

# **The Fifth Business of educational improvement: Leadership for equitable and inclusive schools**

**By: Malcolm J. Richmon**

## **LEADERSHIP: A REFLEXIVE INTRODUCTION**

Undertaking a literature review on leadership in education is, at best, an act of scholarly bravery, but less charitably, an act of considerable foolhardiness. With well over a century of academic writing to draw on, the literature isn't simply voluminous, it's all but insurmountable. Further still, the literature itself is so varied, and the conceptual features of leadership so widely disputed, that there is very little assurance that different inquiries into leadership are even studying the same phenomenon. In an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, Yukl (1998) suggests that leadership involves processes of influence between leaders and followers, but even this seemingly benign generalization has become increasingly challenged by some of the newer directions in the field, as we will see in the pages that follow. Given the facile usage of some of the most fundamentally important terms in the field—leadership, administration, and management—with less attention or concern than we might reasonably expect regarding the conceptual nuances of each, it's hardly surprising that effective knowledge mobilization to support systematic efforts to improve schools and school systems can be challenging.

It is necessary to begin this paper with such a disclaimer about the conceptual imprecision surrounding leadership and its cognate concepts, because this paper, like many papers of this sort, requires that readers begin it with an act of faith. While leadership *development* is in the ascendancy of strategic planning for educational systems, the conceptual stars by which it navigates are by no means fixed. And to be sure, this is not simply a measure of bookish scepticism or scholarly pessimism. Even among some of the more prolific and well-known scholars of the field, the plain point that we have little clarity about what leadership is or might be, is readily acknowledged. “It is important to be clear ... that what has been learned about leadership in schools has not depended on any clear, agreed-upon definition of the concept” (Leithwood & Duke, 1999, p. 45).

About a decade ago, I began grappling with some of the conceptual difficulties associated with leadership, not aspiring to arrive at any single, omnibus account of the phenomenon (if such a thing could ever exist) but rather attempting to map out the breadth and scope of the conceptual variations across distinct understandings of leadership. The fruits of this labour eventually found their way into an article, *Toward a Conceptual Framework for Leadership Inquiry* in an issue of *Educational Management and Administration* (Richmon & Allison, 2003). The article provided an analysis of some of the persistent similarities and differences in theories of leadership, and compared and contrasted these theoretical approaches to school leadership with a view toward understanding it better. At the time, I had certainly not hoped to be exhaustive in my examination, though I was reasonably contented that I had adequately captured the lay of the land, identifying and classifying over thirty distinct theories of leadership that had gained some measure of prominence in the educational literature.

#### **LEADERSHIP AND MORE LEADERSHIP**

No sooner had I begun using the article *Toward a Conceptual Framework for Leadership Inquiry* as a reading in an introductory graduate studies course in educational administration, than students would point out to me that I had ‘missed’ one theory of leadership or another. In some respects, this wasn’t all that surprising. I had expected that leadership would be a moving target, going so far as to suggest that “staking one’s place in the leadership literature is often characterized by finding a new, fiery adjective to modify the term” (Richmon & Allison, 2003, pp. 31-32). Yet the deluge of apparently overlooked approaches to leadership that were brought to my attention seemed to signify a new (or at least newly framed) direction in administrative inquiry that was garnering significant attention. Once again, I began the work of trying to account for these budding leadership perspectives, and found myself with a growing list including collaborative leadership (Telford, 1996), democratic leadership (Woods, 2005), empowering leadership (Short, 1998), participative leadership (Somech & Wenderow, 2006), shared leadership (Printy & Marks, 2006), teacher leadership (Mangin, 2007), and most prominently, distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006).

Initially, I had hoped to provide a coherent and compelling way for discriminating among these perspectives, in an attempt to clarify how leadership is understood under the auspices of these seemingly innovative administrative approaches. I had reasoned that each of these distinct perspectives should be borne of particular sets of conceptual nuances which could be readily identified and classified. Yet my engagement with the related literature quickly proved less rewarding than I had first hoped, and I found that these new approaches suffered from a great deal of the conceptual imprecision and incoherence that the more generalized field of leadership did. Across sources, it appeared that inquiry used certain leadership terminology interchangeably, while in other cases, the very same term appeared to be used to reflect markedly different leadership sensibilities. Stranger still, some literature adopted the term *distributive* leadership rather than *distributed* leadership, though there did not appear to be any nuanced differences in the ways these competing terms were used.

