

Leading Instruction: The Distribution of Leadership for Instruction¹

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Introduction

The past decade has witnessed extraordinary efforts to improve the quality of instruction in America's classrooms with raised expectations for students' academic work leading to increased expectations for teachers' instructional practice, expectations that imply substantial change for existing classroom instruction. To achieve these ambitious goals, national and state standards have been deployed and many states have built new assessment systems aligned with these standards. These initiatives represent an extraordinary marshaling of incentives and resources in the cause of more intellectually rigorous pedagogy. Still, because of the magnitude of changes envisioned by reformers, most local educators will have to learn a great deal to grasp the substance of the reforms and their entailments for practice. For a majority of teachers much of the learning essential for successful implementation of recent instructional reforms will have to be initiated and supported at the school level. It is difficult to imagine how state and district staff, given their limited resources and distance from classrooms, would ever be able to motivate and support this sort of teacher learning on their own.

We bring an analysis of school leadership to bear on two core challenges in the implementation of recent instructional reforms -- the challenge of *going to scale* and the challenge of *going to substance*. Going to scale essentially involves facilitating the dissemination of recent reforms beyond the handful of schools and classrooms that usually "take" to instructional innovation. Going to substance involves ensuring that reforms are enacted in ways that are consistent with their "spirit." It involves ensuring that the changes local administrators and teachers undertake in response to reform involve a transformation of the core rather than the margins of practice. The school, and school leadership in particular, will be crucial in addressing the challenge of going to scale and going to substance. Schools that cultivate certain in-school conditions including shared visions for instruction, norms of collaboration, and collective responsibility for students' academic success create incentives and opportunities for teachers to improve, and thereby aid the implementation process (Louis and Kruse, 1995; Newman & Wehlage, 1995). School leadership is recognized as important in promoting these conditions.

The Challenge

While there is an expansive literature about *what* school structures, programs, and processes are necessary for instructional change, we know much less about *how* school leaders enact these changes. As a recent review of the literature concluded, detailed accounts of how school leaders develop and maintain those conditions that enable instructional innovation are lacking and this gap in the knowledge base needs to be addressed (Heck & Hallinger, 1999). One key challenge, then, involves making the "black box" of school leadership practice more transparent through in-depth investigations of how leaders enact those tasks thought critical for instructional innovation.

A second challenge involves moving beyond the pre-occupation with the work of those in formal leadership positions, typically the principal. Concentrating on measuring the effects of school principals, the leadership literature has contributed to the belief that the principal is a synonym for school leadership. The leadership literature, regardless of tradition, has focused mostly on individuals in formal school leadership positions. For example, the leadership traits approach defines leadership chiefly as a function of individual personality, ability, traits and style – the focus on the venerable “great man” theories of leadership drawn from 18th and 19th century historians continues unabated (Burns 1978). Even the cognitive tradition of leadership research, which represents a major advancement because of its attention to leaders’ thinking continues the tradition of seeing leadership chiefly in terms of individuals. As a result researchers have often ignored other sources of leadership in schools, a problematic omission because other professionals can also play important roles in leading instructional (Heller & Firestone 1995). If leadership in schools involves a range of these actors, then, the pre-occupation in the literature with the work of individual leaders has limitations.

While there is an expanding literature on teacher leadership the work focuses chiefly on the role of teacher as leader and usually does not attempt to understand simultaneously the work of other leaders such as the principal and assistant principal. The focus in the literature on the work of those occupying particular formal and/or informal roles rather than the composite of leadership practice in a school means that our understandings of school leadership practice are not

comprehensive. We argue that in order to understand school leadership it is necessary not only to understand the practice of each of those who lead but also to understand the relations among these leading practices.

Responding to the Challenge: A Distributed Perspective On Leadership

If the challenges of scale and substance are to be addressed at the school level, then we need to reconsider our conceptions of school leadership. We argue for such a re-conceptualization in this paper by articulating a distributed perspective on leadership. The Distributed Leadership Project, a four-year study of leadership practice, takes the school leadership activity, rather than the principal as the unit of analysis. Our central argument is this: school leadership is best understood as a distributed practice, *stretched over* the school's social and situational contexts. It is not simply a function of what a school principal, or any other individual leader – assistant principal, teacher leader – does.

