

Distributed Leadership: What's All the Hoopla?

James P. Spillane

Institute for Policy Research
School of Education and Social Policy
Northwestern University

There is a new flavor in the education business; no surprise, fads are plentiful in the education industry. This time the flavor of the month concerns school leadership namely, distributed leadership. The notion of distributed leadership has garnered the attention of many policymakers and practitioners (see Education Week, 23(27), March 17, 2004). The term is often used interchangeably with “shared leadership” or “democratic leadership” (among others), raising the question as to whether there is really anything new about distributed leadership. Is distributed leadership simply a re-labeling of familiar phenomena? At least in my understanding, there is much that is new about taking a distributed leadership perspective.

Below, I take up this question: What is distributed leadership? The short answer is that it depends; it depends on what one reads and with whom one talks. My intention is not to offer the “one best” definition of distributed leadership. Rather, I describe how I have come to understand distributed leadership, based on a five-year research project in elementary schools in Chicago (see <http://www.distributedleadership.org>). The paper is organized like this: I begin with a brief overview of the distributed leadership perspective, introducing and defining key terms and ideas. The main section of the paper unpacks these ideas in three sub-sections – leaders, followers, and situation. The final section takes up the uses and miss-uses of distributed leadership.

Overview: Getting to the heart of the matter

A distributed perspective on leadership argues that school leadership *practice* is *distributed* in the interactions of school *leaders*, *followers*, and their *situation*. Two issues need to be underscored here. To begin with, distributed leadership is first and foremost

about leadership practice rather than leaders, leadership roles, or leadership functions. Leadership practice is the core unit of analysis in trying to understand school leadership from a distributed perspective.

A second critical point is that practice is defined or takes form in the interactive web of leaders, followers, and their situation. We will examine these three core elements of leadership practice below. The issue here to grapple with is that leadership practice is not equivalent to the actions of the principal or some other school leader. Simply, leadership practice is *not* a function of what a leader knows and does. From a distributed perspective, leadership practice takes shape in the *interactions* of people and their situation, rather than from the *actions* of an individual leader. Some readers might argue this is little more than semantics. If you are one of those, consider the performance of a dance, let's say the 'Texas Two-Step' for argument sake. Now, while the actions of partner one and partner two are important, the practice of the Texas Two-Step is in the interactions of the partners. In a sense, the dance is *in-between* the two partners. Hence, an account of the actions of both partners fails to capture the practice; the account has to focus on the partners in interaction. Moreover, the music – part of the situation – is also essential to the creation of the practice in order to get the 4 steps to 6 beats of music rhythm. Indeed, we might say that the practice of the Texas Two Step dance is *in-between* the two partners and the music. The same holds for leadership practice, though frequently there are more than two leaders and of course followers and aspects of the situation are also critical are also a relevant consideration. Perhaps square dancing begins to capture of the complexity more.

Distributed Perspective on Leadership Practice

The aspect of distributed leadership that has garnered most attention is the recognition that school leadership involves multiple leaders, both administrators and teacher leaders. As a principal in one of our research sites put it most aptly, “I just couldn’t do it all.” I suspect that no one individual could, and recognizing that is essential. The pre-occupation with the principal in the school leadership literature is problematic and has contributed to making the job an impossible one. Others, besides the principal, can and do take on leadership responsibilities.

Our research in Chicago elementary schools illustrates that the execution of most leadership functions and activities involve multiple leaders. Principals rarely go it alone. Who leads and the extent to which leadership is distributed over multiple leaders, however, depends on the leadership function and on the leadership function or activity. As one might expect, monitoring instruction and teacher evaluation tends to be the purview of principals and assistant principals, while teacher development tends to involve more leaders ranging from the principal to teacher leaders. The extent to which leadership is distributed over two or more leaders in a school also depends on the subject area. Specifically, leadership activities for literacy instruction tend to involve more leaders and are more likely to involve the principal compared with leadership activities for mathematics or science instruction. The subject matters when it comes to the distribution of leadership for instruction.

At one level, then, a distributed perspective presses us to ask who takes responsibility for which leadership functions and activities in a school. One approach

might involve examining who is responsible for which leadership functions (e.g., constructing and selling an instructional vision, building norms of trust and collaboration) in a school. Another approach might focus on key leadership activities or routines in a school, identifying the key leadership tasks involved in the execution of this routine, and then investigating who is responsible for executing these tasks.

Regretfully, many discussions of distributed leadership end, prematurely, at this point. As a result, both scholars and practitioners wonder what is new about distributed leadership. If this is the ending, little indeed is new. But, in my view of distributed leadership this is only the beginning. After all, savvy principals the world over could have told one that they depend on others for the execution of key school leadership functions and activities. Moreover, scholars have long argued for moving beyond those at the top of organizations in order to understand leadership.

The critical issue, from a distributed perspective, is not that leadership is distributed but *how* it is distributed. And, *how* it is distributed over leaders, followers, and their situation. Hence, the importance of keeping leadership practice front and center. A distributed perspective presses us to consider how leadership practice is defined in the interaction of two or more leaders, followers, and their situation.

Leadership Practice: Leaders & Followers

From a distributed perspective, a core challenge involves figuring out how leadership practice is distributed over leaders and followers. It involves unpacking the interdependencies among leaders and followers in leadership practice. Leadership is typically thought of as something that is done to followers. From a distributed

perspective, this is problematic because followers' co-produce leadership practice in interaction with leaders.

