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Distributed Leadership

by James P. Spillane

Stories of leadership successes follow a familiar structure: A charismatic leader, often the CEO or school principal, takes over a struggling school, establishing new goals and expectations and challenging business as usual within the organization. This leader creates new organizational routines and structures that with time transform the school's culture, contributing in turn to greater teacher satisfaction, higher teacher expectations for students, and improved student achievement.

Stories in the "heroics of leadership" genre, however, are problematic for at least two reasons. First, these epics equate school leadership chiefly with an individual leader—typically the school principal. This is inaccurate because school principals, or any other leader for that matter, do not single-handedly lead schools to greatness; leadership involves an array of individuals with various tools and structures. Though scholars have long argued for moving beyond those at the top of organizations in studies of leadership (Barnard 1938), the "heroics of leadership" genre persists. The second problem with these accounts is their inattention to leadership practice. They dwell mostly on the "what" of leadership—structures, functions, routines, and roles—rather than the "how" of school leadership—the daily performance of leadership routines, functions, and structures (Hallinger and Heck 1996). Leadership practice centers not only on what people do, but how and why they do it. Understanding leadership practice is imperative if research is to generate usable knowledge about and for school leadership. Distributed leadership is a recent antidote, or more correctly a series of antidotes, to the work in the heroics of leadership.

Distributed leadership has garnered considerable attention in the United States and abroad. It often is used interchangeably with "shared leadership," "team leadership," and "democratic leadership." Some use distributed leadership to indicate that school

leadership involves multiple leaders; others argue that leadership is an organizational quality, rather than an individual attribute. Still others use distributed leadership to define a way of thinking about the *practice* of school leadership (Gronn 2002; Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2001, 2004). Distributed leadership's popularity likely has to do with how easily people can use it to relabel familiar approaches. It is little wonder that many observers are perplexed about the meaning of distributed leadership and whether it is anything new. Perhaps distributed leadership is just another case of old wine in new bottles.

Distributed leadership often is cast as some sort of monolithic construct when, in fact, it is merely an emerging set of ideas that frequently diverge from one another.

My understanding of distributed leadership, based on *The Distributed Leadership Study* (School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University 2004), an elementary school leadership research study, is outlined. The following question is addressed: What does it mean to take a distributed perspective on school leadership? My intent is not to provide a comprehensive review of different perspectives or identify the "one best" definition, but to lay out my own definition of distributed leader-

ship. An overview of distributed leadership, in which key terms and ideas are introduced and defined, is provided. I next address how leadership is distributed over an interactive web of people and situations, examining how leadership is spread over both leaders and followers given key aspects of their situation, including organizational routines, structures, and tools. I then illustrate how this definition of distributed leadership is a case of new wine—not new bottles for old wine—and consider its implications for research, practice, and leadership development.

Putting Leadership Practice Center Stage

Distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures. Though they are important considerations, leadership practice is still the starting point. A distributed perspective frames leadership practice in a particular way; leadership *practice* is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation. This point is especially important, and one that is frequently glossed over in discussions of distributed leadership. Rather than viewing leadership practice as a product of a leader's knowledge and skill, the distributed perspective defines it as the interactions between people and their situation. These interactions, rather than any particular action, are critical in understanding leadership practice. Too frequently, discussions of distributed leadership end prematurely with an acknowledgment that multiple individuals take responsibility for leadership in schools. This "leader plus" view, however, is just the tip of the iceberg

because, from a distributed perspective, leadership practice that results from *interactions* among leaders, followers, and their situation is critical.

Some educators might argue that this is merely semantics, pointing out that leadership scholars have long recognized the importance of these interactions and acknowledged that leadership typically involves more people than those at the top of the organizational hierarchy. My argument is not simply that situation is important to leadership practice, but that it actually constitutes leadership practice—situation defines leadership practice in interaction with leaders and followers. This way of thinking about situation differs substantially from prior work.

People and Practice

Equating leadership with the actions of those in leadership positions is inadequate for three reasons. First, leadership practice typically involves multiple leaders, some with and some without formal leadership positions. It is essential, therefore, to move beyond viewing leadership in terms of superhuman actions. Second, leadership practice is not something done to followers. From a distributed perspective, followers are one of the three constituting elements of leadership practice. Third, it is not the actions of individuals, but the interactions among them, that are critical in leadership practice.

Existing scholarship shows that responsibility for leadership functions can be distributed in various ways. Studies have shown how this responsibility can involve multiple leaders—not just principals or copincipals—who work in a coordinated manner at times and in parallel at others (Heller and Firestone 1995). Recent work in more than 100 U.S. schools showed that responsibility for leadership functions typically was distributed among three to seven people, including administrators and specialists (Camburn, Rowan, and Taylor 2003).

