**1 Introduction**

The worldwide grip of distributed leadership as a favoured theory of educational leadership is apparent in the academic and gray literature. Research articles flow from Africa, the [Arab](file:///C%3A%5Carab) nations, Europe, Scandinavia and Anglophone countries. What appears evident is the one facet of distributed leadership on which the field of educational leadership can agree: that since the 1990s the theory has held a dominant role in the research and development of practice (Gumus, Bellibas, Esen, and Gumus*,* 2018). Much else is contested, including a definition, whether it is solely a heuristic lens or also a way of leading, and if its impact on learners and faculty has been positive or negative. This chapter adopts a critical perspective, in broad terms arguing that the theory is flawed and serves purposes other than those that are espoused. It explores some of the assertions, uncertainties, and contradictions of distributed leadership as both concept and practice. It suggests that bureaucracy is a more enduring and universal form in education and that its disparagement and disregard has been to the detriment of the field.

**2 Critiques of distributed leadership**

*2.1 Distributing what?*

It is not surprising that there is no agreement on a definition of distributed leadership, as it adds one opaque idea, distribution, to that of another, leadership, which itself is a highly ambiguous and contested concept. Some, such as Lakomski (2008), go so far as to consider the concept of leadership “a folk theory” and “therefore a contender for outright elimination” (p. 161). Historically, the extensive literature on theories of leadership has focused on who and what leaders are, their values, ethics, personality traits and so on, and their actions – that is, what they do, the two being interrelated. Distributed leadership has introduced into this scenario greater emphasis on leadership outcomes as unintended, emerging from the concatenation of intention and the material and social context: “leadership is the outcome both of people’s intentions (intentionality) and the complex flow of interactions in the daily life of schools (emergence)” (Woods & Roberts, 2019: 665).

Though distributed leadership reaches back at least as far as the 1950s as a concept that has much in common with shared leadership, systems leadership and other generic leadership theory, there is a more recent insistence on a theoretical distinctiveness, drawing on the developing science of cognition as a socially distributed process. Halverson (2002) uses Hutchins (1995) as a source of distributed cognition theory: “*a model of the operation of a sociocultural system from which the human actor has been removed*” (p. 363, original emphasis), in contrast to an earlier person-centred “model of an individual’s internal cognitive processes” (p. 249). Lakomski and Evers (2016) describe the process of socially distributed cognition as recognizing that individual intentional agency cannot account for how humans function and that “cognition, in this view, ‘leaks’ into the world, therefore is no longer bounded by skin and skull” (p. 9).

If leadership is reconceived as distributed cognition leaking from multiple individuals into the organization, it perpetuates long-term uncertainty over the concept of leadership, in particular over distinguishing leadership activity from other unintentional cognition: as potentially, everything that happens in an organization could be labeled leadership. Clarke calls this “cognitive bloat” (Clark, 2008: 80, 278). Gronn (2009: 200) translates this tendency into the context of education leadership as “a somewhat promiscuous inclination to think of virtually every initiative on the part of teachers and administrators as leadership” (p. 201).

This impulse can be illustrated by Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz, and Seashore Louis’s 2009 longitudinal study of six schools in the United States over three years. This presents teachers meeting together to plan instruction more effectively as an example of distributed leadership in action. In Chinese schools, similar collaborative meetings to improve student learning are routine and are known as teacher learning or teacher research, not leadership (Liu & Hallinger, 2018). In Finland, teachers collaborate at district level to achieve curriculum reform, and this is conceived as shared sense-making, not leadership (Pietarinen, Pyhältö & Soini, 2019). Collaboration by teachers to improve curriculum and learning can be traced back in the literature over half a century, variously referred to as cooperative teacher preparation, teacher development, networking, cooperative learning, sharing professional knowledge, and many other terms (Brooks Smith, 1968). Timetabling is another example of an activity undertaken by a teacher that is defined as leadership in Murphy *et al.*’s study on the grounds that it involves not just software manipulation but also value judgments (Gronn, 2003). The difficulty is that all educational activity involves value judgments and much of it entails working with other people. If most activities, even the most mundane, can be defined as leadership, then leadership as a distinct activity disappears.

