
Distributed Leadership in Practice

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Taking a Distributed Perspective

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Distributed leadership has the attention of practitioners, professional developers, philanthropists, policymakers, and scholars. Some state and local governments have invested in promoting a distributed approach to leadership. Philanthropists have devoted millions to research and development work that favors, or at least acknowledges, a distributed approach. Professional developers, including some universities, have created programs for school practitioners that promote a distributed approach. Increasingly, scholars use a distributed perspective to frame their work (Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon, & Yashkina, 2007; MacBeath & McGlynn, 2003; MacBeath, Oduro, & Waterhouse, 2004; Timperley, 2005).

The appeal of a distributed perspective lies partially in the ease with which it becomes many things to many people. Frequently used as a synonym for democratic leadership, shared leadership, collaborative leadership, and so on, the distributed perspective easily and effortlessly entered the discourse about school leadership and management. Usages vary. Some use it as though it were a blueprint or recipe for effective school leadership—yet another Holy Grail for improving schools. Others use it as a conceptual or analytical lens for investigating school leadership. Some move back and forth, sometimes unknowingly, between normative and theoretical stances. Such diversity in usage and understanding is to be expected; it is the way that ideas work in the world of practice, scholarship, and development. Ideas, as they percolate

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or trickle through various conversations, become understood in new ways, taking on new meanings and getting put to new uses. Some might say that ideas such as distributed leadership become diluted or muddled, but of course that conclusion assumes some pure original state. Perhaps the best we can hope for concerning distributed leadership—and any set of ideas, for that matter—is that they continue to be a part of conversations about school improvement.

Still, some commentators worry that distributed leadership's user-friendly qualities portend trouble. Some wonder whether distributed leadership is just a new label for old familiar constructs or ideas. The fear is that distributed leadership will become a catchall for any attempt to share leadership or delegate leadership to others (Harris, 2005). As a result, a distributed perspective could end up being everything and nothing at the same time. Does a distributed perspective offer a substantively different way of thinking about school leadership or is it simply another case of the emperor having no (new) clothes? Loose constructs pose problems for researchers and practitioners alike. For researchers, they contribute to fuzzy scholarship. For practitioners, while they ease exchanges, they often give a false sense of agreement and understanding among people as they talk past one another.

This book focuses on taking a distributed perspective to study school leadership and management. Our central question is this: What does it mean to take a distributed perspective? To address this question, we describe the core elements of a distributed perspective and investigate the entailments of taking this perspective to examine school leadership and management. Further, we consider the value added by adopting a distributed perspective in studies of school leadership and management. While our primary orientation in this book is as researchers, we do not see academics as having a monopoly on the collection and analysis of data. Instead, we believe that practitioners—school leaders, staff developers, and district policymakers—also can and should engage in research as part of their work. While practitioners' research orientations may differ in some respects from those of academics, the design efforts central to practice should be informed by diagnostic work, some of which can be carried out only by practitioners.

In this chapter, we outline what we mean by a distributed perspective on school leadership and management. Our aim is to articulate, as clearly and succinctly as possible, a distributed framework for investigating leadership and management in schools. Attempts at clarity often are misconstrued as pontificating. This is not our aim. Rather, we seek to explicate what we mean when we take a distributed perspective in the study of practice. We anticipate other interpretations and understandings and at times allude to these, not to disparage but rather to make our own meaning clear. We also

should acknowledge that our own understandings continue to evolve as we continue with the theory-building work reported in this book.

LEADING AND MANAGING THE SCHOOLHOUSE

School leadership and management (often equated with school principals' work despite empirical evidence calling for more inclusive perspectives) are thought critical for successful schools. School-level factors matter when it comes to improving student learning and maintaining these improvements over time.

What Matters

Specifically, various lines of inquiry, from effective schools research to work on professional community, have identified key organizational functions that must be performed in order for schools to run effectively. A selective synthesis of the research suggests that these functions fall into three broad categories:

- Compass setting
- Human development
- Organizational development

Studies consistently have identified that both compass setting and maintaining a direction are critical for school success. This work puts emphasis on developing an instructional vision that is shared by members of the school staff (Bryk & Driscoll, 1985; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). As one might expect, human capital development is also critical for a school to run effectively. This development happens through functions such as summative and formative monitoring of instruction and its improvement, support for individual and collective staff development and growth, and recognition of individual successes by school leaders. A third set of functions focuses on organizational development and includes developing and maintaining a school culture in which norms of trust, collaboration, and collective responsibility for student learning support ongoing conversations about instruction and its improvement.

