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The institutionalization of distributed leadership: A 'Catch-22' in English public services

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ABSTRACT

Distributed leadership is promoted as being well suited to public service organizations because of their multiple goals, less pronounced managerial authority and presence of powerful professional groups. Drawing on qualitative evidence we analyse the complex process of the institutionalization of distributed leadership in English schools. Our analysis suggests that competing institutional forces simultaneously foster and stymie the adoption of distributed leadership. Consequently, the school principals find themselves in a classic Catch-22 situation, which they resolve by enacting a weak form of distributed leadership. Ironically, the implementation of distributed leadership is the most difficult in the schools located in socially deprived areas, that is, the very context where policy-makers expect distributed leadership to make the most impact. Moving beyond our specific case, we argue that distributed leadership, and leadership more generally, cannot be divorced from its institutional context and that the relative influence of divergent institutional forces depends upon the immediate organizational environment.

KEYWORDS

distributed leadership ▪ institutional theory ▪ leadership ▪ public services ▪ schools

Empirical evidence suggests that leadership has a significant effect on organizational performance (Agle et al., 2006; Bycio et al., 1995; de Hoogh et al., 2004; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Ogbonna & Harris, 1999; Waldman

& Yammarino, 1999). Beginning in the 1980s, the prescriptions for performance-improving leadership have often been based on the individualized conception of leadership, such as the model of transformational leadership developed by Bass (1985) (Bryman, 1992). These prescriptions have been grounded in a long tradition of mainstream leadership psychology that, from the classical trait, style and contingency theories to the contemporary neo-charisma theories, has focused on the individual (Fairhurst, 2007), More recently, however, commentators have argued that, for reasons of democratic governance, as well as organizational performance, leadership needs to extend beyond a single individual at the apex of organization (April et al., 2000; Heifetz, 1994; Khurana, 2002). Consequently, an increasing focus has been placed on distributed leadership (henceforth DL) as feature of a business enterprise in the 'dynamically competitive era' (Teece, 2007: 61), a key characteristic of a knowledge-creating company (Nonaka & Toyama, 2002), and a model of leadership for healthcare (Buchanan et al., 2007), local government (Hartley & Allison, 2000) and educational organizations (Spillane et al., 2001).

In this article we investigate the forces that promote and retard the implementation of DL in public service organizations. Adopting an institutional approach to leadership, we treat the individualized conception of leadership as an established institution and the DL as an institution in the making. As a nascent institution, DL already has some regulatory, normative and cultural-cognitive elements of an institution in place, but is not yet fully embedded in the broader institutional system. In our analysis, we highlight the context of leadership as we focus, first, on organizational field as a meso-level context, and, second, on the immediate organizational environment (organization set) as a micro-level context, and examine how the forces at these two levels affect the enactment of DL.

Thus, the article unfolds as follows. First, we outline our theoretical framework, detailing an institutional approach to leadership generally and its specific application to DL. Second, we present our empirical context. Third, we describe our data and method. Fourth, we analyse the findings. Finally, we discuss the main results of our study, draw conclusions and suggest implications and directions for future research.

Leadership in an institutional framework

Institutional theory argues that organizations are driven to adopt the practices that are institutionalized in order to enhance their legitimacy and increase their survival chances. In the three decades since the inception of

neo-institutional school of organizational analysis (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977), extensive empirical evidence on various organizational structures (e.g. multidivisional form), practices (e.g. total quality management) and processes (e.g. due process in the workplace) has been accumulated to support this argument (for the latest reviews of neo-institutionalism in organizational analysis, see Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Scott, 2008). Remarkably, leadership, despite its prominence, has received scant attention, a notable exception being the theoretical work of Biggart and Hamilton (1987). We believe that the understanding of leadership can be enhanced by insights from institutional theory, and the emerging research employing institutional perspectives on leadership shows considerable potential (see Currie et al., 2009, on leadership and institutional change in the public sector; and Lucas, 2003, on institutionalization of female leadership).

We find institutional theory particularly relevant to the analysis of leadership, because institutionalism is a phenomenological, 'high social construction' approach to organizational analysis (Jepperson, 1991: 153), and leadership is a social construction par excellence (e.g. Meindl, 1993, 1998; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Followers imbue individuals in formal positions of leadership with exceptional properties and act upon these beliefs, making leadership a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Meindl et al., 1985; see also Fairhurst, 2007; Grint, 2000; Kelly, 2008). Our theoretical framework rests on four propositions.

Proposition 1: Individual leadership is an institution

Leadership fits perfectly with the definition of an institution, which is 'a social order or pattern that has attained a certain state', in which its reproduction represents a 'self-activating social process' and 'is not dependent . . . upon recurrent collective mobilization' or intervention (Jepperson, 1991: 145). It is a 'standardised interaction sequence(s)' that is 'taken for granted' in the sense that it is both treated as a relative fixture in a social environment and explicated as a functional element of such an environment (Jepperson, 1991: 147). Similarly to other 'objects' commonly regarded as institutions, such as marriage, contracts, or formal organizations, leadership can be thought of as a 'packaged social technology, with accompanying rules and instructions for its incorporation and employment in a social setting' and for 'establishing identities and activity scripts for such identities' (Jepperson, 1991: 144, 146–7).

