

Distributed Leadership

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Introduction

School leadership is often equated with a person in a formal leadership position, typically the principal (Spillane, Diamond, & Jita, 2003). The categorization of leadership into traits or models, has furthered focussed on leaders' attributes or behaviour, and, as such, has perpetuated the view of leadership in terms of the individual (Spillane et al., 2003). Teacher leadership has more recently emerged as an alternative way of looking at leadership (Harris, 2003), yet tends to concentrate specifically on the role of teacher as an informal leader, with benefits and disadvantages to that role. Recent movement away from role-based conceptions towards distributed views of leadership encompasses the contributions of the many members of a school organization and enhances the capacity of the organization to grow and change. This paper begins with a look at the link between effective school leadership and the formal leader, and then explores the benefits and barriers to teacher leadership. Distributed leadership is further discussed and examined as an alternate practice that builds the capacity of the school organization for growth and change. Finally, the *Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice-Principals* from the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) is examined as a framework which enables the practice of distributed leadership; one that is necessary to sustain itself as it responds to a world that is increasingly complex.

School Leadership

Effective school leadership is closely linked to school improvement. In fact, leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student outcomes (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Research shows that although the quality of teaching has a powerful influence on student motivation and achievement, it is the quality of leadership that determines the motivation of teachers and the quality of teaching in the classroom (Fullan, 2001, as cited in Harris, 2002). It is, therefore, of great value to consider leadership in the quest to improve student achievement, and of great interest to both researchers and practitioners to define effective school leadership. The focus on formal school leadership has led to much of the existing research to date which concerns itself with the leadership capabilities of just one person

(Harris, 2002). The leadership-traits approach defines leadership as a function of individual personality, ability, traits and style (Spillane et al., 2003), while the study of leadership practices or functions perpetuates the concept of focused leadership as the domain of those with formal authority (Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon, & Yashkina, 2007). And yet, research on schools has suggested that leadership is not the solely the function of the principal, but that teacher leaders also play important roles in leading instructional innovation (Smylie & Denny, 1990 as cited in Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004), and contributing to school improvement.

Teacher Leadership for School Improvement and Professionalism

Teacher leadership is rooted in school improvement and shared decision-making initiatives, and is associated with reform movements that call for greater professionalization, more teacher leadership, and collaboration in schools (Bascia, 1997; Lieberman, 1988; Smylie & Denny, 1990; Wasley, 1991, as cited in Anderson, 2004). The current change model recognizes teachers as full partners in leading, defining, and implementing school improvement efforts (Fessler & Ungaretti, 1994, as cited in Murphy, 2005) and builds on the energy of teacher leaders as change agents at the school level. In fact, it is believed that school reforms have a better chance at penetrating the classroom and contributing to higher student achievement if teacher leadership can be nurtured and strengthened (Urbanski & Nickolaou, 1997, as cited in Murphy, 2005). Current demands on principals to act as visionaries and managers as well as instructional leaders can be lessened by drawing on the expertise of teacher leaders, who often remain in the school for longer periods of time than do their principals, thus holding strong cultural and institutional knowledge of the school (Danielson, 2007). Benefits also exist for the teachers themselves, as the flatness of the teaching profession, where veterans have the same responsibilities as novice teachers, often results in frustration and cynicism if a desire for greater responsibility is left unfulfilled (Danielson, 2007). In fact, “teacher leadership has become synonymous with the drive towards greater professionalism for teachers” (McCay et al., 2001, as cited in Murphy, 2005, p.43). The “transformation of teaching from an occupation to a profession” (Berry & Ginsberg, 1990, as cited in Murphy, 2005, p.43) involves teachers assuming leadership and being provided with the opportunity to influence both practice and

change in schools. And yet, there are both structural and cultural barriers that conspire against leadership development in teachers.

Obstacles to Teacher Leadership

The well-established structures of schooling are, in themselves, barriers to teacher leadership. In fact, reviewers document how school structures, formed using materials from the nineteenth-century organizational designs, actually discourage the exercise of leadership across role boundaries (Rallis, 1990; Smyser, 1995, as cited in Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz & Seashore Louis, 2009). For teacher leaders, the structural elements of time and access impede their availability to other teachers during the regular school day and school year, as they are busy in their classrooms and unable to work with colleagues and develop the relationships necessary for their role as teacher-leader (Smylie & Denny, 1990). As well, most leadership opportunities are assigned in addition to teachers' regular school and classroom assignments, with little to no time given for their added responsibilities. What is more, norms needed to distribute leadership to teachers are inconsistent with the values embedded in the hierarchical, architecture of the school (Lambert, 2003), where leadership is situated within formal leadership roles.

