

# Sharing Leadership of Schools through Teamwork

*A Justifiable Risk?*

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## Sharing Leadership—in Principle

The principle that teachers should treat all children fairly, nurture individuals according to their different intellectual and emotional needs, and provide a welcoming and secure environment for learning would probably find universal acceptance among educators. But what principles should apply to working relationships among school staff? Does a defensible approach to school leadership imply shared leadership and, if so, which aspects of leadership should be shared, by whom, with whom, how equally, and under what circumstances?

The purpose of this article is to develop the normative argument that school leadership should ideally be extensively shared but, because school leaders do not live in an ideal world, the extent of sharing which is justifiable in practice depends on empirical factors. In other words, championing of shared leadership draws on principles which are contingent on the situation, not absolute. Specifically, I wish to explore empirical factors connected with the contexts of schools and consequent risks—especially for headteachers—that may inhere in their endeavour to share leadership. To support this contention, findings will be discussed from research into senior or school management teams (SMTs) in British primary schools, whose role is to support the headteacher in leading and managing the institution. Typically, they consist of the head, deputy head and other teachers with the most substantial management responsibility. Team members are variably involved in making major policy and routine management decisions on behalf of other staff, whose views are represented in some measure. The term ‘management’ in the label ‘management team’ therefore refers both to leadership (setting the direction for the organization) and to management activity (orchestrating its day-to-day running). A combined cultural and political perspective was employed to investigate how the ‘culture of teamwork’ expressed in SMTs embodied contradictory beliefs and values reflecting the wider social and political context which impacted reciprocally on team members’ use of power and affected the extent to which leadership was shared between team members.

Several principles have been advanced over the years to support the claim that school leadership should be shared relatively equally amongst staff. Most centre on staff entitlement. First, they are entitled to contribute to decisions about development of the school

which affect their work, and to be empowered to collaborate in creating an excellent institution. Shared leadership is morally just (Blase and Anderson, 1995; Bottery, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1996; Southworth, 1995; Starratt, 1995) in a democratic country where individual rights are accorded high priority. Second, since staff give their professional lives to their school, they are entitled to enjoy the comradeship that working closely with colleagues can engender. Participating in shared leadership has intrinsic value, potentially, as a fulfilling experience for all involved (Nias et al., 1989; Wallace and Hall, 1994). Third, staff are entitled to gain this experience to further their professional development and career aspirations. It offers individual team members a potent opportunity for informal and incidental workplace learning (Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Wallace, 1991) whereby they may improve their performance in their present role and prepare for promotion. A fourth principle looks to staff obligations as student educators. Adult working relationships in schools play a symbolic part in fostering children's social development. As role models, staff have responsibility to express in their working relationships the kind of cooperative behaviour they wish their students to emulate.

A fifth principle focuses on valued leadership outcomes rather than the process. Shared leadership is potentially more effective than headteachers acting alone. Staff are interdependent: every member has a contribution to make as leadership tasks can be fulfilled only with and through other people. Achieving extensive ownership of policy decisions is therefore necessary (Bell and Rhodes, 1996) if staff are to work together to implement them. Empowerment through mutual commitment and support enables staff to achieve more together than they could as individuals (Sergiovanni, 1990; Starratt, 1995; Wallace and Hall, 1994). In these circumstances they can achieve an optimum degree of synergy, which may be defined as group members combining their individual energies to the best of their ability in order to achieve shared goals. Advocates assume that staff will adhere to these principles if given the chance: those offered their entitlement will take it up; they will act as good role models for students; and they will collaborate and generate synergy.

## Prescription versus Practice

Such ideas are embedded in normative theories of educational leadership from which prescriptions for practice are derived (e.g. Leithwood et al., 1992; Sergiovanni, 1996; Starratt, 1995), informing the school restructuring movement in North America (Bailey, 1992; Fullan, 1993; Pounder, 1998) and advocated for the UK by a few commentators (e.g. Southworth, 1998). They commonly refer to notions of transformational leadership and organization-wide learning originating with the world of business (e.g. Burns, 1978; Conger and Kanungo, 1998; Senge, 1990). Principals (headteachers) are urged to promote transformation of the staff culture through articulating a vision of a desirable future state for the institution; garnering colleagues' support for it; and empowering them to realize this shared vision through developing management structures and procedures emphasizing professional dialogue, teamworking and mutual support. How principals should behave, according to these theories, reflects assumptions about the real world of schools which include:

1. principals possess freedom to determine their vision, their strategy for inspiring colleagues to share it, and the means for implementing it through their practice;
2. it is possible to engineer change in a teacher culture with predictable results;

3. elements of the teacher culture are mutually compatible and individual interests are reconcilable, facilitating transformation that results in unity of purpose;
4. empowerment of teachers leads to their actions to realize the vision proffered by principals.