The Distributed Leadership Study also showed that responsibility for leadership routines involves multiple leaders, though the number involved depends upon the routine and subject area. Some routines, such as monitoring and evaluating teaching practice, involve fewer leaders (typically the principal and assistant principal), compared with routines such as teacher development in literacy, which often involve the principal, curricular specialists, and lead teachers. The extent to which responsibility for leadership routines was distributed differed by school subject, with fewer leaders involved in leadership routines for mathematics than for literacy. For example, at Adams Elementary School, the principal, literacy coordinator, curriculum specialist, and lead teachers were frequent and active participants in executing leadership routines for literacy. Conversely, leadership routines for mathematics instruction were typically defined by one of four lead mathematics teachers (Spillane, Diamond, and Jita 2003).

Leaders act in situations that are defined by others' actions. From a distributed perspective, it is in these interactions that leadership practice is constructed. *The Distributed Leadership Study's* analysis of leadership performance documents how leadership practice is defined through the interactions of two or more leaders. When observing leadership routines for literacy instruction at Adams Elementary School,

one immediately notices how leadership practice becomes defined in the interactions of leaders and followers. These leadership routines often involve some combination of four leaders: the principal, the school's literacy coordinator, the African-American Heritage coordinator, and a teacher leader. At times, these leaders' actions parallel or overlap one another; at other times, they do not. The principal emphasizes goals and standards, keeps the meetings moving, summarizes comments, and reminds participants of what is expected in their classrooms. The literacy coordinator identifies problems with literacy instruction, suggests solutions and resources, and encourages teachers to present their ideas. The teacher leader describes his or her efforts to implement a teaching strategy that the literacy coordinator shared. The actions of followers (in this case, primarily classroom teachers) also contribute to defining leadership practice. They provide knowledge about a particular teaching strategy—knowledge that sometimes is used by leaders to illustrate a point about improving literacy instruction.

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Leadership practice takes form in the interactions between leaders and followers, rather than as a function of one or more leaders' actions (Spillane et al. in press). Individuals play off one another, creating a reciprocal interdependency between their actions. The Distributed Leadership Study identified interdependency as the primary characteristic of interactions among leaders. This theory has been informed by the work of orga-

nizational theorists (Thompson 1967; Malone et al. 1999). Three types of interdependencies identified by Thompson (1967)—reciprocal, pooled, and sequential—served as the basis.

Leadership practice can be spread across two or more leaders who work separately yet interdependently. The leadership practice used in monitoring and evaluating teaching at Ellis Elementary is illustrative. The principal believes that biannual visits are inadequate to evaluate a teacher's practice. She and the assistant principal developed a comprehensive routine for monitoring and evaluating teaching practice. The assistant principal, who has a good rapport with teachers, visits classrooms frequently to conduct formative evaluations and give regular feedback to teachers. The principal engages in summative evaluations through her biannual visits to classrooms. Through formal and informal meetings, the principal and assistant principal pool their information to develop an understanding of teachers' practices. Through this "pooled" interdependency, these two leaders' separate actions interact to define a collective practice for monitoring and evaluating teaching.

Sometimes separate leadership practices are spread over the actions of two or more leaders and must be performed in a particular sequence. In these cases, multiple interdependent tasks, arranged sequentially, are critical to the performance of a leadership routine. For example, the five-week assessment at Adams School illustrates how leadership practice can be stretched over leaders over time. This assessment involves seven stages performed in a specific order:

- The literacy coordinator creates the student assessment instruction.
- Teachers administer the assessment.
- The literacy coordinator and her assistant score and analyze the results.
- The principal and literacy coordinator meet to discuss the assessment results, using information from classroom observations to diagnose problems.
- The literacy coordinator compiles resources and strategies that might enable teachers to address the problems identified through the analysis of assessment data.
- The literacy coordinator reports assessment results to teachers during literacy committee meetings.
- The literacy coordinator, principal, and teachers interpret assessment results and identify instructional strategies to address problem areas.

Leadership practice takes form in the interactions between leaders and followers, rather than as a function of one or more leaders' actions.

This sequence illustrates coordinated leadership. The term "coordinated" is used to emphasize that leadership practice that involves a sequential interdependency must be performed in a particular sequence.

People, Place, and Practice

Leaders typically have interaction with others. They also have interaction with aspects of the situation including a variety of tools, routines, and structures. Tools include everything from student assessment data to protocols for evaluating teachers. The five-week assessment described here is an example of a routine. Structures include routines such as grade-level meetings and the scheduling of teachers' prep periods. From a distributed perspective, these routines, tools, and structures define leadership practice; the situation both enables and constrains leadership practice.

Aspects of the situation define and are defined by leadership practice in interaction with leaders and followers. Structures, routines, and tools are the means through which people act. Yet, these same structures, routines, and tools are created and remade through

leadership practice. The distinction between the ostensive and performative aspects of organizational routines (Feldman and Pentland 2003) is helpful.