The proposition, however, requires an important qualification. The depiction of leadership as an institution pertains only to individual leadership.

Indeed, the interpretation of leadership as an institution can be clarified by contrasting the leadership as a property of an individual with the leadership as a property of a group or network of individuals. Institutionalization is a relative property. Whether a particular social pattern is considered to be an institution depends upon analytical context and on comparison with other social patterns (Jepperson, 1991). Furthermore, we can distinguish various degrees of institutionalization in terms of relative vulnerability of an institution to social intervention (Jepperson, 1991). We argue that individual leadership is highly institutionalized, as it is firmly embedded in other institutions, such as formal organization with its hierarchy of authority. In comparison, distributed leadership lacks the same institutional supports.

By conceptualizing individual leadership as an institution, we do not, of course, mean to portray it as a uniform and fixed phenomenon. The notion of (individual) leadership is surrounded by considerable ambiguity (Barker, 1997); there is a lack of consensus about its definition (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003); the vast literature on leadership is contradictory and lacks cohesion (Rost, 1991); and, in both theory and practice, leadership comes in various shapes and forms. Yet, all the classical theories of leadership, including trait, behavioural, and contingency approaches, the majority of contemporary theories of leadership (see, for representative reviews, Bryman, 1996; Grint, 1997), and the 'lay' notions of leadership in the Western culture (Hoppe & Bhagat, 2007) share 'the overwhelming tendency to assume "individual" leadership. Leaders are seen variously as visionary, heroic, transformational, transactional, charismatic, inspirational, flexible, sensitive, innovative, but the enduring theme is that leadership is individualized' (Lawler, 2008: 27).

Proposition 2: Distributed leadership is an institution-in-the-making

Relative to individual leadership, with its long history in theory and practice, DL is a much more recent idea. It was first suggested by Gibb (1954), but lay dormant until its rediscovery by Brown and Hosking (1986). Since then, the descriptive and prescriptive literature on DL has blossomed, particularly in application to team work and educational settings (for reviews in the context of teams, see Day et al., 2000; Pearce & Conger, 2003; in the context of education, see Harris, 2007; Robinson, 2008; and in both fields, see Gronn, 2002; Bennett et al., 2003). The boundaries of the concept, however, have been somewhat blurred by the range of different terms employed to describe leadership that extends beyond the individual located within the upper echelons of an organization (e.g. 'collective': Denis et al., 2001; 'shared': Pearce & Conger, 2003; 'democratic': Bennett et al., 2003; 'devolved', 'participative' and 'collaborative': Harris, 2007). For the sake of

simplicity, we employ a broad definition of DL, as a concertive (i.e. representing more than an aggregation of individual acts, with steps initiated by one individual developed by others through the 'circulation of initiative') and conjoint (i.e. synchronizing individual acts by having regard to individuals' own plans, those of their peers, and their sense of group membership) action of a group or network of individuals (Bennett et al., 2003; Gronn, 2002).

The proponents of DL argue that leadership can and should be distributed within and outside organizations, particularly when organizations are located in pluralistic settings characterized by diffuse power and divergent objectives and where complexity of the issues lies beyond the capacity of any individual leader (Bryman, 1999; Denis et al., 1996, 2000, 2001; Heifetz, 1994; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Sims & Lorenzi, 1992).

Because DL is a nascent institution, models of DL vary from 'strong' to 'weak' forms. A 'strong' form of DL, as articulated by Buchanan et al. (2007), implies that no single person is in charge and that leadership agents are 'numerous, transient, [and] migratory' (Buchanan et al., 2007: 1085). In contrast, a 'weak' form of DL, as described by Heifetz (1994), retains the distinction between the formal leader and the followers and vests the ultimate responsibility for organizational performance with the formal leader, but encourages those who are led to identify problems and forge possible solutions. Finally, in the 'middle ground' form of DL, as proposed by Denis et al. (2001), leadership is not as diffused as in the strong form and not as concentrated as in the weak form but represents a 'constellation', in which each member plays a distinct role and all members work together harmoniously. Such arrangements, however, are fragile in the context of diffuse power and multiple objectives, where leaders rule at least by the consent of the led.

As an emergent institution, DL is not yet firmly embedded in other institutions, but its development reflects the 'institutional work' associated with creating institutions. We draw attention here to the four processes contributing to the gradual institutionalization of DL: theorizing, educating, defining, and changing normative associations (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Theorizing stands for 'the development and specification of abstract categories, and the elaboration of chains of cause and effect' (Greenwood et al., 2002: 60). With regard to DL, as we noted above, a considerable amount of theoretical development and empirical research has already taken place, but the terminological disarray around the notion of DL and the lack of consensus on the definition of DL attest to the ongoing social construction of DL as an institution.

Educating involves creating the new skills and knowledge necessary to support the new institution. With regard to DL, we see a recent strong drive towards establishing the professional education and development

programmes focused on DL. In the context of our empirical case, in the field of secondary education in England, the National College for School Leadership (henceforth NCSL), set up by the UK government in 2002, has worked to educate in DL. To support the project of 'shared, collaborative and distributed leadership', the College has established a number of programmes, including the Networked Learning Communities programme, 'a partnership initiative . . . in which groups of schools have formed learning networks as a force for knowledge-sharing and innovation', and the Collaborative Leadership Learning Groups programme, 'conceived as a process for developing skills in peer facilitation of collaborative leadership learning groups' (James et al., 2007: 87).