Leadership also disappears in a second sense. Woods and Roberts (2019) assert that “Leadership is not reducible just to the intentions and actions of individuals” (p. 665). Such a concept of distributed leadership as an emerging, spontaneous, fluid and dispersed activity offers a solipsistic vision in which the embodied human leader disappears behind the disembodied concept of leadership. In using Hutchins’ (1995) construction of cognition as a sociocultural system separate from human actors, Halverson (2002) acknowledges as much. A critical perspective insists, to the contrary, that educational organizations’ service to learners is embodied, dependent on the socially (un)just intentions and actions of individuals, and that the impact of action relates to the differential power that they hold. Such power may draw on the authority of a particular role but, equally, may relate to knowledge, access to resources or networks, charisma, or a host of other factors. The critical factor in supporting leaders, for practical purposes, is that individual human beings use conscious intention. The guidance of practice engages the leader’s intention and, in any attempt to bring about change, the consciousness of power is crucial.

*2.2 Power and distributed leadership*

Power is essentially the capacity to influence or direct others to act in a way that the powerholder wishes (Lumby, 2019a). This straightforward definition overlies a number of complex and contested theories on how such capacity is acquired and implemented. Direct orders may be used but, equally, indirect strategies may shape the playing field, and even the mindset of the players so that their actions are influenced, circumscribed, or shaped without them necessarily being aware of it (Lukes, 1974).

Competing ontologies underlie the research on leadership in education and, consequently, our concepts of power and organizations. On one hand are concepts in which faculty can be trusted to use their professional knowledge in the interests of learners. Here, cooperation functions effectively, based on “educational traditions and changes infused by different visions – those that prioritize collaboration, democratic values and humanistic aims” (Woods & Roberts, 2019: 663) that are embodied in practice; that is, “a shift away from a leadership paradigm based on power and control” (Halpin, 2003: 85). On the other hand, a much less promulgated vision sees leaders, teachers and organizations quite differently. Research from the 1980s (Hoyle, 1982) to more recently (Brosky, 2011; Samier, 2014; Lochmiller & Pawlicki, 2018) has shown that educators are perceived to work for what is best for their learners only in part (Piot & Kelchtermans, 2016). They also pursue individual and or partisan goals by means of relationships, forming coalitions and engaging in conflict. What is best for learners is contested, and action is arrived at through the temporary resolution of the ongoing competition between these interests. This view presents organizations as places where, regardless of which structural changes are made, hierarchies and coalitions emerge (Courpasson & Clegg, 2006).

Power in the field of education is generally viewed negatively, as compulsion or manipulation, both of which are assumed to undermine professionalism. Professionalism “gives central stage to and trusts the professional judgment of teacher educators to do what they deem is good, appropriate, or best” (Vanassche, Kidd & Murray, 2019: 485). Faculty’s freedom to do as they wish is argued to be essential to the effectiveness of education and the self-identity of educators, justified by their context-specific knowledge and skills. An erosion of professionalism has been strongly linked to analyses of managerialism since the 1990s and embodies resistance to the perceived growing power of senior authority figures. Distributed leadership uses the same argument as professionalism, linking greater faculty autonomy to effectiveness by means of lessening power differentials and opening up leadership.

A vision that rejects oligarchy and offers greater freedom and equity, as befits the professionalism of educators, is an attractive prospect for self-identity and, perhaps because of this, is widely evident in the literature on educational leadership in the last three decades. Micropolitically based research and analyses are less frequent: the view of educators pursuing self-interest as well as learners’ interests is far less comfortable. However, many argue this it is neither a negative nor a cynical picture but simply a reflection of the reality of day-to-day life in schools, colleges, and universities (Bolden, 2004; Brosky, 2011). It is perhaps a more clear-sighted assessment that both at national and organizational level: “Much of the time, education is not about what is best for children; it is about the adult issues of power and control” (Owen, 2006: 103).