Notwithstanding these conceptual frustrations –which have, after all, plagued the broader field for decades–there did appear to be a common spore of conceptual concern across all the approaches. Despite adopting different terminology, what was evident was a more explicit and emphatic concern with the leadership potential of institutional and organizational agents *not* formally vested with administrative authority. And while elements of such concerns have appeared sporadically in scholarly inquiry for decades<sup>1</sup>, the proliferation of these ostensibly innovative ways of conceptualizing leadership as exceeding the capacities of formally designated administrators could not be denied. That organizations need to mitigate their emphases on hierarchy and the leadership potential of individuals by better recognizing and inclusively utilizing the capacities of *all* members had emerged as an evident –if not *the* evident–theme.

In forsaking the subtleties among and differences between collaborative, democratic, empowerment, participative, and shared approaches to leadership in favour of broader ‘distributed’ themes, I acknowledge that I fail to capture much of the unique conceptual spirit of

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<sup>1</sup> Gibb (1954) conceptualized leadership as a characteristic of the organizational collective half a century before contemporary interests (re)emerged. Similarly, Argyris (1964) promoted a humanistic approach to leadership which focused on providing organizational members with maximum freedom from administrative encumbrances, allowing them to realize their potentials.

each, and ultimately contribute to the overall conceptual incoherence that I, myself, am critical of. Yet I am less apologetic than I might ordinarily be, because this omission isn't the result of being pressed to meet a publication deadline, or any function of idleness, but rather it is reflective of an appropriate measure of scholarly humility. Having ventured down this road once before, I am more reluctant to purport to conceptualize leadership in any sort of coherent way. Even when done well, such efforts are especially time-sensitive, quickly losing relevance and theoretical traction in the relentless pace and tempestuousness of shifting trends within the field. And when done poorly, of course, such efforts risk overreaching with their claims to leadership knowledge, exposing a sense of scholarly hubris that is hard to justify in the face of the humbling immensity of the field.

In this paper, I focus chiefly on the potential for these aforementioned approaches to expand the purview of school leadership and promote more inclusive participation in schools. I suggest that broadening the organizational scope of leadership is indeed a laudable end, though it is often problematic when conceptualized within contemporarily dominant administrative thinking. I have, for some time, been especially critical of contemporary trends in administrative theory which persist in conceptualizing linear pathways of organizational influence (Richmon, 2006), where particular sets of administrative behaviour are taken to precipitate particular sets of desirable behaviour among subordinates (or at the very least, particular sets of administrative behaviour are taken to provide the *conditions* under which particular sets of desirable behaviour among subordinates will surface). In rejecting this unrelenting spirit of determinism, notions of leadership as reflecting more complex (and even chaotic) distributed phenomena need to seek out more appropriate foundations upon which to be conceptualized. This is so much the case that some prominent scholars have begun to question whether leadership is even an appropriate focus for studying organizations, and whether it might be at all helpful in trying to inform the day-to-day realities of improving schools (Lakomski, 2004).

### **WHO'S BUSINESS?**

In becoming a teacher and scholar, I have devoted a good deal of time to reflecting on my own experiences as a student. In retrospect, I can see that while I was typically a 'good' student, I wasn't always a thoughtful one. This was especially the case in English classes, where my

utilitarian sensibilities found me more often than not seeking to simply understand the texts I read rather than enjoy them. And so I ignored the literary aesthetic of Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, and Mordecai Richler, among so many others, opting for the unadorned, ersatz versions of the summary texts that could be found in book stores.

In hindsight, it is now plain to me that a great deal of wonderful Canadian literature was wasted on my adolescent self, and so as an adult I have sought to right this wrong by revisiting these texts, and for the last few years, my leisurely readings has been devoted to *rereading* texts that I hadn't done justice to the first time around. Among these texts was Robertson Davies' marvellous *Fifth Business*<sup>2</sup>. My titular reference to the 'Fifth Business' of educational improvement, then, is in homage to this late, great Canadian elder statesman, scholar and writer, who suggested that in the theatre or the opera there is an ancillary character in any drama who is not the heroine, her lover, the rival or the villain –yet despite playing a seemingly inconsequential role—is essential to the plot. For the purposes of any truly equitably and inclusive school, the question that emerges is *who might the Fifth Business of educational improvement be?* If we are to indeed broaden the traditional purview of leadership in an effort to more inclusively and equitably recognize additional sources of potential leadership that may impact on schools and their efforts to improve, identifying these under-examined and underutilized individuals serves our needs considerably.

