The strange case of the emergence of distributed leadership in schools in England

Abstract
This article reports upon research investigating the rapid rise to prominence of distributed leadership in schools in England. Distributed leadership is located within wider structural reforms of education in England as part of the New Public Management movement in public service delivery and the marked discursive shift to leadership which took place largely during the New Labour governments of 1997-2010. Contradictions in the relationship between leadership discourses and this reform process are then examined and the strangeness of the rise of distributed leadership in this context is highlighted. Research from an ESRC funded project on distributed leadership in schools with teachers and designated school leaders is then used to further reveal this strangeness in terms of the discursive forms and social practices associated with distributed leadership, including the sometimes idiosyncratic meanings and practices linked to this discursive intervention. It is concluded that although the forms which distributed leadership takes within different school settings are in part shaped by particular contextual features within individual institutions the capacity of officially authorised discourses of distributed leadership to reach into the social practices of schools remains strong. Indeed, the very strangeness of the forms which distributed leadership takes in different institutions is shown to be intimately linked to the strength and intensity of this official discourse as designated school leaders and teachers seek to accommodate this notion into their practices.

Key words: Leadership, Education Policy, Distributed Leadership, New Public Management

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Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to a body of work which views educational reforms and developments within schools as part of economic, social and political strutural changes both within the public sector and more widely that are having a profound influence upon educational institutions and those who work within them (Hall and Gunter, 2009). Accordingly in the schools sector the emergence of DL must be viewed as being located within a wider policy environment where the organisation of schools has been significantly altered by a range of developments including, in particular, the 1988 Education Reform Act centralising key aspects of curriculum and assessment in schools, the local financial management of schools establishing them as individual business units, the associated marketization of schooling through the creation of educational quasi-markets (LeGrand and Bartlett, 1993) seeking to prioritise parental consumer choice and subsequent attempts to performance manage educational institutions and actors. It focuses upon the emergence of distributed leadership (DL) as a dominant discourse around school leadership in England as part of the modernization of the education sector and wider reform of the public sector based on New Public Management (NPM). The article is based upon research investigating distributed leadership in schools funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The first part charts the rise of DL in England by locating it within both the reform process and the rise of leadership more generally as a cultural ideology that has steadily emerged in schools in England. It points to key tensions and contradictions underlying this discursive intervention. Through this lens it highlights the strangeness of this development by contrasting the rhetorical invitation to teacher and school leader agency as part of the shift to DL with the restrictive managerial intent of the New Public Management. The second part examines the impact of the discursive rise of DL in one secondary school. In this section the strangeness of DL is viewed in relation to the role of a school and its headteacher in

mediating and shaping officially sanctioned notions of DL. Here the strangeness of DL resides in the discursive use of DL alongside traditional managerial practices rooted within a strictly controlled hierarchy. By foregrounding the strangeness of DL in English schools this article seeks to take a reflexive approach to the production of knowledge in the field of educational leadership (Gunter, 2005). This approach refuses to accept now familiar features of schools in England and elsewhere unquestioningly, and instead seeks to confront the strangeness of policy and practice in this context (Smyth, 2001).

The rise and rise of DL

In common with other areas of the pubic sector, leadership has emerged strongly within education in England as a means of transforming schools in line with visions that can be broadly characterised as post-welfarist (Ball, 1997). Early attempts to re-model schools enacted by the Conservative administrations led by Margaret Thatcher and John Major focused mainly upon securing the more effective and efficient management of schools in line with wider educational reforms enacted during that same period. The emphasis during this period can be viewed as one where the centralisation of curriculum and assessment linked to the creation of a National Curriculum went hand in hand with the financial decentralisation of schools through both the construction of educational markets and a variety of measures that offered increased opportunities for schools to manage their own finances. For headteachers and others involved in leading and managing schools one significant effect of these reforms was the creation of a set of institutional imperatives that combined to unleash a wave of managerialism that swept through schools in England (Gewirtz, 2002). Such managerialism was focused upon the driving up of educational standards largely within single institutions and in which headteachers as the imagined single leaders within schools were viewed as playing the key role.

Leadership and New Labour (1997-2010)

Following the formation of a New Labour government in May 1997 there followed a further wave of educational centralisation as a series of carefully directed strategies and initiatives were put into place in order to raise educational 'standards' as part of a wider public service reform process. Such strategies and initiatives were typically accompanied by targets that were intended to hold schools accountable for various aspects of their performance. As with the previous administrations these measures were accompanied by increasing financial autonomy at school level within competitively structured local educational quasi-markets which, in themselves, increased pressures upon schools to 'deliver' ever higher levels of performance, in particular in relation to pupil attainment in national tests, as schools competed with one another as best they could to maintain or improve their positions within local educational hierarchies represented most starkly by published school league tables (Levacic and Woods, 2002). This government sponsored pursuit of managerialism within the education sector can be viewed as evidence of an attempt by the state to roll out its power (Pollitt, 2004) to schools as individual institutions so that managerialism itself operates as a key technology both within schools and the policy process more generally.

One of the more curious and, as the title of this article attests, strange aspects of this reform process under New Labour was an increasing discursive emphasis upon leadership rather than management within education; a tendency most marked in the formation and work of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL)[1]. This discursive turn can be seen as reflecting the conceptual ascendancy of leadership within the context of school reform

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[1] The National College for School Leadership is now widely referred to as the National College since it's title was formally changed to the National College for School Leadership and Children's Services. However, rather confusingly for those following the fortunes of this institution it has more recently reverted to its former title as the National College for School Leadership.