The cultural and social norms of the teaching profession itself conspire against the leadership development of teachers (Murphy et al., 2009). There is a powerful norm in schools that teachers need to be teaching (Little, 1998, as cited in Murphy et al., 2009) and that instruction in the classroom is the sole authentic work of teachers. The norm of division between the administrator role and that of the teacher emphasizes the belief that the traditional job of management should remain the sole responsibility of the administrator (Smylie, 1992, as cited in Murphy et al., 2009). Further norms of privacy and autonomy (York-Barr & Duke, 2004) grant teachers the freedom from scrutiny of others while assigning them the reciprocal expectation of not meddling in the classroom business of other teachers (Little, 1998, as cited in Murphy et al., 2009). Finally, the egalitarian culture of schooling discourages teachers from disrupting the equal professional status that they all share (Smylie & Denny, 1990) while the norm of civility promotes the evolution of cultures that tend to privilege the status quo over change which is at the heart of teacher leadership (Little, as cited in Murphy et al., 2009).

A Distributed Approach to Leadership

The fact that schools rely on a clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities presents a major barrier to the idea of teachers as leaders. Yet, leadership looked at from a cultural perspective presents leadership as part of an interactive process of sense-making that is continuously engaged in by organizational members (Harris, 2003). From this point of view, leadership involves learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. All organizational leaders can lead and leadership is a form of agency that can be distributed or shared (Harris, 2003). As such, “teachers are, in the first place, expert teachers, who spend the majority of their time in the classroom but take on different leadership roles at different times” (Ash & Persall, 2000 as cited in Harris, 2003, p.316). It is within this context that teacher leadership best resides and is reflected in distributed leadership theory. Distributed leadership theory moves beyond trying to understand leadership through the actions and beliefs of single leaders to understanding leadership as a dynamic organizational entity (Harris, 2008). It means more than shared leadership, or the idea that there is a formal leader plus other leaders at the school. It is a form of leadership that is “constituted through the interaction of leaders, teachers, and the situation as they influence instructional practice” (Spillane et al., 2004).

Elements of Distributed Leadership

From a distributed view, the critical issue is how leadership is distributed, including how it is stretched over multiple leaders; the role that followers play, and the aspects of the situation, including routines and tools (Spillane, 2006). No one leader has the energy, time or resources to lead alone. Leadership at the school level is often designed and enacted in teams consisting of the principal, assistant principal, teacher leaders, and classroom teachers, yet it is the way in which the team members interact which defines their leadership practice. An examination of team members’ co-performance leads to three types of leadership distribution: collaborative distribution, collective distribution and coordinated distribution (Spillane et al., 2003). Collaborated distribution requires two or more leaders to work together in the same place and time to execute the same leadership routine, such as facilitating a staff meeting. Collective distribution involves two or more leaders who enact a leadership routine by acting separately but independently, while coordinated distribution refers to leadership routines that incorporate

activities that have to be performed in a particular sequence (Spillane, 2006). Of the three types of distribution, it is “collaborated distribution [which] involves a reciprocal interdependency, in which the actions of different leaders involve input from one another in co-performing a leadership routine” Spillane, 2006. p.61). It is these reciprocal interdependencies that involve individuals “playing off one another” with the action of one directly enabling the action of the other (Spillane, 2006, p.61) so that the interacting practices are more than the sum of the actions of the individual leaders.

The follower dimension is another important component of leadership practice, in that followers interact with leaders to further define their leadership practice. Classroom teachers, administrators, specialists, and others may find themselves in the role of follower, depending on expertise or circumstance, and thus contribute to the construction of others as leaders, through the frequency and substance of their participation (Spillane, 2007). The interactions between leaders and followers are further influenced by the situation in which the interactions take place, and by what type of routines and tools are employed to influence those interactions. Routines can be constructed to encourage distributed leadership, such as the school improvement planning process, while tools can be used to encourage interaction around instruction, such as the teacher evaluation protocol (Spillane, 2006). Tools and routines are the vehicles through which leaders interact with one another and with followers; they are aspects of the situation that contributes to defining the daily practice of leading, by focusing the interactions among leaders (Spillane, 2007).

