WINNING COMBINATION OR STRANGE BREW?

Exploring a Merged Concept of Distributed Leadership in New Zealand Elementary School Numeracy Reform

By

Robert J. DeAbreu

Student #: 84910124

A Paper presented to Dr. Mark Aquash,

Department of Educational Studies,

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

EDST 532 – LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

University of British Columbia

Tuesday, November 6, 2012

This paper is

A Critical Response Paper to

Published Case Study:

Configurations of Instructional Leadership Enactments That Promote the Teaching and Learning of Mathematics in a New Zealand Elementary School.

By Joanna Higgins and Linda Bonne

(2011). Educational Administration Quarterly, 47(5), 794-825. doi: 10.1177/0013161X11413763

Introduction

Distributed leadership is a relatively recent, promising branch in educational leadership research (Hartley, 2010). Leithwood states that qualitative research, rather than quantitative, allows us to unpack the contextual nuances that make distributed leadership differentially effective (Leithwood, 2001). In looking at the case of distributed leadership in numeracy reform at a school in New Zealand, Higgins and Bonne's qualitative approach allows them to examine more deeply the root causes of the effectiveness of distributed leadership in this particular context. As part of their findings, they merge Gronn's concept of the hybrid nature of leadership, the fact that leaders use a mixture of leadership styles and tools (Gronn, 2009), with Leithwood's four core functions of leadership (Leithwood et al., 2007) to create, I will argue, a cohesive and flexible framework of distributed leadership. This paper will explore the soundness of this merged leadership model and the possibility of its application in other contexts.

A Balance of Hierarchical Structures and Leadership Distribution

Higgins and Bonne's merged model of distributed leadership is sound because it allows the sharing of responsibilities to complement hierarchical roles already in place. The merits of distributed leadership have been explored in recent years, and for good reason. One needs to look no further than Wikipedia to see how a group of people collaboratively united in a common goal can be more productive than a singular-directed organization ever could (Nathaniel Tkacz, 2010; Reagle, 2010; Su-Laine Yeo, 2010). While collaboration in schools is made unique to web 2.0 cooperation due to the face-to-face social nature of teachers' work (Cigler, 1980), the strength of *collaboration* is important to note. Recent research encourages schools to tap into their broader leadership capacity, which can give a much more thorough instructional grounding to work done in a school than a principal can likely provide (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Wasonga & Murphy,

2010). In the case of the New Zealand school Higgins and Bonne describe, lead teachers and teacher leaders, both formal and informal, distribute responsibilities in the school and share a vision of numeracy improvement. Structures are in place at the school and through Numeracy Development Projects' (NDPs) national coordinators and facilitators to support teachers' professional learning. Higgins and Bonne's argument is that there exists hybrid forms of hierarchical and heterarchical configurations of leadership – a blend of the leadership stemming from hierarchical positions internal and external to the school and the leadership that is distributed over these positions – which enable the school to make positive strides in numeracy reform (Higgins & Bonne, 2011). Schools will not be successful if they fully embrace a political-historical model of leadership through hierarchical position (Foster & Smyth, 1989) nor will they be efficacious if they share leadership in a way that disregards the structural strengths provided by this hierarchy (Shields, 2005) – a dismissal often implied by literature promoting distributed leadership. In addition, Higgins and Bonne's focus here on qualitative research gives a more accurate picture of the effects of distributed leadership in particular contexts than quantitative studies that simplify the effects of leadership to a numerical value and disregard specific context by generalizing results (Leithwood, 2001). Higgins and Bonne's concept of a "hybrid" form of hierarchical and heterarchical configurations is a useful framework that eliminates the possibility of a false duality and opens up a more realistic continuum of leadership configuration. This aspect of the framework allows leaders the flexibility to deal with their particular context and to acknowledge that leadership "flows through the networks of roles that comprise organizations" (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995, 225). In short, Higgins and Bonne's model is sound as it introduces a workable framework that allows schools to flexibly distribute leadership over already existing hierarchical structures according to the needs of their context.