Schools, colleges and universities are unlikely to be staffed by faculty who completely put aside their self-interest and engage in no conflict or micropolitical strategies. Nor are they devoid of those who wish to do the best for learners for much of the time and sincerely pursue what they deem to be a path of integrity. Most faculty are neither angels nor demons but a complex mix of self-awareness and self-deception, and who both collaborate and oppose. The absolutes to be relied upon are that power will be in play and that trust in faculty will inevitably be circumscribed by a realistic vision of human capacity rather than an idealization of professionalism.

Such a position can be traced in the critical literature on professionalism, which recognizes that educators’ power is typically invisible. Where it is discernible, power is presented as necessary to the interests of the learner (Osgood, 2006). The classic features of professionalism, which include the acquisition and deployment of a specialized set of skills and vocabulary to provide appropriate ethical service to the client, shape it as an “apolitical and common-sense construct” (p. 5). Many commentators suggest that this “appearance of neutrality” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 242) disguises a struggle for control, where the discourse is a tool for the acquisition of power. Its purpose as a means for the professional to gain greater autonomy and control must be hidden, even from the professionals in question, as pursuing power contradicts a self-identity based on devotion to service (Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011).

Until the 1990s, the functional literature on professionalism largely served as a means to resist perceived attempts by the state to control educators (Dillabough, 1999). From the 1990s onwards, the concept of distributed leadership has arguably taken over as the major discourse proposing greater autonomy for educators to lead in the interests of the learner (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2019). Just as the literature on professionalism insisted that improved service to the learner was the underlying justification for faculty’s preference for autonomy, so has distributed leadership emphasised the learner as the primary beneficiary. For example, Leithwood *et al.* (2019) insist that distributed leadership’s positive impact on learner outcomes has been proven empirically and those who question it are mistaken. Consequently, from professionalism to distributed leadership, an unbroken tradition can be discerned in the education leadership literature. Both discourses are used essentially to fight for greater faculty autonomy. In both cases, improving learning is the major justification and the power that shapes which faculty gain greater autonomy or otherwise is largely bleached out, as is faculty’s resistance to the power of, or the control by those in authority roles and the state.

Distributed leadership has been frequently critiqued for not translating ideals about power into specific actions, structures, and processes (Hatcher, 2005; Flessa, 2009). For example, Murphy *et al.* (2009) suggest that “distributed leadership must grow from the soil of changed organisational and professional norms and be actively nurtured by administrative leaders in a variety of ways” (p. 189): these “ways” are not explained. Flessa (2009) points out that, while Spillane and Diamond (2007) instruct us to pay close intention to interaction, not just action, they neither explicitly engage with micropolitical understandings of how human beings interact, nor draw out how we are to interpret interactions and respond in terms of improving learners’ experience. Woods and Roberts (2018: 677) provide a list of principles to support the development of collaborative leadership. Their suggestions, such as “a partnership between schools and external agencies” or “opportunities for open discussion”, ignore the likely power plays inherent in such partnerships and communications (Griffiths, Vidovich & Chapman, 2009). A detailed analysis of the literature on distributed leadership reveals either a general pursuit of idealized change, such as unspecified transformations of culture or structure, or, when more explicit, actions that for decades have been part of leaders’ repertoire and fail to distinguish distributed leadership as different from what went before.

Osgood (2006) argues that communities locate themselves in relation to discourses that “reflect the socially sanctioned dominance of certain ideologies and subjugation of others” (Sinclair, 1996: 232) and that “alternative counter-discourses become pathologized and marginalized” (p. 6). This is the case with distributed leadership, which has largely supplanted other theories of leadership. Following Foucault’s insistence that we consider alternative perspectives, the questions then are: If the guidance based on distributed leadership as a concept lacks engagement with the reality of day-to-day life in educational organizations, are any other theories more compelling? What theory or theories best support fallible human beings, working in contexts where ideals and micropolitical interests coexist? It might be a helpful exercise to consider the most pathologized theory of all, bureaucracy.

