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Making Sense of Distributed Leadership: A Conversation Among Teacher Leaders

Kathleen Dickinson Rockwood
Manhattanville College

MAKING SENSE OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: A CONVERSATION AMONG TEACHER LEADERS

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The online discussion presented here followed up on prior reading and class discussion about distributed leadership in an Educational Leadership program course in the greater New York City area. The course focuses on the building leader's role in working with and cultivating the people within the organization. Major course topics include effective supervisory practices, team building, conflict resolution, and building leadership capacity.

Eleven students, working in both formally-appointed and informal teacher leadership roles in suburban and urban districts, participated. What follows are threaded student responses to two questions I posted. The students' responses were edited only for length and flow, with the substance maintained. (Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper for all the students and for the names of their districts/schools.) The purpose of this assignment was to hear how the students integrated their understanding of distributed leadership and to get them, as current teacher leaders and future school leaders, to take a stand about it. For this assignment, I purposely removed myself from the conversation. In this paper my thoughts within the online discussion appear in brackets, and I then provide my final reflections at the end.

Online Discussion

Question 1: Share your vision of distributed leadership and how that resonates with the current reality in your school district.

Debbie: I believe that leadership is only truly effective if it is distributed in a fair and logical way. The myth of the beloved autocratic ruler is just that; and even if it worked out at times in the past, it really would be a bad idea in the educational arena. Within the last six years, our school district has created many more leadership roles than had existed before. However, because many of these positions were new, a few years had to pass in order for the leaders themselves to feel confident and productive.

Roberta: I agree with you, Debbie. Distributed leadership (at its best) is fair, and I think it is also the most effective type of leadership. The most effective leaders are the ones who build something that lasts beyond their period of leadership, something that inspires people to want to keep it going. To that extent, distributing leadership gives everyone ownership and embeds the leader's vision within the culture of the school.

Doug: I view distributed leadership as a wonderful way to encourage those who possess a particular talent for inspiring and leading others. In Bolton, many of the leadership positions are filled internally, by design. Most of the time, I feel that this is a positive thing, in that the current administration clearly recognizes the potential in some of its best teachers.

The danger is that distributed leadership can, if not exercised properly, appear to be an exclusive, hierarchical system. Many teachers at Bolton treat those who are given leadership responsibilities as though they were the chosen ones. Because of this, I notice resentment on the part of the faculty who have not been given a similar opportunity. For many, the issue lies in procedure. Many of my colleagues wish to see a formal interview process that looks at internal and external candidates for all leadership positions.

An effective school needs to cultivate a vision of a succession of leaders who could possibly come from within. It is dangerous to do otherwise, and ultimately will hurt the students as they fall prey to rocky [leadership] transition periods.

Debbie: Yes, Doug, I agree that students do suffer from rocky transition periods with new administrators and with new teachers, too, for that matter! The difference between our districts appears to be that many times our district seeks leadership from outside, and yours from within. I think each carries its own benefits and drawbacks, such as an inevitable learning curve in my district. [*Doug and Debbie appear to be focusing only on individuals who become administrators, not the informal leaders. This needs to be addressed during the class debrief.*]

Joan: Distributed leadership means allowing other trusted members of your faculty/staff to assume positions of leadership in a building/district. In other words, you (as principal) don't try to do everything on your own.

Mary: The key word that Joan used in explaining what distributed leadership is all about was "trusted." Garnering the trust of a faculty can be a huge task. That is why power sharing through effective models of delegation and communication is crucial. Collaborative approaches in school administration increase full buy-in to its programs or goals. An effective leader must discern who can be trusted to help build and share in a learning organization's vision. Trust among teachers can sometimes be difficult to find. It often takes years for colleagues to appreciate and get to know each other.

Ann: My vision of distributed leadership is essentially encouraging staff members to assume leadership positions in the building. It is important to recognize the talents of your faculty and staff and provide support and encouragement. When you

offer this support as an administrator, I believe that staff/faculty will view you as not only resourceful but also as a partner for change. In my building there is abundant evidence that leadership is supported and encouraged.

Beth: Mary, it is true that trust is not easily earned, especially with new leadership. This is a reality that anyone contemplating an administrative role must face. While I think it might be easier to develop this trust where there is a collaborative culture established, it is incumbent on the new leader to nurture, respect, and convey trust within the existing learning community.

In my school there is a culture of collaboration which permeates our learning community; leadership is distributed through a variety of committees and roles. One example is the Strategic Planning Committee, which met the week after school ended. Representatives from each grade level and specialty area met with the principal to reflect on this past school year as well as to set goals for the coming year. The work we did focused on the impact of recent initiatives, as well as grade level, individual student progress, and related support [needs].