Should these assumptions prove to be unrealistic, it follows that the underlying principles on which the normative theory rests must be compromised if it is to have prescriptive value. That transformational leadership is deemed exceptional enough in North American schools and industries to merit books and training programmes promoting it suggests that the assumptions behind transformational leadership do not obtain in North America; their applicability to the UK is even more questionable.

First, British headteachers have lost their freedom to be visionaries after a decade of central government reforms. Recently published 'national standards for headship' (Teacher Training Agency, 1998: 4) require that 'the headteacher provides vision, leadership and direction for the school and ensures that it is managed and organised to meet its aims and targets'. The content of these aims and targets is largely determined by a central government engaged in a nationwide school target-setting exercise and imposing what, when and how literacy and numeracy must be taught in primary schools. Headteachers are expected both to articulate and gain colleagues' support for government ministers' educational vision and to ensure its implementation.

Second, research on schools implies that the teacher culture is not directly manipulable through leadership activity, though it is open to change (e.g. Nias et al., 1989). Attempts to stimulate cultural development may precipitate cultural change in unforeseen and undesired directions (Wallace, 1996, 1999). Hargreaves (1994) found that attempts in North America to foster a collaborative teacher culture merely engendered 'contrived collegiality'—a poor substitute for the genuinely collaborative culture which he argues may arise spontaneously. Similar conclusions have been reached in studies of British industry (Anthony, 1994; Williams et al., 1993).

Third, teacher cultures frequently contain incompatible elements: contradictory beliefs and values coexisting in tension. An earlier study of secondary school SMTs conducted by Wallace and Hall (1994) showed how their culture of teamwork encompassed two contradictory sets of beliefs and values. SMT members believed in a management hierarchy with headteachers at its peak, since they are in charge of running the school under supervision of the governing body and have unique ability to affect colleagues' careers through their contribution to staff selection and development. The sense of hierarchy was reinforced by the system of graded posts for staff, representing differential status, salary and responsibility levels, where senior staff are entitled to oversee the work of junior colleagues for whose work they are responsible. At the same time, team members believed in the ability of all their number to make an equal contribution to teamwork, being entitled to have an equal say in working towards consensual decisions whatever their status in the management hierarchy. Headteachers were hierarchically superior as creators, developers and leaders of their SMTs, but also team members whose opinion carried equal weight with that of colleagues.

Fourth, empowerment of other staff does not guarantee that they will take up this entitlement in a manner acceptable to heads. Research has found consistently that a significant minority of SMT members remain uncommitted to teamwork and may even attempt to undermine their colleagues' efforts (Secondary Heads Association, 1992; Torrington and

Weightman, 1989; Wallace and Hall, 1994; Weindling and Earley, 1987). Even where commitment is uniform, SMT members other than the headteacher may use power accompanying their team membership to act in ways that lie outside the limits of practices that accord with the headteacher's 'comfort zone' (the range of others' acceptable or tolerable behaviours).

Under the structure of authority in British schools the decision over how far to share leadership has long lain within the gift of headteachers. Research over recent decades suggests that perhaps the majority actually behaved more in accordance with the 'head-master tradition' born of 19th-century public schools (Grace, 1995). Many primary heads identified closely with 'their' school, confining shared leadership to empowering colleagues to deliver their agenda (Hall and Southworth, 1997; Southworth, 1995). In a hands-off political climate where state education in Britain was a 'national service, locally administered', heads enjoyed considerable agency, empowered to adopt their idiosyncratic construction of headship, often entailing restricted sharing of leadership which cast their colleagues exclusively in the role of followers. However, research also suggests there was limited followership, teachers publicly toeing the official line of heads and subject leaders in the 'zone of policy' (Lortie 1969) while, behind the classroom door, in the 'zone of practice', they also possessed sufficient agency discreetly to do their own thing (Wallace, 1986).