**3 Bureaucracy**

The features of bureaucracy as outlined by Weber (1947) are widely known: the appointment and reward of faculty on merit related to their education, training and experience; labor demarcated by role and expertise; a hierarchy within which each is subject to the instruction of superiors through agreed rules and procedures; and security of tenure. Bureaucracy is “founded on authority, that is, the belief in a legitimate, rational-legal political order” (Olsen, 2005: 2). Both in societal discourse and in education, the term has come to be connected with, at best, negative and restricting structures and processes and, at worst, malign intentions that dehumanize and undermine individual agency (Courpasson & Clegg, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2009). However, its origins relate strongly to values of justice and equality. Just as distributed leadership now claims to be a response to the changing context of society and organizations, and specifically increased complexity, so Weber’s (1989a) conception of bureaucracy was in response to “the general growth in those demands on the administration, which result from the increasing complexity of civilisation” (p. 348), and a shift from nineteenth-century models of leadership to one that he saw as more rational and so potentially more effective.

As initially conceived, bureaucracy offered an alternative to the untrammelled power of oligarchy, with its historic baggage of nepotism, simony, corruption and other forms of exclusion, such as ‘race’ (Weber, 1989b). The distinctive, rule-based approach that is currently deplored by many was an attempt by Weber (1947) to conceive a method not to inhibit all human initiative but to prevent illegitimate behavior, thus protecting the individual and, by this means, to secure effective organizational functioning (Kallinikos, 2004). Just as many believe that society moves forward by offering all citizens the protection of being subject to the rule of law, so bureaucracy subordinates all members of an organization to the same rules, thereby attempting to circumvent arbitrary or self-seeking action by those with most power.

In its vision of greater equality and more open access to leadership, distributed leadership is based on a positive view of human nature and capacities. Similarly, bureaucracy implies a view of human nature, but it is a less optimistic view. It assumes that human beings are not always fitted for particular leadership roles, nor will they always put the interests of the organization first. Selection and boundaries are required. Bureaucracy assumes that faculty will want a structure that promotes their career, rules about salary, security of tenure, and access to opportunities that are based on rational decisions: the “‘objective’ execution of business in this context means execution which has ‘no regard for persons’ and which follows calculable rules” (Weber, 1989a: 351).

Weber’s hope was that a bureaucratic organization might go some way toward eliminating the sometimes overt and sometimes subtle or covert means by which some people rise more than others in terms of status, salary and access to challenging work, to the detriment of those whom the organization serves. However, the notion that an organization with classic bureaucratic features would banish inappropriate behavior is as much an ideal type as distributed leadership. Weber (1947) suggested that sociologists need to conceive of pure forms of organization in order to be able to make distinctions and evaluate implications; however, “this ideal *pure* form, is perhaps as little likely to be found in the real world as is a physical reaction, calculated on the assumption of an absolute vacuum” (Weber, 1989b: 23, original emphasis). He reflected on the potential of bureaucratic organizations to support ethical and effective functioning that opened up opportunities to individuals based on training, experience and equality before the rules, yet he was also aware of the possibility that application of the model could tip into a rigid and dysfunctional application of systems. From its inception, the concept of bureaucracy accepted the inevitability that human beings would use organizational forms of leadership both to achieve positive outcomes and to subvert them with negative consequences.

Some critics of distributed leadership have similarly conceived of negative outcomes from distributed leadership in practice (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2009; Hatcher, 2005), but many more have promoted it on the basis that deliberate encouragement of many into leadership roles and fluid self-selection of leaders represents a liberation that leads to greater organizational effectiveness. The potential for distributed leadership to deepen exclusion, and thereby reduce effectiveness, is less evident in the literature. The formal or informal appointment or the spontaneous emergence of a leader may be predicated not just on an individual’s choice but on the willingness of others to accept him or her as a leader. Consequently, stereotypical prototypes of what a leader looks like serve to shape the willingness to support. These may relate as much to unjustified prejudice as to the individual’s expertise. The flows into and out of leadership according to organizational need, which is suggested by some to be an identifier of distributed leadership, depict an organization as apolitical, free from sexism, racism, and other forms of prejudice. Simultaneously, numerous studies of distributed leadership in action repeatedly show both control over entry into leadership by those in senior positions and the exclusion of some individuals for reasons other than capability (Hairon, Goh & Lin, 2014; Murphy *et al.,* 2009).

