

Thoughts on School Leadership

(Draft)

March 17, 2009

Submitted by

The Sub-Group

Hank Rubin

Segun Eubanks

Mark Simon

Fred Brown

Lois Adams-Rodgers

David R. Schwandt

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
The School Leadership Issue	3
New “Meanings” of School Leadership	4
An Inclusive Strategic Goal	5
Potential Actions of the Total Group	5
Practice and Action Learning.....	6
Policy Definition.....	6
Research and Dissemination of Knowledge	7
Preparation of Educational Professionals	7
Next Step for the Total Group Meeting	8
References	9

Introduction

A characteristic of human social systems is their ability to self-generate and adapt through the process of continuously examining their purposes and basic assumptions in the context of their changing environments. Implicit in this statement is the *capacity to learn*, not just adapt (Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to put forth a draft summary of the discussions of a sub-group of participants of the October 2008 luncheon (convened by the National Education Association and the Institute for Collaborative Leadership) concerning teacher leadership and “new approaches to distributed/collaborative leadership in schools” (The members of this meeting will be referred to as the “Total Group” throughout this paper). The objective of this sub-group was to reflect on the input from the Total Group meeting and plan a useful second meeting around the issues and/or suggestions of the first. The discussions of the sub-group centered around five topics; The School Leadership Issue, New Meanings of School Leadership, A Strategic Goal for School Leadership, Potential Actions for the Total Group, and A Potential Framework for the next meeting of the Total Group. These topics serve as an organizing frame for this paper.

The School Leadership Issue

Continuing efforts to strengthen the relationship between student achievement and teacher effort has now evolved to concerns with the impact, both positive and negative, of school leadership on student outcomes (Leithwood, Lewis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Meta analysis of the principal’s influence on student achievement (Cotton, 2003; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003) point to the principal’s role in providing safe and supportive educational environments, setting high expectations, establishing goals focused on student achievement, use of collaboration, and staff empowerment. The Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) study presented 21 “responsibilities” of school leadership that are linked to student achievement and puts forth the premise that a one standard deviation increase in all 21 responsibilities “... would translate into mean student achievement (improvement) ... of 10 percentile points.” (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003, p. 3) These studies and others are now focusing on the context of education and provide insight into the complexity of the role of school leadership in creating and sustaining a learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000)

Many aspects of our society’s organizations (private, not-for-profit, government, etc.) are evolving past the “traditional person-in-position leader models” that have dominated the structures of our institutions. This evolution is also apparent in our K-12 education systems. The complexity of both the educational task and its context requires new thinking about how individuals and schools organize, make sense of their environments, and create meaning concerning education in our society. This complexity emerges from the relationships between external factors, leadership and management at the school level, classroom teaching, and student learning. As a result of these conditions, it is important for the Total Group to discuss, debate, and take action with respect to this changing conceptualization of school leadership and its impact on learning.

New “Meanings” of School Leadership

The concept of “influencing in schools” has traditionally manifested itself in official positions of authority and responsibility, commonly in the form of principals, assistant principals, department chairs, etc. Recognition of the complexity of the school context, coupled with the need for more focused attention on professional development and student performance, has made the single-role focus of school leadership more difficult to implement, if not obsolete (Lashway, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). The leadership of learning is now understood as involving more than the “traditional leader” model can deliver, “... the relationship between external factors, leadership and management at school level, classroom teaching and student learning is more like a causal network with an overall directional flow than a linear sequence”.(Wallace, 2002, p. 165)

At the same time, many schools nationally, are finding it difficult to find sufficiently qualified candidates to fill school administrator positions. The national principals’ associations, the American Association of School Administrators, and school districts across the country are creating partnerships with universities and freestanding institutions to expand the pool of candidates for leadership positions through alternative preparation programs. The National Education Association is exploring the expansion of their efforts to include training of teachers in “teacher leadership” so that their membership can play a meaningful role in the structuring of their schools. In conjunction with this, universities are also examining educational administration curriculum in response to criticisms of inadequacy (Levine, 2005). These circumstances, coupled with the growing complexity of the school principal’s role have triggered an interest in the consideration of alternate leadership structures that consider the development of leadership distinct from developing a “leader” as a person-in-position (Biggart & Hamilton, 1987; Day, 2001).

