

Reading 2.3

Myrowetz, D. (2008). Making sense of distributed leadership: Exploring the multiple usages of the concept in the field. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(3), 424-435.

Reading 2.3 – Mayrowetz, D. (2008)

Synopsis

Although the term “distributed leadership” is widely used amongst scholars and educational practitioners, there is confusion and ambiguity about what it actually means. Furthermore, there is no strong link between distributed leadership and school improvement or leadership development.

Identifies four common usages of the term “distributed leadership”: one as a descriptive theoretical lens, the other three as prescriptions of how sharing leadership can improve practice

1. A Theoretical lens for looking at the activity of leadership
2. Distributed leadership for democracy
3. Distributed leadership for efficiency and effectiveness
4. Distributed leadership as human capacity building

1. A Theoretical lens for looking at the activity of leadership

- “ The first usage comes from the original definition by Gronn and Spillane (separately)
 - . It came about from importing a theoretical construct from other areas of social science to assist their research “help practitioners interpret and think about their ongoing leadership practice”
 - . It did this by widening the target of leadership development from administrators to school-wide and making leaders more aware of the tools they use and design in the practice of leadership

1. A Theoretical lens for looking at the activity of leadership (continued)

- “ Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2001) argued that the idea that activity is distributed or “stretched over” multiple people could be helpful to understand the practice of leadership in schools
- “ Others (Mayrowetz, 2005; Timperley, 2005) point out that the above authors argue that leadership activity *is* distributed, not that it *should* be – this morphed the descriptive orientation into a more normative stance

2. Distributed leadership for democracy

NB This is seen as a prescription, not a definition

- “leadership activities should not be accreted into the hands of a sole individual but, on the contrary, they should be shared between a number of people in an organization or team” (Storey, 2004)
- “Unclear how it came to be associated with the call to promote democracy in schools

2. Distributed leadership for democracy (continued)

- “ Johnson (2004): distributed leadership is an antidote to slick top-down management approaches
- “ Others took opposite view: advised to look closely at whose interests were served by such distribution (Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006)
- “ Others still suggested that teachers could become over-stressed by shared decision-making if teachers' and organizational goals are not well aligned (Conway, 1976, and others listed p.429)
- “ Unclear whether shared/democratic leadership can lead to school improvement

3. Distributed leadership for efficiency and effectiveness

- “ Another argument is that it is simply more efficient to ask nonadministrators to engage in leadership activity if they have the necessary expertise
- “ Elmore (2003): this distributed expertise leads to distributed leadership
- “ State Action for Educational Leadership Projects (2003) developed distributive leadership models to make the job of principal “do-able”

3. Distributed leadership for efficiency and effectiveness (continued)

“ The empirical research presents a less rosy outlook: it does not necessarily lead to school improvement:

- . it may actually lead to less student engagement (Leithwood&Jantzi, 1998)
- . Evidence that not all people engaged in leadership activity are necessarily good leaders (Kellerman, 2004)
- . Distributed leadership may result in distributed incompetence (Timperley, 2005)

4. Distributed leadership as human capacity building

- “ This usage promotes the notion that these individuals will learn more about themselves and the issues facing the school: “maximizing the human capacity within the school” (Harris, 2004)
- “ Empirical results show some collective capacity building, but less school improvement than hoped
- “ Reculturing teaching profession to accept the work involved in high-level collective inquiry is no small task (Mc Laughlin & Talbert, 2001)

Conclusion

- “ The first usage has strong conceptual underpinning, but diffuse connections to school improvement and leadership development
- “ Pushing for democracy and effectiveness might address immediate concerns of school improvement and leadership development, but are not well grounded in theory: some even fly in the face of empirical evidence

Conclusion (continued)

“ Suggestions for field researchers:

1. For supporters of “distributed perspective” (ie usage 1) shift from *describing* distribution patterns to *assessing their effectiveness* for different leadership activities in different contexts
2. For usages 2-4,
 - a. Establish what they mean by distributive leadership
 - b. Develop a theoretically grounded framework
 - c. Explicate how their research will inform efforts at school improvement and leadership development