Central government education reforms from the late 1980s changed all that. As part of a hands-on international political movement to increase public-sector efficiency (Clarke and Newman, 1997), state schooling is being 'modernized', transformed into what may be dubbed a 'community enterprise, nationally directed, steered and disciplined'. Local administration has been largely squeezed out, replaced by additional central government authority to direct educational essentials like curriculum, incorporation of new technology and determining standards through legislation, financial incentives and quangos, complemented by devolution of authority to headteachers (within centrally determined limits) over inessentials like the operating budget. The most compelling reason for sharing leadership is now less a matter of principle than of pragmatism in a hostile environment. Heads must share leadership and their colleagues must deliver. The former are ever more dependent on the latter to contribute their specialist expertise in implementing mandated reforms, to feed this expertise into the leadership process as they gain experience with new practices and to assist with monitoring implementation.

Heads now have less room to manoeuvre: their notion of headship is increasingly being constructed for them by external forces, and they can no longer afford not to accept the risk of sharing leadership in some degree. Yet an ironic consequence of central government strategy is to render sharing leadership as risky for heads as it is necessary. For while they still enjoy exclusive authority to decide how far to share leadership, they are also held uniquely accountable for the outcomes of their decision. Reforms designed to strengthen external accountability, like national assessment of pupil learning and regular external inspection of schools, both of which include publication of results, have increased the vulnerability of the very headteachers on whom central government ministers depend for implementation of their reform package. Heads alone are charged with legal responsibility for running the school within the oversight of the governing body. The accountability measures have increased the likelihood that headteachers will be publicly vilified if evidence is revealed of failure to implement central government reforms or to reach stipulated targets for educational standards. No less than one in seven primary school heads have been singled out by inspectors as offering poor leadership (OFSTED 1997).

Headteachers are confronted by a heightened dilemma: their greater dependence on colleagues disposes them towards sharing leadership. In a context of unprecedented accountability, however, they may be inhibited from sharing because it could backfire should empowered colleagues act in ways that generate poor standards of pupil achievement, alienate parents and governors, attract negative media attention or incur inspectors' criticism. If this is the reality of schooling, how far should headteachers be expected to risk sharing leadership, since it could negatively affect their reputation, colleagues' work, and ultimately children's education? If the risk of ineffective leadership can be reduced by limiting the amount of sharing, is it justifiable for headteachers to adopt a contingency approach, varying the degree of sharing as the situation evolves?

## The Case of Primary School SMTs

The remainder of the article seeks a tentative answer to these questions by considering evidence on the operation of primary school SMTs. First, relevant aspects of the research design and the combined cultural and political perspective framing the investigation are outlined. Second, findings are reported showing how the headteachers variably shared leadership by setting parameters for teamwork according to a differing mix of belief in a management hierarchy and in equal contribution of team members. Third, a model is put forward which links different levels of team synergy with interaction between headteachers and other SMT members, according to their belief in a management hierarchy and in equal contribution. Finally, a contingent approach to sharing school leadership is justified on the basis of this model and implications for training are identified.

The research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, investigated the operation of SMTs in large primary schools. (For a full account, see Wallace and Huckman, 1999.) Institutions with over 300 students were selected because SMTs in them would probably constitute a subset of the teaching staff, as in secondary schools. A key criterion for selecting SMTs for in-depth study was members' unified professed commitment to a team approach. Headteachers at potential sites were contacted and individual SMT members' stated commitment confirmed during a preliminary visit. Focused, interpretive case studies (Merriam, 1988) of four SMTs (labelled as Winton, Pinehill, Kingsrise and Waverley) were undertaken over the 1995/6 academic year. Data sources comprised 58 semi-structured interviews (eight with headteachers, 20 with other members of the SMTs, 26 with a sample of other staff, and four with chairs of school governing bodies); non-participant observation of 12 SMT meetings and 10 other meetings where SMT members were present; and a small document archive. Research questions for the case studies were derived from a literature review, the previous study of secondary school SMTs and an initial postal questionnaire survey of headteachers, to which interview questions related. Fieldnotes were taken during case-study observations and tape-recorded interviews. Summary tapes were prepared and transcribed with reference to fieldnotes, schedules and documents. Data analysis was informed by techniques for data reduction and display developed by Miles and Huberman (1994): interview summaries fed into site summaries, forming the basis for cross-site analysis; tables and matrices were constructed to display findings; the data set was scanned to explore the contextual complexity of specific interactions; and explanatory models were developed.