Who are you? Where do you fit into poetry and myth? Do you know who I think you are ... I think you are Fifth Business. You don't know what that is? Well ... you cannot make a plot work without another man ... and he is called in the profession Fifth Business, because he is the odd man out ... and you must have Fifth Business because he is the one who knows the secret of the hero's birth, or comes to the assistance of the heroine when she thinks all is lost, or keeps the hermitess in her cell, or may even be the cause of somebody's death if that is part of the plot. The [main characters] get all the

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<sup>2</sup> The first book of the Deptford Trilogy, *Fifth Business* was originally published in 1970 and is considered by many to be Robertson Davies' finest work. It has undergone many reprintings over the last four decades, and is currently published by Penguin Canada.

best music and do all the spectacular things, but you cannot manage the plot without Fifth Business! It is not spectacular, but it is a good line of work, I can tell you, and those who play it sometimes have a career that outlasts the golden voices. Are you Fifth Business? You had better find out.

(Davies, 1970)

## **DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AS A FIELD OF INQUIRY**

Even in the absence of a scrupulous review of the distributed leadership literature<sup>3</sup>, certain analytic features of the concept warrant attention. For these purposes, I will briefly focus on three main areas of analytic concerns, examining distributed approaches to leadership in an effort to identify (a) which organizational agents each approach is thought to apply to, (b) what is thought to be ‘distributed’ within each approach, and (c) what educational outcomes are thought to be advanced by each approach?

First and foremost, in much of the distributed leadership literature, the dominant analytic focus of the approaches remains on school administrators or others with formally vested organizational authority. Notwithstanding the apparent emphasis on the dormant leadership capacities of *non*-administrators, the associated literature frequently conceptualizes the principal or designated administrator as the ‘prime mover’ of any subsidiary leadership behaviours that emerge and as the overall moderator of the leadership sharing process, preserving the crucible of administrative control in the hands of the administrator. Spillane (2006) makes clear that a distributed approach places “leadership practice centre stage” (p. 25). While Spillane conceptualizes leadership as transcending the efforts of any one individual or administrator, he still attends to leadership as a function of leaders, albeit more than one, engaged in complex social interaction in which organizational ends are served through the concerted efforts of multiple organizational agents. Leadership is ‘stretched’ across the organization, but purposefully so, to enable formal school leaders to facilitate the prospects for leadership among other organizational members. Some studies, for example, considered alternative, yet still formal

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<sup>3</sup> A number of distributed leadership reviews and critiques have appeared over the last few years, including Bennet, Wise, Woods, and Harvey (2003) and Harris (2006).

administrative structures under the auspices of distributed leadership, such as dual principals, rotating principals or co-principals (Grubb & Flessa, 2006). As well, aside from the distribution of leadership across formally designated administrators, the preponderance of other forms of leadership sharing described by the literature is thought to be between administrators and *teachers*. Leithwood and Reil (2003) note that “teacher leaders can help other teachers to embrace goals, to understand the changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning and to work towards improvement” (p. 3). And though teachers are a conspicuously obvious choice for shouldering leadership responsibilities in schools, the conceptual emphasis on this particular target of distributed leadership is unnecessarily narrow and potentially limiting. To be sure, if distributed leadership is indeed about “learning together and constructing knowledge collectively and collaboratively” then we might expect the literature to attend to broader, more inclusive forms of distribution. Given the enduring administrative emphasis, and the substantial attention on the most conspicuous of school personnel, there appears to be only marginal prospects for identifying the Fifth Business of school improvement in the distributed leadership literature.

While it would seem that the substance of distributed leadership—that is, what exact organizational responsibilities are being ‘distributed’—would be apparent in the literature, in many cases it was not. While the spirit of distributed literature has significant popular appeal given its implicit critique of hierarchical structures and the potential for capacity building across organizational agents, there are actually fewer empirical accounts of what exactly it is in any functional sense (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2004; Hopkins & Jackson, 2003). In some studies, the types of organizational responsibilities being shared under the auspices of distributed leadership appears to involve prosaic administrative tasks rather than those of any real organizational importance, or even simply administrative efforts to offer provisions for collaborative opportunities or structures among staff (Timperley, 2005). In still other cases, the leadership ‘sharing’ appears to involve the administrative reframing of tasks that have already long been associated with the work of teachers<sup>4</sup> (e.g. establishing relationships of instructional