The ostensive aspect refers to the “routine in principle,” while the idealized version of the performative aspect refers to the routine in practice in particular places and at particular times. For example, the seven stages of the five-week assessment represent the ostensive aspect of this routine, while reporting student assessment results to teachers in a literacy committee meeting is the performative aspect of the routine. The ostensive aspect frames practice—

both enabling and constraining it. Practice creates and recreates the ostensive aspect. Though Feldman and Pentland (2003) confined their discussion to organizational routines, ostensive and performative distinctions can be applied to other aspects of the situation, including structures and tools.

Student assessment data, a widely used leadership tool by all schools in *The Distributed Leadership Study*, is a good ex-

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ample. In an effort to reflect the district’s policy of holding schools accountable for student achievement, the student assessment data tool framed leadership practice in a particular way across all schools by focusing leadership practice on curriculum content coverage. The student assessment data tool, however, was transformed differently in and through leadership practice at each school. In some schools, assessment data were reported, problem areas were identified, and specific topics on which teachers should focus were presented at faculty meetings. In other schools, assessment data were used differently. At Baxter School, for example, assessment data were disaggregated and used as the basis for ongoing conversations about instructional improvement and curricular priorities.

Sometimes tools designed for other purposes are appropriated for leadership. At Hillside School, students’ “writing folders”—designed for classroom writing instruction—have become a core leadership tool. The key leadership routine is the monthly review of these folders by the school principal. Every teacher submits a folder containing one composition written by each student in his or her class. The principal reads each student’s work and provides teachers and students with written feedback. The leadership practice in this example is defined in the interactions of the principal and the writing folders, as well as those between teachers and students. Through this monthly routine, writing folders have been redesigned as a leadership tool. In turn, the writing folder fundamentally shapes a leadership practice grounded in what students are learning about writing and engaging teachers and students in improving writing instruction.

Is this perspective on situation new? After all, contingency theorists have long maintained the importance of situation to leadership. Leadership circumstances influence leaders' actions, as well as their effect on followers (Bossert et al. 1982; Murphy 1991). From a contingency perspective, situation works independently to influence a leader's behavior or mediate its effects. A distributed perspective differs in at least two respects. First, situation does not simply affect what school leaders do as an independent, external variable. Rather it defines leadership practice in interaction with leaders and followers. Second, there is a two-way relationship between situation and practice. Aspects of the situation can either enable or constrain practice, while practice can transform the situation.

A Case of Old Wine in New Bottles?

The answer to this question depends on the particular definition of distributed leadership being considered. Distributed leadership often is cast as some sort of monolithic construct when, in fact, it is merely an emerging set of ideas that frequently diverge from one another.

The distributed perspective on leadership in this paper gives center stage to leadership practice. Though scholars have viewed leadership as a behavior or act for some time (Fiedler 1973), this work equates leadership practice with the acts of individual leaders. From a distributed perspective, leadership practice takes shape in the interactions of leaders, followers, and their situation, thus breaking new ground rather than simply relabeling old ideas.

Shared leadership, team leadership, and democratic leadership are not synonyms for distributed leadership. Depending on the situation, a distributed perspective allows for shared leadership. A team leadership approach does not necessarily involve subscribing to a distributed perspective in which leadership practice is viewed as the interaction of leaders, followers, and situation. Similarly, a distributed perspective allows for leadership that can be democratic or autocratic. From a distributed perspective, leadership can be stretched over leaders in a school but is not necessarily democratic.

Distributed leadership is considered by some educators as a cure-all for all that ails schools—an opinion to which I do not subscribe. Distributed leadership is a perspective—a conceptual or diagnostic tool for thinking about school leadership. It is not a blueprint for effective leadership nor a prescription for how school leadership should be practiced.

The lack of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of distributed leadership in promoting instructional improvement and increasing student achievement is considered a weakness. While this concern is understandable, it is not crucial. What matters for instructional improvement and student achievement is *not* that leadership is distributed, but *how* it is distributed. Descriptive theory building is essential before causal links between distributed leadership, instructional improvement, and student outcomes can be established.

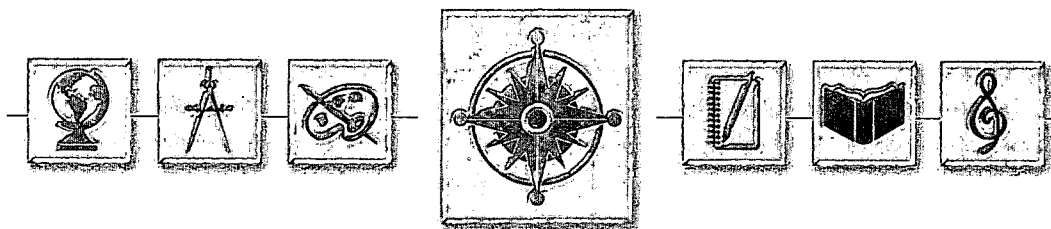
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From a distributed perspective, leadership is a system of practice comprised of a collection of interacting components: leaders, followers, and situation. These interacting components must be understood together because the system is more than the sum of the component parts or practices.

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