(Fullan, 2001; Day et al, 1999); a process that signalled both an extended and enhanced focus upon the leadership of schools and, by implication, a shift away from management. This shift is viewed as strange because the apparent need for managerialism and its associated techniques and methods remained pressing within the NPM school reform programme being actively pursued by New Labour. Schools and their pupils were typically being required to perform to particular standards using nationally prescribed methods and strategies; a context in many ways ideally suited to an unreconstructed form of managerialism defined here as being:

> the belief that all aspects of organisational life can and should be managed according to rational structures, procedures, and modes of accountability in the pursuit of goals defined by policymakers and senior managers (Wallace and Pocklington 2002: 68)

So at a point in time at which New Labour NPM related managerialist pressures were being experienced intensely in schools a marked and sustained discursive shift to leadership took root. Even stranger this was a discursive shift that emphasised and appealed to the agential aspects of running schools and, by implication an expanded role for those responsible for leading and managing schools. Whereas managerialism focused primarily upon rational planning and decision making in response to clearly established strictures, leadership was instead constructed as personal for the leader, and something wider and, sometimes, grander involving a sustained focus upon change and constant adaptation. Thus in what were widely regarded as managerialist times (Thrupp and Willmott, 2002) schools and those who worked within them were being exposed to a discourse emphasising what has subsequently been described as 'leaderism' (O'Reilly and Reed, 2010).

From single to distributed leadership

Out of this discursive turn towards leadership a particular form of this ideology came to predominate in the field of education. This was widely referred to as transformational

leadership (Leithwood et al, 1999), a form of school leadership in which the headteacher became the school leader, the key agent of change made responsible for reform and obliged as a key requirement of his/her role as leader to instigate change. The ascendancy of transformational, single leadership in England was especially marked during the early years of New Labour, but for a number of reasons outlined below it was a model of leadership that came under intense strain and scrutiny amongst those, most especially the NCSL, given responsibility for overseeing the reform process. First, a series of very public failures of transformative school leaders or 'hero heads' being parachuted into 'failing' schools raised questions about the efficacy of single leadership. If the transplanting of charismatic, heroic and transformative heads from one institutional context to another failed to sustainably produce anticipated outcomes (Crawford, 2002) then, the thinking went, it might be necessary to spread 'leadership' in schools at levels within the occupational hierarchy below that of the headteacher. Second, as a direct consequence of the reform process and the 'distinctively British serial re-structuring' (Pollitt 2007: 533) experienced by schools in England, their leaders were subject to a bewildering array of initiatives and policy directives. This policy explosion in education together with a widespread programme of institutional reform seeking to extend choice to educational consumers within the marketised schooling system led to a steep acceleration in the quantity of policy directives, advice and guidelines to which they were required to respond. This increase in the speed and scale of change experienced by state maintained schools had major implications for those designated leaders, teachers and others working within them, not least in terms of the sheer volume of non-teaching work required of schools. Third, the notion of transformational leadership in schools reliant as it was upon the single leadership of headteachers was looking increasingly untenable in the light of empirical and analytical research (Gronn, 2000; Spillane et al, 2001) that offered both evidence and normative claims about the distributed nature of decision making within schools and

challenged the plausibility of single leadership in terms of the way that organisations conduct their work. Gronn's (2000) vigorous rejection of individualistic views of leadership, characterised as naïve and mistaken, and his simultaneous highlighting of the extent to which such views had come to dominate the field of leadership, can be viewed as being especially significant in this respect.[2]

It was in this above context that DL emerged as a discursive intervention promoted primarily by the NCSL in a normative set of published literatures, training manuals and a website. It was a development also strongly supported by a range of education academics broadly supportive of this approach (Harris, 2003; Hopkins, 2001; Leithwood et al, 2006). In developing the leadership of schools as a key policy strategy for the delivery of national reforms locally in schools, New Labour drew on the research and reputation of school effectiveness and school improvement (SESI) researchers and consultants. This research predates New Labour taking office, but it is clear from policy texts that New Labour explicitly aimed to use this work (Barber 1996, Reynolds 1996). Gunter's (2011) study of the interplay between policy demands and research agendas shows that DL was developed and promoted as good practice. Those in government worked with and contracted SESI researchers and consultants to enable the rapid reform agenda to be implemented. This was done in a number of ways: first, investment in projects that established an evidence base (Bennett et al. 2003) and examined empirical conditions for distribution (Day et al. 2009; MacBeath et al. 2004); second, the support for publications that promoted DL as effective professional practice (e.g. Leithwood et al. 2006); third, engagement with knowledge producers who not only were commissioned to undertake such projects but also took up roles in government (e.g. Hopkins, Southworth) and provided advice and support.

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[2] See Bolden (2011) for a detailed description and analysis of the rise of DL both within education and more widely.

Official DL and alternative perspectives

This officially authorised form of DL proposes it as a model of good leadership practice that offers significant potential for schools wishing to transform the practices and outcomes of schooling in line with the modernization process. Within this framework a common feature of DL is that leadership is promoted across a range of groups and individuals within schools so that it is located not only within the upper echelons of a school's hierarchy but also spread or 'stretched over' (Spillane, 2001: 20) this wider range of actors. Within these accounts school change is viewed largely in functionalist terms[3] (Gunter et al, 2011) of securing more efficient and effective local delivery of curriculum programmes that can be measured according to externally pre-determined standards achieved through securing the commitment of the workforce to reform implementation. Given the close association between this officially authorised version of DL and the wider educational reform process it is hardly surprising that leadership, at least in part, is conceptualised as being what those in formal, hierarchical positions known as leaders do in order to deliver change. As such it is a form of leadership that appears to reside firmly within a managerialist model as part of the wider NPM movement. An interesting feature of this officially authorised approach is that simultaneously these functionalist literatures also appeal to the emancipatory, participatory and, sometimes, democratic possibilities for educational practitioners of employing DL practices across schools (Leithwood et al, 2006; Hopkins, 2001). In such accounts of DL, in line with a wider literature on leadership referred to earlier in this article, the agential aspects of the participatory possibilities unleashed by DL are associated with opportunities for more autonomous and less directed forms of working in schools. In this way DL might be viewed

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[3] Use of the term functionalist in this article needs to be distinguished from Hartley's (2010a). Hartley's use of this same term emphasises objectivist approaches to the study of distributed leadership which seek to study and measure universally generalisable phenomena deploying methods closely resembling those used in the natural sciences.

as appealing to a form of teacher professionalism pre-dating the NPM related reform programme in which teachers experienced a working environment marked by higher degrees of professional autonomy. Nevertheless, tensions between such latter approaches and the 'instruction to deliver' (Barber, 2007) are rarely, if ever, referred to in functionalist literatures focusing upon DL.

