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Why Distributed Leadership Matters

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Abstract

This paper explores key findings from a study that examined how distributed leadership affected school turnaround at an underperforming urban high school. The study considers the presence of leadership as a distributive process, which is bound by action and not by role. How leadership was distributed across all tiers of the school's leadership structure was examined, ultimately resulting in dramatic turnaround. Additionally, the settings by which teachers, administrators, and support staff learned and thrived were examined; practices that these stakeholders believed made a difference for their students were also explored. Key to the site's shift was the collective foci on students. Each interviewee built to create a collective voice, celebrating their teamwork and their freedoms, from the district level down to the classroom level. No one setting or practice was touted as the fix for school change. Rather, study participants recognized the power of multiple settings and spoke of the necessity of each. They highlighted their personal connections, both at the site and within the community, stating its impact on school growth. Thus, this paper considers the impact of leadership when it is spread across many capable members of a school site.

Introduction

Educational circles today buzz with talk about distributed leadership. That's promising, because distributed leadership has the potential to dramatically impact school turnaround. What is missing from these conversations, unfortunately, is *how* distributed leadership (DL) works. Few studies paint a picture of *how* leadership is distributed among members of a school site. This hole in the research is partly due to the fact that leadership is difficult to study in motion. To study the impact of DL, data are collected after-the-fact, since sites are identified once they have notable improvement. However, this sort of reflection serves as a wise teacher. We see critical analysis in noted models, such as doctoral candidacy programs, National Board Teacher Certification, and action learning paradigms. By looking at others histories, I think we can envision how distributed leadership might look like at our own sites.

Scale-up models, up until now, have not replicated models of DL with much success. So, why are some sites successful while others fail? I believe the answer lies largely in *how* DL is approached. In 2000, I worked for a principal who used DL to turn our site around. Our school was on a watch list—we were one of the lowest performing middle schools in the State. In just a few years, we made huge strides toward the 800 API target. So, *how* did DL impact us? For one, the principal enlisted teachers to behave as leaders. We met weekly, sometimes even daily, to discuss how to help students. We challenged one another and supported one another—in a constructive kind of environment—and we all thrived.

What is Distributed Leadership?

Distributed leadership (DL) can be defined as leadership that is "stretched over leaders, followers and aspects of situations" (Spillane, 2012). The concept of distributed leadership comes from a viewpoint that leadership is related to activity, and is not role-bound (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Gronn, 2002). It allows for a broader community of leaders, such as: administrators, teachers, support personnel, and even district or community partners. More members are involved in leadership activities, which increase capacity building within a school. And although principals have a dramatic impact on a site's success (Aladjem, Birman, Orland, Harr-Robins, Hereida, Parrish, & Ruffini, 2010; Peurach & Marx, 2010), the non-traditional model of distributed leadership extends influence to the majority, not just the few.

Turnaround Models

Distributed leadership is a capacity building model, that when rolled out properly, has the ability to turnaround failing schools. The term *turnaround* emerged from the corporate world, where a high degree of intolerance was given toward prolonged failure (Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010). As a term, *turnaround* has only been considered in research and policy contexts in relation to schools in the last decade. Some might argue that school turnaround is an unreachable goal. Yet, some schools, like the one where I worked, demonstrated real turnaround. And while the parameters set by the federal government have shifted away from the hard stick of the No Child Left Behind Act, even the Common Core requires accountability. Certainly, schools have an uphill battle to produce a college-and-career-ready generation. In fact, turnaround is at the tippling point, where DL can make its greatest impact.

Distributed Leadership Practices

Few turnaround sites sustain their gains. While there are a number of factors that affect sustainability, studies suggest that schools with initial turnaround success tend to slip back after a change in leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003). A leader's influence can only take a site so far. However, one high school that I studied in southern California bucked this statistic by actually increasing both its API and AP offerings after more than one change in principals. Instead of slipping back with each new principal, the site maintained its turnaround status and moving out of Program Improvement right onto a post-800 API score . The teachers at the school credit the decade-long turnaround to distributed leadership. They reflected with me in interviews about how they took ownership of their school. As new leaders moved in, they were able to continue from their foundation with strong relationships that fueled their momentum.

It may seem counterintuitive that a change in leadership would benefit a school after it pulled itself out of a hole, but organizational theorists suggest that leadership succession energizes organizational recovery (Murphy, 2008). This makes sense because when a leader exits, the infrastructure either stands strong or it implodes. At this site, the teachers spoke of the attributes of distributed leadership and how they worked together to make their school a mark on the map. If its teachers and staff had not owned the school's infrastructure, they would have imploded when new administration stepped in. But, as I interviewed teachers and staff, it was clear that they had taken ownership of the turnaround process. While much credit was given to past and present administrations, the teachers told me of their journey and how held their ground through each change.

Attributes of Distributed Leadership

More than one indicator of DL surfaced as I interviewed teachers and staff. Foremost, the teachers praised their autonomy. They relished the fact that their administrators allowed them to make decisions and empowered them to assist in running the school. They also highlighted the ownership, flexibility, and supports that were given to them. They remarked that administration stuck to vision, support and oversight, while leaving decisions closely tied to curriculum and the classroom in the hands of the teachers. Under a distributed leadership model, each principal let go of tight controls, trusting the power and influence of their staff. This type of empowerment generates passion within teachers. When teachers are treated like professionals, they will step up to the plate. Then, when they begin to work together, their empowerment becomes magnified, permeating into every aspect of a school.