Multiple Leaders Leading. We define school leadership as the identification, acquisition, allocation, coordination, and use of the social, material and cultural resources necessary to establish the conditions for the possibility of innovation in teaching and learning. The distributed leadership framework incorporates the practice of those multiple individuals in a school who work at mobilizing and guiding school staff in the instructional innovation process. A distributed perspective presses us to identify (and explore the enactment of) the leadership tasks performed by these formal and informal leaders. Aside from the principal, other potential school leaders include assistant principals, curriculum specialists, and reading or Title 1 teachers. Further, teachers, either individually or collectively, take on leadership responsibilities including mentoring and supervising peers and providing professional development.

Our on-going research in 13 Chicago elementary schools suggest that the work of leading instruction is distributed among multiple leaders. Preliminary analysis of teacher interview data suggests that leadership for instruction typically involves the principal, assistant principal, teacher leaders, and regular classroom teachers. A teacher captured the situation:

I've changed tremendously in the way that I teach reading . . . I had to pull things out of everywhere. I went to every teacher that I could possibly think of in this school that

could help me. I got information from the reading recovery teachers, from the reading specialists. (11.05.99).

For this teacher and others in our study, leadership for instruction involved multiple people, both people in formal leadership positions and people who took on informal leadership responsibilities.

Material Artifacts and Leadership. Few studies of school leadership pay sustained attention to the tools and material artifacts that are part and parcel of leading instruction. And when tools and artifacts do figure in accounts of school leadership they are typically treated as context, part of the backdrop for leaders' work. Yet, a cursory examination of the work of leadership suggests that tools of various sorts – student test scores, teacher observation protocols, curricular frameworks – figure prominently in the work of school leaders. In our study, teachers' accounts of where they turn to for leadership underscore the importance of material artifacts:

What I do is look in the book. We have a book that lines up everything from language arts to math, so I know, depending on what I am doing how to match it up. I look at what they [students] need to know for the test. For example, the science was state goal twelve, academic standard B, frameworks 4 - 7 and then I can go to the book and look that up. State goal twelve is having working knowledge of the fundamental concepts and principles of the life, physical and earth space sciences and their connections. Academic standard B is understanding the effects of organisms on the environment . . .

I did a lot of reading on professional books. I was on the Internet all the time. I joined a first grade newsletter on the Internet where people share different ideas and how to teach different things . . .

Teachers identified material artifacts including, but not limited to, state and district standards, student tests and test scores, textbooks and other printed materials, as well as the internet and other technology-based tools as sources they turned to for guidance and direction with respect to their teaching practice. When asked about their classroom instruction, teachers typically identified from two to six sources - individuals and artifacts - they turned to for instructional leadership.

Similarly, our observations and interviews with school leaders illuminate how material artifacts and tools of various sorts are ubiquitous in the practice of leading instruction. School leaders' actions are mediated by an array of artifacts including forms of various sorts, observation protocols, meeting agendas, student tests and test scores as well as a variety of tools for representing these scores, and curricular materials. From a distributed perspective, tools and

materials artifacts are not simply a backdrop for leadership work, but a core element of that work. Hence, leadership for instruction is not simply distributed among individuals but also distributed in material artifacts such as student tests, curriculum guides, and various sorts of protocols. Consequently, we are currently systematically investigating how artifacts and tools are used in leading instruction in elementary schools.

