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Different Approaches to Sharing School Leadership

This report examines international examples of co-head partnerships and teacher leadership collectives (initiatives in which two or more people share, or replace the position of headteacher), drawing on concepts of distributed leadership to help explain their different aims and practices.

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A continuum of leadership

■ Sole leadership

In sole leadership, one person, as the real and titular head, has the dominant voice and leadership is not shared.

■ Supported leadership

Supported leadership (characterised sometimes as the 'patron' approach, or consultative leadership) exists where the recognised single leader draws on and acknowledges input and advice from a wide range of people.

■ Dual leadership

Dual leadership involves a partnership between two people, both recognised as the leaders.

■ Shared leadership

Shared leadership is diffuse – a property shared to some degree by all persons and groups involved in the collaboration. Gronn (2002) describes fully shared leadership as conjoint, holistic and purposive, concerted action that is more than the sum of its parts.

Co-heads and teacher leadership teams vary in the ways they combine elements of individual, supported, dual and shared (conjoint) leadership. Their innovations are shaped by their participants' aspirations and interpersonal relationships, as well as by their local school contexts and broader cultural and regulatory environments.

Full-time, split-task co-principalships

In North Carolina, the aim was to improve instructional leadership by appointing one co-principal for administration (managing the school 'business') and another to focus on professional leadership in curriculum and pedagogy. While the original aim was achieved, two-thirds of the partnerships re-negotiated their responsibilities according to their individual interests and strengths.

Mixed gender co-principalships in primary schools in the Netherlands aimed to provide opportunities for mutual support and enhanced gender equity. Status differences emerged, however, as a consequence of the male principals

performing more management and 'public relations' roles, while the female principals focused on student administration and care.

These approaches have prioritised individual leadership enacted within a dual headship.

Supported dual leaderships

In supported dual leaderships, co-heads, have shared more of the leadership tasks between them and with others in their schools. At Stantonbury Campus, the amalgamation of two secondary schools resulted in a co-directorship. At El Molino High in the United States and at Hastingsbury Upper and Community School in England, partners who had experienced success in sharing a deputy head position went on to initiate co-headships.

While some individual leadership is practised in this approach, the co-heads say that being equal partners enables better collaborative decision-making and problem-solving. Thus a more holistic conjoint form of dual leadership seems to be emerging here.

Part-time, job-sharing co-heads

Some women teachers in schools in the USA, Canada and the UK job-share headship so that they can advance in their careers while still giving time to their family, community and study commitments. The first wife and husband team was appointed in England at Mayflower Primary School in Leicester in 2001.

Job-share partners alternate in the headteacher position. To some extent they work alone when on the job, but supported and conjoint leadership is important for maintaining consistency and continuity. This is achieved through regular meetings, phone discussions and working closely together to plan, negotiate 'specialist' tasks, up-date each other and problem-solve.

Integrative co-headships

In two secondary schools (in Oregon, USA and Auckland, New Zealand) mixed gender co-principalships were proposed as an educationally sound structure that could challenge gendered stereotypes of leadership. Both co-principalships also aimed to breakdown leadership hierarchy. This was enabled through a wider distribution of leadership in project teams and through whole staff or Site Council decision-making.

These successful shared leaderships have been highly collaborative, with no pre-determined roles and are thus able to build on individual strengths. They have been based on shared values and goals and on trust, have incorporated equal responsibility and accountability, and opened up team strategies of administration.

Difficulties that constrained three other attempts at integrative co-headships in England and New Zealand include insufficient support from boards or regulatory authorities; incompatible or not equally competent partners; funding and staffing crises and demands from parents that encroached on time for building interpersonal communication and trust; and mistrustful governors that 'meddled' in the co-heads' day-to-day management.

Teacher leadership teams and whole staff leadership collectives

These initiatives replace the headteacher position. At a year K-12 school in Minnesota, USA, six teachers (appointed from the 28 staff) successfully shared between them all the previous principal's functions and tasks, including curriculum changes, budget decisions, student discipline and teacher evaluations. Another teacher leadership team operated successfully between 1994-2002 at Anzar High School, California. Three teachers were appointed (for a three year term), with release time for administration. They built a team culture of commitment to constructive debate, collective problem-solving and shared accountability.

A similar conjoint leadership approach developed at His School in Norway, where all eight teachers have worked since 1974 as a leadership collective. The aim to model democratic practice for both students and the community has been achieved, according to the teachers and other evaluators. The teachers work together in whole school planning and decision-making and rotate particular administrative responsibilities between them.

In a small secondary school in New Zealand, all three teachers are the co-principals. The initiating teachers resisted constructions of the principal as a controlling executive manager or as a charismatic transformative leader. They wanted a co-principalship that was 'less focused on trends or the personality of the leader and more on teaching and learning.' They aimed to remove the principal/teacher divide and achieve a structural change that would validate collective decision making and collegial work. After some protracted contract negotiations between their school board and the state employing agency, they developed a fully flat, three-way teaching co-principalship. Despite several changes in personnel, this conjoint leadership is still operating successfully.

Key findings

The New Zealand Education Review Office and Ofsted have reported that shared school leadership can be highly effective in developing strong commitments to improving student learning.

Advantages for successful co-principals and teacher leadership teams include:

- reduced isolation and stress
- enhanced professional development, stimulation and enjoyment

Further advantages for schools include:

- an increased skill resource
- better decisions
- more completed projects
- improved professional supervision

Factors contributing to success include:

- open and honest communication
- scheduled time for professional critical reflection and debate
- negotiated agreements about philosophy and strategies for effective learning
- on-going experimentation, review and revision
- commitment to shared responsibility and mutual accountability
- interpersonal respect and trust

References:

Gronn, P (2002) **Distributed leadership**, The Second International Yearbook in Educational Leadership, eds K Leithwood, P Hallinger, K Seashore-Lois, G Furman-Brown, P Gronn, W Mulford, & K. Riley, Kluwer: Dordrecht

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S P R I N G

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