One alternative to the person-in-position approach is *distributed leadership*. Distributed leadership can be the delegation of leadership responsibilities, establishment of leadership teams, involvement of teachers in the leadership function (Hord, Stiegelbauer, & Hall, 1984), or any combination of efforts to increase involvement in the management of schools, sharing of information and responsibility, and the participation in decision making. Spillane (2004) defines leadership of schools as;

... mobilizing school personnel and clients to notice, face, and take on the task of changing instruction as well as harnessing and mobilizing resources needed to support the transformation of teaching and learning. 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 teaching and learning. (p. 11)

Elmore (2000) sees the concept of distributed leadership as crucial in generating instructional improvement. He emphasizes the principle of comparative advantage that underscores that people should lead where they have expertise. Other studies have stressed the structuring mechanisms associated with distributed leadership (Alliance, 2002) and the necessity of involvement at multiple levels (Copland, 2003). Spillane (2001) emphasizes leadership’s dependence on distributed cognition which envisions thinking as a social, not individual, action (Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000).

The linking of distributed knowledge with distributed leadership allows the school system to incorporate a “true organizational learning” perspective into their educational environments. The actions of school leadership, in the context of organizational learning processes (Senge, 1994), enable the school to evaluate and possibly alter its basic cultural assumptions concerning education and student learning (Rubin, 2002).

Although the above “meanings” of school leadership are derived from a broad sense of the literature, the Total Group in October generated a set of “characteristics” that reflected similar attributes that they foresee as pertinent to school leadership. These included a Learning/Learner Focused Culture, Authentically Distributed Accountability and Authority, Communication-Intensive Leadership Processes, Data-Valued Environment, and Teacher’s Ideas Considered and Used. These characteristics emerged from “flattened hierarchal” school structures that were flexible, transparent, and open to change. In addition, these “cultures of partnerships” would rely on “self-confident professionals”. These characteristics and structural prerequisites, coupled with the findings from the literature, provide insight and justification for a strategic goal and potential actions that the Total Group could facilitate.

An Inclusive Strategic Goal

The sub-group spent extensive time making sense of the Total Group’s multiple meanings of school leadership and how they can be incorporated into a strategic goal that is “inclusive of all concerns”, but yet not so “general” to have little impact on actions. As a result, the sub-group’s conversations focused on the above issues and meanings to arrive at an overarching goal that ultimately redefines society’s concepts of school leadership. This redefining goal would result in school leadership that is a “flexible organizational *capacity* that coevolves with its context and involves all members of the system (teachers, students, administrators and other stakeholders) with the purpose of providing students with relevant educations, the maintenance of transparency of actions and accountability, and the sustainment of an educational environment that provides dignity for all concerned.” It was felt that employing this goal would provide flexibility in the restructuring of the school and its learning community, and would allow schools to be more responsive to their unique environments and better meet the needs of their students and the community.

Potential Actions of the Total Group

As can be seen from the above discussions of issues, meanings and goals, the concepts of “teacher leadership” and “distributed or collaborative leadership” have captured the interest of many professional and academic institutions. However, there has been little “purposeful action” and “research” associated with the concepts. The Total Group, at this time in history, has a unique opportunity to explore through multiple cooperative efforts the processes and feasibility of new concepts of school leadership. The Total Group represents professional associations, institutions of higher learning, and other multiple stakeholders with differing perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of what constitutes leadership in schools. If this “team of rivals”¹ can proceed with a

¹ “Team of Rivals” is taken from Doris Kearns Goodwin’s characterization of Abraham Lincoln’s cabinet during his first term in office. (Goodwin, 2005)

portfolio of actions directed toward the realization of school leadership with the above characteristics, they may be able to accomplish the changes that the general public wants and provide the educational environment our society needs. It is envisioned that there is no one single best way, or model, that can realize the strategic goal. However, there are lines-of-effort that the sub-group felt could provide a framework for the discussions and actions of the Total Group; Practice and Action Learning, Policy Definition, Research and Dissemination of Knowledge, and Preparation of Educational Professionals. Each of these lines-of-effort is elaborated below.

Practice and Action Learning

Multiple experiments and action learning projects could be initiated and supported through partnerships among the members of the Total Group. The experiential portion of this action learning component would be achieved through projects that are field-based approaches to implementing the broader concept of influencing (leadership) in the *existing context* of the participating schools. Each project would include a diagnosis, change strategy, maximum involvement, leveraging of networks, critical inquiry, and measures of effectiveness. To the greatest extent practicable, these projects would be collective undertakings of a team in the context of the participants' own school and/or district.