Material artifacts and tools are not simply accessories or aides that leaders use to execute a particular task. Material artifacts and tools are constituting components of leadership practice – they help define that practice – and are not simply devices that allow individuals to execute a task in some apriori determined fashion. Tools influence leadership tasks, how they approach these tasks, and how they set about enacting them. Consider for example teacher evaluation. Many local school systems mandate that school leaders use a particular teacher supervision form when undertaking summative evaluations of teaching practice. Understanding the practice of teacher evaluation involves exploring the mediational properties of these evaluation protocols; that is, how leaders use these forms to mediate their practice as evaluators of teaching. If we consider for a moment two different evaluation protocols the importance of the tool in understanding leadership practice will be further illuminated. Imagine “protocol A” consisting of a checklist of generic teaching processes of the sort identified by the “process-product” research tradition including items such as wait time and teachers’ use of praise. In contrast “protocol B” is subject matter specific, including, for example, items on mathematics teaching such as “how the classroom task represented doing mathematics,” and “how students were required to justify their mathematical ideas.” Teacher evaluation is constituted in the interaction of these observation protocols, the school principal, and teachers.

The observation forms are a defining element of the practice of observing teachers. The form or protocol is not simply an accessory or aide that the leader uses to execute the evaluation task in a priori manner. Further, because evaluation tools can *represent* teaching and the nature of what it means to be competent in teaching in different ways (as our two examples illuminate) changing the protocol may contribute to changes in the practice of evaluating teaching. Considering

the artifacts apart from practice may allow us insight into the intentions of the artifact designers, but considering the artifacts as they enable and constrain leadership practice provides a lens into leadership as a distributed practice in schools.

This is a rather particular way of thinking about situation, one that differs substantially from previous scholarship on leadership where situation or context is treated chiefly as an independent variable that influences what leaders do and the impact of what they do. In our scheme situation is a constituting element of leadership because it offers particulars –tools of various kinds, among other things – that affords and constrains leadership practice.

Leadership Practice as Stretched over Multiple Leaders. Our account to this point has focused on arguing that multiple individuals and material artifacts must be considered when documenting leadership in elementary schools. But, what are the relations among the leading practices of the multiple leaders that teachers in our ongoing study reported as important sources of leadership? For us, analyzing leadership as a distributed practice involves more than developing models that capture the amount of leading in an organization or that factor in and map the leadership responsibilities and practices of all leaders in a school. Studying leadership as a distributed practice also involves exploring relations among leadership practices. Understanding how leaders in a school work together, as well as separately, to execute leadership functions and tasks is an important aspect of leadership distribution.

Previous work suggests that different leaders in a school can practice independently, in parallel, to execute a particular function or task and duplicate each other's work (Heller & Firestone, 1995). Or leaders might divide-up responsibility for the execution of different leadership tasks. However, based on our data analysis, we want to consider another perspective on relations among leadership activities in a school: leadership is *stretched over* the practice to two or more leaders. Each of these are plausible scenarios and not mutually exclusive of each other. One might find examples of all three in a school.

Pressing on the idea of leadership distribution, we are exploring how leadership practice is *stretched over* multiple individuals and tools. We use "*stretched over*" to highlight that the

distribution of leadership involves a consideration of how leadership tasks are co-enacted by two or more leaders working together or independently. We consider two examples below as a sort of “existence proof” of what we mean by leadership practice being stretched over leaders. Specifically, we focus on the interdependencies among leaders’ practices and leadership activities, using our data to identify and articulate two patterns that help illuminate what we mean by leadership being stretched over people.

We use “collective leading” to characterize when two or more leaders work together to co-enact a particular leadership task. We found many examples of this collective leading across the schools in our study especially in situations where principals, assistant principals, and teachers worked together to facilitate meetings and workshops. For example, at a professional development meeting at Parkside elementary the principal and two leaders collective led a major segment of a two-hour workshop on “project-based” learning.² The principal keeps the meeting on task and on schedule, pressing the group to move from one agenda item to the next. Teacher 1 (Ms. Johnson) leads the discussion and Teacher 2 (Mr. Jones) by defining terms and interpreting ideas clarifies teachers’ contributions and records the discussion. It is not simply that these leaders “divided up” the practice of leading the meeting. Because Teacher 2 engages in the clarification of the teachers’ comments, Teacher 1 is able to continue the discussion while the group maintains some shared understanding. These three leaders worked together, playing distinct facilitation roles, to co-construct the leading of the meeting: the facilitation of the meeting is stretched over the practices of these three leaders as they facilitate the meeting together, and the collective leading is dependent on the practice of each actor. The interdependency among these leaders revolves around the facilitation roles they take on.