Defining implies the construction of rule systems that confer status or identity, identify boundaries of membership and set practice standards. In the context of our empirical case, the relevant developments include the new guidelines for school inspection elaborated by the Office for Standards in Education to incorporate specific criteria for evaluating school leadership in terms of not just the individual leadership of the school principal, but also the leadership of the senior staff, the involvement of governors in school leadership, and the development of partnerships with the local community and parents (Office for Standards in Training and Education, 2007).

Changing norms means 're-making the connections between sets of practices and the moral and cultural foundations for those practices'. With regard to DL, we notice a gradual convergence of the two types of normative justification for DL (Leithwood et al., 1999): the justification based on democratic principles, which emphasizes the importance of including multiple stakeholders in the leadership process (Freeman et al., 2004), and the justification based on organizational effectiveness rationale, which highlights the role of DL in leveraging expert knowledge and increasing the employee commitment (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Vanderslice, 1988).

Proposition 3: The enactment of (a particular form of) leadership in organizations is influenced by institutional forces operating on an organizational field

The impact of the macro-level (national cultural) (e.g. Dickson et al., 2003; House et al., 2004) and micro-level (organizational) (e.g. Pillai & Meindl, 1998; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006) institutional environment on leadership have been fairly extensively examined in the literature, but the meso-level has remained relatively unexplored and represents the focus of this article. We suggest that leadership should be viewed as a process deeply embedded in an organizational field, defined as 'those organizations that, in the aggregate,

constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 148). We also suggest that the enactment of a particular form of leadership is profoundly influenced by institutional pressures operating in an organizational field, including coercive/regulatory forces (e.g. governmental policies promoting specific leadership models), normative forces (e.g. professional norms), and cultural-cognitive forces (e.g. common perceptions of leadership).

In any organizational field there are multiple institutional rules that may exert contradictory pressures on organizations (e.g. Friedland & Alford, 1991; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). In terms of regulatory/coercive forces, government policies towards the public sector reflect a tension between the drive for performance improvement and the mandate for democratic inclusion and create inconsistent institutions for the enactment of DL. Performance management, with its emphasis on individual accountability, promotes individual leadership, while various measures to address the perceived democratic deficit underpin DL. In terms of normative forces, the norms of professional collegiality are conducive to DL, but the norms of professional autonomy and the established professional hierarchies discourage the distribution of leadership. In terms of cultural/cognitive forces, leadership appears to be predominantly conceived of as a property of an individual, though there is also evidence that in some settings (ranging from the Cameroon rainforest [Kets de Vries, 1999] to Danish classroom [Mahony & Moos, 1998]) DL represents a 'naturally occurring' and taken-for-granted pattern.

We do not, however, wish to portray an institutional view of leadership as being overly deterministic. Our approach builds on recent developments in institutional analysis, which explore 'the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions' (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 251). Faced with conflicting institutional pressures, agents may play different institutions against each other and construct hybrid forms that combine properties of multiple models (Haveman & Rao, 1997), adopt apparently incompatible practices (D'Aunno et al., 1991), or produce 'bricolage' accounts that show them to simultaneously attend to contradictory requirements (Stark, 1996). The Catch-22 metaphor reflects the situation in which organizational actors are driven to accommodate the opposing demands for individual and distributed leadership. How they accommodate these opposing demands depends on the immediate organizational context, that is, the local circumstances and contingencies that circumscribe the effects of institutional forces.

Proposition 4: The influence of institutional forces on the enactment of (a particular form of) leadership varies depending on the organization's immediate environmental context

Leadership may be viewed as involving ceremonial aspects (see Meyer & Rowan 1977), particularly when individuals and organizations are judged as much on the basis of their compliance with the formal criteria of appropriateness and their conformity to social expectations as they are on the basis of their efficacy. To gain legitimacy, organizations may, depending on their circumstances, adopt – and/or construct the accounts of – individual leadership, DL or some combination of the two. The circumstances, such as an organization's history, performance, proximate organizations, and the local community, may be more or less conducive to the enactment of a particular form of leadership. We expect that, to minimize resistance, an organization would be more likely to attend to those institutional pressures that are commensurate with its conditions.

In our empirical study, we specifically examine how institutional forces and local conditions influence the implementation of DL in secondary schools in England. Below we detail the contradictory institutional forces, some of which bolster individual leadership and others promote DL in the field of secondary education in the UK. Two research questions guided our effort:

> *Research question 1*: How do institutional forces in an organizational field impact on the enactment of DL?
>
> *Research question 2*: How does the immediate organizational environment influence the relative impact of institutional forces on the enactment of DL in an organization?

Research setting

Public policy in England, since the election of the Labour Government in 1997, has pursued two broad aims. The first aim is economic and focuses on improved organizational performance through targets set by central government, including cost improvement. The second is social and is concerned with tackling social deprivation and the democratic deficit in decision-making (Newman, 2001). Although the successive Labour Governments have argued that the economic and the social agendas can be met simultaneously, it remains unclear to what extent public service organizations are in practice moving beyond a narrow economic agenda to encompass a broader social agenda (Ferlie et al., 2003; Newman, 2001).