Distributed Leadership for Capacity Building

The practice of distributed leadership is one seen as an “emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals” (Gronn, 2000 as cited in Harris, 2008). It is a practice that provides opportunities to collaborate and actively engage in change and innovation, thus enhancing organizational change and development (Little, 1990; Murphy, 2005, as cited in Harris, 2008). Since leadership practice in schools makes a difference in their ability to develop and improve, the capacity of the school is heavily dependent on its patterns of leadership activity, and there is increasing evidence to suggest that more widely distributed patterns of leadership equate with greater potential for organizational change and development (Silns & Mulford, as cited in Harris, 2005).

As teachers are encouraged to contribute and lead, and leaders are encouraged to learn and be influenced by their followers, opportunities for lateral capacity building emerge. As the structure of the school moves from a role-based, hierarchical one to a flatter organization, opportunities for collaboration are nurtured and new norms of working together develop (Leithwood et al., 2007). And yet, distributed leadership does not imply that the formal leadership structures within schools are redundant; a relationship must still exist between the vertical and lateral leadership processes. In fact, principals have a great deal of responsibility for making distributed leadership work in the school (Harris, 2005; Smylie, Conley & Marks, 2002, as cited in Leithwood et al., 2007). Principals encourage distributed leadership by creating problem-solving teams in the place of administrative decisions, by selecting teachers to take on leadership and then providing the types of professional development that would benefit these teachers, and by providing the resources, recognition and role clarity necessary for teachers to participate in distributed leadership (Leithwood et al., 2007). Formal leaders play a major role in the enabling of others to become informal leaders through structuring their school to allow for collaborative work among staff and by encouraging their staffs to network with others. Practices such as the establishment of professional learning communities in schools and the forming of networks between schools lay the groundwork for developing shared ideas and for generating forms of leadership that promote improvement. This type of broad-based leadership, where teachers have opportunities to collaborate and to actively engage in change and innovation, enhances organizational change and development (Little, 1990; Murphy, 2005, as cited in Harris, 2008).

Distributed Leadership as Design

“Design refers to the human endeavour of shaping objects to purposes”(Perkins, 1986, pp. 1-2, as cited in Spillane, 2006). Design in regards to the leadership of a school can be thought of as an on-going process of adopting and adapting a leadership routine so that it more adequately meets a particular purpose (Spillane, 2006). Principles of design for school leadership incorporate three principles:

- *Principle One:* The *practice* of leadership should be a central focus in efforts to improve school leadership because it is a more proximal cause of instructional improvement than leadership roles, processes, or structures.
- *Principle Two:* Intervening to improve leadership necessitates attention to *interactions*, not just actions, because leadership practice takes shape in the interactions among leaders and followers.
- *Principle Three:* Intervening to improve leadership practice requires attention to the design and redesign of aspects of the *situation*, such as routines and tools, because the situation helps define leadership practice. (Spillane, 2006, p. 94)

These principles provide a framework for leaders to reflect on how and in what form leadership is distributed in their school. As a framework for thinking about leadership in schools it focuses attention towards leadership practice rather than leadership, and encourages formal leaders to analyze how leadership is distributed in the school, who is involved in the performance of various routines and how situation defines leadership practice. Both design and redesign are central to leadership work (Spillane, 2006). Principals design routines that facilitate the distribution of leadership and then build structures that enable both teachers and administrators to perform the leadership work. They design and then redesign tools to meet the purposes they are intended to support. They move beyond appointing leaders to developing leaders and then scaffold their transition to leadership positions. Most of all, they design a culture in which leadership is distributed to best promote the goals of deep and broad student learning for all (Hargreaves & Fink, 2008).

Distributed Leadership as Practice

A distributed perspective of leadership is grounded in activity rather than position or role (Harris, 2008). Activity can unfold both within schools and between schools through communities of practice which connect leaders and teachers in the interests of student achievement. Formal leaders play a critical role in enabling activities such as professional networks, which intentionally facilitate capacity building (Katz, Earl & Ben Jaafar, 2009). Professional networks enable and encourage schools to share and transfer existing knowledge

that can help students learn better; they stimulate the professional fulfillment and motivation that comes from learning and interacting with colleagues; they give teachers more voice in professional and school-based decision making; they provide teachers and others with opportunities for lateral leadership of people, programs and problem-solving beyond the immediate school setting, and they help personalize every school as a learning community, where they can adopt emergent solutions for their own needs (Hargreaves & Fink, 2008). The practice of distributed leadership in learning networks influences the building of personal capacity in an active and reflective construction of knowledge; it develops interpersonal capacity through collective practice; and it builds organizational capacity by creating and maintaining sustainable organizational processes (Katz et al., 2009). The principal, as the facilitator of the learning community, plays a critical role in the distribution of leadership within and between learning networks or communities of practice. A focus on leadership practice and on developing the necessary skills to distribute leadership should therefore be found within existing leadership policy.