Qualifiers such as “bounded empowerment” (Bouwmans *et al.,* 2019: 568) or “pragmatic schools” (Hairon *et al.,* 2014: 370) have emerged to limit the earlier optimistic explorations of distributed leadership. The latter study suggests that distributed leadership is useful in Singapore schools, while also making it clear that faculty are uncomfortable with the notion and do not wish to expend time on leadership which they see as the province of those appointed to such roles: “they do not wish to spend time for the self-organization work needed” (p. 379). This quotation raises the issue of the cultural inappropriateness of distributed leadership in parts of the world that do not prize a reduction in power distance to the same extent that is evident in the West, where the concept of distributed leadership evolved.

**4 Sustaining the weakness of the field**

The research on distributed leadership perpetuates several weaknesses in the field of education leadership: poor historical awareness; side-lining of inconvenient alternative perspectives; unacknowledged methodological limitations; cultural colonialism through global promotion of a concept based on Western values; and marginalization of the issue of exclusion.

*4.1 Poor historical awareness*

An example of poor historical awareness is the excoriation of bureaucracy and the presentation of distributed leadership as overturning what are characterized as the nineteenth-century values and structures that inhibit leadership by the many (Murphy *et al.,* 2009; Day, Sammons & Hopkins *et al.,* 2010). Such assertions are based on “oversimplified and stylized images of the bureaucratic form… marked by an astonishingly naïve functionalism devoid of any historical awareness” (Kallinikos, 2004: 2). The initial purpose of bureaucratic forms, to create more egalitarian, just, and effective organizations, is lost and replaced by a caricature that presents only its potential disadvantages, which Weber (1947) fully anticipated and acknowledged, and none of its advantages.

*4.2 Theoretical evangelism*

Much of distributed leadership research’s blindness to alternative perspectives can be illustrated by reference to bureaucracy. Some assert that distributed leadership is evident in all educational organizations, given that spontaneous leadership will emerge in a group of people whatever its intentions, structure, or culture (Gronn, 2016). Woods and Roberts (2013) insist that “leadership is a distributed phenomenon”; however, there is at least as much evidence that education embodies bureaucracy, given its widely evident framework of rules, standards and processes, sometimes state-mandated, matching the features of bureaucracy. The persistence of evidence showing that in education the dominant form is a formal hierarchy (Earley *et al.,* 2012) is played down by assertions that, within a distributed leadership system, formal leaders are still necessary and that hierarchy runs alongside heterarchy (Zala-Mezö *et al.,* 2019). What a hierarchy brings positively to leadership is either underexplored or categorized as a component of distributed leadership. A key characteristic of bureaucracy, the allocation of roles to those with relevant expertise, is explained exclusively as a facet of distributed leadership: for example, “patterns of leadership distribution tend to be based on patterns of expertise” in “authentic distributed leadership” (Leithwood *et al.,* 2019: 10) rather than being analyzed as a defining characteristic of bureaucracy. There is a tendency to characterize factors as illustrating or providing evidence of the presence of distributed leadership even though they could just as well be evidence of alternative forms of leadership using other theoretical frameworks.

Compare research in educational leadership with that in generic leadership and a different breadth become apparent. Bureaucracy rarely appears in educational leadership research except as something to be avoided, replaced, or deplored (Lumby, 2019b). By contrast, generic leadership research has engaged with challenging and developing bureaucracy, evolving new concepts such as representative bureaucracy (Kemp, Mathias & Raji*,* 2019) and hybrid adaptive bureaucracy (Zhi & Pearson, 2017), just two illustrative examples of many attempts to evolve hybrid and alternative models in public services (Fotaki & Jingjit, 2018). The narrow focus on distributed leadership in educational leadership research has deprived the field of necessary knowledge and insights into the bureaucratic form that is, to some degree, evident in all educational organizations.