Nancy: While I cannot speak for the building or district, the special education department within my district provides an example of distributed leadership. Past and present administrators have encouraged me to become more involved in special education administration, more specifically preschool special education. Approximately three years ago…I became actively involved in the process and sat in on several meetings. My previous CSE [Committee on Special Education] chairperson spent a lot of time training me and explaining different laws and regulations. The administration included me on several district-level discussions so that I could learn more. The following year I was appointed CPSE [Committee on Preschool Special Education] chairperson. I was somewhat reluctant to take on this leadership role, as I did not feel fully prepared. However, in hindsight, I am so glad that I was provided with both the support and the opportunity to take this on.

Edward: As Mary pointed out, members' buy-in [to shared leadership] requires a collaborative approach. On the instructional level, we have seen that it isn't enough for us to tell students that they need to know the material we are teaching; when we do that, it goes in one ear and out the other. Students need to be invested in the material to truly learn. Effective leaders who are able to share their power create or sustain environments where their subordinates become personally invested in the goals of the organization. At this level, it is no longer about personal power, but more that each individual in a position of influence uses his/her leadership within a smaller, perhaps more focused group to motivate those people

toward the organization's ultimate objectives. Each leader then enhances his/her own effectiveness by accomplishing his/her own immediate goals more efficiently. By increasing the power of the entire group organization through distributed leadership, the building leader enhances his/her own power.

Dora: I don't believe that the trust issue starts with administration having trust in their staff in order to distribute leadership. I think the process begins with the individual administrators first having trust in themselves, their abilities and expertise. That confidence is reflected in their personalities and allows them to appreciate and nurture leadership skills in others. Without that inner trust in oneself, how could one effectively and successfully distribute leadership to others?

In my current school, it really does not seem to work this way. There is a lot of favoritism. The teachers that seem to make strides are those who have some sort of personal connection to the current administration. From what I see, it seems that nine out of ten times they are not the best choice for the task at hand. The other few teachers that have special duties are usually those that the administration sees as overachievers, and the rest of the staff silently label as the *outcasts*. They are by no means *overachievers*, but rather those who do their job efficiently and complete the task by the administration's desired method.

I'm fairly certain that this happens in part because the New York City system is so large. They don't invest too much in the individual because they don't want to waste time, energy, and resources on someone who in a short time will most likely move on to be a teacher in another district. On the flip side, I am sure that if more teachers were involved, trusted, and properly trained, the revolving door would not revolve as quickly. [*She raises an important systems issue.*]

Jill: It is so important to all involved that everyone is honest and open with each other. When that doesn't (or simply cannot) happen, distributive leadership is difficult to achieve. For years, my district has used the old boy network for the distribution of leadership. There are long-standing chairs, team leaders, etc., whose positions are basically untouchable. The irony is that in our superintendent's four-year tenure in my district (though teachers are "encouraged to apply"), she has caused good leaders at all levels to search elsewhere. It is so important to nurture and support teachers who are seeking leadership roles, and to give them an honest chance. But first, building a climate of trust and respect all around is crucial.

Question 2: Formulate recommendations that you would make to area school districts about how to build leadership capacity. What should occur at the building level

and at the district level to support movement toward distributed leadership?

Doug: First, I believe that the goals need to be established clearly and then shared with the school community. Districts and schools should be capable of assessing current leadership and stating what types of leaders they would like to see in the future. Next, there should be a clear process for identifying future leaders. If every leadership position requires both an internal and external search, districts should follow this procedure.

Dora: I agree, but I was also thinking about the teachers who are always asked to assume leadership roles. I really don't know if I have a suggestion to reverse this, but I have experiences with administrators who always rely on a certain few to complete leadership tasks. Many [teachers] are afraid to volunteer, but I think that if the administration gave others a chance to shine, they might find that there are a lot more people capable of the task. This requires gaining some understanding of your staff by committing time to investigate the interests and personalities of the people in your building.

Roberta: I agree with you, Doug, about the need to establish clear goals, and also with you, Dora, about needing to *spread around* the leadership opportunities instead of turning to the same people repeatedly. In a place where there is no culture of distributed leadership, however, I think it has to be generated from the bottom. It is ironic because the directive for it might come *from the top*, but it can only work if everyone is invested in it from the start. I think that taking the time to make sure that everyone understands what distributed leadership is, and how it benefits us professionally and enhances student learning, is the most important first step. In other words, the clear goals that Doug mentioned would be generated by the potential leaders themselves. The drawback is that this process takes time.

At my middle school we have an Instructional Council which is made up of representatives from every team in the school. The IC meets monthly to discuss and implement various instructional or policy initiatives, some of which come from the central office or the state, and some of which have been generated in response to concerns voiced by the staff. The IC representatives facilitate weekly meetings with their teammates, and then take the concerns/feedback from the teams to the larger council, which ultimately advises and frequently decides what the school as a whole will do regarding particular initiatives. Reps from each team serve two years, and representation on IC rotates through the various members of the team. Everyone is encouraged to participate as an IC rep at some point; the norms of our school go against anyone serving multiple consecutive terms. It

works well for us, and even worked in the year that our principal was on leave and we had a disastrous interim (who, by the way, never attended an IC meeting).