The cultural and political perspective guiding the research integrates concepts about

teacher professional cultures and micropolitics. It focuses on the reciprocal relationship between culture and power: cultural determinants of differential uses of power and uses of power to shape culture (Wallace, 1999). Culture informs deployment of power which, recursively, contributes to maintenance or evolution of this culture. A simple definition of culture is 'the way we do things around here' (Bower, 1966): beliefs and values about education, leadership and relationships common to some or all staff in a school. A culture of teamwork may develop among SMT members which comprises shared beliefs, values and norms of behaviour about how they work together to run the school. As indicated, a pivotal feature of the culture in the case studies was the interplay between uses of power according to belief in the management hierarchy and in the entitlement of all team members to make an equal contribution to the SMT. The uneasy coexistence of these beliefs is a consequence of the flow of wider social and political forces for cultural change and continuity going back to the headmaster tradition (based on belief in a strict hierarchy with heads at the top); the subsequent upsurge of demands from teachers to share in leadership (reflecting belief in equal rights as colleagues to participate in schools located within a democracy); and the new 'managerialist' belief in public-sector managers' right to manage (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Whitty et al., 1998) to achieve goals set by their political bosses (reasserting belief in hierarchy but with heads now in the middle of the chain of command).

Following Giddens (1984), a definition of power as 'transformative capacity'—use of resources to achieve interests—is employed. This conception was selected to encompass interactions which vary between the synergistic, where staff pull together to achieve the same goal, and the conflictual, where they pursue incompatible goals. Power may be divided (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980) into authority—use of resources legitimated by beliefs and values about status, including the right to apply sanctions—and influence—informal use of resources without recourse to sanctions linked to authority (although other sanctions may be available). Headteachers' conditions of service give them exclusive authority over other staff, but teachers may wield influence in seeking to support or undermine headteachers. The latter have recourse to authority and influence to promote a particular culture of teamwork within the SMT but cannot guarantee it will happen. Controlling other staff is, for headteachers, more a matter of delimitation—allowing for different behaviour within the boundaries of their comfort zone—than of establishing directive control over them. Changing beliefs about the redistribution of authority and influence between heads, their colleagues and other stakeholders reflect the impact of externally imposed reforms which delimit the agency of heads and other staff along quite narrowly defined boundaries. Headteachers may have created their SMTs, but not under conditions entirely of their own choosing.

## A Balancing Act

The four headteachers had authority to decide, according to their professional beliefs and values, whether to adopt a team approach to leadership and how far to share leadership within it. SMT operation at Winton was relatively egalitarian, with a strong emphasis on equal contribution by all members to a wide variety of team tasks; in the other three schools it was more strongly hierarchical, with deputies being more involved than other members in a narrower range of tasks. The four heads enjoyed very different degrees of freedom to choose their team mates. The headteacher at Pinehill was newly appointed

from elsewhere and inherited other members of the SMT. The headteachers of Kingsrise, Waverley and Winton had been in post for some years. They had both created their SMT and played a major part in selecting all team colleagues when vacancies had arisen, and so had been able to appoint colleagues who subscribed to their conception of teamwork.

Elements of a management hierarchy were intrinsic to headteachers' design of the four team structures. Each consisted of staff with highest status in the school, including one or more senior teachers whose status was reflected in the award of several salary increments above the basic level for teachers. The spread of individual management responsibilities among team members gave them joint oversight of other staff. Table 1 summarizes how it was achieved through a combination of cross-school responsibilities, such as appraisal, and departmental responsibilities for a group of classes. Most extensive cross-school responsibilities rested with the highest staff status levels in each team, headteachers retaining responsibility for the devolved school budget. (The numbers inside each cell of Table 1 indicate how many SMT members were at each status level and the management responsibilities of each person. For example, at Winton there were two deputies, one responsible for the infant department, the other for the junior department.)

The extent to which headteachers shared leadership depended on the balance they sought between expressing belief in the management hierarchy and in equal contribution of team members in the SMT's operation. The headteacher at Winton had created a small team expressly to facilitate extensive sharing consistent with her belief in promoting an equal contribution by all members, who could take initiatives and engage fully in debate:

I have always stuck out against a larger team because I couldn't see how I could make it workable on a regular basis. I couldn't imagine how I could have regular and meaningful meetings with seven or eight people. So it didn't just become a token thing—'We have got a senior management team, we meet once a fortnight, and I bring things to them and say, "This is what I want us to do!", and they rubber stamp it.' I don't think you can have genuine discussions in a group that size.