The interaction between the economic and the social agendas creates considerable tensions for public sector managers (Newman, 2002). In education, these tensions are reflected in 'clashes over priorities and the limits of professional compliance', which threaten to 'disrupt the uneasy co-existence of managerial methods and the social democratic ends' (Fergusson, 2000: 220). These tensions also characterize the Labour government's policy on school leadership, as we discuss below.

Schools offer an instructive case for the analysis of DL because they exemplify complex organizations (Denis et al., 1996) in terms of facing multiple, sometimes competing goals (e.g. economic and social objectives) and having complex power relationships (e.g. involving managers, professionals and outside agencies). Further, the phenomenon of DL has attracted significant attention in the research on school education, which we can draw upon when developing our arguments.

To develop a rich picture of the field-level institutional forces pertaining to leadership in schools, we undertook an extensive review of relevant academic literature, the documents produced by the UK government agencies overseeing the secondary education (such as the Office for Standards in Education), and the publications of the NCSL, the organization in charge of leadership development in the UK secondary education. In the following section, we describe the regulatory and normative forces and the contradictory pressures they exert on schools, as some of these forces foster individual leadership and others promulgate DL.

Regulatory forces

In pursuit of 're-inventing government' (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), more effective leadership is central to the policy-makers' goals to improve the performance of public sector organizations (in countries subject to Anglo-American influence, such as Australia, US, Canada and New Zealand) (Hennessey, 1998; Kakabadse et al., 2003). In the UK, interest in leadership has increased in conjunction with the current Labour Government's modernization agenda, captured in the *Modernising government* White Paper (Cabinet Office, 1999), followed by policy papers emphasizing the role of leadership in virtually every segment of the public services (Hartley & Allison, 2000; Storey, 2004).

In English secondary education, government policy has promoted 'transformational leadership', but with a particularly individualist slant; that is, the policy model of transformational leadership is a normative one. Transformational leadership has been a buzzword among education ministers in successive Labour governments as a means by which poorly performing

schools can be 'turned around' (Currie & Lockett, 2007). Principals, like CEO 'superstars' in the private sector, have been cast in a heroic, transformational mould and encouraged to exhibit characteristics, such as 'impetus', 'vigour', 'drive' and 'enthusiasm', in improving schools (Gunter, 2001; Khurana, 2002). Under the model of accountability prevalent in secondary education in England school principals are ultimately responsible for school performance (Currie & Lockett, 2007; Currie et al., 2005). If a school is underperforming, the principal will be replaced by a 'superhead' (Newman, 2001; Storey, 2004). Consequently, principals focus on the results-orientated objectives at the expense of social objectives (Currie et al., 2005; Grace, 2000; Greenfield, 2004; Fergusson, 2000), and this focus is reinforced by the growth of inspection and audit (Kelly, 2003; Power, 1997). In summary, 'public managers [in England are particularly] constrained by the fact that they work within a set of legal, regulatory and policy rules and demands, and are required to be accountable for their and their organization's actions' (Ferlie et al., 2003: S9). Such a regulatory framework drives more individualistic forms of leadership, since 'the buck stops' at the principal's desk (Currie & Lockett, 2007).

More recently, however, the emphasis has shifted to the promotion of DL. A prescriptive report by the Department for Education and Skills (2003) has set out a new strategy for schools to build strong leadership teams within and partnerships outside schools. Similarly, guidelines for school inspection have been revised to include specific criteria for evaluating school leadership in terms of development of the leadership of senior management team, engagement of school governance in leadership, and creation of partnerships with parents and businesses in the local community (Office for Standards in Training and Education, 2007). Other governmental initiatives have also promoted DL in schools. First, the move towards site-based management of schools (Leithwood et al., 1999) has encouraged a distribution of leadership between the school and the Local Education Authority (LEA). Second, the UK government has increased its efforts to enhance user and community (including representatives of local business and parents) involvement in the development and delivery of public services (Newman, 2001). Cumulatively, these developments have resulted in a set of institutional rules that promote DL.

Normative forces

Schools conform to the professional bureaucracy archetype (Mintzberg, 1979), in which the dominant professional core of staff (teachers) exercise significant autonomy over the means and ends of service delivery and

self-regulate their activities, with limited managerial intervention (Friedson, 1994; Hebdon & Kirkpatrick, 2005; Wilding, 1982). The 'leader' is drawn from their ranks, but the leader is 'first amongst equals', with a notion of collegiality underpinning decision-making (Kirkpatrick, 1999; Sheaff et al., 2004). These factors facilitate the distribution of leadership among the professional core of staff.

To support the enactment of specific leadership practices within public service organizations, the UK government has created the infrastructure for leadership development (Currie & Lockett, 2007), including the National Health Service Leadership Centre (2003), Leadership College for Further Education (2003), Defence Leadership Centre (2003), Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (2004), the National School of Government (2005), and, in secondary education, the NCSL, which opened in 2002.

