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# Leading Educational Change and Improvement

*No matter what states and districts do to bolster their educational workforce they will need to do more and better with the talent they have*

(Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 2)

In the relentless pursuit of improved educational performance and outcomes, there is preoccupation with finding new solutions, new ideas, and new approaches. It is as if we are starting at ground zero in our knowledge about educational change and improvement. Yet in our search for better educational systems, better schools, and better districts there *are* things that we categorically know. A substantial body of school effectiveness and school improvement research clearly

points to the common characteristics and strategies that can be used to secure better organizational outcomes (Chapman et al., 2012; Harris & Chrispeels, 2009).

A far back as 1989, the seminal study by Susan Rozenholtz made it clear that the distinguishing feature of high performing districts compared to those performing less well is the quality of their relationships. She highlighted that superintendents that were "stuck" exhibited the norms of self-reliance and professional isolation. In contrast, the superintendents that were "moving" built effective teams and engaged in collective problem solving. The central message from this work and other more contemporary school improvement studies is crystal clear: collaborative working can be a powerful strategy if long-term improvement is the core aim.

Another clear message from the international research evidence is that *leadership* is a key driver in securing and sustaining improved outcomes (Harris et al., 2013; Chapman et al., 2012). Contemporary evidence points toward the importance of *instructional leadership* where the focus is upon emerging leaders and their ability to lead change that results in better learning outcomes (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Sofo et al., 2012). Instructional leadership is driven by the desire to understand the capacity of educational leaders to make substantial contributions to student outcomes specifically and to school improvement generally (Hallinger & Heck, 2009).

So do instructional leadership and distributed leadership actually relate? Yes, but the point of connection is rarely made. In their work, Heck and Hallinger (2010, p. 656) conceptualize instructional leadership as "an organisational property aimed at school improvement." As such, they talk about collaborative leadership or shared leadership aimed at school improvement, which encompasses "both formal and informal sources of leadership" (Sofo et al., 2012, p. 509). In essence, they are talking about distributed leadership. It seems that instructional leadership is little more than a shorthand way of describing those leadership influences and practices within an organization that impact upon student achievement. Distributed leadership is similarly concerned with the technical core of teaching and learning.

As Spillane and Coldren (2011) point out, "Even though factors beyond the school walls (e.g. students socio-economic status) do indeed influence student achievement, school leaders must focus on things they can leverage such as instruction. Thus connecting leadership and management practice with teaching and learning is essential" (p. 20). Consequently, instructional leadership and distributed leadership share more similarities than differences. The empirical research findings also point in a similar direction and reinforce that "collaborative leadership" or "leadership beyond the principal" has a powerful influence on instructional improvement and student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

As educational leaders, at all levels, struggle with the many demands of their day jobs, it is important to highlight where ideas, research, and evidence reinforce each other and overlap. Unfortunately, some researchers in the leadership field are prone to demarcating, and indeed protecting, their favorite *leadership type.* The field is awash with "adjective overload" but simply putting a new word in front of *leadership* does not make anything new, interesting, or valid. What does passionate leadership, boundary-breaking leadership, creative leadership, or indeed any other type of leadership actually mean or add to our understanding of leadership or leadership practice? This pick and mix of leadership terms is simply not helpful to those in schools and districts faced with the daily task of making change happen. Therefore, throughout this book, the aim is not to make a special case for distributed leadership over any other leadership type. Instead, the intention is to stick to the facts, look at the evidence, and make connections.

But let's cut to the chase—what forms of leadership practices are now needed most by those leading schools and districts? The short answer is not the leadership we currently have.

For those leading schools, districts, and entire systems, the reality of improvement is messy, complicated, and emotionally frustrating. The pace of change, the pressures of the external climate, and the internal demands make it abundantly clear that the job of the school leader and district superintendent is

now far too big for one. The expectations of those in leadership roles necessitate almost superhuman powers that relatively few mortals possess or indeed aspire to. The reality is that without actively and purposefully distributing leadership within the organization, long-term survival is not guaranteed. Without leadership, that involves the many rather than the few, those in formal leadership positions will continue to be vulnerable and exposed.

But let me be clear: distributed leadership is not the antidote to "command and control" leadership or a much misunderstood, misaligned, and misrepresented alternative to it. Rather, distributed leadership is conceptualized, here, as *shared influence* that can contribute to positive organizational improvement and change. In summary, distributed leadership is not just some accidental derivative of high performing organizations but rather has been shown to be an important contributor to organizational success and performance (Hargreaves et al., 2011; Harris, 2008).

Before accepting this argument, it is important to look at the facts. It is important to consider the evidence. Simply advocating or celebrating distributed leadership, without taking a long, hard look at the evidential base, would be ill advised and unwise. As highlighted earlier, the educational leadership field is prone to fads and fashions, sometimes with little empirical substantiation. Take a look in any bookstore, and you will see shelves of books on the topic of leadership. Discerning between commercialism, opportunism, and empirical fact is no easy task.

Consequently, this book examines the evidence about distributed leadership from various research fields. It devotes a full chapter to the "facts" about distributed leadership and highlights the contemporary evidence about the relationship between distributed leadership and improved organizational outcomes in three different sectors (Hargreaves et al., 2010). No apology is made for drawing extensively, and some might say exhaustively, upon the research evidence in order to

explore the relationship between distributed leadership and organizational improvement. It is important that school, district, and system leaders know that any ideas or arguments made are grounded, have legitimacy, and have empirical support.