Contradictions between instrumental and modernising forces in English schooling and appeals to those more expressive (Hartley, 2010b) and participatory dimensions of work in schools have been clearly highlighted by more socially critical (Gunter et al, 2011) writers. These socially critical writers focusing upon DL, in particular, and educational leadership and management more generally have viewed the modernisation process in schools in England very differently to their functionalist counterparts. They have, in particular, pointed to the strictly limited opportunities for the participation of children and teachers in a 'top down' performance regime of headteacher managerialism (Hartley, 2007; Hatcher, 2005) and critiqued DL in its current form as an effervescent (Hartley, 2010b) distraction from centralised, narrow and instrumentalist interventions in the education system. One of the implications of socially critical work on DL is that it is a development that appeals to the agential and participatory emotions and fantasies of teachers and headteachers, but in a wider policy environment highly unpromising in terms of the possibilities for such fantasies to be enacted. Unlike their functionalist counterparts socially critical writers associated with this grouping largely reject the shape and direction of the current reform process and instead view educational change and transformation as being inextricably tied to the challenging of existing hierarchy and advantage as part of a process of bringing about more socially just participation (Gunter et al, 2011). Within this framework leadership is viewed as a shared and communal concept, and as a practice that all can participate in to work for change.

Tensions and contradictions in the reform process

The contradictions between the instrumental and the participatory within schools and the differing perspectives of functionalist and socially critical writers on DL reveal wider tensions within the public sector reform programme where the construction of leaders as change agents for reform lies in contradictory tension with the role of leaders as independently directing local public service organizations (O'Reilly and Reed, 2010). It is these tensions that can be viewed as central to the strangeness of distributed leadership. So in the public sector as a whole those 'leaders' made responsible for implementing, co-ordinating and directing nationally determined changes within individual organisations were faced with tensions between the directive and agential dimensions implicit in their work roles, within education these tensions could be viewed as being distributed to a wider range of individuals at lower levels of individual organisational hierachies. As such, in schools not only headteachers were being invited to exercise their agency in implemeting change, but also teachers, senior and middle leaders, support staff and others. It might therefore be imagined that the unpromising possibilities for the exercise of agency by those at the top of their individual organisational hierachies would be even less promising for those at the lower levels of such hierarchies in this carefully managed and regulated working environment

These tensions and contradictions for those charged with the task of implementing public service reforms in the education sector point to two main questions central to the research reported upon in this article and directly related to the introduction of DL into this context. First has the discursive turn towards leadership more generally and DL in particular been accompanied by changing practices in schools and amongst teachers and designated leaders? Whilst there is evidence that the authorised discursive roll out of DL is now well established

in schools in England, indeed empirical work (Penlington and Kington, 2007) has reported that every one of the participants in each participating school indicated that leadership in their schools was distributed, it is less clear how this has impacted upon schools, teachers and designated school leaders in England. Whist research has been conducted in the higher education sector revealing the importance of the rhetoric of DL and its capacity to distract from underlying power dynamics (Bolden et al, 2009) rather less is known about DL and its effects upon schools and those who work within them. What has been the effect upon teachers' professional identities? Have schools changed in terms of their leadership and management practices? Has the stressing of the agential and the autonomous in the educational reform process unleashed hitherto unrealized opportunities for school leaders to engage in self-created reform of their own making? Has the roll out of functional DL been welcomed, resisted or accommodated by those working in schools? To what extent are the boundaries of teacher professionalism malleable to official injunctions in favour of DL and how far might such officially authorised discourses reach into the working lives of teachers, designated leaders and support staff in schools? Might DL therefore, and the extent of its acceptance in schools in England, be viewed as a 'litmus test' of teacher professionalism at the point in time at which the research was conducted? In addition this discursive turn raises important questions about the reform process more widely. Does it mark a new chapter in public service reform in general and in the education sector in particular? Is it now possible to refer to a post-NPM style of handling public service reforms in which managerialism has been displaced by 'leaderism'? Or alternatively does the discursive turn towards leadership in general and DL, in particular, mark a new twist in the development of NPM?

Researching DL as a social practice

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Whilst it is not possible to respond to all of the above questions in this article it follows that the contradictory tensions arising out of the leadership related dimensions of the educational reform programme in England have important implications for those working in schools. In particular as the introduction of DL invites all working within schools to view themselves as leaders, how might the strangeness of this development be manifested at the level of individual schools and those who work within them. By examining the social practices of schools in relation to DL the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project (RES 000-22-3610) Distributed Leadership and the Social Practices of School Organisation in England (SPSO) project sought to shed further light upon these emerging tension and contradictions. The research undertaken as part of the project is located within five anonymised and pseudonymised case study schools, as listed in Table 1, selected to include a range of school types in terms of their performance in national tests, the socio-economic status of their students and their organisational status. Patterns between them are analysed in ways that demonstrate dynamism, and which "anticipates change and imperfection" of people within contextually and historically located organisations (Lawrence Lightfoot 1983: 24-25).

Table 1: Case study school sample

Case Study	% pupils Free School Meals	Performance History (based on KS3 SATs results)	Other characteristics
Oak Tree	Low	Consistently High Performance	Small, mixed, selective in rural location
Cherry Tree	Medium	Close to national average	Mixed, non-selective in medium sized town
Birch Tree	High	Low performance	Mixed, non-selective Academy in urban location
Maple Tree	High	Close to national average	Large, non-selective in urban location
Lime Tree	Low	Consistently High Performance	Large, single sex, selective in suburban location

Based upon interviews with a range of educational practitioners and a review of documents in case study schools a portrait of each school as an organisation was initially written with theorisations about the official discourse. At this early stage of the research interviews focused upon participants understandings and/or non-recognition of leadership and DL both generally and within their schools, the exercise of leadership and DL within their school and, in some cases, their own leadership practices. Leadership as a social practice was then examined through the study of a significant process in each school. This ranged from the formation of a middle leadership group through to the creation of a new whole school homework policy. Evidence was gathered through observing key meetings, conducting formal interviews with participants in each process, through informal discussions and by obtaining relevant documents/materials. At this stage interviews focused upon participants' interpretations of the processes observed and their perceived relationship to leadership and DL. The above was complemented by using Q methodology (Brown, 1997, McKeown and Thomas, 1988); a means of gaining detailed comparison of the differences/similarities in perception between different educational practitioners. It enables viewpoints to be examined through a factor analysis which identifies shared ways of thinking about particular topics. In total at least ten practitioners went through the Q Methodology process in each school where they were required to respond to a series of statements created by the researchers from previous stages of the study. This stage of the research included an interview with each research participant to discuss their response to the findings. Following this five rich portraits of case study schools as organisations were produced which examine the interplay between the discourses relating to DL, the observed practice and the perceptions of research participants.

