Networked leadership

Practice is the heart of the matter: Distributed leadership and Networked Learning Communities

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Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) have exciting possibilities but are complex to manage. Traditional thinking about solo leaders running schools or networks does not begin to capture how to make the networks among groups of schools successful in promoting improvements to pupil, adult and leadership learning.

Distributed leadership is a topic which has enjoyed a great deal of attention among educators in recent years. Some see distributed leadership as synonymous with terms like 'shared leadership', 'team leadership' and 'democratic leadership'. Some use the term to denote that the work of school leadership involves multiple leaders, others to argue that leadership is an organisational, as distinct from an individual, quality. Others use distributed leadership to define a particular way of thinking about the practice of school leadership. Distributed leadership is not monolithic; it takes on different meanings depending on the source. It is not surprising then, that observers are often confused as to the meaning and entailments of distributed leadership.

Furthermore, although leadership has always been distributed in schools, until recently we have not really begun to understand how it is distributed, because the focus of research has been on identifying the personal characteristics of the so-called 'heroic leader', positioned at the top of the hierarchy and influencing others towards their organisational vision. For a number of reasons, this vision of leadership has proved unsustainable: there are insufficient numbers of such people for all our schools; their achievements are often short-lived; and many potentially effective leaders have been discouraged from seeking promotion because of the perceived impossibility of emulating that kind of leader. In reality, we have many highly effective leaders who make very different contributions to leadership practice.

Practice is the heart of the matter

Distributed leadership emphasises practice or activity rather than personality. From a distributed leadership perspective, practice is the heart of the matter. In analysing practice, of course leadership roles, structures, routines and functions are important considerations. But leadership practice is the starting or anchoring point. A distributed leadership perspective frames leadership practice as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers and their situation. Practice is a co-production, generated in or defined by the interactions of these three elements rather than a function of what leaders know and can do. It is these interactions, rather than particular actions, that are critical in understanding leadership practice. This latter point is essential from a distributed perspective and one that is frequently missed and misunderstood in discussions about distributed leadership. Leadership practice is not just something that is done to followers; followers co-produce leadership in interaction with leaders. Situation is also constitutive of leadership practice. It defines leadership practice in interaction with leaders and followers. So, leadership practice is not only distributed across people, it is also distributed over aspects of the situation in which the practice takes place: routines, tools and structures. Situation is more than a container for practice.

So when leaders ask themselves the question: "How do I promote improved pupil learning?" there is no right answer because the specifics of a given leadership activity take place in a particular context. A distributed leadership perspective sees this context as part of the leadership activity, both shaping it and being shaped by it. That said, the interactions within NLCs create very complex contexts and it is easy to get diverted from the central purpose of improving pupil learning when trying to manage all the interactions and relationships among and within the schools. By keeping the spotlight on how the network activities impact directly on pupil learning, some of these diversions may be prevented. In addition to this, certain contexts are particularly challenging when trying to keep the focus on this central purpose. Competing interests dominating the interactions among participants would be one example. Reviewing together how the resolution of these conflicts serves the main purpose of the network and how the leaders can collectively shape it to ensure that it does so will help to keep the network focused on its central purpose.

Staying coherent

Distributed leadership is more than dividing up tasks or responsibilities among different individuals who perform defined and separate roles. Rather, it recognises that leadership involves dynamic interactions between multiple leaders involved in the execution of both separate and overlapping leadership activities. The important leadership task is to understand how it all works together. NLCs provide significant challenges when 'keeping a handle' on this big picture. Many people are involved in a range of complex activities, and leadership positions are often assumed without formal responsibility or authority.

Some important review questions for leaders of Networked Learning Communities:

- which activities promote the kinds of interactions that address the key aspects of the vision for the network?
- which activities divert the focus from the vision and how might they be redefined in ways that are more productive?
- who keeps an eye on the big picture to ensure that the complex leadership activities fit together to maintain the important work of the network?
- how do network activities and ideas mesh with individual schools' activities in ways that maintain the integrity of each participating school's organisational and instructional coherence?

Staying connected

Unless a school is very small, it typically has different leaders and groups undertaking different leadership functions and routines. Traditionally, headteachers have responsibility for the big picture, middle managers have responsibility for smaller organisational units (such as a department or year group) and teachers focus on classrooms. These 'units' need to stay connected if the school is to maintain coherence. Failure to stay connected may mean that the school will develop patches of brilliance as well as places where things do not work well. These connecting mechanisms can be described as 'boundary spanners'.

