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Distributed leadership in schools: A brief review of the literature

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Introduction

Several forms of leadership are discussed in the literature and have been practiced within schools and across different school levels. Some of those include transformative leadership, strategic leadership, distributed leadership, and participative leadership, among others. While each form of leadership has its own strengths and weaknesses and is more or less applicable depending on organizational contexts, distributed leadership has risen as an alternative form of today's school leadership. Unlike other forms of leadership, distributed leadership is primarily concerned with the interactive and interdependent practice of leadership rather than the roles and responsibilities of those who have a formally assigned leadership position. To better understand the concept of distributed leadership, this article first reviews some literature on the topic and then offers some recommendations for practice.

What is distributed leadership?

The concept of distributed leadership has grown in popularity in recent years and has been practiced in many organizations, particularly in school settings. Distributed leadership is often referred to as shared leadership, team leadership, situational leadership, or democratic leadership by many people; these types of leadership are, however, not synonyms of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005; 2006). James Spillane, a leading expert in distributed leadership, considers distributed leadership as another way of thinking about leadership practice, which involves significant interactions between leaders, followers, and aspects of their situations (Spillane, 2006). He stresses that better school leadership needs to involve multiple leaders who take leadership roles across

school levels. Leithwood et al. (2009) contend that following the distributed leadership perspective, everyone in an organization, regardless of their status or rank, can take leadership responsibility according to their nature of tasks. Distributed leadership, therefore, focuses on interactions of those who have both formal and informal leadership roles rather than their actions (Bennett et al., 2003; Harris & Spillane, 2008).

Theoretical origin of distributed leadership

The idea of distributed leadership is not new; it has been embraced by scholars and practitioners for many decades (Bolden, 2011). According to Oduro (2004), the origin of the distributed leadership concept can be dated back as far as 1250 B.C., making it one of the most ancient leadership conceptions recommended for achieving organizational goals. However, Harris (2009), who based on the work of Gibbs (1954), proposes that its theorization can be traced back as far as the mid-1920s and possibly earlier. Later on, several notable researchers such as Alma Harris (2007; 2008; 2009; 2014), James Spillane (2005; 2006), Kenneth Leithwood (2009), Nigel Bennett (2003), Richard Bolden (2007; 2009; 2011) have conducted studies on this leadership concept and have provided a fundamental understanding of the theoretical development of distributed leadership.

Why Is distributed leadership a rising interest?

Several evidence-based studies indicate that distributed leadership is the leadership idea for today's schools. Harris and Spillane (2008) and Harris (2008) suggest three reasons for its current popularity. Firstly, distributed leadership is viewed as having "normative power" that reflects current changes in school leadership practice; it has led to the expansion of leadership tasks and responsibilities across different school levels. This leadership has replaced the old form of leadership that depends much on a leader or a small group of leaders with a wider leadership team. Secondly, distributed leadership also has "representational power," which represents alternative approaches to school leadership that has emerged due to increased external factors such as new needs/demands, competitions, and globalization. This trend forced schools to restructure their leadership teams and create new roles to respond to new needs. Harris and Spillane (2008) point out that in a more complex world of education, the practice of leadership will undoubtedly require a variety of skills

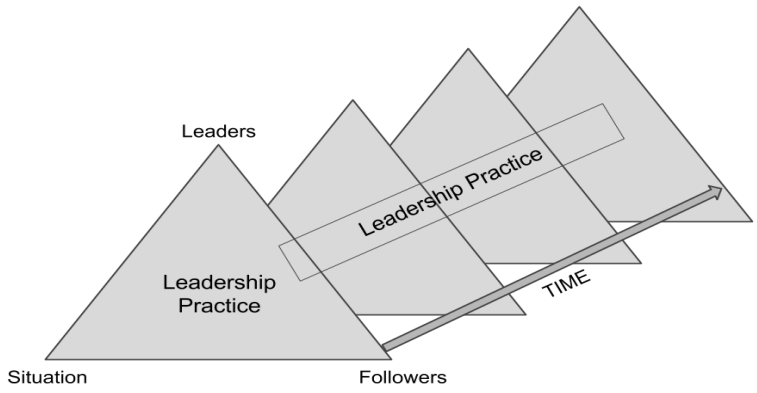
and expertise as well as different forms of leadership to meet new challenges and needs. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, distributed leadership is proved to have applied power. More and more studies have shown a significantly positive relationship between distributed leadership practice and organizational improvements. For example, Harris (2014) and Leithwood et al. (2009) see distributed leadership as a conspicuous contributor to school improvements and positive changes.

Essential aspects of distributed leadership

Spillane (2006) advocates that distributed leadership is the leadership practice that involves significant interactions with three vital elements, specifically leaders, followers, and their situations. As shown in Figure 1 below, the leadership practice is seen as a triangle in which each side exhibits one of the three aspects (leaders, followers, and situation). At the same time, their interactions are established over a specific period of time.

Figure 1

Leadership Practice from a Distributed Perspective (Spillane, 2006, p. 3)



Spillane (2006) further adds that distributed leadership is not about whether leadership is distributed but about how it is distributed. As he argues, "a distributed perspective presses us to investigate how leadership practice is stretched over two or more leaders and examine how followers and the situation mutually constitute this practice" (Spillane, 2006, p. 15).