General findings from the SPSO research

Our research (Hall et al, 2011) confirmed that the emergence of DL as a dominant discourse in officially sanctioned school leadership texts in England in recent years has been accompanied by a marked discursive turn towards DL at the point in time at which the research was mainly conducted (2009-10). There was widespread recognition of and use of the term DL amongst the headteachers, teachers, support staff and governors participating in the research. Mirroring the normative texts in this area the term DL was widely used in an affirmative manner, a tendency most especially marked amongst designated senior leaders. Although, as discussed in more detail below, there were differences in the meanings associated with DL between different individuals and groups of respondents two common and contradictory themes did emerge. The first was a sense of DL as closely tied to the existing hierarchy and chain of command in the school organization. Here DL was associated with authority being passed down the chain of command in the school organization:

> *"Distributed leadership is everybody knowing that they've a place in leadership and what to do. They are guardians of the mission and ethos and that actually they are an important cog in the wheel".* (Simon, Headteacher, Birch Tree School)

This notion of DL has close associations with the concept of delegation, well established in management literatures, where hierarchically endowed individuals or groups control the distribution of authority to those beneath them in the organisational hierarchy. This reflects the widespread existence of traditional forms of organisation and management in schools in England where significant powers are vested in a headteacher responsible for 'delivering' standards according to nationally determined performance criteria which are tightly monitored and controlled. A second frequently voiced understanding of DL lay in its association with teacher autonomy and/or leader autonomy whereby the distribution of leadership enables

greater independence and scope for decision making for those other than the headteacher. Miriam, the Headteacher of Lime Tree School, explained her understanding of DL as follows:

> *"for me it starts with empowerment and it's a feeling of being able to apply your creative energies to see a development through and therefore it's not necessarily linked to a formal structure in a school. It's facilitated by a formal structure there is leadership at every level………. its providing that scope to empower people to develop either themselves or the work they do in whatever way is appropriate to the needs of the organisation and the individual". (Miriam, Headteacher, Lime Tree)*

Here the notion of DL speaks more to the agential capacity of teachers, their capacity to be active agents in the educational process and the devolving of powers beyond the headteacher. These two understandings of DL offer insights into its discursive appeal with a semantic elegance that the term delegation lacks and with what have been described as seductive and effervescent (Hartley, 2010b) meanings linked to the agential capacity of teachers and school leaders.

Whilst the forces of official inscription (Rose, 1996) referred to above were strong in terms of informing conceptions of DL in schools, the impact of these forces upon different groups and individuals were found to be mediated by a range of factors that shaped the effects of these structuring powers. This broad, affirmative replication of DL accompanied by localised shaping can best be illustrated by detailed reference to one of the case study schools, Birch Tree where the experiences of DL are discussed as an illustrative example of the way in which this discursive intervention has played out in an institutional setting.

Birch Tree School

Birch Tree School serves a socio-economically disadvantaged inner city area. It opened as an Academy following the closure of two local schools. The proportion of students who are entitled to free school meals is well above the national average and the neighbourhood in which the school is located and in which the vast majority of students live ranks amongst the lowest 250 on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation[4] reflecting the social and economic circumstances of its catchment area. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds account for just under one fifth of the student population and approximately 10% of students speak English as an additional language. A greater than average percentage of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

This modern, purpose built school in some ways defies the urban nature of its location on a large social housing estate. The school premises are surrounded by rough grass and trees with an almost rural feel intensified by an occasional buzzard soaring overhead. This sense of place is interrupted by the ten foot security fencing surrounding the school and by the need for vehicles and pedestrians to access the institution through security gates. Once allowed through these gates visitors enter the wide open, spacious reception area. The reception staff have an open-plan office area in the corner, rather than being hidden behind a small window hatch as in many schools in England, and are friendly and welcoming. Comfortable sofas are arranged in the middle of the vast reception area suggesting a sense of ease and relaxation that is reinforced by the broad and sweeping stairway leading up to the first floor. Once out of this reception area a different sense of the school emerges; all doors leading to corridors and classrooms are locked and pupils are 'shepherded' through by staff:

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[4] This dataset uses the Indices of Deprivation 2007 which provide a range of information including detailed breakdowns for small areas (Super Output Areas) and aggregate the summary statistics. In each case the Super Output Area (SOA) with a rank of 1 is the most deprived area and the area with a rank of 32,482 is the least deprived.

"we control as much as we can the areas of the school that the children have access to … The doors are locked. There is, within the café there's teachers on each of the doors to make sure the children can only go out into the Quad, the playing area, and if they've got the appropriate pass, they can go outside on to the field but the only other way they could possibly go is generally either blocked by the magnetic doors or a responsible member of staff. So it's very much shepherding the children to the places we want them to be and where we can keep and eye on them." (Para-teacher)

Inspection of Birch Tree (Ofsted, 2009) highlighted strengths in the school leadership and reported good progress in raising levels of student attainment. The proportion of students gaining five or more GCSE grades at C and above in 2008 was marginally in excess of both the local authority and national averages, although when Maths and English are included this falls significantly below both the local and national averages. These attainment levels had been secured in the face of what Ofsted describe as a legacy of underachievement at Birch Tree's predecessor schools and since the creation of Birch Tree, KS3 and 4 attainments at the school had risen significantly. The 2009 inspection rated leadership and management at the institution as *"outstanding"* citing a *"relentless"* focus upon improving provision and raising standards. This 'relentless' focus upon improving provision can be viewed as reflecting the prevailing educational climate at the time when the research was conducted. This meant that 'underperforming' schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods were under severe pressure to increase their national test results; a pressure that was likely to be experienced particularly keenly within those Academies brought into being as a direct attempt by central government to intervene in this area.