These experiments would also aid in the development of the skills and knowledge required of teachers and administrators within the context of a "school building" to implement a more collaborative or distributive model of school leadership that reflects a broader sharing of the leading functions. In addition, the Total Group would develop mechanisms to expand the meaning of the "concept of school leadership" as a complex and coevolving human process and facilitate its dissemination and diffusion through their member organizations.

Policy Definition

The implementation of the proposed goal could lead to complex and conflicting details. As we know, the "devil is always in the details." Here the details are not minor. They include sub-questions such as "who is involved in school leadership?"; "what are the range and nature of 'capacities' needed for school leadership?"; and "what constitutes successful school leadership?" These types of "details" always manifest themselves when we move to the implementation of social system processes and change. However, as important as they are, these sub-questions (details) can not be answered if we do not first acknowledge a difference in context and time. Today our context has radically changed, yet we hold on to cultural assumptions and policies that many times hinder educational change as opposed to facilitating it. Changing the conceptualization of school leadership can be bounded by a reluctance to critically examine twentieth century cultural assumptions and policies designed around concepts of control and reductionism.

This lack of adaptation does not allow schools to adjust their internal complexity and to match the complexity of their context, or environment. This need for flexible policies does not necessarily mean we abandon all of our concepts of leadership, rather it means moving away from them as the "only" world view worth supporting. This may mean entertaining multiple definitions of "school leadership" that are dependent on cultural values that support different policy. We may have to accept a more fragmented

and less predictive culture, rather than one that is unified (or integrated) and stable. It may mean we have to increase our school systems' tolerances for diverse "individual capacities" that can be developed through different paths at different rates, and by different structures. Finally, it may mean letting flexibility emerge from our education system and its understanding of "knowledge" by recognizing the differences among the concepts of "learning" (individual capacity), "education" (collective need to transfer sanctioned/valued knowledge), and "schooling" (society's attempt to structure and achieve efficiency within the education system).

If the Total Group is successful, changes in policy will result in societal norm transitions over an extended period of time. In turn, these changes in norms will again necessitate further adaptation of flexible policies that form the basic assumptions of school leadership.

Research and Dissemination of Knowledge

The need for knowledge of these new modes of school leadership and their effectiveness has been emphasized by Spillane (2004); "...it suggests that leadership activity at the level of the school, rather than at the level of an individual leader or small group of leaders, is the appropriate unit of analysis in studying leadership practice. The distributed frame also specifies an integrated model for thinking about the relations between the work of leaders and their social, material, and symbolic situation, one in which situation is a defining element in leadership practice. A distributed perspective suggests the need for more complex approaches to studying the expertise of leaders." (p. 28)

In keeping with the essences of inquiry and scholarly endeavors, the practice of school leadership will be accompanied by a research component. These endeavors will be driven by an agenda that reflects a contribution to the overarching goal of social change in schools. The results of the research will not only inform the participating schools, but also be incorporated into existing curriculums of higher education and disseminated to the broader field for the development of professional educators. The sub-group discussed three specific examples of this type of research effort:

- A national review and documenting of new approaches to school leadership.
- Exploration of existing data. For example, a large school system has drawn initial correlations between teacher's choice of assignments in schools-at-risk and the leadership processes of those schools.
- Relationship between student learning, accountability, and leadership processes.

Preparation of Educational Professionals

If schools as social systems are to change the way they are structured, the individuals that make up those schools must also change or learn. Reformulating the concepts of school leadership and how they are developed in individuals can be based on a combination of multiple developmental objectives; a commitment to trans-disciplinary studies, a focus on solving complex "social responsibility" issues, a global and local perspective of education and its implications, expertise in individual/collective learning, organizational development and leadership, and the establishment of a more "neutral"

academic environment in which obsessions with “bottom-line purposes for leadership development” and “past ways of doing things” do not result in reinventing the traditional person-centered approach to leadership.

Many higher education programs and personal development strategies emphasize leaders establishing goals and actions to reach a “stable state” orientation within the school. This need for stability can drive the school towards a default-culture that stresses only exploitation of its resources rather than exploration and learning. This results in managerial answers of expedience, sometimes at the expense of effectiveness. This drift in the purpose of school leadership can be seen in trade-offs between standardization of processes and objectives over flexibility, experimentation, and diversity of thought. Trade-offs are not always bad, however, they can contribute to the reduction of the educational system’s learning capacity.

