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Business, Industries



During the last ten years, the concept of distributed leadership has swept through the theory and practice of educational leadership. It has become the theory of choice for many. The literature continues to burgeon with multiplying taxonomies of methods of distributing leadership and of frameworks to position theoretical approaches. In some of its manifestations, it has the ring of offering something revitalizing and inclusive. Others have applied a more critical analysis, questioning the purpose and impact of the distributed leadership industry.

This article's aim is to consider how to account for the dominance of distributed leadership. Not only its widespread enthusiastic adoption in schools and higher education but also its relative persistence suggests that distributed leadership currently serves some important function. The premise of the article is that its purpose may not be primarily its publicly espoused efficacy in delivering benefits for learners. The article suggests that, despite dissenting voices, distributed leadership has been used largely to create a mirage, an apolitical workplace. It further situates this within a historical and critical perspective, as an example of the ever-new ways that emerge to maintain the status quo of power. The article first traces the origins of distributed leadership in education and charts its rise and change in use from a research frame of reference to a recommended practice. It notes the implications of distributed leadership for power distribution in organizations and explores what theories of power might be relevant. The article goes on to consider the uses of power by individuals adopting or promoting distributed leadership, exposing as dubious the claims that distributed leadership opens up new opportunities for staff or empowers them.

It considers the notable silence about unequal inclusion in leadership, for example, related to issues of gender and race. The article argues that distributed leadership, whether a lens to consider the complexities of leadership constructed by many, or a description/ prescription of practice, is in itself a use of three- dimensional power; distributed leadership reconciles staff to growing workloads and accountability and writes troubling issues of the disempowerment and or exclusion of staff out of the leadership script. Distributed leadership is presented as potentially replacing previous forms of leadership that are critiqued negatively in relation to their ethics and or efficacy, such as heroic, charismatic, collegial, top-down and transactional, with a novel kind of leadership. The new theory and practice are depicted both as more inclusive and more effective, indeed more effective because more inclusive.

Consequently, there appears to be a widely expressed belief that, whether facilitated by the head teacher or as a result of self-organization, distributed leadership potentially enables all to participate in leadership on the basis of capacity alone. A seductive invitation appears to emerge for staff to share leadership for the benefit of learners. Reaction Personally, the assertion that everyone could lead is not generally accompanied by deep reflection on the implications of this stance and what inclusion of more in leadership might imply.

The central issue of power surfaces only superficially, if at all, in much of the literature. A redistribution of power and or authority is not indicated as justifying much attention. The major part of the literature on distributed

leadership tends not to problematize power, nor its relationship to distributed leadership. No mention is made of the kinds of structural barriers such as gender and race that might provoke questions about including a wider range of people in leadership. In contrast to this fantasy world of fluid, unproblematic power is the accumulated wisdom that organizations do not function in this way. Commentators on distributed leadership might protest that this is acknowledged, albeit briefly.

What is not fully acknowledged or theorized is the relationship between power and inequalities, and the degree of tension that may lie submerged beneath the dominant normative narrative.