The Acknowledgement of Teacher Agency

Higgins and Bonne's assertions are also workable because they assume teacher agency in the process of leadership distribution. While the concept of distributed leadership is one that sets out to acknowledge the leadership capabilities of teachers, it can be argued that many educational leadership theorists use language that emphasizes that leadership is distributed at the whim of a sole actor – the school principal (Campbell, 2012; M. Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012). However, Timperley rightly "assum[es] that leadership in schools is almost inevitably distributed, and the issues to be considered are how the leadership activities are distributed and the ways in which this distribution is differentially effective" (Timperley, 2005, 397). In the case of the New Zealand school, lead teachers and teacher leaders do not distribute leadership because they are told to do so, but because they choose to as a way to develop effective dialogue about learning within flexible system guidelines: "Because the scoring [in New Zealand curriculum] is not standardized, it is crucial to develop among teachers a shared understanding of the various stages of the number framework and the student behaviors and strategies that are consistent with different stages" (Higgins & Bonne, 2011, 801). The International Baccalaureate (IB) system is similar to NDP guidelines in that it provides a framework for schools to work from rather than a strict "how-to" checklist for program implementation (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012b). The effect of the lack of strict rules in the IB system, and likely the effect in the New Zealand system, is a challenge to schools to successfully unify their programs amidst flexible guidelines (Hallinger, Lee, & Walker, 2011). Upon closer examination, many successful IB schools are those where faculty members collectively take up the challenge to articulate their whole school program and both systematically and spontaneously distribute leadership to enable this articulation (Lee,

Hallinger, & Walker, 2012a). As Higgins and Bonne report, the faculty members at the New Zealand case study school are each change agents in a similar fashion, distributing leadership in order to provide greater coherence in the context of the lack of system standardization. In this school, it is the job of those in hierarchical leadership positions to oversee this process of distribution and encourage and facilitate the growth of leadership in key areas; it is not their job to take full control over the distribution of leadership. Teacher agency is also demonstrated by teachers' initiation of action research as a means of informing the development of their practice (Price & Valli, 2005). Action research is a way that teachers can provide themselves with the solid professional grounding to guide the path of their own professional development, and avoid falling into the trap of following fleeting and unproductive "bandwagons" and "slogans" (Leithwood, 2008). As Higgins and Bonne emphasize, it is evident that teachers are active agents in their own professional development and in the enactment of distributed leadership. The framework that they promote assumes teacher agency and thus provides an effective model for the conceptualization of distributed leadership.

Applicability to Other Contexts

While Higgins and Bonne's model is sound, it is questionable whether this model is transferrable to other contexts. For instance, in the New Zealand school case, it is assumed that the demands of the NDPs were supported by the school and were positive for student development. However, not all national reform programs in all countries have been well received. In addition, factors affecting teacher morale can seriously hinder the motivation of staff to distribute leadership. In North American contexts, strict state regulations and frequent job action issues have brought down faculty morale. Some jurisdictions, such as the province of Ontario, have recently legislated for administrators to be removed from teachers' federations,

which can create an adversarial relationship, as it has done in the United States (U.S.) (Berg, 2009; Steven Gallagher, 1998). Histories of job action have made teachers feel bullied when legislation is used to cancel strikes (Raymond Bowe, 2002) and ban further job action (Kristen Calis, 2012), and have lowered public opinion about the teaching profession (Keith Baldrey, 2012). All of these experiences create low morale among staff and combative relations between administration and teaching staff. Low morale is a context that breeds a strong desire in staff to avoid additional responsibility, and look unfavorably upon those who do not (McConaghy, 1998). In such a context, distributed leadership is nearly an impossible reality. Higgins and Bonne also reveal that the New Zealand case school is selected to be representative of high socio-economic status of elementary schools making strides in numeracy reform (Higgins & Bonne, 2011). An abundance of research shows that schools with low socio-economic status are often sites of underperformance (Gary Scharrer, 2008; Wiley, 2008) and low morale (Byrd-Blake, Hunt, Fabunmi, Leander, & Pryor, 2010). In addition, there are perceptions within the teaching profession inherent in North American culture that can hinder the development of a collaborative environment in schools (Hytten, 2011; Nolan & Stitzlein, 2011). While it is not impossible, it seems that the application of the model Higgins and Bonne propose may be difficult in the North American context, and possibly in others.

Concluding Remarks

Still, Higgins and Bonne's model has applicable merits. As Leithwood suggests, the policy context of accountability common to many countries at present can best be managed through the use of distributed leadership concepts (Leithwood, 2001). Regardless of possible limits, an effort on the part of all school faculty is important to ensure that all staff contribute their strengths towards providing better school environments for students and staff alike.

References

Berg, E. E. (2009). *Perceived effects of teachers' unions on administrators' and teachers' roles and morale.*

Byrd-Blake, M., Hunt, J. W., Fabunmi, M., Leander, R., & Pryor, B. W. (2010). Morale of teachers in high poverty schools: A post-NCLB mixed methods analysis. *Education and Urban Society, 42*(4), 450-472. doi: 10.1177/0013124510362340

Campbell, E. (2012). Teacher agency in curriculum contexts. *Curriculum Inquiry, 42*(2), 183-190. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-873X.2012.00593.x

Cigler, E. (1980). *Social group work with primary school teachers.* (M.A., University of South Africa). , 1-348.

Covington, C. D. (2010). *Lagging in the race: The impact of teacher morale on student achievement.*

Foster, W., & Smyth, J. (1989). Toward a critical practice of leadership. *Critical Perspectives on Educational Leadership,* , 39-62.