Programs for developing professional educators must be broadened to accommodate their active role in school leadership. These professional development programs and curriculums of higher education must provide skills and knowledge to facilitate school leadership. They must be experiential in nature through dealing with real issues and problems. Specific skills and knowledge could include: developing schools as organizations, human relationships and interactions, transformational and transactional approaches to change, distributed leadership, organizational learning, linear and non-linear social practices in schools, and the use of theory, research, and practice to build organizational change capacity and critical inquiry.

The sub-group was clear that if the outcomes of the Total Group’s efforts are simply the training of teachers to be principals, then the goal, and benefit, of changing the structure of schools will be a lost. The group’s efforts must not be bounded by either the culture of “teacher” or that of “school administrator”, it must be inclusive of the best parts of both. The Total Group’s efforts must resist the forces that will try to redirect the reformulation of school structures into the traditional models of person-in-position leadership.

Next Step for the Total Group Meeting

This final section of the paper provides suggestions for the useful employment of the Total Group in a format similar to that used during the October 2008 meeting. It is envisioned that the session should last 3-4 hours (not including any meal).

The objectives of the session would be:

- Review of the work (paper) of the sub-group for clarification etc.
- Generate more specific actions in the four areas of “Lines of Effort” – Practice, Policy, Research, and Professional Development.
- Develop the members’ commitment to action.
- Decide on a subgroup to develop the Action Plan

The agenda would include:

- Introduction and review of the “issue, goal, meaning” (1 hour)
- Small groups generate specifics concerning Lines of Effort (1 hour)
- Short reports on small group efforts (1 hour)
- Discussion of Commitments and Next Steps (1 hour)

This agenda could address issues associated with any, or all, of the following:

- Clarification of Language, Definitions, Goals and Concepts
- Generate General Principles
- Generate specifics for Actions
- Resources
- Evaluation Criteria for Progress
- The Total Group as a Distributed Leadership Example
- Future Roles
- Time Table
- Accountability

References

- Alliance, T. E. (2002). *The bridgeport story: What urban school districts need to know about school leadership teams*. Providence, Rhode Island: The Education Alliance.
- Biggart, N. W., & Hamilton, G. G. (1987). An institutional theory of leadership. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 23(4), 429-441.
- Copland, M. A. (2003). The bay area school reform collaborative: Building the capacity to lead. In J. Murphy & A. Datnow (Eds.), *Leadership lessons from comprehensive school reforms* (pp. 304). Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.
- Cotton, K. (2003). *Principals and student achievement: What the research says*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Day, D. V. (2001). Leadership development: A review in context. *Leadership Quarterly*, 11(4), 581-613.
- Elmore, R. F. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington, DC: The Albert Shanker Institute.
- Goodwin, D. K. (2005). *Team of rivals: The political genius of Abraham Lincoln*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.
- Hord, S., Stiegelbauer, S., & Hall, G. (1984). How principals work with other change facilitators. *Education and Urban Society*, 17(1), 89-109.
- Lashway, L. (2003). *Research Roundup 19, 4: Distributed leadership*. Eugene: University of Oregon Clearinghouse on Educational Policy Management.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Leithwood, K., Lewis, K.S., Anderson, S. & Wahlstrom, K. (2004) *How Leadership Influences Student Learning: A Review of Research*. Wallace Foundation.
- Levine, A. (2005). *Educating School Leaders*. New York: The Education Schools Project.
- Lezotte, L. (1994). The Nexus of Instructional Leadership and Effective Schools. *School Administrator*, v51 n6, 20-23.
- Rubin, H. (2002). *Collaborative leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press Inc.
- Schwandt, D. R., & Marquardt, M. J. (2000). *Organizational learning: From world-class theories to global best practices*. New York: St. Lucie press.
- Senge, P. M. (1994). The leader's new work. *Executive Excellence*, 11(11), 8-9.

- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. (2004). Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 36(1), 3-34.
- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 23-28.
- Wallace, M. (2002). *School Effectiveness and Improvement*, 13(2), 163-186.
- Waters, T., Marzano, R. J., & McNulty, B. (2003). *Balanced leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.