The NCSL has been instrumental in inculcating the spirit of DL among secondary education professionals, by promoting DL in its educational programmes, which span the whole range of professional ranks (experienced principals to the middle ranks). The NCSL has also initiated partnership projects with and between schools aimed at developing DL in practice, such as the Networked Learning Communities programme, focused on the creation of knowledge-sharing networks, and the Collaborative Leadership Learning Groups programme for 'developing skills in peer facilitation of collaborative leadership learning groups' (James et al., 2007: 87). The NCSL even offers on its website a 'practical toolkit . . . to explore and visualise . . . the key components of implementing a collaborative leadership design' (National College for School Leadership, 2008). These developments create the normative environment conducive to DL.

The presence of a dominant profession, however, creates tensions for the distribution of leadership outside of the professional core. First, professional autonomy may lead to the exclusion of non-professionals from important decisions. Consequently, service users may not have a voice and so services are likely to remain professionally, rather than user, defined (Dent, 1993). Second, the professional hierarchy may act against the distribution of leadership owing to significant power disparities regarding who can lay claim to knowledge and jurisdiction over expert matters (Abbott, 1988). Third, the managerial hierarchy has been elaborated in schools with grading systems for the main body of teachers allocating financial reward and status for taking on responsibilities, such as managing curriculum areas (Day et al., 2000). This may further limit the extent to which leadership is distributed beyond those formal organizational responsibilities.

Our description of the field-level institutional forces highlights the contradictory pressures on organizations in the field. To maintain legitimacy,

organizations need to demonstrate their conformity to both the requirements for individual leadership and requirements for DL. How organizations attend to these conflicting demands, and what influences their adherence to a particular set of demands or the adoption of some form of leadership that may satisfy both sets, represents the core of our empirical inquiry.

Data and methodology

Our empirical study focuses on the examination of the influence of field-level institutional forces and the local environmental conditions on the enactment of DL in secondary schools in England. We employed a qualitative approach because it is acutely sensitive to the context in which leadership is enacted (Bryman et al., 1996). The data were gathered through interviews at 30 schools. We focused on one geographical area in England (Nottinghamshire), with schools selected so that they were representative of English schools more widely in terms of salient characteristics such as rural or urban location, the degree of social deprivation of the student body, school's financial deficit or surplus, and school performance in terms of qualifications obtained by students at 16. Where possible we interviewed both principal and deputy/assistant principal at a school, which resulted in a total of 51 interviews. The interviews generated over 1000 pages of interview transcript.

The development of the key themes emerging from our interview analysis involved an iterative process. The interviews are best considered holistically as narratives because interviewees were telling stories, typically time sequenced, relating to their experiences (Reissman, 1993). In analysing the interviews, the authors undertook three stages of analysis. Stage 1: we independently read transcripts of interviews and then created analytic notes alongside the interview, which were then copied and placed within the accompanying interview text to create an embedded analysis. Stage 2: related parts of the embedded analysis in each interview were placed together. At least one co-author checked and discussed the coding of another's transcripts, thus ensuring reliability of interpretation across the authorial team. Stage 3: the analysis of each interview was then considered against the overarching research questions. At all stages of analysis, we remained alert to evidence that countered emergent, analytical themes. Where we judged contradictory evidence as informative for analysis (on the basis of it more frequently appearing in interview transcripts), then such evidence was included in the presentation of the case to provide a more nuanced storyline. Specifically, the difficulties of enacting DL in socially deprived contexts were more fully discussed utilizing the Catch-22 analogy.

Results

To examine how the field level forces play out 'on the ground', and interact with the local environmental conditions, we analysed the responses of school principals and deputy principals to the contradictory pressures associated with DL. Our interview data align with our metaphor of Catch-22, which is exemplified by one principal's attempts to involve his teaching staff in leadership:

> I'm criticized if I don't give them some autonomy and responsibility to lead strategic change in the organization. However, the same staff are also likely to point their finger at me and say: 'You're paid to take the big decisions and carry the can for those decisions. You're the head of the school.' Whatever I do, it seems I can't win with them.

Other principals described similar experiences of interactions with internal stakeholders (particularly senior managers) and external stakeholders (specifically school governors drawn from business, the community and local government educational managers) of the school. Below we consider the Catch-22 situation facing principals in terms of distributing leadership within and outside the school.

Distributing leadership within the school

The principals and deputy/assistant principals identified two groups of stakeholders to whom school leadership might be distributed: the deputy and assistant principals, and the main body of teaching staff.

The principals and deputy/assistant principals acknowledged that the recent changes in the division of labour in schools supported the distribution of leadership. Among these changes they particularly singled out the two: the replacement of one or more deputy principals by a growing cohort of assistant principals, who enjoy lower status and pay than deputy principals, and the greater devolution of responsibilities within a flatter organizational structure.

Interestingly, despite the structural changes, the enactment of DL remained challenging because of a host of reasons. First, many principals remained wedded to the individualistic conception of leadership, which was reflected in the metaphors used by the principals to describe themselves as, for instance, a 'conductor of the orchestra' or a 'captain on the bridge of a ship'. Reflecting 'heroic' conceptions of leadership, some principals were inclined to attribute improvements in school performance to their efforts.