> For those busy with the daily demands of running a school or working at the district level or seeking to improve the system, the question is, *does distributed leadership matter* and to what extent?

As well as taking full account of the research evidence, this book has been informed by the direct experience of leading professional collaboration in many countries, many districts, and many schools. It draws upon the work of coleading a national program of professional learning communities involving over 1,800 in Wales (Harris & Jones, 2010). It also draws upon a breadth of experience in developing custom-made professional collaborative programs in different countries: first, the "Teaching Schools" in England (Harris & Jones, 2012), second, a program for schools in high-poverty settings in Russia (Pinska et al., 2012), and third, schools in Australia that create intra- and interschool "disciplined professional collaboration" (Harris & Jones, 2012). This book reinforces the simple but profound idea that organizational outcomes improve if professionals collaborate in a purposeful and disciplined way.

Research has repeatedly shown that carefully constructed and disciplined professional collaboration can make a positive difference to organizational performance and outcomes. The emphasis here is upon the word *disciplined.* Too much of what passes for professional collaboration equates with loose or unfocused professional groupings, partnerships, or networks. While professional partnerships or networks have a variety of uses including knowledge and information sharing, the jury is still out on their ability to directly change learner

outcomes for the better. An international review of school-to-school networks found that few could demonstrate a positive impact upon learners, particularly learner engagement and achievement (Bell et al., 2006). In their analysis of school networks, Hadfield and Chapman (2009, p. 9) note the difficulty of establishing any causal link between school-to-school networks and improved learner outcomes.

While there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence about the benefits of networks and networking, in reality, it is hard to substantiate any positive or lasting impact on learners. As some have argued, quite rightly, the challenge of gauging the impact of professional networks is difficult and complex. But difficult does not equate with impossible. Those advocating or leading professional networks have an obligation to find more robust and reliable methods of evaluating outcomes. Otherwise, why should busy professionals invest their time and participate?

The research also shows that to be most effective, professional networks require a certain leadership approach. As Hadfield and Chapman (2009, p. 153) conclude, for networking between schools to be most effective, there "needs to be a reconceptualization of educational leadership in terms of transferring knowledge, trust and shared purposes." As the pages that follow show, distributed leadership is characterized by high levels of trust, interdependence, reciprocal accountability, and shared purpose (Harris, 2008).

## Distributed Leadership

A great deal of the writing about distributed leadership, including my own, has focused upon definitional, methodological, and empirical issues. The question of how to distribute leadership has not had the same prominence. The few texts that actually tackle the issue of application tend toward description and, in some cases, low level and misguided prescription. While there may be some useful tips and

suggestions contained within these ring binders and pages, grounded guidance to help schools and districts has not been so forthcoming.

It remains the case that the theory of distributed leadership is viewed primarily as an analytical device or tool (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2011). As a theory, it offers a way of understanding and interpreting leadership practice. There is no intention or desire to go beyond that to prediction or prescription. This is not a criticism but simply the case. Writers working with the theory of distributed leadership readily acknowledge that their intention is not to take a normative position or to speculate upon the potential benefits or limitations of this form of leadership (Spillane, 2006). Instead, they use distributed leadership as a lens or frame to investigate leadership practice and to assist leaders in the process of managing change (Spillane, 2011). While the theory of distributed leadership undoubtedly provides an important analytical tool, as Kurt Lewin said, "There is nothing as practical as a good theory." Plus there is emerging empirical evidence to suggest that distributed leadership is more than just a theoretical perspective.

Some have argued vociferously that the research on distributed leadership is still in its infancy, so it is really far too early to make any substantiated claims for it. Certainly, this is true, but only in part. While the evidence base encompasses a relatively short time span, in the grand scheme of things, it presents a consistent picture about the relationship between distributed leadership and organizational outcomes (Chapter 3). Also, do we really have to wait several more decades before utilizing and sharing what we know about distributed leadership practice?

While there are no "effect sizes" to give it the legitimacy and popularity afforded to other types of leadership (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), the evidence base is growing, and most importantly, it is contemporary. While analyzing the research evidence, over ten or twenty-five years or more, is without doubt achieved only through exceptional

scholarship, it is also critical to ensure that any findings are still relevant and applicable to the contemporary world of education. Schools are very different places from a few years ago, let alone ten or twenty-five years. So how do we know these ideas are the *best* things for schools and districts, not simply just the *latest* things?

Indeed, how do we know that distributed leadership is not just the latest leadership fad or fashion? The answer to this question resides in looking at the available empirical evidence and assessing what it reveals about distributed leadership and organizational improvement (see Chapter 3). While there are rare occasions when distributed leadership is a by-product of a particularly positive school culture, most usually it happens by careful design. As Leithwood et al. (2009a) propose, to be most effective, distributed leadership has to be carefully planned, supported, and aligned. In short, it has to be facilitated so that the best possible outcomes and results follow (see Chapter 8).

But before getting too far into the evidence base about distributed leadership, let's step back a little and locate it in the contemporary world of education. Let's take a look at the challenges of 21st century leadership practice, particularly the challenges of leading change and improvement at scale.