The hierarchical approach she had rejected as tokenism, where a headteacher would merely seek support for his or her agenda, was close to that embraced by the other headteachers who opted for larger teams. She portrayed how the Winton SMT was central to orchestrating the work of teachers in this large school through members' shared responsibility for:

Organisation, day to day, week to week, year to year . . . getting the whole thing to hang together smoothly. The school is such an enormous machine, not just because of the numbers but because of the layout, and it is like trying to drive the thing along together without having all the wheels trying to go in different directions at the same time as bumping along.

By contrast, the headteacher at Kingsrise was unwilling to share leadership widely because of her interest in retaining tight hierarchical control over other SMT members which delegation could jeopardize:

One of the hardest things in my view is for a primary head to let go and to delegate. We are used to having everything under our control and it is very, very hard to delegate it

Table 1. Case-study SMT membership and individual management responsibilities

| <i>Status and salary level of SMT members</i> | <i>Winton (4 members)</i>                                  | <i>Pinehill (6 members)</i>                                                                                                                         | <i>Kingsrise (7 members)</i>                                                               | <i>Waverley (5 members)</i>                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Headteacher                                   | (1) overall responsibility, school budgets, governing body | (1) overall responsibility, school budgets, governing body                                                                                          | (1) overall responsibility, school budgets, governing body                                 | (1) overall responsibility, school budgets, governing body                                                            |
| Deputy headteacher(s)                         | (1) infant department<br>(2) junior department             | (1) in-service training, appraisal, assessment, students with special needs, parents, link between headteacher and other staff                      | (1) in-service training, parents, link between headteacher and other staff, mathematics    | (1) assessment, student profiling, link between headteacher and other staff, lower junior department, art and display |
| Teacher(s)<br>(3 salary increments)           | (1) students with special needs, upper juniors team leader | (1) early years department, parents as educators<br>(2) middle years department, classroom management<br>(3) older years department community links | (1) assessment, student profiling, English<br>(2) English as a second-language team leader |                                                                                                                       |
| Teacher(s)<br>(2 salary increments)           |                                                            | (1) curriculum management group leader                                                                                                              | (1) infant department<br>(2) lower junior department<br>(3) upper junior department        | (1) infant department<br>(2) junior department, mathematics, technology<br>(3) English, information technology        |

down and think, 'Are they going to do it the way I want it?' And if they don't get it the way I want it personally, then I know I will have to let them run with it. And if it's effective I must accept it, but if it's not effective, I know that I will have to step in and say, 'Now look, we have given you your head but do you think this is working?'

How limited headteachers' power can be to set parameters for SMT operation when inheriting a team was demonstrated at Pinehill. The new headteacher attempted to impose his authority to introduce a more hierarchical mode of operation on other members of the existing team. The previous headteacher and deputy had been absent for long periods and other members of the SMT had enjoyed the opportunity to make a relatively equal contribution to teamwork. Several would not, initially, accept the more restricted contribution the new headteacher allowed them. One pointed to the erstwhile egalitarian practice in the SMT, stating that:

It used to be a totally equal team, no matter what the [individual salary and status] positions were . . . I used to feel equally valued as everyone else in the group. And I think the new management structure's more top down.

Department leaders used influence by offering minimal compliance to the headteacher while complaining to other teachers behind his back, generating a widespread perception of a disunited team.

## Varying the Balance between Equal and Hierarchical Sharing

Different degrees of sharing were expressed through several aspects of the teams' practice. First, the extent and boundaries of team tasks diverged: at Winton, the headteacher encouraged all other SMT members to participate fully in most leadership tasks, from days spent together out of school working up policy proposals to full participation in maintaining student discipline. At Pinehill, team tasks excluded curriculum matters (which were addressed by a parallel group consisting of the headteacher and deputy and a teacher designated as curriculum leader). Monitoring implementation of decisions extending to classroom observation was being developed through training for the headteacher and deputies at Winton; the headteachers of the other schools had accepted that this potentially threatening level of internal monitoring was a task for them alone. They were not sole determinants of the limits of SMT practice: reticence among SMT colleagues to monitor the performance of other staff ran counter to the wider staff professional culture which accorded individuals considerable autonomy behind the classroom door. These SMT members had used influence to voice their unease and realize their interest in avoiding an unwelcome task. The notion of a management hierarchy suited them here, in that they could argue it was not their job as junior members to monitor colleagues.