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<sup>4</sup> Harris (2006) writes that “distributed leadership means sharing the most important tasks, which means those associated with instructional improvement” (p. 261). Yet the most important tasks associated with instructional improvement have always been related to instruction itself, and belong to the domain of teachers’ professional practices. Leadership effects have almost always been recognized as secondary. It is almost tautological that the

support, seeking to improve pedagogical technique, solving problems in teams), newly offered under the auspices of exercising ‘leadership’ (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003; Scribner, Sawyer, Watson & Myers, 2007). Across the literature, conceptions of distributed leadership involving the sharing of prominent or important *administrative* tasks were uncommon, and studies that involved non-administrators engaging in traditionally administrative activities (such as teachers suggestively evaluating their peers) found difficulties in realizing the potential of such an approach given the hegemonic hierarchical structures that are often associated with schools (Goldstein, 2003). Moreover, Timperley (2005) points out that “while distributed leadership among teachers may be desirable, some caution needs to be sounded about the potential difficulties involved ... Although formally appointed leaders do not automatically command respect and authority, teacher leaders may be particularly vulnerable to being openly disrespected and disregarded because they do not carry formal authority” (p. 412).

Expectedly, studies into distributed leadership provide for mixed evidentiary support, particularly as the approach relates to advancing student achievement. In some instances, evidentiary support related to the apparent power of teacher collaboration (or other peripherally related concepts) seemed to reinforce the value of a distributed approach, and certainly some studies did find that when teachers exercised leadership, it quite significantly surpassed principal-derived leadership effects (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). For the most part, however, only very modest evidence connecting distributed leadership and school improvement is to be found in the literature (Lashway, 2003; Mayrowetz, 2008).

### **COMPLEXITY AND DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP**

Taken together, it may be the case that despite pursuing seemingly meaningful ends, distributed forms of leadership appear to have only limited success in actually reconceptualizing leadership to allow for more global participation in the administrative advancement of organizational effectiveness. It would seem that the pervasiveness of post-positivist and neo-positivist perspectives in the field –rooted as they are in linearity and a concern with causality— provide a poor point of departure for conceptualizations in which leadership might emerge

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essence of distributed leadership involves the administrative provision for teachers to exercise leadership over what has traditionally been ascribed to their professional role.



spontaneously across organizations, without predetermined direction, procedural predictability, or explicitly designated targets.

An alternative and more auspicious direction for reconceptualizing leadership as a distributed process involves resituating certain assumptions of the field within those of complexity science, and reframing our understandings about organizations within the context of complex adaptive systems. Within this perspective, the complex interconnectedness of a system provides for its ability to adapt and change. Given that change occurs as a function of ongoing interaction and recurring feedback from a huge number of interconnections within a system, this perspective necessarily forgoes the hubristic proposition that the system can be determined with any precision, but rather recognizes that it can be understood as being consistent only in terms of the processes which render it indeterminable. When applied to administration, leadership can be viewed as an equitably distributed property of an *organization* rather than something that is 'distributed' with intentionality by particular organizational members to other organizational members. This shift requires that understandings of leadership emerge at the nexus of complex, recursive organizational interactivity, rather than through linear pathways of organizational influence.

Complexity science is the broad umbrella discipline for a systems theory which rejects classical Newtonian mechanics in favour of burgeoning understandings derived from mathematics and quantum physics<sup>5</sup>. Central to complexity science is the study of complex adaptive systems (CAS), a hugely interdisciplinary endeavor which seeks to understand how diverse elements within a system are interconnected, and how these interconnections provide the system with the ability to adapt and change. CAS approaches have been used to study the properties of interactive systems as divergent as honeybees (Seeley, 1995), cellular networks, chemical compounds (Prigogine, 1997) and, of course, social systems including organizations (Stacey, 2001).

**John Holland offers an often cited account of what CASs are.**

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<sup>5</sup> For a systematic analysis of the differences between Newtonian and quantum paradigms and their implications for leadership see Fris and Lazaridou (2006).