The Principal, as head of the School Leadership Team (SLT), and the Financial Director, as head of the Senior Management Team (SMT), jointly lead the school. The SLT comprises, the Principal, two Vice Principals and seven Assistant Vice Principals and the SMT, which is responsible for resources and operations, comprises the Financial Director, Facilities Manager, Administration Manager and ICT Manager. Sums of money are allocated for various 'performance management' tasks at the school. These are one year posts and up to three can be allocated per person. Those with two or three tasks are designated as Middle Leaders and those with one post are termed as Emergent Leaders.

Since Birch Tree was created in 2006 there has been a significant turnover of staff. By 2008 just 25% of the teaching staff and 50% of the support staff remained from the predecessor schools. The combined figure now stands at 'around 20%' according to the Principal. Comments from Simon strongly suggest that this high level of turnover was viewed positively:

"I absolutely 100% knew that I was not taking all them shit people out of the predecessor schools…I wasn't prepared to have them because I know that if you give me two rusty sheds at the bottom of the garden and excellent people, I'll give you a school. You can't give me a building like this and crap teachers, the kids will wreck the building".

This is underlined by comments from other staff approving of the removal of staff regarded as being unable or unwilling to 'sign up' to the vision or remaining 'on message'. Those who either refuse or are unable to 'sign up' to this vision are excluded; a feature of Birch Tree to

which the frequent references to turnover of 'off message staff' attests. As Senior Leader 1 commented when discussing staff who had left the school:

"we've only been together a few years, lots of the really negative people either didn't come and also to be fair your traditional skivers, you know the ones who always seem to have quite a few Mondays off or don't do their reports ever or skive meetings, Simon won't tolerate ... I can think of 20 people who have started here but are no longer here for that very reason ... you know staff had to get in but just not, just didn't fit into the ethos. " (Senior Leader 1)

"it's a sink or swim kind of school really, it's not for everyone by any means, not for everyone. 50% of the teachers, especially experienced teachers, I don't think could work under the conditions that we work under, because of the amount of innovation ... its very, very different to any other school that you will ever go to ." (Class teacher & emergent leader)

Leadership at Birch Tree

Simon's voice echoes throughout every aspect of the academy, a fact that he clearly acknowledges. In his initial interview for the project he made repeated reference to his track record and capacities as an educational leader:

"I mean, I know how to turn around failing schools. This is the most deprived school in [this area] and you would never in a thousand million years think that would you?"

"So, I've been a head teacher before and I turned around one of the worst schools in the country and made it one of the most improved."

"[Ofsted] came in on the target setting visit, I mean I had a letter from the Prime Minister and everything saying 'brilliant, well done',"

"you've watched me and you've seen how I interact with people, I'm a people person, and I do a lot of that inspirational stuff"

These and other similar statements can be viewed as representing the more effervescent dimensions of Simon's professional discourse extolling his own virtues with dramatic and hyperbolic statements. Simon's dominance in the school is widely attested to by others working at the school:

"[Simon] rules with an iron fist" (Class teacher)

Simon's role in establishing and disseminating the school ethos was viewed as being similarly dominant:

"I think it's come from his (Simon) vision and how he's got there but I also think with the staff that's involved as well, I think that's very important. I think you could have maybe a strong leader but if you've not got the right staff sharing that vision then I think it might not necessarily work and again obviously its down to him (Simon) and whoever has been interviewing to pick the staff that probably share that vision" (Emergent Leader 1)

"We have, obviously, the Principal at the top and he dictates, dictate is probably the wrong word, he helps decide on how the organisation will move forward." (Class teacher)

Both of the above quotes capture well the sense of leadership that emerged from the research at Birch Tree. Research participants were quick to recognise that Simon's role was dominant, but they also frequently wished to stress their consent for this form of leadership. Thus 'dictate is the wrong word' rather Simon 'helps decide on how the organisation will move forward'. Similarly the vision is 'his' yet the 'staff' are 'involved'. It is important to note however that whilst recognising Simon's tight grip upon the institution those interviewed simultaneously spoke with real enthusiasm about the school and what they believe is being achieved there. This included a strong perception of being part of a successful and high functioning institution where staff talents are recognised and rewarded. This sense of being part of a successful school was intimately tied to the almost exclusively highly affirmative statements about Simon's leadership:

I think the leadership here is really good, it's the way, you feel very supported and very managed in a good way, in a safe way that you are given the opportunities to further your career which in many schools you wouldn't. (Emergent Leader)

These tensions between recognising Simon's dominant position within Birch Tree whilst simultaneously stressing their consent for, and indeed active complance with this, are also evident in the Q-Sort summarised in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Q Sort analysis

BIRCH TREE CONVERGENT FACTOR

Members of this group are happy to work at Birch Tree School and feel valued at work. They feel trusted to get on with their jobs as teachers and/or leaders. The group disagree that leadership in this school is strictly hierarchical and that leadership is mainly exercised by the SLT. They do consider that the school hierarchy is important to the way that leadership operates and feel that leadership is highly effective in the school. They believe that leadership is exercised by staff at a variety of different levels and that DL is practiced here. They also consider that leadership is fundamental to a teachers' job and that it is important that teachers have ownership of decisions made in school. Members of this group feel confident that they are capable of taking on more leadership responsibility and don't feel that they require training in order to take on a leadership role.

The group feel there is a high degree of autonomy in their work at Birch Tree School, they are not happy to let senior leaders make the decisions and just get on with what they're told to do. They would happily suggest their ideas to senior colleagues.

Members of the group feel that it is important to always be aiming for higher standards of pupil attainment at school. They think that teachers and school leaders should be willing to challenge the conclusions of an Ofsted inspection.

The group believe that the school vision/ethos was imposed upon the school (ie belongs to the head). They feel that colleagues share and work together in the school and feel a strong sense of personal connection to their work as teacher and/or leader.