While individual leaders act, they do so in a situation that is defined in part by the actions of others - their actions are interdependent – and it is in these interactions leadership practice takes shape. Sitting in on any one of the numerous leadership activities for literacy instruction at Adams Elementary School on Chicago's Southside one is immediately struck by how the leadership practice takes form in the interactions of the leaders and followers. These leadership activities typically involve some combination of four leaders – the principal, the school's literacy coordinator, the African-American Heritage Coordinator, and a teacher leader. Sometimes these leaders act in similar ways, other times they do not. The principal usually presses the big picture in terms of overall goals and standards, she moves the meetings along, synthesizes what has been said by others, and constantly reminds teachers of what is expected of them in their classrooms. The Literacy Coordinator does some of this, but she is also the detail person, identifying problems with literacy instruction, suggesting solutions and resources to address these problems, and getting teachers to participate. Leadership practice for literacy at Adams gets constructed in the interactions of these leaders' actions. But, teachers are also critical in defining leadership practice in these meetings. For example, they often offer descriptions of how a particular teaching strategy suggested by the Literacy Coordinator played out in practice that are sometimes taken up by the leaders to press a point about improving literacy instruction.

Leadership practice in the above example is stretched over leaders and followers. We term this collaborated distribution to underscore the reciprocal relationship between

the actions of the leaders and followers that gives rise to leadership practice. Reciprocal interdependencies involve individuals playing off one another, with the practice of person A enabling the practice of person B and vice-versa. It resembles the interdependencies between partners in the Texas Two-Step or perhaps, considering the number of people, square dancing is a better comparison.

We have identified two other types of distribution – coordinated distribution and collective distribution. In a “coordinated distribution” situation leaders work separately or together on different leadership tasks that are arranged sequentially. For example, some schools in our study use a routine called the five-week assessment cycle to identify instructional problems and establish instructional improvement priorities. This cycle involves a number of interdependent sequential steps – student test data and other information has to be analyzed before instructional needs and priorities can be defined. In this situation, the leadership practice is stretched over the different activities that must be performed in a particular sequence for leadership practice.

In a “collective distribution” situation leadership practice is stretched over the practice of two or more leaders who work separately but interdependently. The actions of two or more leaders working separately generate leadership practice. Consider Ellis Elementary where both the principal and assistant principal see evaluating teaching as a critical leadership activity for instructional improvement. The principal believes that the legally required biannual visits are grossly inadequate to evaluate teacher’s practice. Together with the assistant principal, they have developed a more elaborate approach to evaluating teachers’ practice. The assistant principal, who has a friendly and informal rapport with teachers at Ellis, visits classrooms frequently, engaging in formative

evaluation with regular feedback to teachers about their practice. As he describes it, he “makes the rounds,” two or three times a day, often sitting in on a lesson and giving the teacher immediate feedback. In contrast, the principal engages in summative evaluation. Teachers at Ellis see her very much as an authority figure referring to her as “Doctor.” She visits classrooms once or twice per year and makes final determinations about the quality of teachers’ instructional practices. Through formal and informal meetings the assistant principal and principal pool their information to develop an understanding of and evaluate teachers’ practice.

Leadership Practice & the Situation.

Organizational routines and structures, material artifacts, and tools are an important part of the situation of school leadership. School leaders, like the rest of us, rarely work directly on the world. Instead, they work with tools, routines, and structures of various sorts that fundamentally shape leadership practice. From a distributed perspective, tools and organizational routines along with other aspects of the situation are not simple accessories that allow leaders to practice more effectively or efficiently – they contribute to defining the practice in much the same way that the actions of different leaders and followers do. In our study sites, aspects of the situation that contribute to defining leadership practice include the School Improvement Planning Process, Five Week Assessment routines, grade level meetings, student assessment data, among others.

Key aspects of the situation in interaction with leaders and followers define leadership practice. Of course aspects of the situation such as tools and organizational structures can be made and remade in leadership practice. A quick example is

illustrative. At Hillside School in Chicago, the principal appropriate students “writing folders” (a tool designed for classroom writing instruction) as a leadership tool, as a leadership tool and developed the monthly writing folder review around it. Believing that writing and communicating clearly was critical to the success of the Mexican-American student population at Hillside, the principal set out to transform writing instruction. The key leadership routine in this effort was the principal’s monthly review of students’ writing folders: every teacher submits monthly a folder that contained one composition written by each student in the class. The principal reads each student’s work and provides the teachers and students with written feedback.

The leadership practice in the above example is defined in the interactions of the principal and the writing folders (and of course teachers also). The writing folder was re-designed by Mrs. Miller has a leadership tool through her monthly writing folder review routine. In turn, the writing folder fundamental shapes the leadership practice grounding it on what students were learning and not learning about writing and engaging both teachers and students simultaneously in the task of improving writing instruction.

Conclusion

A distributed perspective on leadership involves more than identifying and counting those who take responsibility for leadership in a school. It also involves more than matching particular leaders with particular leadership functions and activities, though that is an important initial step. A distributed perspective on leadership presses us, to examine how leadership practice gets defined in the interactions among leaders, followers, and key aspects of the situation; it urges us to examine the interdependencies

among these three defining elements. In doing so, we explore whether and how things like better designed tools, new or reworked organizational structures, different combinations of leaders on particular leadership activities might transform the interactions and thereby potential improve leadership practice. In this way, distributed leadership is a diagnostic tool that principals and others can use to think about the work of leadership and a set of ideas that can guide efforts to revise leadership practice. It is not, however, a blueprint.