

Distributed Leadership Matters

Perspectives, Practicalities, and Potential

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Preface

A great deal has been written about distributed leadership. Indeed there is a burgeoning literature on the subject. This is both encouraging and reassuring as the concept is now widely used and known. On the down side, some of the writing about distributed leadership has simply served to obscure a relatively simple and straightforward idea. Consequently, this book takes a realistic and pragmatic look at distributed leadership practice. It looks at the different *perspectives* associated with the idea; it considers the *practicalities* of making it happen and the *potential* of distributed leadership affecting organizational improvement. This book focuses on why distributed leadership matters, by looking at the facts, the evidence, and the practice.

Distributed leadership is primarily concerned with the interactions and the dynamics of leadership practice rather than a preoccupation with the formal roles and responsibilities traditionally associated with those “who lead.” This book argues that it is the *practice* of leadership that is most important if the goal, in schools and districts, is to secure better instruction and improved learner outcomes. Most recently, Spillane and Coldren (2011) have suggested that the adoption of a distributed framework, under the right conditions, can contribute to organizational development. This is achieved particularly, rather than exclusively, through a process of diagnosis and design. But as the authors are careful to note,

For this diagnostic and design work to bear fruit, in terms of student achievement and educational attainment, it must be anchored in the core work of schooling—classroom teaching and student learning leadership. (p. 108)

This book anchors distributed leadership in the core work of instruction and argues that to be most effective, leadership distribution has to be first and foremost focused upon improving learner outcomes. The chapters that follow explore and explain the potential of distributed leadership to secure improvement and change. However, as Spillane and Coldren (2011) note, people can exercise leadership but “fail to influence others to change” (p. 28). While this is certainly true, if leadership is defined as those activities or practices tied to “changing the core work of the organization” you would realistically expect to see some change in outcomes.

There are two important points to be made here. First, distributed leadership needs to be aligned to the “technical core” of learning and teaching if it is to really make a difference to learner outcomes. Second, to be most effective, the diagnostic and design elements associated with distributed leadership need to be firmly located within a clear, overarching model of professional collaboration and learning.

Even though the theory of distributed leadership is now well known and firmly established in the minds of those who think and write about leadership (Spillane, 2006) the important matter of *how* to make it happen is less well traversed territory. Accounts of distributed school leadership still tend toward theory, debate, discussion, ideological bias, and analysis rather than practical application. While theory is undoubtedly important as it can frame, explain, and predict, it is also important that theory connects, in some way, to practice.

This book proposes to make a direct contribution between theory and practice. It argues that distributed leadership is not just a powerful analytical frame or the latest leadership theory, but it is also a leadership approach that, if properly constructed and enacted in schools and districts, can result

in better learner outcomes. The book proposes that, under the right conditions, distributed leadership can be a positive influence on organizational change and improvement.

Audience for the Book

This book will be of interest to practitioners, policy makers, and researchers who are committed to school and system improvement. It has been written for an international audience, and there are some specific examples to illustrate and illuminate some of the key ideas. In summary, this book will be useful to district and school administrators, district teacher coaches and teacher leaders, school leadership teams, professional development coordinators, and those teachers interested and engaged in the process of improvement.

Central Purpose of the Book

The central purpose of this book is to go beyond the theory by guiding readers to and through a research-based change process. The book links the idea of distributed leadership directly to *disciplined professional collaborative learning*.¹ The book's "big idea" is that distributed leadership, in the form of collective expertise, carefully constructed through professional collaboration, can positively influence learning and teaching. This book focuses on why distributed leadership matters, how it matters, and where it matters most of all.

Advance Organizer

This advance organizer offers a preview of what to expect in the book. It is an overview of the chapters and a summary of the key ideas. Essentially, the book is divided into eight chapters:

¹See Harris and Jones (2012) for a full exposition.

- *An introduction and overview* of change, improvement, and system transformation (Chapters 1 and 2)
- *An analysis* of the leadership approaches and practices required in the future (Chapter 3)
- *An outline* of the research evidence about distributed leadership and organizational improvement (Chapter 4)
- *A commentary* on the more negative aspects of this leadership approach and how it can be misused and misrepresented (Chapter 5)
- *An analysis* of social capital—how to build it and sustain it for organizational change (Chapter 6)
- *A reflection* upon professional learning communities as a form of disciplined collaborative learning (Chapter 7)
- *A guide* to leading and facilitating or supporting professional collaboration with impact and concluding thoughts about distributed leadership (Chapter 8)
- *An Appendix* that offers practical resources that can be used by those leading professional collaboration

Chapters 1 and 2 set the global scene by looking at the challenges of educational change and focus on one key question: Why has there been *so much reform and so little change?* (Payne, 2008). Together, these chapters offer readers the contextual piece and advocate that leadership is *the* critical component in school and system improvement. For readers interested in the bigger picture, these two chapters provide a contemporary critique of school and system reform within an international context.