Here the tensions are between perceptions of the school where 'hierarchy is important to the way that leadership operates' and in which the 'vision/ethos was imposed' and those where the organisation is viewed as being not 'strictly hierarchical','leadership is exercised by staff at a variety of different levels' and research participants reported experiencing 'a high degree of autonomy in their work'. What this suggests is that notions of leadership and a sense of autonomy play a significant role in apparently offsetting experiences of organisational domination by a single leader; a matter returned to later in this article.

One notable aspect of the research at Birch Tree was the extent to which views about the school of those working there converged. In particular the views of the 10 members of staff who completed the Q-sort converged around one single factor. The extent to which different individuals 'loaded' with or related to the above factor inevitably varied, but 8 out of the 10 participants recorded higher than 70% agreement and all were greater than 50% showing a high degree of conformity of response. This does not mean that dissent was entirely absent from the discourses of research participants, but it is interesting to note in this regard that there was a clear sense of fear of the potential consequences of dissent :

"People don't tend to say they are unhappy ... because sometimes they are concerned about repercussions." (Middle Leader)

"generally when people have been here a while and have adjusted to the way things work, I think people are content, having said that, people who aren't content usually move on pretty quickly". (Lead Practitioner)

"If you are not seen as being supportive on school policies and you are not supporting the school ethos, it doesn't really look very good." (Middle Leader)

"There has been a time when people have passed comment and it's got back and they've got into trouble about it " (Middle Leader)

One Senior Leader described how it was acceptable to disagree with Simon, but that it was not done in an open arena. In the same way it was explained that staff 'moaning' is not done in the staff room but quietly behind closed doors. *"I would talk to [Simon] and ultimately the decision is his and if I was disagreeing with [Simon], it would be in this office with the door closed and that's how we do it. If he makes a decision I support that."* (Lead Practitioner)

Our research pointed to a strong sense of a traditional top down approach to leadership both in terms of the way in which those at various points in the school hierarchy describe their own roles and those of their more senior colleagues and of how the Principal himself describes his own work. So when responding to questions regarding decision making processes respondents commonly framed their responses in relation to the school occupational hierarchy:

if it's a departmental level you go to your head of your department, if its an academy level you still might go through a head of department route and then it will go to a middle leader, it just so happens the head of my department is my middle leader as well so then it will go through that stage and they will have a debrief and then it will go to SLT and then final decision with Simon." (Newly Qualified Teacher)

:

"Everyone knows exactly what to do, they know where the issues may arise and the senior leader team, the middle leader team and all the teachers know that they can rely on everyone above them and everyone below them" (Para Teacher)

"the remit I've been given from Simon is that at the next Ofsted we have outstanding at teaching and learning, so basically my job description is to get us there" (Senior Leader)

When the respondents were asked to discuss leadership they commonly began with the Principal and then worked their way 'down' the school hierarchy. For example, a Middle Leader when asked about the origination of themes and ideas discussed by meetings of the middle leadership group talked about how those themes and ideas would be checked with members of the Senior Leadership Team:

Interviewer: "So who would you run those ideas by?"

Middle Leader: "Just check probably with [Simon] and [the Vice Principals] just more to check that that's the kind of way they want it to go. In that respect we're not obviously completely free to do what we want but there has to be some restrictions because we could go 'oh, I'm sure they thought our ideas would be absolutely fine' but we could've said something crazy and they'd be like, what are you doing?"

Similarly an Emerging Leader when asked about his capacity to exercise leadership personally responded:

"I think I would always seek approval from higher up the line just as a matter of respect or courtesy"

Similarly the formation and practices of the Middle Leadership group, which acted as the focus for Stage 2 of the research, was based upon a rationale linked strongly to the school organisational hierarchy:

"Curriculum initially sat around the senior leadership table in the school's infancy but as it matured there was a need for leaders to take more a strategic role and therefore some of the operational management issues to do with subjects and subject leaders needed to go down, obviously go to a middle leader or a middle leader level so there was that curriculum being owned by a middle leader in a more traditional subject leader way but also to build capacity as well so two fold really." (Vice-Principal)

DL at Birch Tree School

Simon himself, in common with others interviewed, is direct about being in control and running things his own way.

"What distributed leadership isn't is a democracy and sometimes I'll say the problem you've all got is you think this is a democracy and it ain't because frankly I get paid a lot of money and the reason I get paid a lot of money is because the buck stops here" (Simon)

Nevertheless Simon does make strong claims to distributed leadership and its importance both to himself and the organisation of the school. The idea of DL conveyed both here and in a quotation from Simon cited earlier in this article is tied closely to the older and more conventional notion of delegation whereby the leader remains in control but hands work down the chain of command to subordinates lower in the organisational hierarchy. Within this account Simon is clear that they are practising DL at Birch Tree Academy, but he is equally clear that there is a distinctive and strong hierarchy in place and readily admits to being firmly in control of events at Birch Tree:

"it is impossible for me, for the one and a half days that I'm in, not to be a charismatic hero because I can't do it. "

So Simon feels able to make claims about the distribution of leadership within Birch Tree whilst simultaneously making reference to his 'charismatic heroic' approach. Simon's interpretation of DL can be viewed simultaneously as both strange and normal. Strange because tensions between the distribution of leadership within Birch Tree and Simon's own powerful position and his heroic/charismatic approach to leadership remain absent from this discourse. As referred to earlier in this article this strange construction of DL can be viewed as being located within wider contradications in the educational reform process between the directive aspects of the educational reform process in which those working within schools are viewed as implementers of reform and the agential possibilities for headteachers, school leaders and teachers located within the discourse of leadership in which their individual agency within their own institutions is stressed. Normal because DL is normalised discursively so that the continuation of a heroic/charismatic approach to leadership is not viewed as problemmatic within the context of distributing leadership. In this way, DL can be

viewed as enabling both Simon's and Birch Tree's capacity to meet its instrumental outcomes; a process neither inviting nor generative of reflexive approaches to leadership that might reveal tensions and contradictions with the potential to distract from this overriding intention.

