Prescribed distributed leadership in the era of accountability: The experiences of mentor teachers

Jessica Holloway, Ann Nielsen and Sarah Saltmarsh

Abstract

Contemporary accountability frameworks position school leaders as being essential to improving school performance and driving innovation. Simultaneously, new accountability demands have forced the restructuring of school leadership, both in terms of form and function. In this paper, we look at the growing trend of distributed leadership among teachers who are tasked to assume leadership roles while maintaining their (sometimes reduced) teaching responsibilities. In the US, federally backed programs have incentivized schools to bolster teacher leadership opportunities, often predicated on claims of teacher empowerment and leadership democratization. Given the rise in distributed leadership as a prescribed local governance structure, we examined one popular distributed leadership model in the US to better understand how the teacher leaders are experiencing their dual roles and responsibilities. Drawing on focus group interviews with mentor teachers, we found tension between the teachers' expectations with regard to increased collegiality and mentoring opportunities, and their actual experiences of bureaucratic control and finding that their expectations were unrealistic. We argue that prescribed, incentive-driven forms of distributed leadership can place teacher leaders in precarious positions that demand more of their time, while limiting their capacities to participate in the leadership practices they deem most valuable.

Keywords

Introduction

Contemporary accountability frameworks position school leaders as being essential to improving school performance and driving innovation (Heck and Hallinger, 2009; Torrance and Humes, 2015). Simultaneously, new accountability demands have forced the restructuring of school leadership, both in terms of form and function (Anderson and Herr, 2015; Strain, 2009; Youngs, 2014).

Corresponding author:
Jessica Holloway, Kansas State University, 326 Bluemont Hall, 1100 Mid-Campus Drive, Manhattan, KS 66506, USA.
Email: jhollow@ksu.edu

In this paper, we look at the growing trend of distributed leadership among teachers who are tasked to assume leadership roles while maintaining their teaching responsibilities. In the US, federally backed programs have incentivized schools to bolster teacher leadership opportunities, often predicated on claims of teacher empowerment and leadership democratization (Bolden, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). However, some scholars have cautioned that the policy trend of expanding data infrastructures has required teacher leaders to absorb the increased administrative responsibilities related to data collection and reporting, a practice which has resulted in a number of different approaches to distributed leadership (Lumby, 2013; Youngs, 2014). We examined one popular distributed leadership model in the US to better understand how the teacher leaders were experiencing their dual roles and responsibilities. Drawing on focus group interviews with mentor teachers, we found tension between the teachers' expectations with regard to increased collegiality and mentoring opportunities, and their actual experiences of bureaucratic control and finding that their expectations were unrealistic.

We set the study against the backdrop of an increasingly data-demanding conceptualization of education that has risen to prominence over the past few decades (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2013; Lingard et al., 2013). As education becomes tied up in a numbers-based configuration, and 'accountability' becomes the central logic of education policy, schools are increasingly required to collect performance data and report it to external stakeholders (Ball, 2003; Falabella, 2014; Koyama, 2011; Lingard, 2011). This has significantly shifted the role of the educational leader, who is now inundated with heightened levels of managerial tasks and responsibilities (Anderson and Herr, 2015; Eacott and Norris, 2014). To absorb the increased tasks, various prescribed models of distributed leadership offer new means for teachers to help carry the burden (Bolden, 2011; Lumby, 2013; Spillane, 2005).

Specifically, prescribed distributed leadership models that rely on instructional coaches, peer evaluators and the like, allow for more individuals to assume the increased responsibilities conventionally held by one or two school administrators (Lumby, 2013; Youngs, 2014). While this form of distributed leadership has been lauded as more equitable and democratic for teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), we must question the ways in which these new leadership roles are defined by the frameworks within which they are produced. To this end, our study focused on one teacher leadership role – the mentor teacher – within one prescribed distributed leadership model (i.e. TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement, henceforward referred to as the TAP System). This model was of particular interest because of its prominent adoption and use in the US (Elements of Success, n.d.) and because of its application to a variety of federally backed initiatives that promote teacher leadership (e.g. Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant awards; Teach to Lead).

The TAP System is the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching's (NIET) comprehensive, performance-based compensation school reform program.[1] The TAP System was built on the career ladder model and, according to NIET, is 'a comprehensive educator effectiveness model that provides powerful opportunities for career advancement, professional growth, instructionally focused accountability, and competitive compensation for educators,' (Elements of Success, n.d.). The TAP System defines the mentor teacher as a classroom teacher who is provided with release time from classroom duties to serve as a member of the leadership team, peer evaluator, co-leader of professional development and an ongoing support to classroom teachers. These teacher leaders first apply for the position, and then they are vetted according to indicators determined by the specific school or district leadership team, often including their teacher effectiveness scores (as measured by the TAP System). They are compensated for their additional responsibilities with a stipend of $4000.