Members that I interviewed remarked that they knew when their site had begun to turn around based on dialogue by colleagues. In conversation, they identified data and student behavior as signs that the school was on the move. In fact, they could gage how well they were doing by student attitudes, attendance at interventions, and the connection that both staff and students had to their school and outlying community. Over and over, the staff commented on the importance of their community, which is strong on and off campus. Some of the community existed before the turnaround took place; however, a great deal of the community built on campus was intentional. Teachers and other staff members attended a retreat where they described what kids needed to feel safe, to motivate them, and to keep them accountable. Without reservation, the teachers spoke out saying that they saw themselves as parents and took their roles in the lives of their students seriously.

Teachers spoke passionately about their freedoms and how they were encouraged to innovate and take risks. One teacher remarked, "If one idea didn't work out, you didn't worry.

You knew something else, or some one else, would come up with an answer." When asked about the climate, one teacher said, "Admin supports us when we try new things. You don't worry about making mistakes, because they support what you are doing." This kind of two-way dialogue is a hallmark of DL.

Settings Support Distributed Leadership

Saunders and Goldenberg (2005) highlight the necessity of *setting* as a key factor to school improvement. However, Fullan (2000) suggests that we "know nothing about how particular schools got that way [exited Program Improvement], let alone how to go about producing more of them (p. 582). He suggests that deeper study in necessary to find out how they made their way out of PI. Thus, by studying the formal and informal settings in which DL plays out, we can better discover what is necessary to make DL effective.

Actually, the participants that I interviewed mostly credited informal settings as the place where colleagues influenced their beliefs or ideas. Fewer teachers reported formal settings, such as PLCs, as factors in their changed beliefs or practices. Most of the teachers reflected on how they would meet in between classes, after school, and even on weekends, to reach collective goals. If they went to happy hour after work, their spouses or friends would feel left out, because they would discuss students or issues from work. I experienced the impact of informal settings at the site where I worked as well. Teachers that I worked with regularly popped into one another's rooms, even while classes were in session—we were that comfortable with one another. A trust had been built and we had a strong sense of camaraderie. If I needed to see how a colleague rolled out a writing strategy, I could go to their room and see how they approached it. Later, I often followed up to asking more questions. This practice of informal observation, and self-selecting areas to improve drove my practice to new levels. I could see where I fit into my school culture.

In essence, settings are mini laboratories where *"leadershipping"* occurs. *Leadershipping*—the notion that teachers lead as they are put into roles where they make impact (Cherubini, 2008)—implies that mere role does not constitute leadership. Leadership, is not ab assigned role, but is a process of how to get work done. We can see evidence of the leadership process by looking at the *how* team members influence one another. When I met with my PLC and one teacher shared her content expertise in writing, I leaned forward and took notes. She was *leadershipping*. So, leading is an action that we do, no matter what our job title. If we are influencing one another's practice or beliefs, we are *leadershipping*.

By observing who influences whom, we begin to discover how distributive leadership works. In fact, Peter Senge (1997) writes about how organizations learn in his groundbreaking book, *The Fifth Discipline.* He says that schools need to show "second-order change"—which requires new ways of thinking and learning by participants, yielding dramatic results.

Distributed Leadership In Context

To look at second-order change in the context of DL, consider this scenario:

A second-year math teacher sits down with a colleague and asks about her classes' success with a difficult concept. The experienced teacher replies that she has found a method that has proved to be successful with the largely EL population. The newer teacher asks for input, then goes and tries out the strategy. After having success, this learner-teacher returns to the seasoned veteran for more classroom strategies. Likewise, this role can be reversed as the fledgling teacher brings innovative ideas from their induction program back to the school site.

The interchange that takes place between the two professionals occurs both in formal and informal settings.

That being said, a PLC is only as effective as the members within it. If leadership is distributed where all members feel that they have a unique and important place on the team, then real information sharing and exchange can take place. Otherwise, it is just a meeting. And we have enough of those. From those that I interviewed, some were not on highly synced PLCs; instead they drew upon other colleagues for inspiration. But, whoever they went to, they knew that they had someone to share ideas with and felt that they could practice as they saw fit.

Leading Is a Skill, Not a Role

Leading happens when a member uses a leadership skill: When someone convinces, trains, redirects, or supports another site member, they are leading. This opens up the idea of leadership on a whole new level. Leadership becomes an action—*leadershipping*— rather than a designated role. This opens up a broader span for leadership: Principals and formal administrators can learn from teachers; teachers can learn from their students; ultimately, anyone can lead and anyone can learn. Of course, it does not remove the importance or intentionality of school redesign. Structures, goals and initiatives are still part of the turnaround process. However, *how* information is exchanged is no longer a "top-down" approach. Rather, it becomes a "horizontal" approach, placing all members of a site on the same plane because at any one moment any one can demonstrate leadership actions.

Distributing leadership allows for movement of information between settings, so that information sharing is not designed as a one-way street. What works in one classroom no longer becomes a singular event. Schools become laboratories where strategies are worked out, and shared, where transparent feedback exists. In effect, strategic innovation thrives where members of a school exchange equitable and elegant transfer. Perhaps, future teacher induction programs will add *leadershipping* to their course requirements, indicating that teachers are leaders and that a distributed approach is what makes the difference in school turnaround.

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