Another more localised explanation for Simon's interpretation of DL can be found in his reflections upon his career as a headteacher and a distinction, crucial in this respect for Simon, between an earlier stage of his work as a headteacher in a previous school and his current work in this role. These reflections were triggered by an Ofsted inspector who following an official and, according to Simon, highly successful inspection of his previous school privately pointed out to him that he was in danger of 'disempowering' staff. Simon recounts this as follows:

> *"He said I haven't sat in a meeting, I haven't been anywhere where I haven't heard well Simon says Simon says, and every single meeting. I said are you telling me I'm disempowering everybody. He said no. He said I'm telling you you're going to and you've got to change ... so I spent the next one and a half years that I was there trying not be a charismatic hero. Its impossible frankly because I am one and its impossible. So I tried but what I learned from that whole experience was actually although the charismatic hero is the default position its an incredibly useful skill if you don't abuse it and all you need to do is to make sure that you stand back ... I can't not go around touching people and dominating situations and such because I can't do it because that's actually what I am. But what you do is you set up to stop the disempowering factor and to build in DL."*

Simon's understanding of DL in this context is intimately associated with its capacity to act as a corrective to his tendency to dominate in his role as headteacher and can therefore be viewed as linked to his own personal professional history. Within this construction of DL Simon retains a strong attachment to the charismatic heroic approach that he has internalised to the extent that it has become for him 'what I am'. Thus tensions between the distribution of leadership and a charismatic heroic approach remain unresolved and largely unspoken and Simon's construction of this term remains distant from those in normative literatures about DL. For Simon though his discursive construction of DL can be viewed as one which enables him to distinguish in a seemingly instrumental manner between different phases of his own conception of school leadership. He understands and accepts, in the light of the Inspector's comments, that there can be problems with what he terms a charismatic heroic approach to leadership, not least from Ofsted, but is unwilling, or as he describes it, unable to let go of such an approach. Deep and formative experiences as a headteacher were for Simon marked by a form of charismatic/heroic leadership that to some extent had become inconvenient in his professional context at the point in time at which the research was conducted. This particular professional tension can be directly linked to the wider structural changes occuring in education in England during this period linked to the modernisation and reform of this service. It also reflects contradictory aspects of Simon's leadership role that remain hidden, at least in part, from Simon himself.

Notions of DL, although different to Simon's, that parallel this instrumental use of the term emerge from interviews with other members of staff at Birch Tree. An Emerging Leader when asked about his understanding of DL responded positively by invoking the opportunities and

possibilities it afforded for enabling members of staff lower down in the school hierarchy to gain promotion:

"It is an effective form of leadership I think because its two fold because if you've got people like myself trying to work their way up the leadership ladder, in order to experience how to get to next levels you've got to get access to the types of things that they're doing and the type of things that they're involved in and distributing work as well as leadership efforts.....I think its important to allow people who are lower down on the leadership rungs access to these types of things in order to progress themselves"

Here the attraction to DL is very different from Simon's but a clear similarity in the sense that the term is used to serve a direct purpose; again underlining the instrumental logic of the school in this respect. In this case DL enables 'lower' members of staff insights that may be useful in their attempts to secure promotion; it is viewed as valuable because it offers opportunities for promotion. Thus DL in this context can be seen as being used to lend weight to what might be termed the competitive individualist behaviours of more junior staff members seeking to secure a place higher up the school hierarchy. Thus DL is not challenged, questioned or used reflexively; instead it is commandeered to enable personal career advancement.

The notion that working at the school might open up career opportunities was not confined to teachers lower in the school hierarchy. It was also used by more senior leaders at the school and can be seen as being linked, at least in part, to Simon's wider ambitions for the school:

"In terms of the talent and emerging talent, absolutely, Simon is very good at spotting people's potential and skills and using them and I always feel when talking to Simon that he is committed not just to developing leadership for the academy here but also wider and at national level and he does contribute at a national level and he sees part of his role here as growing people so that they can contribute at that level as well" (Lead Practitioner)

Other respondents were less clear as to the meaning of the term DL. One respondent, for example, had looked up the term prior to the interview and another, a Senior Leader, explained that she did not know what it meant when Simon made reference to the term at a staff event.

"Don't really know, I've not heard that phrase before. I would imagine it means sharing out the leadership, sharing out the different responsibilities." (Emergent Leader)

So what emerged at Birch Tree specifically in relation to DL were a range of conceptions held by individual respondents varying from strong attachments to the term, from Simon in particular, accompanied by clear although idiosyncratic understandings through to what might be termed as looser and weaker attachments to the term.

In this regard it was interesting to note during the Q-Sort, as described above, a strong sense that DL is being enacted within the school and as discussed earlier a sense that autonomy is afforded in their work. We understood from the Q-sort and from interviews that there was a

high degree of agreement between staff members at Birch Tree, but it might be viewed as surprising, given the relatively weak understandings of DL that there should be such an affirmative response to this concept.

So, how can we explain this high degree of consensus and lack of dissent amongst those working at Birch Tree and how does this speak to the highly affirmative, if also sometimes confused response, to DL. Our explanation is linked to the strong claim that Simon has made to the term DL and the logic of institutional practice in this institution. As we have seen the term DL means a great deal to Simon. First, because of the perceived dangers from Ofsted of being viewed as having an overly autocratic or authoritarian style and the consequent capacity of distributed leadership to act as a corrective or distraction to this. Second, because he believes that it acts as a vital symbol signalling his shift to a different form of leadership to that exercised in an earlier stage of his career as a Headteacher. One consequence of this has been that Simon has taken opportunities to communicate to staff at the school his belief in DL and the importance of distributing leadership to the development of the school. Given Simon's dominant position in the authority structure of the school and the use of the term 'DL' by senior members of staff and Simon himself, it can be viewed as hardly surprising that such discursive affirmation is replicated amongst those lower down in the hierarchy. In order to 'get on' or survive in this organisation it is necessary to be seen as supporting the Principal and other powerful members of the leadership team and potentially dangerous, in career terms at least, to be challenging ideas publically discussed in an approving and approved manner. This process of not challenging the Principal and affirming top down discursive edicts can be viewed as central to the logic of this institution. So it follows that DL as a concept will be viewed through that particular lens; meaning that it will be judged and valued by teachers in terms of its capacity to enable individual teachers to 'get on' and/or survive in their work.