A similar sort of interdependency revolves around different knowledge or expertise. For example, in another of our schools, the principal and the language arts coordinator meet with individual teachers for what they call a “strategy meeting.” Together, they discuss the teacher’s instructional plans in mathematics and language arts for the quarter. The principal is knowledgeable

about the district's accountability measures around math and literacy and also draws on her background as a math science coordinator at her former school. The language arts coordinator knows the literacy content and instructional strategies and is familiar with the reading series she recently ordered for the school. Using their respective knowledge, these leaders together execute this leadership task.

In the above examples, the collective leading depended on the interplay among multiple actors. There is a *reciprocal* relationship between the practice of these leaders, each requiring input from the others. In this "reciprocal interdependency" (Malone et al., 1999), individuals play off one another, with the practice of person A contributing to and enabling the practice of person B and vice-versa. The collective leading of the meeting results from the interaction of these multiple leaders.

Leadership practice can also be stretched across the practice of two or more leaders who work separately but interdependently in pursuit of a common goal, targeting either different elements of the instructional unit (students, materials, teacher) or the same element(s). For example, at Carson elementary school, the school's administration uses standardized test scores, and a breakdown of student performance in particular skill areas, to focus instructional improvement efforts on specific student learning needs. This strategy involves a number of interdependent activities, each building on resources produced through the completion of prior activities. First, the tests must be administered to students, requiring scheduling and coordination. Ms. Roland, the school counselor, takes responsibility for the logistics of the testing process. Second, Ms. Roland, Dr. Johnson (the school Principal) and Ms. Brown (the assistant principal) analyze and interpret student test results. Ms. Roland's knowledge and skill is in psychometrics, Dr. Johnson understands the schools' overall instructional program, and Ms. Brown, a former elementary school teacher, understand classroom practice. Together they work on interpreting the results. Third, based on this analysis, instructional priorities are established, these priorities are disseminated to teachers, professional development is organized to support these priorities, and their implementation

² All names are pseudonyms.

monitored throughout the school. This example suggests a sequential or flow interdependency in which leadership practice depends upon the completion of prior tasks (Malone et al. 1999). The example illuminates how leadership activities can depend upon resources generated from prior leadership activities. Multiple, interdependent steps are required for the execution of the leadership task. Leadership practice is stretched over activities over time.

In the above scenarios, the group performing the task has cognitive properties that exceed those of any one member – “the cognitive properties of groups are produced by an interaction between structures internal to individuals and structures external to individuals” (Hutchins, 1990: 306). We contend that the collective cognitive properties of a group of leaders working together to enact a particular task leads to the evolution of a leadership practice that is potentially more than the sum of each individual’s practice. Consequently, to understand the knowledge needed for leadership practice in these situations, one has to move beyond an analysis of individual knowledge and consider what these leaders know and do together. School leaders’ knowledge and expertise may be best explored at the collective level rather than exclusively at the individual leader level.

The Subject Matters. A final observation: investigating instructional leadership has to be in fundamental ways about the activity being led – teaching and learning. That is a more complex task than the existing literature suggests because instruction is a vast, complex, and multi-dimensional practice including the questions teachers’ pose for students, the materials teachers’ use, the ways students’ interact with each other and the teacher, and classroom management. Further, subject matter is an important context for teachers’ practice (Stodolsky, 1988). Yet, we know relatively little about school leadership as a practice of leading instruction in particular school subjects or about relations between leadership practice and dimensions of instruction.