Second, the headteachers variably empowered team colleagues to contribute to tasks they did share. While the headteacher at Winton encouraged SMT colleagues to take strategic initiatives within broad boundaries (such as piloting a new system for improving student discipline), the other headteachers confined sharing to consulting team colleagues on their pre-specified agenda. One SMT member at Waverley commented how the headteacher often used other members to:

... bounce ideas off the rest of us, discuss ideas with us before going to staff meetings, raise general issues and so on. So, as far as him actually allocating tasks to us, that's been fairly minimal up to now. He's really discussed things with us, asked our opinions on things, we've fed back to him, he's taken that into account, and then he's made decisions or not made decisions.

Where all members participated in making team decisions, the norm was universal that a working consensus must be achieved. Debate leading to a decision at Winton, however, commonly comprised 'open consultation' where all members were encouraged equally to offer ideas. The other headteachers tended to opt for a more hierarchical approach of 'bounded consultation', where they put forward their proposed decision and sought colleagues' comments before taking it to a meeting with other staff. Pooling information to build an overview was a feature of the four teams, but the flow of information and opinion was multidirectional at Winton and channelled more unidirectionally in the other SMTs towards what the headteacher wished to know.

Third, appreciation varied of how individual members possessed different knowledge and skills which could augment those of their team colleagues. SMT members at Winton were aware of the complementarity of their expertise connected with their individual management responsibility, and of contrasting skills linked to personalities which were required to balance creative thinking with getting tasks completed. One deputy stated:

Teams need different skills, and on my own I haven't got them all . . . [the headteacher] is a very good innovator, brings new ideas, wants to set the ball rolling with new things; I would be the main 'keep it plodding along' person; [the other deputy] is a completer, she has got a tick list . . . a systematic way of doing things.

Awareness of complementarity in the other teams was restricted largely to knowledge connected with the hierarchical distribution of individual management responsibilities, suggesting that their contribution to the team did not run as deep.

While the team approach at Winton expressed belief in equal contribution of SMT members most fully, expression of belief in a management hierarchy was not only enshrined in the structure but was also reflected at times in the team's practice. Observation of Winton SMT meetings indicated that members other than the headteacher expressed their belief in the management hierarchy by ensuring their contribution stayed inside the implicit boundaries set by her. They would check voluntarily that she was comfortable with the course of action they were advocating. One deputy, when discussing her initiative to pilot the scheme for improving student discipline, asked the headteacher if it would be OK to go ahead 'without you knowing the detail at this stage'. Where there was disagreement over a team decision, the headteacher noted that:

There's often a casting vote type of situation, and they will accept that and acknowledge that there are some times when we are not all going to agree and we will have gone backwards and forwards but in the final analysis I will just have to say, 'This is the way it is.' I think it works quite well because we know we would never move forward on a lot of issues if we didn't have that unspoken arrangement.

The culture of teamwork shared throughout this team included the norm that the headteacher had authority as formal leader within the management hierarchy to pull rank, but

only for contingent situations where equal contribution did not result in consensus. The flexibility with which all team members were able to switch between the two contradictory beliefs as circumstances changed was one foundation of synergy for this SMT. Unified commitment to combining individual energies in pursuit of a shared goal was not jeopardized when the prevalent norm of equal contribution was temporarily replaced by reversion to hierarchical operation. Team colleagues' willingness to switch in this way reduced the risk for the headteacher of losing control that relatively equal sharing can bring. The culture of teamwork here was sophisticated enough for contradictory beliefs and values to coexist without conflict, mutually empowering all members.

The depth of all members' commitment to teamwork at Winton was revealed by their practice of meeting daily before lessons began, weekly after school, and occasionally at weekends. Time spent in meetings in the other teams was considerably lower, suggesting that more restricted sharing of leadership required less coordination. The pattern of meetings of subgroups within the SMTs was equally symptomatic. An element of hierarchy was present in all cases where headteachers and deputies met whenever required to deal with day-to-day issues, often during lesson times. These informal meetings happened more frequently in the three SMTs marked by a strong element of hierarchy than at Winton. At Pinehill, they were supplemented by a regular formal meeting between the headteacher and deputy, indicating how she participated more fully in shared leadership than her less senior SMT colleagues. Subgroup meetings were more central to operation of the three more hierarchical SMTs.