Leadership Policy

The Ontario Ministry of Education acknowledges that the role of principal as “facilitator of a learning community is one of the most cogent descriptions of modern principalship” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 2). The principal is viewed as a catalyst for the development of others, and for sustaining a professional collaborative environment within the school, while affecting the practices and policies that can help to improve student outcomes (Leithwood, 2005; Marzano et al., 2005, as cited in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). The *Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice-Principals* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) stands as a framework for growth, and organizes leader practices and competencies into five domains, two of which correspond closely with the practice of distributed leadership. Within the domain of *Building Relationships and Developing People*, principal practice includes the development and implementation of effective strategies for leadership development, with the expectation of a commitment to shared leadership for improvement. The domain of *Developing the Organization* further describes best practice as building a collaborative culture within the school and actively engaging with other schools to build effective learning communities. Key

elements of this framework suggest that leadership practice, as well as competencies, make an effective school leader, and emphasize the interaction of leaders and followers, rather than the actions of individual leaders, as part of an effective leadership practice. The *Leadership Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) is in essence a catalogue of what effective leaders do, and provides a framework within which the distributed practice of leadership operates to the benefit of schools and their communities. It is an example of how policy is informed by and acknowledges the distributed perspective on leadership.

The Distributed Perspective

The distributed perspective is an essential way of looking at leadership because educational leaders who cannot engage others in leading will not be very successful (Spillane et al., 2003). Leaders need to be able to spread and mobilize expertise necessary for instructional improvement, and cannot do so alone. At the same time, “principals occupy the critical space in the teacher leadership equation and centre stage in the work redesign required to bring distributed leadership to life in schools (Heller & Firestone, 1994; Smylie, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2007, as cited in Murphy et al., 2009, p.181). As schools are re-defined as learning communities, leadership is premised upon building the capacity for organizational growth and change. In a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform these complex tasks without widely distributing the responsibility for leadership among roles in the organization (Elmore, 2000, as cited in Harris, 2002).

Sustainable Leadership in a Complex World

The practice of distributed leadership, with its focus on the interactions of leaders and followers who design and redesign situations as they work to build organizational capacity fits well with the view of the organization which has the capacity to share, create and apply new knowledge continuously over time in cultures of mutual learning and continuous innovation (Hargreaves, 2007). In this organization, termed by Hargreaves (2007) a knowledge society, organization members are provided with extensive opportunities for lifelong upskilling and retraining; barriers to learning and communication are broken down; people are encouraged to work in overlapping, heterogeneous and flexible teams; problems and mistakes are seen as

opportunities for learning more; everyone is involved in the ‘big picture’ of where the organization is going; and the social capital of networks and relationships provides people with extra support and further learning. The knowledge society is a learning society that is sustained and depends on the leadership of others. The distributed perspective of leadership is the type of leadership necessary to carry us into the world of the knowledge society. In fact, “in a complex world, no one leader, institution or nation can control everything without help. Sustainable leadership is distributed leadership – as an accurate description of how much leadership is already exercised, and also as an ambition for what leadership can, more deliberately, become” (Hargreaves, 2007, p. 225).

Conclusion

Distributed leadership is a productive way to think about leading and sustaining an organization by involving its members in knowledge sharing. It is a form of leadership premised upon building the capacity for organizational growth and change (Harris, 2002). The practice of distributed leadership is one that moves away from role-based conceptions of formal and informal leadership and re-defines the school as a learning community where members continuously engage in the process of sense-making. If schools are to be true learning organizations where student achievement is influenced by leadership, then the distributed view provides great potential for positive change and transformation in schools and school systems (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2006; Spillane, 2006, as cited in Harris, 2008). As Peter Senge (1990) argues, the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind - from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to being connected to the world.

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