Our ongoing analyses suggest that the manner in which leadership practice is distributed varies among subject areas. Patterns of distribution vary depending on the subject matter - mathematics, science and language arts. For example, the extent to which leadership was distributed in our sites tended to vary by school subject. While leadership for instruction was distributed across two or more leaders in all schools, there were fewer leaders for mathematics instruction

compared with language arts instruction, and fewer still for science instruction compared with the other two subjects. Leadership for literacy instruction was typically stretched over the principal and/or assistant principal, a language arts coordinator or specialist, grade level lead teachers, and the school's external partners. With respect to mathematics instruction, leadership was typically spread over the principal and/or assistant principal (though not always), a lead mathematics teacher (who often taught fulltime), and classroom teachers while leadership for science was typically confined to two or more classroom teachers, few of whom had any official designations (e.g. science resource teacher or coordinator). While leadership was distributed across multiple leaders, the range of distribution was much greater in language arts than in both mathematics and science.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our distributed view underscores that leadership activity is *distributed* in the interactive web of actors, artifacts, and *situation*. Prior research has established the importance of the leadership situation arguing that what leaders do as well as the effects of what they do on followers (Murphy 1991). Our distributed perspective argues for a different view of relations between situation and leadership practice. In arguing that leadership is a situated practice we mean that situation or context does not simply "effect" what school leaders do, but that it is *constitutive* of leadership practice. In this scheme, situation is not viewed as an independent variable that influences leadership practice; instead situation is best understood as a fundamental constituting component of leadership practice. Leadership practices are to varying degrees stretched over aspects of the situation. Because situations offer particulars – e.g., tools of various kinds, organizational structures, - that are constitutive of leadership practice, as these particulars vary from one situation to the next so too will leadership practice.

School leadership then is not simply a function of what an individual leader, knows and does. Rather, it is constituted in the dynamic interaction of multiple leaders (and followers) and their situation around particular leadership tasks (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). If leadership is a distributed practice, then, investigations of leadership that focus exclusively on the work of individual positional leaders are unlikely to generate comprehensive understandings of the practice

of school leadership. It is essential to go beyond a consideration of the roles, strategies, and traits of those individuals who occupy formal leadership positions to consider how the *practice* of leadership is stretched over leaders, followers, and the material and symbolic artifacts in the situation. The situation of leaders' practice – material artifacts, tools, etc., - is not simply an appendage, but rather a defining element of that practice. Leadership practice emerges in and through the interaction of leaders, followers, and situation, in the execution of leadership tasks.

The distributed framework offers considerable leverage for studying leadership as a school wide rather than an individual practice. Our frame suggests that leadership activity is the appropriate level of analysis in studying leadership practice. Focusing either exclusively on one or more formal leaders or on teacher leaders is unlikely to generate robust insights into school leadership. Further, our distributed frame argues that the tools leaders use should be central, not peripheral, in the study of leadership. Forms, curricular documents, tools for representing test score data, and other material artifacts have rarely received systematic and in-depth attention in studies of leadership. We contend that systematic attention to these artifacts is essential in studying how leadership practice unfolds in schools.

Taking the distributed perspective seriously also suggests a need for more complex approaches to studying the expertise of leaders. From the distributed perspective we have developed here, expertise is not simply a function of a leader's thinking and mental schemata. Viewing skill and expertise exclusively as a function of individual traits, styles, and schemata obscures how what leaders do is also a function of their situation. Leadership expertise extends beyond the mind of individual leaders. We are not suggesting that the knowledge and skill of an individual is unimportant – it clearly is. Studies of leadership expertise then must investigate how and the extent to which the expertise essential for the execution of particular leadership tasks are stretched over different leaders as well as the tools with which they work.

This distributed perspective is also essential as a practical matter because educational leaders who cannot engage others in leading will not be very successful. They will not be able to spread and mobilize the expertise necessary for instructional improvement in their organizations and thus

are unlikely to be very effective. It is highly unlikely that a principal practicing solo can improve instruction in his or her school. To improve educational leadership, then, it is essential to understand how the practice of leadership is stretched over the work of multiple leaders in an organization. Further, we may also need to rethink our approaches to education for leaders. The distributed perspective suggests that intervening to improve school leadership by focusing exclusively or chiefly on building the knowledge of an individual formal leader in a school may not be the most optimal use of resources. If expertise is distributed then the school rather than the individual leader may be the most appropriate unit for thinking about the development of leadership expertise.

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