Organizational development also involves procuring and distributing resources necessary for the work of school improvement, including materials, time, support, and compensation. This work frequently involves negotiating the environment beyond the schoolhouse walls. These three categories of organizational functions have been identified by numerous studies as

essential elements for school improvement, and the school principal is often critical to ensuring that these organizational functions are addressed (Lieberman, Falk, & Alexander, 1994; Rosenholtz, 1989a).

Some Definitional Issues

Many scholars distinguish *management* from *leadership* (Burns, 1978; Cuban, 1988). Management activity maintains, hopefully efficiently and effectively, current organizational arrangements and ways of doing school business; it centers on maintenance. Leadership activity, in contrast, involves influencing others to achieve new, hopefully desirable, ends; it frequently involves initiating changes designed to achieve existing or new goals. Typically, leadership activity involves transforming existing ways, upsetting business as usual in schools and classrooms, although the “managerial imperative” often dominates the work of school leaders (Cuban, 1988).

For the purpose of this book, we go with the popular definition of management: the maintenance of current organizational arrangements and ways of doing business. Our definition of leadership, however, departs somewhat from many popular definitions.

Leadership refers to activities tied to the core work of the organization that are designed by organizational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, affect, or practices of other organizational members or that are understood by organizational members as intended to influence their motivation, knowledge, affect, or practices. (Spillane, 2006, pp. 11–12, emphasis in original)

Our definition excludes actions intended to influence relationships that are not tied to the school’s core work. Of course, defining leadership in terms of the school’s core work is not without its problems. We see the core work as teaching and learning, although some organizational theorists would point out correctly that for school staff, the core work might be preserving the school and their positions. Leadership is not always about change. As will be evident in Chapter 5, it also can be about resistance to change efforts.

Two aspects of this definition are important. First, our definition of leadership does not rest on evidence of effectiveness or a particular outcome being achieved. We define activities as leadership even if those who were intended to be influenced by an activity were not influenced. Second, in our definition, leadership needn’t necessarily involve outcomes that are positive or beneficial. Leadership can influence people and organizations—indeed, entire societies—in directions that are not at all beneficial (Spillane, 2006).

Managerial activities, which are designed to produce stability, may differ substantially from leadership activities designed to promote change (Firestone, 1996). But what leaders do in the administrative and political realms, although often not directly and explicitly connected to changing some aspect of school life, may be an essential component of leadership in general, and leadership for instruction in particular. Indeed, efforts to change and efforts to preserve often are blended in the practice of leaders as tasks serving multiple agendas and functions. For example, maintaining scheduling arrangements for teachers that create opportunities for them to meet with one another can enable instructional innovation. Leaders who neglect managerial concerns, such as respecting the constraints on the daily schedule, may have difficulties leading change. Further, while the management versus leadership distinction is helpful as a theoretical tool, in practice it is often difficult to classify actions as purely managerial or purely leadership. The same activity can be designed to meet both maintenance and leadership goals.

THE PRACTICE OF LEADING AND MANAGING

A central argument in this book is that examining the day-to-day *practice* of leadership and management is an important line of inquiry and one that has been mostly neglected in both school administration and administrative studies in general. Much of the literature on leadership dwells on leaders and leadership structures, functions, and roles. Focusing mostly on *what* leaders do in broad and general terms, such accounts pay limited attention to the practice of leading and managing (Hallinger & Heck, 1996b). Knowing what leaders do is one thing, but a rich understanding of how, why, and when they do it, is essential if research is to contribute to improving the day-to-day practice of leading and managing schools. An in-depth analysis of the practice of leadership and management, not just the practice of leaders, merits the attention of scholars.

A practice or “action perspective sees the reality of management as a matter of actions” and encourages an approach to studying leadership and management that focuses on action rather than exclusively on structures, states, and designs (Eccles & Nohria, 1992, p. 13). Defining leadership and management as activity allows for the possibility that people in various positions in an organization might take on the work (Heifetz, 1994). It also foregrounds practice, an important move because “the strength of leadership as an influencing relation rests upon its effectiveness as activity” (Tucker, 1981, p. 25). In-depth analysis of leadership practice is rare but essential if we are to make progress in understanding school leadership (Heck & Hallinger, 1999).