*4.3 Insufficient interrogation of research methodology*

The primary justification for the introduction of distributed leadership as a practice is that it will improve learning. The literature on distributed leadership asserts its connection to improved student outcomes. For example, Harris (2008: 3) claims that “Distributed leadership is a common denominator of highly effective organizations across different sectors”. Many researchers make similar claims (Timperley, 2008; Day, Sammons, Hopkins *et al.* (2010). Research has focused increasingly on identifying the connection definitively. For instance, Heck and Hallinger (2010) conducted a large-scale, longitudinal study and concluded that “the evidence therefore suggests that change in distributed leadership can be empirically linked to change in school improvement capacity and subsequent growth in student learning” (p. 881). Such claims continue (Supovitz, D’Auria & Spillane, 2019).

The extent to which relevant research is considered trustworthy determines whether a connection is accepted between distributed leadership and improved student outcomes. Multiple issues have been raised. First is the widely expressed difficulty in reaching a clear definition of distributed leadership that is adequate for translation into distinctive and reliable research factors across differing contexts. However, increasingly, commentators insist that distributed leadership takes various forms (Bolden *et al.,* 2009; Robinson, 2009; Leithwood *et al.,* 2019), leading Robinson to suggest that the appropriate question is not whether there is a connection between distributed leadership and improved student outcomes but “What are the relative impacts of particular types of distributed leadership practice?” (p. 238). The evidence about any such connection would need to be sorted by its relation to the particular form of distributed leadership, were there a sufficiently clear definition of each and a way to identify which was under scrutiny. The evidence’s relationship to the culture of the research location would also need to be assessed. A form may appear positive in, say, Hong Kong but not South Africa. Only then could the data be interrogated to see if the evidence is sufficiently robust. Often these conditions have not been met, and some researchers have acknowledged weaknesses in the research (Heck & Hallinger, 2010) or suggested that, while the connection is unproven it remains “intuitively attractive” (Hairon & Goh, 2015: 694).

A further problem is that if the argument is accepted that leadership is always distributed (Woods & Roberts, 2013), then a counterfactual is impossible: it is not feasible to eliminate distributed leadership from a control group school(s) or parts of a school in order to assess its impact. Despite assertions that those who question the evidence of improved student outcomes have either consulted insufficient literature or misunderstood it (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Leithwood *et al*., 2019), many research issues remain unresolved: inadequate definition (Lakomski, 2008); reliance on self-reported data, whether through interview or survey; insufficient attention to the impact of the researcher’s presence, understood by some as the ‘Hawthorne effect’ (Stand, 2000); the difficulty in establishing a control group and researcher bias, given the extent of investment by both national policy and research systems in this form of leadership (Lumby, 2019b). All conceptual frameworks bias the results to some degree, but it would be useful if those researching distributed leadership could interrogate the weaknesses in this research more fully.

*4.4 Colonization by research theories*

Such interrogation is less likely in a study whose researchers and the faculty at the research site are proponents of distributed leadership, leading to potential bias in the study’s self-reported data and analysis. In particular, the cultural fit of distributed leadership appears at times to be set aside to demonstrate its presence, however it is defined by a study, even when its data suggest that this is doubtful. For example, Hairon, Goh and Lin’s (2014) data analysis shows leaders’ “reluctance to relinquish key operational decisions to subordinates or only encourage faculty to make decisions within their work scope”, relating this to Singapore’s culture. Yet no question is raised about whether the data indicate the presence of distributed leadership or, instead, another kind of leadership. In many parts of the world, propelled by the support of many researchers and the OECD (2008), in the field of education leadership the square pegs of distributed leadership are hammered into cultural round holes. This perpetuates the tradition of colonization by theory; that is, the eager export and adoption of theories originating in Anglophone countries by those whose culture and values may be quite different (Normore & Collard, 2007).

*4.5 Blindness to exclusion*

Education leadership research is generally bifurcated. Much includes, at best, a token reference to the forms of prejudice embedded in education, such as sexism and racism. Much less is critical research giving centrality to issues of inequity and exclusion among both faculty and learners. Distributed leadership generally falls into the first category.