This particular interpretation is supported by the contradiction between the partially examined or unexamined notions of DL in interviews as shown above and the strong willingness to endorse the concept in the Q-Sort. Thus respondents are willing to propose ideas about DL in a manner strongly suggesting a loose understanding of the term, yet they simultaneously offer a strong endorsement of this same term. Interestingly Simon's reaction to such affirmative responses regarding DL in the Q-sort and the highly convergent nature of the responses as a whole was highly positive.

Our interpretation of our data from Birch Tree is that the lack of conceptual clarity around the term DL and its correspondingly elastic qualities have left the door open to a myriad of understandings of this term. In this way the versatility of the term, the manner in which it can stretch over a variety of contexts and leadership related activities offers the potential for it to act as an important explanatory and justificatory tool at Birch Tree. For Simon it can be viewed as functioning as a discursive demarcation device (Hall et al 2010) acting to separate his current from his previous leadership practices in a manner that does not invite further scrutiny, either by himself or by others, of this aspect of his leadership. So although by common consent Simon remained a highly dominant, powerful and influential person at Birch Tree DL acted to soften the potentially harsh edges of this dimension of his leadership. For others working at Birch Tree School the term can be seen as having an important distracting role which combined with other aspects of the school's work, in particular the belief that they are positively intervening in the lives of the young people at the school and their capacity to pursue 'successful' careers in that institution, enables them to ignore or overlook the nature of leadership.

Overall, the discursive references to and practices linked to DL at Birch Tree can be seen as operating to legitimise existing leadership practices in ways that serve to distract from the reality of Simon's continuing attachment to charismatic heroic school transformation and reluctance or inability to move towards different leadership practices. In this way the tensions and contradictions surrounding Simon's own use of the term DL can be viewed as being replicated at both an institutional level and by staff at various levels in the hierarchy. So whilst the arrival of DL at Birch Tree had important implications for the institution and as discussed earlier at least, in part, replicated wider national level policy tensions the particular ways in which DL played out in this context were mediated by Simon's own personal and professional history. In common with other schools researched as part of the SPSO project Simon as headteacher was found to be of real importance to Birch Tree on account of the significant influence he had in terms of shaping the logic of institutional practice in relation to DL at this school.

Conclusion

Whilst DL took on a particular meaning at Birch Tree and was tied to a particular set of institutional and personal circumstances, like other institutions studied as part of the SPSO project (Hall et al, 2011), the discursive influence of DL was found to be strong with a wide range of different individuals and groups in the school eager to discursively associate themselves with this term. At the particular point in time at which the research was conducted the strength of the discursive influence of DL was matched by a corresponding weakness in the capacity of teachers and, in particular, school leaders to discursively resist it. Nevertheless for all of the schools researched, not least Birch Tree with its relatively low position in the performance regime, the need to comply with and act in accordance with nationally ordained

policies remained pressing. In this tightly controlled environment opportunities to exert agency outside of this regime were found to be strictly limited. It is within this context that the strangeness of DL can be most usefully located; on the one hand a discursive intervention that those working within schools, not least designated senior leaders, found very difficult to resist, on the other the requirement to perform according to a pre-determined and closely controlled set of requirments. In such circumstances it can be viewed as hardly surprising that DL took on such strange and idiosyncratic forms in the different school contexts within which it was found.

Our research findings suggest that the term DL can be viewed as serving an important enabling role in terms of eliding contradictory aspects of the professional experiences of those working in schools. Thus DL can be viewed as acting to smooth the process of creating conforming professional or designer employees (Casey, 1995) very closely identifying their professional work with the tightly defined aims of the school rather than drawing attention to contradictions that might interrupt this process. So instead of seeming strange DL is incorporated into the working lives of teachers and leaders. In this way DL has come to be viewed not as strange, but as normal, in a way that detracts from the wider contradictions of its use in particular school contexts. Although such institutional shaping is an important feature of the different discursive constructions of distributed leadership the capacity of officially authorised discourses to reach into the social practices of schools remains strong. Indeed, as described above, the very strangeness of the forms which distributed leadership takes in different institutions is intimately linked to the strength and intensity of this official discourse as designated school leaders and teachers struggle to accommodate this notion into their discourse and wider practices.

The discursive turn towards DL reported upon in this article cannot we believe be viewed as evidence of a fundamental shift in the nature and character of NPM in England, but it does nevertheless point to potentially new and important developments in NPM in England, at least in the education sector. It suggests a discursive softening of the harsher edges of managerialism that appeals to the effervescent (Hartley, 2011) imaginary of agential and participatory forms of decision making in schools for teachers and school leaders, but in an environment where institutional and personal attachments to those instrumentalist and performative agendas so central to NPM remain strong. Despite the potential for this discursive softening, in an otherwise largely unchanged environment, to make more apparent contradictions between the agential and the directive in the professional lives of teachers and school leaders within the context of NPM, the effect of the roll out of DL has been quite the opposite; it has been integrated into the social practices of schools and the professional lives of teachers and school leaders in ways that have rapidly normalised this potential strangeness in ways that suggest highly malleable forms of professionalism seemingly incapable of withstanding this powerful intervention. As such our research in confronting the strangeness of DL by seeking to move beyond the familiar and widespread existence of DL offers evidence of NPM with a new and glossy discursive twist. It reveals DL as a form of effervescent instrumentalism offering a discursive shine to a largely unchanging set of practices in schools directly linked to a tightly controlled and regulated sector that those professionals working within the sector find very difficult to resist.

At the beginning of this article DL was located within the reforms of the education system included in and following the 1988 Education Act and the New Public Management through which the implementation of these reforms have been handled. Whether DL will endure in the face of continued and rapid policy change in the education sector in England is a matter for

conjecture. Nevertheless whilst tensions between the managerial intent of a central government with pre-determined aims for education, including the tight alignment of schooling to the perceived needs of a globally competitive national economy, operate in tandem with a rhetoric of autonomy for those working within and leading this sector, as has been evident in pronouncements by the Coalition Government elected in 2010, it seems likely that DL or at least a suitably reworked alternative will remain a likely candidate for official promotion within schools.

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