key performance indicators. These do not apply to others in schools. As governments place more emphasis on measurable performance outcomes, it is individuals not teams that are targeted for results. Educational leaders with formal titles, and those at the top of organizational hierarchies in particular, bear the brunt of contending with the outcomes, even though they are not solely responsible for them. This has concomitant implications for their future job prospects and longevity in the role. School principals have precarious employment contracts – they are hired on short-term contracts and can be fired or shunted to another position if governors or education systems deem their efforts to have fallen short.

A further point to make about leadership and accountability is that distributed leadership is targeted solely at the school level. There is no such understanding about the relationship between systemic and school leaders. At the central level, power is even more hierarchically concentrated and despite notions of autonomous schools and ‘devolved’ authority, individual school sites are not at liberty to challenge or contravene policy determinations or major decisions that require implementation. Systemic decisions may involve ‘consultation’, but central officers / policy makers / politicians - those with a higher authority - will make mandated determinations and have the final say. Consultation is not collaboration.

Furthermore, the traditional accountability systems in place do not allow school leaders to appraise or comment on the performance of those above them in the systemic hierarchy. Neither are they permitted to comment publicly on education matters.

In reality a center / core - periphery power model operates. It is hierarchical, one-way and assumes power differentials between leaders and followers with decision-making authority at the top.

DISCUSSION

While school leaders (principals and business managers) and education departments can be seen to hold predominantly conservative perceptions about leaders and leadership, the same can be said of politicians and the Fourth Estate. For example, recent government threats to make principals of ‘failing schools’ ‘shape up or ship out’ demonstrate acceptance of similar conceptions (see Grattan, Tomazin and Harrison, 2008; McManus and Jean, 2008; see also Reid, 2009). Hargreaves and Fink (2006, p. 96) reinforce this argument, pointing out the preoccupation in educational leadership literature with the ‘the top position’, as if leadership is synonymous with the principalship, saying, “[o]ther sources of leadership have been largely ignored.”

There are other problems with this heroic, gallant leadership conception. The job descriptions mentioned above perpetuate the myth that the solution to complex educational problems and improvement is to find the correct person to fill the formal role at the top of the organizational hierarchy (Copland, 2003). Woods (2008) argues that a major problem with traditional leadership hierarchies is that they bottleneck too many problems through to one
individual, overwhelming him or her to the extent that success is impeded. Another problem is that this conception of leadership is putting people off becoming ‘leaders’ since the role appears too onerous demanding, time-consuming and stressful (d’Arbon, Duignan, Duncan and Goodwin, 2001; Gronn & Lacey, 2004; Thomson, Blackmore, Sachs and Tregenza, 2003). People who might once have aspired to leadership positions are beginning to wonder where a family or personal life fits into the picture when expectations are set so high, and when they see existing incumbents being reluctant to take on further leadership assignments (Starr, 2007).

The traditional leadership literature of the dominant technical-rational-scientific kind is unrealistic in its expectations and the picture of leadership reality it encompasses. The ideal it presents is overly confident, optimistic and certain as it anticipates and demands too much of one, over-committed individual who will more than likely fail in some way to measure up. Besides a few standout exceptions “… for the most part, the heroic leadership paradigm is a flawed and fading one” (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006, p. 96). The point is that this flawed ‘ideal’ is perpetuated in job descriptions and official expectations which is confusing when scrambled up with notions of distributed leadership delineated in official policy documents.

However, as stated above, alongside dominant traditional views are newer, ‘post-heroic’ conceptions that perceive leadership as more fluid in nature, as a circumjacent phenomenon that it circulates everywhere within and outside an organization, and as more ambiguous, less straightforward and inextricably bound with its immediate and broader contexts.

The two conceptions of leadership broadly described to this point (traditional and distributed) demonstrate that leadership is about power: who has it, how it circulates and is used, for what purposes and in whose interest. The traditional conception (still dominant and revealed through texts such as job descriptions and accountability measures) places all bets on one person who has ultimate authority. Suffice to say, the problem with leadership and accountability models that focus on an individual, is that they fail if that individual does not meet the mark. In contrast, the distributed conception espouses the benefits of collective wisdom (and skills) emanating from diverse perspectives and experiences – such as is evidenced in a court jury or a board of independent company directors which are established in a collective way to ensure the least risk and the most propitious reliability.