Dora: Roberta's school district really has been progressive in this area, and I think that all of the answers given thus far point to a redefinition of the word *leadership* and what it really should encompass.

It is human nature to need to be recognized and valued. Having a system in place that gives everyone a voice and a role to play, no matter what the degree, would work wonders toward unifying administrators and staff. To me, distributed leadership also means genuinely listening to and considering each individual's opinion and giving that person credit when due!

[*It is so important for Dora and some other students to hear about Roberta's experience. They need to know that the theory they read about can be a reality, even if they do not experience it in their organizations. Dora understands that and is looking for other role models as she cultivates her own vision.*]

Jill: I agree that Roberta's school is incredibly progressive when it comes to leadership and I wish all places were the same. However, a major practical obstacle is time. As more districts create goals along with measurable ways to track success, the need for committee work grows. At Islingham, we have seen increasing numbers of teachers involved in meaningful district goal work, and there are enough committees to appeal to just about any interest (data analysis, curriculum, community relations, character education, etc.). Although some teachers are afraid to volunteer, lest they be rejected by our superintendent, the other, bigger issue that threatens our involvement is the time it takes. Teachers are frequently pulled from their classrooms to work on committees, and that tends to create problems for all involved. Many of the administrators and teacher leaders who run these committees try to work around teacher preps, but so many of us meet with students at these times that the meetings become intrusive. I can remember a time in the not-so-distant past when students were let out an hour early on Wednesdays and we were given structured time to meet as faculties, departments, and grade levels. Districts need to find a way to manage time wisely, so that this important committee work gets the time it deserves, but not at the expense of our primary job: to educate our students. [*As department chair, Jill offers up her reality and insight to the group about an important systems issue related to how time is managed to reflect the organization's priority of shared leadership.*]

Beth: On the district level, this means being transparent in developing leadership roles that encourage respect and accountability. Additionally, by making meaning-

ful professional development opportunities available, the administration can tap into the leadership resources that currently exist in every school district. At the building level, instructional teams and academic and social committees, along with a mentoring program, support building leadership capacity.

Edward: Before embarking on any of these concrete steps, however, I think it is vital that districts establish an atmosphere where risk taking is not only acceptable, but encouraged. It is easy enough to tell people that they have the authority to take the lead on a project or initiative, but when they are constantly looking over their shoulder for approval, then the focus is not on moving forward. We need to recognize that in today's educational environment maintaining the status quo is no longer enough. We need to empower every level of the school organization to try new methods and strategies in an effort to advance learning. I would never suggest that this be done without oversight, but there can certainly be safeguards in place that still allow autonomy and experimentation within established guidelines.

Joan: I think it's essential to build into the structure a framework for incubating ongoing positive professional change. It is one thing to build capacity, but if there is no place for the leaders to use their leadership, then the system is pointless. There must be continued outlets for leaders to use their newly acquired skills so that they may continue to grow as learners.

Instructor's Closing Reflections

As I listened to the conversation that unfolded, I was pleased to hear that all the students had insights about distributed leadership, despite the range of personal experiences in their respective school districts. What started out as an open, conceptual discussion with recurring themes evolved into specific recommendations that would make distributed leadership a reality in schools. Several noteworthy themes emerged. There appeared to be strong consensus that an administrator's ability to trust faculty was a vital condition for distributed leadership. Power sharing and school leaders' views of what constitutes power also surfaced as another element. Finally, the students talked about the importance of redefining leadership and establishing a climate that supports professional growth and varied leadership opportunities. Their concrete examples and recommendations for future action highlighted their understanding of the substantive changes in school culture that school leaders need to initiate in order to truly support distributed leadership.

Throughout this open exchange, the teacher leaders' voices and understandings

resonated with the leadership literature. Lambert (2003a) emphasized that changes will not be possible until educators redefine leadership and create a context and a new framework that will support a continuum of leadership capacity. The guiding beliefs of this framework would include: (a) the right and responsibility of all teachers to be leaders; (b) the importance of engaging in purposeful work; and (c) the importance of contributing in a reciprocal manner to the good of the community (Lambert). This framework is aligned to the theory of distributed leadership where teachers gain control over school operations that enable them to improve their classroom practice (Elmore, 2003; Harris, 2003). Inherent in this theory is the belief that substantive instructional improvement can be accomplished only when powerful leadership, involving teachers in instructional decision making, is distributed broadly among the faculty (Elmore). While grounded in theory, this conversation helped consolidate students' understandings and allowed them to learn from each others' experiences about positive new directions and challenges, as well as to debate the benefits and drawbacks of various practices.

Often I worry about those of my students who are in buildings where traditional top-down management practices predominate and distributed leadership is not welcomed. Our challenge as leadership instructors is to create many opportunities to broaden our students' exposure. I have found that online structured dialogue with program colleagues, representing different community types and district practices, provides one way to broaden everyone's perspectives and appreciation for the diverse organizational cultures and leadership practices that exist.