In the same way, networks of schools need connecting mechanisms. A relatively familiar idea is having people acting as boundary spanners in co-ordinating roles. Less familiar is the idea that when teachers take on leadership responsibilities (or leaders take on teaching responsibilities) they are more likely to be able to span leadership and teaching boundaries and to develop a better appreciation of the place of each in the bigger picture. Similarly, if individuals participate in more than one networked group and they take some responsibility for ensuring coherence in the developing ideas of each group, they are more likely to keep the groups connected with one another. When establishing leadership positions within the network, therefore, it is important to keep in mind their potential for acting as connecting mechanisms among different network activities. Materials

such as written documents can also act as boundary spanners. Meeting agendas and minutes, for example, can help to keep others informed and can help keep networks connected. Achievement data acts as a boundary spanner across schools and, when shared by groups of teachers and leaders, can help to keep the focus of network activities on improving pupil learning.

The subject matters

School leadership practice differs depending on the school subject. Who leads, the involvement of formally designated leaders (school principal, assistant principal), how leaders think about the work of leadership and the role of followers in leadership practice differs by school subject. Specifically, the manner in which leadership is distributed over leaders, followers, and aspects of the situation varies depending on whether the subject being taught is mathematics, science or arts and humanities.

Account of practice

A study in elementary (primary) schools in the USA found that there were fewer leaders in mathematics compared with arts and humanities and fewer still in science. Leadership of literacy typically involved the principal and or assistant principal, a co-ordinator or specialist teacher leaders and often an external consultant. In maths, subject leadership in some schools (though not all) involved the principal or assistant principal, lead teachers and sometimes external consultants, whereas leadership in science was typically confined to classroom teachers, few of whom had any official designation such as senior teacher or co-ordinator. While leadership was distributed across multiple leaders, the range of distribution and the involvement of formally designated leaders was much greater in language arts than in both maths and science.

Leaders' cognitive schemas for the work of instructional leadership also varied depending on the subject matter. Viewing literacy as a subject that cut across the entire curriculum, leaders understood it as an overarching measure of student and school progress and saw integrating reading across the curriculum as the key task of their work. With respect to mathematics, leaders saw their key task to be one of ensuring teachers adhered closely to the sequence of skills in the curriculum. Their thinking about expertise for instructional improvement also differed depending on the subject matter. They saw their own school community as the primary source of expertise for leading change in language arts instruction. Expertise was in-house and homegrown, and the school was the locus of control for instructional change. In contrast, leaders understood the expertise for improving pupil learning in maths to lie with external programmes. Expertise for leading change in maths lay beyond the schoolhouse walls.

Observation of leadership activities for maths and language arts showed there were notable differences in how leaders and followers participated. Specifically, the ways in which leaders and followers participated, the manner in which they reasoned about their work, the norms for constructing knowledge and establishing direction for instructional improvement differed, depending on the subject matter. In leadership activities for literacy there was a balance between leaders' and teachers' talk, with teachers and leaders offering ideas and strategies about how to teach literacy. In contrast, duirng maths leadership activities, the leaders (often fulltime classroom teachers) dominated the conversation, doing most of the talking. Teachers' advice networks about teaching also differed depending on the subject matter. Specifically teachers' advice networks for maths tended to be sparse, fragmented into three or four groups that were not connected and not nearly as robust compared to their advice networks for language arts. Advice networks for language arts included more key advice givers and were more integrated than the maths network.

In NLCs, teachers and leaders are expected to create and exchange knowledge collaboratively and continuously, to reflect deeply on teaching and learning and to take up difficult challenges. Creating collaborations that support the creation and exchange of knowledge is likely to pose different challenges for teachers and leaders with a background in different curriculum areas, so it is important to take into account how they think about the work of improving teaching and learning differently, depending on their subject. Further, it is important to prepare for the fact that how teachers might participate in these collaborations may depend on their subject specialism.

Coherence and vision

Traditional approaches to leadership recommend that organisational and instructional coherence can be established by creating a strong vision for a school that pervades the organisational culture. The activity focus of distributed leadership, however, places the lens on the things people do to enact those visions and create coherence. Visions are embedded in activities rather than inscribed on pieces of paper, and coherence is maintained by ensuring consistency in the multitude of day-to-day activities in individual schools within the network.

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