One justification of distributed leadership is that it opens up leadership to more people; however, if opportunities were indeed being opened up, one would expect to see more people with stigmatized characteristics using informal opportunities as a lever to access formal paid roles or, at least, generally experiencing less exclusion. The literature from many parts of the world supports no such change. Those groups of people who are underrepresented in leadership continue to be so, and in some cases their experience in the workplace blights their professional life (Bush, 2019; Ho, 2015; deLeon & Cryss Brunner, 2012). Distributed leadership appears to have raised expectations for greater leadership opportunities that are not always fulfilled. For example, Holloway, Nielsen and Saltmarsh (2018) examined one form of distributed leadership in the United States and found that teachers’ “expectations were unrealistic” (p. 538). They concluded “that prescribed, incentive-driven forms of distributed leadership can place teacher leaders in precarious positions that demand more of their time, while limiting their capacities to participate in the leadership practices they deem most valuable” (*ibid*.). Far from improving their opportunities, distributed leadership had, in some cases, been a mechanism to extract more work from teachers. Although some critical literature attempts to point out that people’s participation in the putative greater opportunities persists in being shaped by power structures (Lumby, 2013) or social and professional capitals (Woods, 2016), a great many articles set this understanding aside.

A second justification for distributed leadership is that it offers a lens through which to understand the totality of leadership. If this promise were met, it would be a valuable step forward. One might expect to see a range of research encompassing political and critical as well as functional perspectives, exploring in detail how people access leadership or not, their experiences while leading, and how these impact on learners. Instead, there are characteristically surveys, where teachers self-report using a range of factors, some of which could be elements from other forms of leadership, correlated to learner outcomes. Distributed leadership does not appear to have contributed to a fuller picture of leadership to lead us to understand the complex mesh of interactions that enable some, but not others, to take on leadership roles.

**5 The future of leadership theory**

Just as there are debates on whether schools reflect or lead society, so one might question whether theories of leadership improve the experience and outcomes of faculty and learners’ or contribute to the mesh of phenomena that construct the current inequalities and failings. The very least one might expect of research in this field is self-interrogation, a critical awareness of the potentialities of any form of leadership to resist or sustain unequal systems; however, rather than rigorous self-interrogation, distributed leadership has proved a ready tool for smoothing over the complexities of leadership. Spillane and Diamond (2007) point out the irony whereby the very vagueness of its meaning contributes to distributed leadership’s popularity. It has proved a useful label to attach to various leadership activities, carrying with it its positive spin of admirable intentions. Despite claims by some that it widens leadership opportunities, there is evidence that it extracts more work, so is part of the work-intensification project of globalization, and that it sidesteps any explicit engagement in creating opportunities for those groups most likely to be excluded. In an era of populism, the advent of highly visible leaders who flout the traditional public-sector values of honesty, transparency and inclusion demonstrates the dangers of leadership that has insufficient safeguards, balances, and boundaries. The field of education leadership has focused on distributed leadership and set aside the development of forms of leadership that may offer greater protections, such as bureaucracy.

The problem then, is not distributed leadership itself, whose inception was intended to interrogate the complexity of leadership more fully, but rather how it has become a mechanism for the mainstream field of educational leadership to persist in largely ignoring the political and discriminatory aspects of education organizations. This is not to argue that its adoption, in its very many configurations, has not had positive impacts: the Hawthorne effect alone would guarantee this. Nor is it to argue that other forms of leadership will not have their disadvantages as well as advantages. Rather, a critical perspective would demand a more rigorous exploration into distributed leadership’s potential negatives by mainstream research instead of banishment to its margins. A deeper engagement with concepts of power and organization is needed, recognizing that, as Ahlberg and Nightingale (2018) argue, “acts of resistance to subjection… simultaneously confirm and reiterate social hierarchies and discriminatory norms” (p. 385).

Distributed leadership as practice has sought, to use Judith Butler’s (1990) term, to’ trouble’ the prevailing relations in the hierarchies of education organizations without reference to the long-acknowledged paradox whereby resistance both diminishes and heightens existing power relations. Often this is achieved by using three-dimensional power where a field of action serves to manipulate individuals to internalize beliefs that perpetuate the power differentials while they imagine that they are doing the opposite (Foucault, 1974). Distributed leadership has operated in this way. Alongside its apparent role in opening up opportunities and redressing power imbalance, distributed leadership has been a vehicle to perpetuate weaknesses in the field of education leadership research and practice, and so it has served leaders less well than is claimed by many.

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