Chapter 3 looks at the type of leadership required in the future and builds a case for distributed leadership. It argues that future leadership from the corporate world to the world of education is characterized by collaboration, networking, and distributed forms of social influence. It highlights a tension between past and future leadership and argues that existing forms of leadership practice will struggle to remain relevant and useful in a global and 24/7-networked world.

Chapter 4 focuses on the *research* evidence and addresses the central question of *what type of leadership makes the maximum*

difference to organizational change and improvement? This chapter presents the empirical facts.

Chapter 5 considers an issue that is very rarely discussed. It focuses on how distributed leadership could be misconstrued, abused, and misused. It considers the “dark side” of distributed leadership and focuses on what happens when things go wrong. Distributed leadership, or indeed any leadership practice, can be used for good or ill. As this chapter argues, much of the leadership literature tends toward the positive features of leadership, neatly side-stepping any references to the less favorable aspects. Consequently, this chapter looks at some of the more negative dimensions of distributed leadership.

The *how* of distributed leadership and the *practicality* of making it happen are addressed in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. Chapter 6 considers the relationship between distributed leadership and social capital. It focuses on how social capital contributes to organizational improvement and considers how it can be generated and sustained through professional collaboration.

Chapter 7 explores professional learning communities (PLCs) as one way of creating the structures for building the collective capacity for change. It notes that interpretations of PLCs wander between “whole-school” PLCs and “within-school” PLCs. The chapter proposes that viewing the whole school as an entire PLC is essentially *aspirational*; it is something to aim for, something that aligns with the broader vision or mission of the organization. In contrast, within-school PLCs are *functional*; they offer a structural mechanism for generating innovation and change.

Chapter 8 is written for those facilitating the professional learning of others. This chapter makes the case that distributed leadership can be enhanced, supported, and sustained through focused and disciplined professional collaboration (Harris & Jones, 2012). It introduces a *model and methodology*² of professional collaboration³ for those working within schools and

²Further details about the disciplined collaboration model can be found in Jones (2013).

³See Appendix for templates and guides that can assist schools and districts in their collaborative work.

districts. It concludes by arguing that it is impossible to imagine how sustainable innovation and change in complex times can be secured without broad-based and sustained distributed leadership.

Collectively, the chapters are written for those working with and within schools. This is not a research book, although it draws upon the empirical evidence. The book proposes that if carefully planned and supported, distributed leadership can be a potentially powerful force for change.

Throughout this book, there are questions or points to consider that aim to do two things: first, to prompt focused reflection and, second, to highlight and reinforce the central argument and themes that run throughout the book. The last chapter is a deliberate departure from other chapters in the book as it provides a practical framework aimed at supporting professional collaboration in districts and schools.

It is easy to say that evidence suggests that distributed leadership matters, but in what way? It is important to reiterate that as each school and district is different, inevitably, distributed leadership will be different in each context and setting. This is not a convenient “opt out” clause but rather the recognition that there is no blueprint. Ultimately, distributed leadership will be dependent upon the individuals within an organization, their particular expertise, and the unique set of relational dynamics.

In his work, Jim Spillane talks about the importance of organizational routines and organizational tools that shape and define distributed leadership practice. But what sort of routines and tools best support the development of distributed leadership practice? This book argues that professional collaboration can be a powerful routine that effective organizations can deploy to support distributed leadership practice. At the end of the book, the relationship between professional collaboration and organizational improvement is revisited.

Should you read this book?

Think about the following questions:

- Are you committed to improving the learning outcomes of young people, whatever their context and whatever it takes?
- Do you believe that the key to school and system improvement resides in supporting teachers to be the very best they can be?
- Do you agree that collaborative learning with impact is achievable and sustainable?

The answers to these three questions lie at the heart of this book. The first question is about moral purpose, why we as educators do what we do in order to make a difference to young lives and life chances. The second question reinforces that teachers are not our best resource; they are in fact our *only* resource in securing better outcomes for young people. Teachers matter far more than they know. The third question implies that professional collaboration is one way in which we can achieve better teaching and learner outcomes. As I have said on many public stages, it is my belief that we have everything we need to improve our schools and districts *within them*—the real challenge is to make more powerful and effective professional connections.

There are those who will argue that this book falls into the trap of blindly asserting the normative merits of distributed leadership. Interestingly, when it comes to empirical fact, rather than ideological assertion, the dissenting voices are quieter. The idea that distributed leadership is “insidious” and a “profoundly political phenomenon” (Lumby, 2013) is to give distributed leadership characteristics it clearly cannot possess. Distributed leadership is nothing more than a way of thinking about leadership *as practice* and exploring how different patterns of influence can affect organizational change and improvement.