Advantages of distributed leadership

As pointed out by Harris (2008), distributed leadership provides capacity building to sustain improvement efforts and manage changes because the practice of distributed leadership creates opportunities for people in both formal and informal leadership roles to work together in collaborative and supportive ways. When professionals work together on emerging issues, problems, or challenges that really matter to them, the potential for mutual learning can be quite dramatic (Harris, 2014).

Furthermore, distributed leadership brings about better decision making when more people with different backgrounds, experiences, skills, and expertise get involved in the process. As advocated by Harris (2008), two patterns, namely consultative contribution pattern and decisional distribution pattern, may lead to better decisions. The consultative contribution pattern involves significant participation from key staff in providing input and advice on school-wide decisions. However, final decisions are still made by those in formal leadership positions. On the other hand, the decisional distribution pattern gives full responsibility and autonomy to those working on the ground, for example, teachers and teacher leaders, to make decisions within their appointed areas of responsibility.

It is worth noting that in a complex and demanding working environment like schools, school principals alone cannot ensure success. Spillane (2006) stresses that expecting one person to single-handedly lead complex organizations such as schools is impractical. Therefore, a variety of skills and expertise is required to stretch within and across schools. Leadership must then be distributed so that other potential staff members can get involved with leadership responsibilities.

Barriers to distributed leadership

When it comes to the application of distributed leadership, there are undoubtedly some potential barriers. According to Harris (2014), apart from the misuse and misinterpretation of distributed leadership, some critical barriers can be identified. Those barriers include time, culture, professional unwillingness, and the getting it wrong (Harris, 2014). In many schools, the

matter of time appears to be on top of the discussion and raises some critical questions. Where do busy teachers and office staff find the time to lead innovation and change? Why should they devote time away from their core work? On most days, teachers and office staff hardly have time for even a coffee break, let alone take on leadership responsibility, so how is distributed leadership feasible?

With regard to organizational culture, Harris (2014, p. 73) points out that "culture is an important factor, but it is also important to recognize that the way leadership is shared or distributed can, in itself, have a powerful impact on cultural norms." Hence, if the culture is not right, it is suggested that distributed leadership is not best suitable for school changes either. Needless to say, professional reluctance appears to be a critical barrier when there is a general lack of passionate involvement and cooperation from stakeholders. Therefore, a great deal of effort is inevitably needed.

Furthermore, school leaders usually fall into the "getting it wrong" thought. They hold a fear of making errors or mistakes; thus, the pressure of getting it wrong seems intimidating. However, as Harris (2014) argues, creativity is the cornerstone of distributed leadership, and mistakes are part of the learning process. In her own words:

> The whole point of distributed leadership is creativity and not conformity: to try new things and to test them out, to make mistakes so that learning takes place. It is pointless investing time and energy in revisiting safe and ultimately tired old ideas. (p. 74)

Overall, even though there are barriers to implementing distributed leadership, making it happen could mean recognizing skills and expertise that can be better utilized in schools (Harris 2014). As evidence suggests, distributed leadership can influence school development and change (Harris et al., 2007).

Criticisms of distributed leadership

In addition to the barriers above, there are also some criticisms made of the distributed leadership concept. Distributed leadership has been seen as a dressed-up delegation. While it usually provides a good image of leadership

practice, its effectiveness has not been fully understood yet. Lumby (2013) is probably a well-known critic of this leadership concept. Lumby asserts that distributed leadership is a convenient way of extracting additional work for a little extra reward. Another criticism has been made by Hartley (2010), who highlights that the practice of distributed leadership is pretended to focus on the development of individuals, but instead, it typically concentrates on improving organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

Recommendations for practice

From a distributed perspective on leadership, leadership no longer takes place only in the school principal's office; it involves multiple leaders in both formal and informal leadership roles, including assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, subject specialists, and classroom teachers (Harris, 2009; Spillane, 2006). However, the success of distributed leadership depends essentially on the quality of distribution, methods, and purposes of distribution, and the quality and willingness of those who are given leadership responsibilities (Dampson et al., 2018). Harris (2008) highlights two critical elements that are required for the success of leadership distribution. First, leadership needs to be distributed to those who have or can develop the knowledge or expertise required to carry out the leadership tasks expected of them. Second, effective distributed leadership needs to be coordinated, preferably in some planned ways (p. 52).

Moreover, to ensure success, school leaders should carefully consider the nature of work, organizational demands, and any potential barriers discussed above before applying the distributed leadership concept and examine the extent to which leadership responsibilities can be distributed (Bennett et al., 2003). If leadership responsibilities are to be distributed, it is vital that ongoing professional development or capacity building is provided to those who are less experienced or new to the tasks.

Conclusion

In conclusion, distributed leadership has the power to enhance school performance and outcomes if it is appropriately distributed, taking the aforementioned recommendations into account. The recognition and utilization

of skills and expertise of potential individuals, even if they do not hold formal leadership positions, will enhance a sense of shared responsibility within schools. Furthermore, the opportunity to grow and develop professionally will also imbue those potential individuals with motivation and self-efficacy, leading to more efficient performance.

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