## Sharing Leadership through Teamwork

The headteacher at Winton shared most leadership tasks, shared them with all her SMT colleagues and did so relatively equally. While the other headteachers empowered their team colleagues to make a more restricted contribution as equals (especially to debate and some decisions), they shared fewer leadership tasks, shared less with more junior colleagues and shared tasks unequally with all other members. The agency of all four headteachers was similarly delimited by national contextual factors connected with central government reforms, but differentially by school level factors, most notably the opportunity to create their team and choose its membership. The heads retained sufficient agency to employ their authority in orchestrating alternative approaches to sharing leadership within the SMT, dependent on their contrasting balance of belief in a management hierarchy and in equal contribution. Their team colleagues likewise had agency to use influence in making a supportive or resistant response to heads according to the balance of their own adherence to these contradictory beliefs and values. The agency of heads and their colleagues may have been more tightly delimited by reforms but it was still significant. The new central government promotion of a management hierarchy had yet to eliminate adherence to more egalitarian norms whose origin predates the reform era.

Figure 1 is a model explaining what occurred within the agency of the heads and other SMT members. It compares norms relating to belief in a management hierarchy and in equal contribution to which the headteacher subscribes (the left and right hand columns) with the equivalent norms to which other SMT members subscribe (the upper and lower rows). Each cell depicts the combination of norms held by the headteacher and other SMT members. (For simplicity, it has been assumed that other SMT members share allegiance to the same norm at any time.) The upper left cell represents the situation at Kingsrise and Waverley, whose headteachers adopted a strongly hierarchical team approach which

their SMT colleagues accepted. Interaction was harmonious since there was congruence between norms followed by all members. The headteachers took a low risk of loss of control by restricting the contribution of other members. The potential for SMT-wide synergy was also only moderate because the range of shared tasks over which their energies could be combined was limited and other members were not encouraged to take initiatives and to contribute their ideas beyond responding to the headteachers' proposals.

The lower right cell represents the situation at Winton, where the headteacher encouraged other members to make an equal contribution and they were willing to do so. Here the potential for SMT synergy was high because all members were involved in a wide range of tasks and were encouraged to contribute all of which they were capable, including taking their own initiatives. The risk of the headteacher losing control remained low only as long as other members sought outcomes within the headteacher's comfort zone and were willing to compromise if necessary to achieve this situation. Interaction is harmonious in both cells where there is congruence between the norms followed by all members, but the level of synergy is potentially greater where all involved can make an equal contribution.

The solid arrow linking the upper left and lower right cells indicates how a team may sustain harmonious interaction and reap as much synergy as is possible at any time through all members working towards making an equal contribution. If the contingency arises where one or more other members advocate action lying outside the headteacher's comfort zone, and can accept the headteacher pulling rank, withdrawing a decision from the team and making it unilaterally as the team leader who is externally accountable for the work of the SMT, then harmony may be sustained. The key to smooth operation and maximizing synergy is for both headteacher and other SMT members to be flexible enough to switch together temporarily, for such contingencies, from adherence to the norm of equal contribution to the norm of a management hierarchy.

The remaining two cells depict how synergy may be compromised through disjunction