A Complex Adaptive System ... is a dynamic network of many agents (which may represent cells, species, individuals, firms, nations) acting in parallel, constantly acting and reacting to what the other agents are doing. The control of a CAS tends to be highly dispersed and decentralized. If there is to be any coherent behavior in the system, it has to arise from competition and cooperation among the agents themselves. The overall behavior of the system is the result of a huge number of decisions made every moment by many individual agents

(cited in Waldrop, 1992, p. 145)

Encapsulated in this definition are many of the central features of CASs, as they are commonly pursued in the literature. Firstly, we see that complexity approaches are not as preoccupied with system outcomes as they are with system processes. To a large extent, given that system refinements occur as a function of recurring feedback from a huge number or interconnections within the system, the perspective forgoes the proposition that the system can be determined with any precision, rather recognizes that it can be understood as being consistent only in terms of the processes which render it *indeterminable*. In complex systems, the behaviour of organizational agents is not seen as necessarily directed by the demands and exhortations of leaders vested with formal organizational authority, but rather that the global behaviour of the system is locally determined, in which the interactions between and among agents provide for potentially adaptive innovations. Birds form flocks which take on flying formations, ants form distinct colonies, and people form (and reform) social networks which provide for organizational structure and function.

Yet most distributed leadership approaches seem to view leadership distribution as reflecting the intentionality of administrators, suggesting that such efforts can be deliberately directed to meet particular educational ends (Harris, 2006; Printy & Marks, 2006). This may not be the case, however. Firstly, social systems are functions of the interactions of those individuals within them, hence systems have the capacity for a type of self-determination, or *self-organization*, despite efforts to methodically impose external order on them. While it may very well be the case that powerful instances of 'distributed leadership' have been observed and

analyzed by scholars, studying such occurrences emerging spontaneously from complex and dynamic group interactions is entirely different than suggesting we can purposefully bring them about through the contrived manipulation of organizational variables. A weather forecaster may have the meteorological understanding and appreciation of how atmospheric conditions and weather systems interact to produce sunshine or clouds, warmth or cold, or rain or snow, but recognizes that this understanding is limited to providing explanatory and predictive power –not changing the weather. As it were, several scholars have noted that distributed leadership seems to have more heuristic value as an interpretive framework for understanding organizational activity than any immediate or direct set of skills or strategies to be utilized in leading schools (Harris, 2006). It is often said that complexity exists at the *edge of chaos* in that complex adaptive systems are subject to ongoing, recursive feedback, in which iterative changes continually modify the systems. Though it is reasonable to expect that we might anticipate the impacts of a single input on a given system, the effects of the input becomes increasingly removed with each successive iteration. Of central importance, then, is that CASs do not provide for a coordinated calculus with which to effectuate systemic change, rather they provide for a heuristic for better understanding why change is so capricious. As such, it may be conceptually misguided to think that one might ‘practice’ complexity in schools (e.g. Morrison, 2002) or that administrators actively ‘distribute’ leadership (e.g. Harris, 2006), rather both these phenomena are inevitable functions of natural (in the case of the former) and socio-cultural (in the case of the latter) forces. You don’t need to make complexity happen, *it just does*.

Given that unpredictability is a key feature of CASs, change is generally thought to be manifest as *emergent properties* within the system. Emergence is thought to be exhibited in a wide range of natural phenomena, including biological, chemical and physical systems. Likewise, social systems display emergence when global systems’ behaviours cannot be accounted for in terms of the behaviour of their individual constituents. Yet patterns of order *emerge* from the interactions between those (particles, cells, or people) within the system, what Stuart Kauffman (1995) describes affectionately as *order for free*. It is perhaps this facet of CASs, more than any other, which provides a challenge to dominant conceptions of distributive leadership. Analytic tradition dictates that causes are separate from effects, and if we wish to effectuate improvement, change, or reform, then we must apply some external pressure or force to the organization –whether top-down, bottom-up, or laterally. That CASs may undergo

spontaneous changes of their own apparent accord, the consequence of innumerable local exchanges, and that these changes can in turn moderate the subsequent local exchanges of agents within the system may simply be too disempowering to those scholars deeply vested in finding orderly solutions to organizational problems.

In some respects, distributed leadership finds itself in the lurch between traditional administrative theory's longing for immediately practicable and predictable approaches to school leadership, and complexity science's more volatile and tentative epistemology. Still, it is possible to compare the approach as it might be understood alongside its traditional forbearers (Table A).

So who might the Fifth Business of school improvement be? From a complexity point of view, virtually anyone might be seen as contributing to the important work that schools do in advancing school achievement. If we truly wish to consider a theory of leadership to be equitable and inclusive, then it must extend itself beyond the most prominent organizational agents –beyond principals and teachers— and recognize the complex and powerful interactions that occur within (and beyond) organizations, and across *all* organizational members, in effectuating change (Richmon, 2004).

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