Notably, they highlighted their personal vision, connected to the values and ethics that they held, drove improved school performance. On more than one occasion the metaphor of a 'journey' appears in which he or she was the 'guide' to the 'destination', with other senior managers, such as deputy principals or assistant principals, positioned as followers of the vision. 'It's [leadership] about guiding people, taking people with you. It's knowing the destination. It's enthusing people about the destination and the journey that in reality none of them want to take.'

Other metaphors reflected the traditional hierarchical division of labour, presenting, for example, the principal as the 'innovator' and the assistant or deputy principal as the 'company mechanic'. One principal stated:

> I tend to come up with the big ideas. I'll say, 'let's do this, it'll be brilliant'. He [the deputy principal] will work out the detail of it. I do leadership, he does management of implementation.

Second, deputy and assistant principals were to a large extent inclined to sidestep any distribution of leadership. Although they were commonly willing to complain if they did not have any voice, the bottom line was that they did not want to carry the burden of responsibility and accountability. Deputy and assistant principals agreed with the division of labour between the strategic matters (for which the principal is responsible) and operational matters (for which deputy and assistant principals are responsible) and were 'reluctant to stick [their] heads above the parapet'. Many deputy and assistant principals did not aspire to the principal's position because 'the extra salary isn't worth it for the accountability and responsibilities held by the principal' and expressed relief that 'we can hand back the baton of leadership to the principal'. They appeared comfortable with the traditional division of labour where they focused upon operational matters of timetabling or pastoral care.

Third, assistant principals (but also some deputy principals) expressed reservations about the notion of 'empowerment' linked to attempts to distribute responsibility. They suggested that the concept of empowerment was often used as an illicit means by which principals imposed an increasingly more onerous workload on deputy and assistant principals. Likewise, they expressed suspicion about the rhetoric of participation in leadership, as they felt that they were being asked to carry a greater proportion of the managerial burden while the principal assumed the leadership responsibility for the overall strategy of the school. Also, deputy and assistant principals reported that they were so pre-occupied with the day-to-day fire fighting that they 'enjoyed little time to appreciate the bigger picture within which we operate'. On the rare occasions of dealing with external stakeholders, deputy

and assistant principals acted as substitutes for the principal and merely had to report back to the principals, rather than having significant input into any actions or decisions.

In addition to the tensions between the principal and the deputy and assistant principals, there were also tensions between deputy and assistant principals about the division of labour that constrained the attempts to distribute leadership. Assistant principals complained that deputy principals were keen to hold onto power and reluctant to distribute their responsibilities for systems management and pastoral care to others. Deputy principals, on the other hand, perceived the assistant principals as a threat, suspecting that they might usurp the deputy's role. One deputy principal expressed the threat quite succinctly:

> Why should I give away my job to someone below me? Giving up leadership to assistant principals around curriculum management or pastoral care hastens my retirement.

As with principals, deputy principals faced a Catch-22 situation, although of a different nature:

> The pressure is to empower others with leadership and move on up to principal or to move out to the pastures of retirement. I'm doing neither, but I intend holding on.

Finally, the opportunities to distribute leadership more widely to teaching staff within the school were constrained by the governmental policies that 'dictate what we teach and how we teach'. Both deputy and assistant principals complained:

> Today teachers don't have the freedom in the classroom to do innovative things and develop curriculum. We deliver off the shelf materials produced centrally. Sometimes it feels like you are working at McDonalds because everything is so circumscribed.

Thus even within the narrow professional dimension of leadership in the matters of pedagogy, which we might expect all teaching staff to take responsibility for, government policies limited the teachers' autonomy and prevented the distribution of leadership.

Despite these limits, we noted that the schools located in more affluent areas had more leeway in terms of structuring their activities and more freedom from governmental intervention in their affairs. These schools, as a rule, showed better performance results and, hence, were subject to a 'softer

touch' from regulators and inspectors. Consequently, the principals and deputy and assistant principals were more inclined to experiment with greater sharing of responsibilities and to adopt innovative approaches to distributed leadership. As noted by one principal:

> I'm lucky. Our school is perceived very positively because we top local league tables of performance. I can do creative things, such as involving others – the local community, pupils, business, as well as governors – in developing the school. They all bring a great deal of energy to this endeavour and a virtual circle of high involvement-high performance is created.

In contrast, in poorly performing schools, predominantly located in socially deprived areas, the pressures to address other more urgent matters preclude the distribution of leadership. The principals of poor performing schools, and in particular those deemed to be failing, will have their autonomy curtailed. As one principal commented:

> The school was a failing school. The inspectors had given us 40 key issues to address in 24 months before a re-inspection. Never mind consultation. I had to be coercive. I told the staff, 'You've got to do this. We haven't time to argue about it, just bloody do it.'

Thus, we were able to establish 'boundary conditions' with regard to distributing leadership within schools: in schools located in areas of social deprivation, the pressures for accountability were stronger than the pressures for DL and limited the distribution of leadership to a greater extent than they did in schools located in more affluent areas.

