

Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change

Who Distributes Distributed Leadership?

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[image by [Vinoth Chander](#)]

By Elspeth McCartney, University of Strathclyde, Scotland, UK, and
Joan Forbes, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

This brief comment is prompted by discussion at a recent seminar on *Distributed Leadership: Theory, Principle, and Practice* by Professor Jim Spillane, Northwestern University Chicago, hosted by the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change, University of Glasgow, and the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL: 3rd September 2015). It is further informed by previous analysis of leadership and leadership distribution as constituted in Scottish children's policy (Forbes and McCartney, 2012).

Professor Spillane presented a holistic teaching-focussed framework for leadership, and gave US examples of trained school staff members leading and enhancing in-school advice networks. These networks were instituted by a positional leader, the school principal (head-teacher) who allocated staff. In concluding, Professor Spillane stressed the need for formal leadership, and clarified his view that the idea that 'everyone is a leader' was (his capitals) 'WRONG'.

This was questioned by an audience member from SCEL, whose view of distributed leadership encompassed the idea of leadership as the responsibility of all. SCEL's website clarifies the dichotomy by differentiating four leadership roles. The first two, *pedagogical* leadership (leading learning for, and with, all learners, with a clear focus on improving outcomes for everyone) and *middle* leadership (developing capacity to lead colleagues and other partners to achieve change, for example through specific projects or development work) are listed as expected of all teachers; although middle leadership may include formalised and line-management responsibilities which are presumably then ascribed to a specified individual (SCEL, 2015). *School* and *system* leadership forms that affect management are usually held by positional leaders.

Applying MacBeath's (2005: 357) model of leadership distribution, Spillane's examples and SCEL's middle leadership appear to conform to top-down *strategic* distribution of leadership, based on planned appointment of individuals. SCEL's school and system leadership roles involve *formal* distribution, through designated job descriptions. The leadership role expected of everyone in school is pedagogical leadership, classroom teaching. Only this role might be considered to be distributed *culturally*, MacBeath's term for practising leadership as a reflection of a service's culture, ethos and traditions, also described as reflecting bridging social capital (MacBeath 2005: 362). The others are examples of top-down distribution of leadership, controlled by positional leaders creating new positional leaders with more limited authority.

Within the complex and controlled structure of the school top-down distribution is unsurprising. However, in Scotland co-working across public sectors is expected under the overarching Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) Scottish Government (SG) policy (SG, 2012). The example of speech and language therapists who are employed as allied health professionals (AHPs) within the national health service but who work in schools is illuminating (Forbes & McCartney, 2012). The relevant Scottish government guidance for AHPs (SG, 2010) envisages leadership by all: 'leadership needs to be the responsibility of everyone' (SG, 2010: 42) with 'leadership at all levels and across services' (SG, 2010b: 42). Distribution is *cultural*, since an 'ethos of working well together also means recognising each others' leadership role rather than relying on job titles and positions of authority' (SG, 2010b: 42). The summary is a very broad (and under-specified) definition of leadership:

in practice then, leadership is about focussing all activities on delivering an effective service to young people (SG, 2010b: 42).

The different forms of leadership distribution across health and education sectors, and the different opportunities to adopt leadership behaviours afforded to health and school staff, can cause co-working tensions, and indeed difficulty in knowing what decisions may be made by whom. Understandings of fluid, changing and at times temporary school leadership roles distributed by senior management are needed by health service staff, and educationalists need to understand the professional autonomy and freedom of action allowed to health service staff. This is complex and demands good co-practice. Leadership by all can not be 'WRONG' (nor indeed 'RIGHT' – our capitals) in all contexts.

References

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