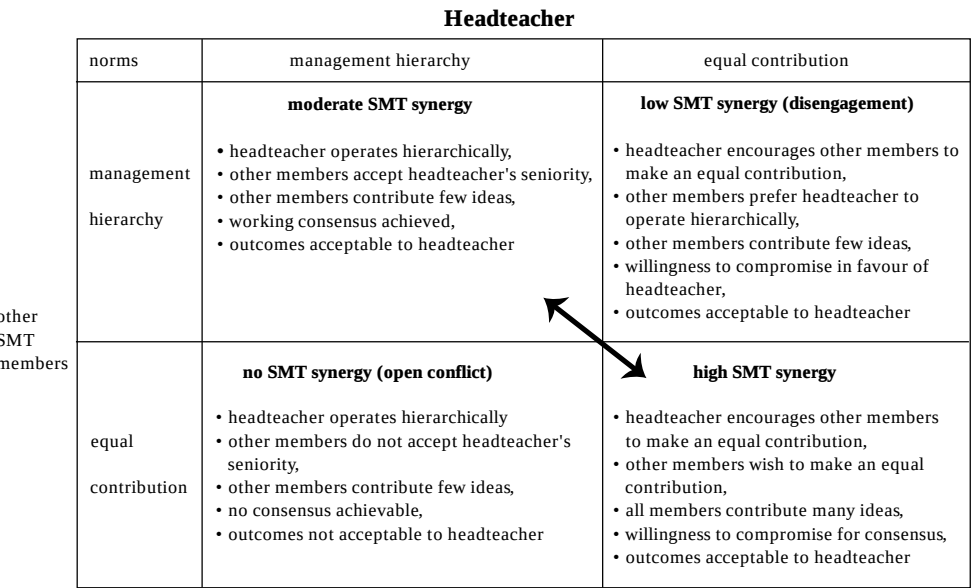


Figure 1. Modelling interaction between the headteacher and other SMT members

between norms followed by the headteacher and other SMT members. The lower left cell covers situations where the headteacher operates hierarchically by pulling rank according to his or her position in the management hierarchy but other members do not accept this move because it transgresses their belief in their entitlement to make an equal contribution. Conflict may ensue, as at Pinehill after the arrival of the new headteacher when other members found his strongly hierarchical approach to leadership unacceptable. The upper right cell covers situations where the headteacher encourages colleague members to make an equal contribution, but they act according to their subordinate position in the management hierarchy. The result is disengagement of other members, as they withhold from making the contribution fostered by the headteacher. Such a situation arose in the more hierarchical SMTs where headteachers encouraged other team members to participate in monitoring other staff but they declined the invitation, implying that it was the headteachers' task as top manager.

## From Practice to Prescription: A Contingent Approach to Sharing Leadership

This model indicates how different approaches to sharing leadership in the case-study SMTs proved significant for the degree of synergy attainable. While the arguments put forward earlier for the principle of sharing school leadership widely and equally are persuasive as far as they go, they fail to take into account two features of the real world, at least in Britain: the risk that sharing results in ineffective leadership which is unacceptable because of its negative impact on students' education; and the strict hierarchy of accountability where the headteacher may have to answer for empowering colleagues to make an equal contribution if things are deemed to have gone wrong. Given this far from ideal context, the research implies that prescriptions for school leadership should be informed by evidence and so rest on principles that are context-sensitive: the approach advocated will therefore be contingent on circumstances. For the UK, evidence-informed principles might be:

1. school leadership should be shared widely and equally to maximize the potential benefit for children's education and for teachers' job satisfaction and professional growth;
2. headteachers have responsibility for promoting shared leadership but the right, because of their unique accountability for doing so, to delimit the boundaries of sharing and to have the final say where there is disagreement over leadership decisions;
3. other teachers have the right to participate in school leadership but the responsibility, because of the headteacher's unique accountability for their work, to ensure that they operate within the boundaries set, including letting the headteacher have the final say where there is disagreement over leadership decisions.

These principles would justify British headteachers proceeding with caution towards the most extensive, equal sharing of leadership possible to maximize potential for synergy, while allowing for contingent reversal to hierarchical operation to minimize the risk of disaster. Such a context-dependent prescription runs counter to the more generic prescriptions portrayed in North American normative theories like transformational leadership and organizational learning, whose applicability to the UK environment has been questioned. Arguably, such theories beg for elaboration and refinement to reduce their cultural

relativity, so that they embrace more of the complexities of leadership in different real world situations and have wider applicability between contexts.

Finally, school leadership training and informal learning support should include raising participants' awareness of their contradictory beliefs and values. Assistance could be offered with learning to live with this contradiction and to switch between alternative beliefs and values as contingencies arise. Rather than offering simplistic advice (until recently, in Britain, pushing towards context-free equal sharing of leadership), headteachers could be advised to adopt a contingent approach, depending on an ongoing situational analysis. The approach to training and shared leadership practice suggested here flies in the face of most training in the UK and elsewhere which tends to reduce the complexity of leadership to a single formula for action. The research shows that real life is not so straightforward, and the sooner training catches up with this complexity, the better. It is ironic that another UK reform—preparatory training for aspiring headteachers introduced in 1997—is cast so much in terms of hierarchy, reversing trainers' equally simplistic earlier orientation. The central government project of 'modernizing' the teaching profession (DfEE, 1998), reflecting a hierarchical approach to leadership in the service of New Labour educational goals, may be challenged because it inhibits headteachers and their colleagues from sharing leadership in ways that maximize everyone's potential contribution. An approach to sharing leadership which works towards equal contribution, with an occasional regression to hierarchy, may be where the synergy lies that could really make a difference to the quality of school leadership, and so help raise educational standards. Ministers would do well to practise the evidence-based practice they preach. Yet the training syllabus focuses closely on the headteacher as directive top manager (Teacher Training Agency, 1998). Sharing leadership through an SMT scarcely makes it onto the new training agenda. Where is the justice in that?

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