Distributing leadership outside the school

The principals and deputy/assistant principals acknowledged that the government policies demanded the inclusion of three important outside stakeholders – parents, local businesses, and local government – in the matters of school governance. They generally applauded government leadership policies promoting social inclusion and were evangelical regarding the influence they might have, especially in more socially deprived areas:

> Not just the kids, but the parents need all the help all they can get in the face of their difficult circumstances. If we reach out and include them in the running of the school. I've had some real success with individual parents and developing their skills through bringing them in, and, in turn, they have helped me reach into the community.

They highlighted, however, that distributing leadership was more difficult in a context of social deprivation:

> I have worked in different schools. In my last school, there were significant numbers of vociferous parents that were middle class and expected to have influence and indeed some substantive involvement in driving initiatives. In this school, which is in a poorer area, parents feel I'm paid to run the school, so why am I asking them to get involved? To be honest, the interference by school affairs by middle class parents, which is often motivated by narrow interests of their children is a pain. Interest by parents in the activities of the school from areas of social deprivation would be welcome.

The quote above illustrates our metaphor of 'Catch-22'. Leadership is most difficult to distribute in a context where government policy demands leadership is distributed. In more middle-class areas the parents were more prepared and eager to take up a leadership role in the school (to the displeasure of at least one administrator!). In more socially deprived areas, the parents, in contrast, expected the principal to exhibit more individualistic leadership. As noted by one principal:

> Because my school is located in an area of significant deprivation, you can't take for granted parental involvement in the same way that you could in a more middle class area. They don't have a huge amount of initiative so, beyond one very committed and articulate representative of the community on the governing board, the responsibility lies with me to develop the school and their children.

Reinforcing the comments above, another principal of a school in a socially deprived area explained:

> Given the devastation in the community, I can't expect them to get involved in the running of the school.

In essence, parents within areas of social deprivation were disinclined to take up opportunities for leadership of schools. Instead they held more traditional expectations about the role of the principal:

> They see me as the boss of the school and when they come up here, they want to see the boss.

Given the difficulties associated with distributing leadership to parents, we might expect governors (lay members of the community, business

representatives, teaching staff representatives, parents, sometimes pupils that sit on a governing body for the school to oversee its performance and governance) to provide a bridge between the school and external stakeholders, and so offer opportunities for leadership. The interview data suggest that governors may merely 'rubber stamp' decisions made by the principal. Principals explained that because governors typically lacked knowledge of the educational context, leadership could not realistically be distributed to them. Furthermore, a perceived lack of context specific knowledge restricts the distribution of leadership to business. Principals suggested that policy encouragement to involve business in the leadership of schools was limited because 'we educate children not manufacture widgets'. It appears as though many principals are not convinced of the benefits of distributing leadership to those who are not educational specialists.

Finally, the demands of local government were described as driven by a need to know what's going on, while rarely wanting to really help you when the going gets tough. Many school principals viewed the motives of local government with suspicion as 'they just want to cover themselves in case a politician wants to know what they are doing to turn things around'. Again, the principal appears caught in an awkward position, where the local authority must be seen to be involved without taking responsibility for leadership of the school.

Discussion and conclusions

Our analysis shows that, in the organizational field of secondary schools in England, there are powerful institutional forces encouraging the spread of DL. Academics have articulated the salient features and benefits of DL and created a theoretical base for promoting DL, both as a 'tool' for improving organizational effectiveness and as a 'democratic good' in its own right. Governmental regulations have defined the rules that encourage the distribution of leadership, both inside and outside the school, and construed the adoption of DL as a sign of compliance with the governmental policies. The development of educational institutions charged with the task of inculcating the leadership 'best practices' have helped to inform the practitioners about DL and build the prerequisite skills for DL. Finally, in terms of professional norms, DL has been commensurate with the established collegiate approach to school management (Kirkpatrick, 1999; Sheaff et al., 2004).

At the same time, there is a plethora of institutional forces that impede the spread of DL. Government policies have retained an emphasis on the principal's individual accountability for school performance (Storey, 2004).

The existing norms associated with leadership in professional organizations and the traditional division of labour in schools still tend to exclude certain groups of staff from participation in leadership. While governmental policies have been supportive of business involvement in school governance, teaching professionals have preferred to retain their control over school's development. Finally, beliefs held by the majority of parents and the local communities at large have remained wedded to the iconic image of the principal as the sole leader.

Employing an institutional framework enables us to explain the Catch-22 situation faced by the school principals. Although Sergiovanni (1991) for the USA, and Day and Harris (2003) for the UK, found Catch-22s in their school, we were able to go further in our analysis. In particular, our study shows the following: in order to enjoy the support of various stakeholders, the principals have to negotiate between contradictory institutional pressures, some of which bolster and others impede the implementation of DL.

These contradictory institutional pressures mean that, where enacted, DL appears to be limited in both scale and scope. Thus, the range of actors to whom leadership is distributed is relatively narrow, and there is little evidence of a concertive action associated with the 'strong' form of DL proposed by Gronn (2002). By and large, DL appears to be enacted in a 'weak' form, in which the formal leader of an organization, aware of their position on 'a razor's edge' of accountability to their political overseers (Heifetz, 1994), retains the ultimate responsibility for organizational performance, while securing compliance of 'lower ranks' by ascribing to them some managerial responsibilities.