Gary Scharrer. (2008,). Poorer schools lag as richer schools lure better teachers. *San Antonio Express-News*, pp. B.1.

Gronn, P. (2009). Leadership configurations. *Leadership, 5*(3), 381-394. doi: 10.1177/1742715009337770

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2010). Leadership for learning: Does collaborative leadership make a difference in school improvement? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 38*(6), 654-678. doi: 10.1177/1741143210379060

Hallinger, P., Lee, M., & Walker, A. (2011). Program transition challenges in international baccalaureate schools. *Journal of Research in International Education, 10*(2), 123-136. doi: 10.1177/1475240911407976

Hartley, D. (2010). Distributed leadership according to the evidence. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 38*(1), 138-140. doi: 10.1177/17411432100380010301

Higgins, J., & Bonne, L. (2011). Configurations of instructional leadership enactments that promote the teaching and learning of mathematics in a new zealand elementary school. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 47*(5), 794-825. doi: 10.1177/0013161X11413763

Hytten, K. (2011). Building and sustaining hope. A response to "meaningful hope for teachers in a time of high anxiety and low morale". *Democracy & Education, 19*(1)

Keith Baldrey. (2012,). Debunking myths around teachers strike. *Richmond News*, pp. 8.

Kristen Calis. (2012,). Durham public teachers' morale down, says union. *This Week*, pp. 1.

Lee, M., Hallinger, P., & Walker, A. (2012a). A distributed perspective on instructional leadership in international baccalaureate (IB) schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 48*(4), 664-698. doi: 10.1177/0013161X11436271

Lee, M., Hallinger, P., & Walker, A. (2012b). Leadership challenges in international schools in the asia pacific region: Evidence from programme implementation of the international baccalaureate. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 15*(3), 289-310. doi: 10.1080/13603124.2011.605475

Leithwood, K. (2001). School leadership in the context of accountability policies. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 4*(3), 217-235. doi: 10.1080/13603120110057082

Leithwood, K. (2008). Should educational leadership focus on best practices or next practices? *Journal of Educational Change, 9*(1), 71-75. doi: 10.1007/s10833-007-9045-7

Leithwood, K., Mascall, B., Strauss, T., Sacks, R., Memon, N., & Yashkina, A. (2007). Distributing leadership to make schools smarter: Taking the ego out of the system. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 6*(1), 37-67. doi: 10.1080/15700760601091267

McConaghy, T. (1998). Ontario's education war far from over. *The Phi Delta Kappan, 79*(7), 552-553.

Nathaniel Tkacz. (2010). WIKIPEDIA AND THE POLITICS OF MASS COLLABORATION. *PLATFORM : Journal of Media and Communication, 2*(2), 6-21.

Nolan, C., & Stitzlein, S. M. (2011). Meaningful hope for teachers in times of high anxiety and low morale. *Democracy & Education, 19*(1)

Ogawa, R. T., & Bossert, S. T. (1995). Leadership as an organizational quality. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 31*(2), 224-243. doi: 10.1177/0013161X95031002004

Price, J. N., & Valli, L. (2005). Preservice teachers becoming agents of change: Pedagogical

implications for action research. *Journal of Teacher Education, 56*(1), 57-72. doi:

10.1177/0022487104272097

Priestley, M., Edwards, R., Priestley, A., & Miller, K. (2012). Teacher agency in curriculum

making: Agents of change and spaces for manoeuvre. *Curriculum Inquiry, 42*(2), 191-214.

doi: 10.1111/j.1467-873X.2012.00588.x

Raymond Bowe. (2002,). Strike leaves poor morale, says union rep: Final edition. *Enterprise -

Bulletin*, pp. 3.

Reagle, J. M. (2010). *Good faith collaboration: The culture of wikipedia*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT

Press.

Shields, C. M. (2005). Hopscotch, jump-rope, or boxing: Understanding power in educational

leadership. *International Studies in Educational Administration, 33*(2), 76-85.

Steven Gallagher, T. S. S. (1998,). Picketing teachers complain of low morale: Sault teachers

feel overburdened: Final edition. *Sault Star*, pp. A.1.FRO.

Su-Laine Yeo. (2010). Collaboration: What wikipedia knows that businesses don't. *Information

Today, 27*(10), 14.

Timperley, H. S. (2005). Distributed leadership: Developing theory from practice. *Journal of

Curriculum Studies, 37*(4), 395-420. doi: 10.1080/00220270500038545

Wasonga, T. A., & Murphy, J. F. (2010). The practice of co-creating leadership in schools. *International Studies in Educational Administration (Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management (CCEAM)), 38*(3), 81-97.

Wiley, K. L. (2008). *No child left behind and teacher morale among african-american teachers in low-performing middle schools.*