Remarkably, this ‘messy’ non sequitur in policy rhetoric and practice is evidenced across much of the world (e.g. Harris, 2004; MacBeath et al, 2006). This is not to imply that leadership should be abandoned or that formal leaders are not required in organisations or social life - even if leadership is distributed or shared. Things need to get achieved; organisations need goals, common purposes and roadmaps towards change and improvement; and some people can get things moving more effectively than others. However the reality is that educational institutions need leaders with differing skills and purviews to achieve a range of goals and who exercise power ‘with’ people rather than ‘over’ them.
From this latter perspective, leadership is about relationships. Leadership is the act of leading, rather than being about a person. It is an integrated, relational and shared activity, not a role - ‘leadership’ is a verb rather than a noun (Cunliffe, 2009). Through relational practices, meanings, purposes and actions are constructed and created (Sinclair, 2007). Such a conception of leadership involves possessing a healthy skepticism, putting taken for granted assumptions under critical scrutiny, interrogating various viewpoints, motives and interpretations, questioning the interests served by policy or practice, and critiquing the consequences of one’s actions. This conception provides the means to explore leadership possibilities that are more open and responsive, authentic, collaborative, democratic, moral, creative and sustainable. In particular this approach allows interests that are privileged or marginalized to be scrutinized, and the morality and ethicality of policies and practices to be examined. Authentic educational leaders would show concern for education policy and practice beyond the confines of a single institution - one might assume they should be concerned about education across a state, a nation and internationally. Authenticity in leadership acts would suggest a genuine concern about education and learners everywhere. Writers such as Cunliffe (2009) and Sinclair (2007) endorse ‘destabilizing’ practices, not because they are anarchic, but because they disrupt what we have blindly been led to believe and what we have unquestioningly accepted as absolute truths about leadership. Leaders should understand their practices are political and moral enactments with philosophical bases.

Distributed leadership, however, is not without its potential downfalls. Storey (2004) claims that distributed leadership has its provenance in established concepts in organizational theory such as ‘autonomous working groups’, ‘self management’ and notions suggestive of a level playing field such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘democracy’ – it is not new. Other critics suggest that not all distributive forms of leadership are sustainable. Without clear agreed purposes, decisions and accountability processes, dispersed leadership can become neglectful, frustrating and impotent at one extreme or anarchic, divergent, confusing and destructive at the other extreme (see Hargreaves and Fink, 2006 and Hay Group, 2006). Distributed forms of leadership need clear focus, clear goals and accountabilities, and the stewardship and guidance of wise heads (plural). Storey’s (2004) case study demonstrates how underlying power relations within and outside the school create tensions, even when goals are established, with formal leaders and external authorities wielding more power than those to whom leadership is ‘distributed’. At its worst, distributed leadership, without its concurrence with traditional notions of hierarchy, could result in anarchy.

The distributed leadership conception tests notions of ethics, democracy, day-to-day practice and equity. Sometimes it involves the courage to resist; it always involves the courage to cultivate meaning, community and commitment (cf. Starratt, 2003). Leadership should not be about professional deference, maintaining hegemony, tolerating cultural limitations or answering complex problems with simplistic structural responses - otherwise educational organisations become dysfunctional and thwarted (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).
At this time, the leadership conceptions described above exist concurrently at least in rhetoric. Governments and educational institutions mostly appear to have absorbed the notion of distributed leadership partially, but not totally. The traditional leadership list presents the economistic conception of education that is predominant in government policy at the current time, spurred on by global competition and problems inherent in economic and political interdependency and legitimacy. Distributed leadership has probably never really been enacted thoroughly but it provides the grist that may be required to genuinely move towards shared, collaborative and distributed forms of leadership, management and decision making that makes best use of professional knowledge and skills.

At the moment, Cunliffe (2009, p. 41) suggests that most educational leaders “just keep their heads down and focus on meeting short-term goals, while complaining to each other about conflicting demands” (as in the traditional leadership list), knowing that both the work and life sacrifices it demands are unsustainable (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). The challenge is to talk and think about how things could be different in order for practice to follow. As Sinclair (2007, p. xviii) suggests:

A more meaningful way to think about leadership is as a form of being (with ourselves and others): a way of thinking and acting that awakens and mobilizes people to find new, freer and more meaningful ways of seeing, working and living. This form of leadership is anchored to personal self-awareness and mindfulness towards others (original emphasis).

If such a definition of leadership were to be embraced, them concurrently attendant accountability structures would also be changed to be shared, and quite probably, more comprehensive and rigorous.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through relational leadership practices, meanings, purposes and actions are constructed and created. Educational leadership should involve healthy skepticism – it should scrutinize taken for granted assumptions; interrogate a range of viewpoints, motives and interpretations; question the interests served by policy or practice; and critique the consequences of actions – including on what we mean by ‘leadership’. Writers such as Cunliffe (2009) and Sinclair (2007) endorse ‘destabilizing’ practices as part of any through definition of leadership, not because they endorse anarchy – far from it - but because they believe we need to disrupt what we have blindly been led to believe and what we have unquestioningly accepted as absolute truths about leadership and leadership acts need to be contested. Leaders should understand their practices are political and moral enactments with philosophical bases.

Australia’s official policy rhetoric and accepted practices are inconsistent, confused and caught up in difficulties concerning trust, power, risk and roles (Starr, 2012a). It has not kept up with current thinking, or where it has, it has added notions such as ‘distributed leadership’ to policy without adopting what it means in practice and thus creating incongruity and confusion. While
this situation remains, distributed forms of leadership are unlikely to be realized in their fullest sense.

REFERENCES