We also demonstrated that the enactment of DL depends on the immediate organizational environment. Schools located in the more socially deprived areas are less likely to enact DL than their counterparts in the more affluent areas. The reasons for this are twofold. First, the schools in more socially deprived areas tend to perform worse on various performance targets and hence are subject to greater regulatory pressures for accountability, which limit their ability to distribute leadership within the school. Second, these schools are located in the communities that have fewer social resources for participation in school governance, which limits the school's ability to distribute leadership outside the school.

Implications for the analysis of leadership

We see our main contribution here in advocating an institutional approach to leadership. In our analysis, we treated leadership as a concept that can be

used both to describe and to prescribe specific activities. We constructed a dual account of leadership: i) leadership in practice, that is, the enactment of DL in schools; and ii) leadership as a (model of) practice, conceptualized by the scholarly community, promulgated by regulatory authorities, inculcated by educational institutions, and interrelated with the existing norms. We interpreted individual leadership as an established institution and DL as an institution in the making and documented the 'institutional work' (see Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) involved in creating DL as an institution. We demonstrated that the enactment of DL could be better understood through reference to field-level institutional forces and showed how contradictory institutional pressures resulted in the adoption of a 'weak' form of DL. We also identified the 'boundary conditions' for the impact of institutional pressures, by specifying how the immediate organizational environment limited or enabled the distribution of leadership.

Our study provides a counterpoint to the more essentialist accounts of leadership by highlighting the socially constructed and often contested attribution of leadership. Similar to Fairhurst (2007), our accounts helps leadership actors (e.g. policy-makers, managers, employees) to understand how they create the 'realities' to which they then must respond; for example, the 'Catch-22' of DL in English secondary schools. Our study thus resonates with the linguistic turn in leadership studies. Although we did not explicitly employ discourse analysis, we suggest that a discourse approach will prove fruitful for our understanding of the ways in which leadership is enacted.

Practical implications for leadership

In terms of practical implications, our research resonates with the growing literature on DL in healthcare (Brooks, 1997; Buchanan et al., 2007; Denis et al., 1996, 2000, 2001; Pettigrew et al., 1992), local government (Hartley & Allison, 2000) and professional partnerships (Hinings & Greenwood, 1988). Increasingly, governmental policies promote DL, while regulatory institutions endorse the accountability of individual leaders (Ferlie et al., 2003). Our analysis shows that public sector leaders find themselves in a Catch-22 situation, struggling to respond to the contradictory pressures and hence enacting the 'weak' form of DL, which allows them to satisfy often incompatible demands. Our advice to policy-makers is to reflect upon and try to address the institutional contradictions that undermine the effectiveness of their policies perhaps by incorporating the contradictions into the very formation of their policies. Policy-makers might move away from their pre-occupation with universalistic models of DL towards a contingency model and note patterns of leadership are likely to vary across context.

Linked to the last point above, our study identifies the boundary conditions that frame the enactment of DL. Distributing leadership requires a certain degree of autonomy, which the school leaders can 'earn' by meeting centrally prescribed performance targets (Hoque et al., 2004). School performance, however, is highly correlated with social deprivation. Schools located in socially deprived areas have less autonomy and greater pressures for accountability than schools located in more affluent areas and, as a result, less likely to distribute leadership within and outside the school. Government policies aimed at tackling the democratic deficit are meant to have the greatest impact on socially deprived areas. We show, however, that it is precisely in these areas that DL proves most difficult to enact. Hence, our advice to policy-makers is to pay greater attention to the local context (the immediate organizational environment) as it strongly impacts on the ability of organizational actors to implement the policies.

Directions for future research

Greater efforts need to be made to understand the enactment of DL in public sector organizations, especially given the difficulty of enacting leadership in the sector (Frederickson, 1996). There are a number of ways in which researchers can help achieve this laudable goal.

First, we urge researchers to analyse the institutional landscape facing every actor and to examine the complex relationships between institutions and leadership. Research should engage with all stakeholders, both internal and external, to establish a detailed picture of how leadership is enacted. To reflect on our own analysis, our claim that attempts to distribute leadership were 'bounced back' would be less robust, and open to the criticism of attribution bias, if based solely on interviews with the school principals, who (as evidenced in our study) were easily seduced by the rhetoric of 'heroic' and transformational leadership (Gunter, 2001) and prone to self-attribution (Day et al., 2000).

Second, we suggest conducting comparative research across different public services. Unlike in secondary education, there is pluralism within a healthcare setting (duality of structure between doctors and managers) and local government setting (with its tripartite structure of elected members, professionals, and managers), which is explicitly formal. Comparative cases will enable us to better understand how institutional processes are influenced by context.

Furthermore, although the majority of research into DL has focused on public services organizations (for reviews, see Harris, 2007; Robinson, 2008), the appeal of DL is equally as strong in the private sector (see, for

instance, Nonaka & Toyama, 2002; Teece, 2007). It will be instructive to identify the institutional pressures and boundary conditions framing the enactment of DL in the private sector.

Finally, we invite longitudinal studies of leadership, perhaps encompassing periods of major change, for example, merger or succession (e.g. Denis et al., 1996, 2000, 2001). Such studies would render visible the dynamics of (distributed) leadership and help to alleviate the problem of recording the 'snapshots' of DL.

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