According to Youngs (2014), there is a need for more nuanced treatments of distributed leadership that consider contextual lenses and analyses. To this end, we saw the mentor teachers' experiences as a rich source of material that we could use to explore prescribed distributed leadership as situated within an increasingly accountability-demanding field. Specifically, we sought to understand how the mentor teacher has experienced the role of 'leader' within one model of distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership

While the tenets of distributed leadership can be traced as far back as the 1920s (Youngs, 2009), it was not until the early 2000s that it appeared prominently in practice and theory (Bolden, 2011; Youngs, 2009). As a break from the 'heroic leader paradigm' (Badaracco, 2001; Gronn, 2002; Yukl, 1999), distributed leadership scholars sought to organize and understand leadership as a decentralized practice involving multiple actors. 'Distributed leadership' serves as both a leadership structure, but also as an analytic lens through which to understand leadership practice and 'the interactions between people and their situation' (Spillane, 2005: 144). Despite the growing interest in distributed leadership, there is as yet no real consensus on its definition for theory or practice (Torrance and Humes, 2015). On the one hand, policymakers and practitioners have adopted the notion of distributed leadership as a move away from 'models of solo, heroic, charismatic leaders, which have been found to be ineffective in bringing about sustained change' (Torrance and Humes, 2015: 793; see also Lumby, 2013). On the other hand, leadership scholars have employed distributed leadership as an analytic lens to better understand how leadership manifests itself in organic and decentralized ways among various school actors (Bolden, 2011; Spillane, 2005). In the following sections, we describe these two concepts of distributed leadership and explain how our study extends this literature.

Distributed leadership as a structure

Many US schools have adopted some form of distributed leadership in order to meet the growing administrative and accountability demands related to policy-driven initiatives (Sawchuk, 2015). Teacher leadership has been encouraged on a national scale through incentive programs such as the federally backed Teach to Lead program. The initiative encourages schools to adopt prescribed distributed leadership models where suitable teachers are identified and encouraged to take on formal leadership roles, while also remaining in their classroom positions.

The teacher–leader model is but one type of distributed leadership model, as well as one of many processes through which distributed leadership manifests itself (Bolden, 2011; Youngs, 2014). Some processes are more organic in nature, such as spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relationships (Gronn, 2002), spontaneous alignment, spontaneous misalignment (Leithwood et al., 2007) and cultural distribution (MacBeath et al., 2004). Other models are more prescribed and/or pragmatically constructed, such as formal distribution, strategic distribution (MacBeath et al., 2004), institutionalized practice and planful alignment (Leithwood et al., 2007). For a comprehensive list of distributed leadership types and characteristics, see Bolden (2011), and see also Youngs (2014) for a categorization of typologies.

Generally, the academic community has received and written about distributed leadership positively. It has been associated with overall school improvement (Crowther et al., 2009; Graetz, 2000; Harris and Muijs, 2005; Murphy, 2005; see also Liljenberg, 2014), positive school culture

(King, 1996; Griffin, 1995) and increased teacher job satisfaction (Hulpia et al., 2009). Muijs and Harris (2006) found that it increases the sharing of best practices, which can lead to improved practice in the classroom (Lieberman et al., 2000; Little, 1990, 2000). Instructional coaches who are teacher leaders, in particular, are shown to have a positive impact on student achievement data (Campbell and Malkus, 2011). While these positive outcomes are noteworthy, we must also acknowledge the challenges that distributed leadership planning and execution present.

In order for distributed leadership to function effectively, several structural conditions must be met, including: 'a dynamic interplay between the organisation of distributed leadership, issues in focus, principal support, legitimation of leadership and – perhaps most importantly – a professional attitude towards collaboration and development within the organisation' (Liljenberg, 2014: 164). Distributed leadership models work better and are better received by organizational members when leadership tasks and responsibilities are pre-planned and aligned with the strengths of the participants (Mascall et al., 2008). Furthermore, building capacity, and full support of such positions are crucial to the sustainability of these roles (Mangin and Dunsmore, 2014). For example, teacher leaders need professional development in order to carry out their responsibilities effectively (Camburn et al., 2003). Recent studies on instructional coaching have established that successful coaching is a complex mix of time, relationship building and expertise (Anderson et al., 2014; Huguet et al., 2014; Mudzimiri et al., 2014).

Not only are individuals in need of support, but the overall leadership team needs to be a cohesive group that share a common vision and similar values (Bennett et al., 2003; Briggs and Wohlstetter, 2003; MacBeath, 2005; Oduro, 2004). The cohesiveness of the leadership team is more important to the organization's success than the distribution of leadership tasks (Hulpia et al., 2009). Such cohesiveness relies on trust, collaboration and an effective leadership framework that specifically defines roles and responsibilities (Bennett et al., 2003; Grubb and Flessa, 2009; Holtz, 2004; Leithwood et al., 1999; Spillane et al., 2003).

Distributed leadership as an analytic lens

While distributed leadership models have proliferated in practice across the US and internationally (Lumby, 2013; Sawchuk, 2015), there has been a simultaneous growth in application of distributed leadership as a theoretical framework and analytic lens (Torrance and Humes, 2015; Woods, et al., 2004). The leadership perspective problematizes the ways in which leadership manifests itself among relationships rather than emphasizing individual leadership roles, responsibilities, and personal characteristics and qualities (Spillane, 2005). Therefore, we must consider social and historical contexts (Osborn et al., 2002), for 'leadership is not only the incremental influence of a boss toward subordinates, but most important it is the collective incremental influence of leaders in and around the system' (Osborn et al., 2002: 798).

In addition, in attempts to understand distributed leadership, we must avoid conflating distributed leadership with distributed power (Hatcher, 2005; Lumby 2013), which has been largely overlooked in the distributed leadership literature (Hartley, 2009; Youngs, 2009). 'The notion of distributed leadership may be invoked by senior managers to encourage engagement and participation in organisational activities while masking substantial imbalances in access to resources and sources of power' (Bolden, 2011: 260). This is particularly important when considering the influence of policy demands that schools and school administrators currently face. If we conflate distributed leadership and distributed power, we ignore the emergent and holistic characteristics (and possibilities) of leadership, while also potentially ignoring the impact of policy

demands that can de facto distribute leadership tasks – only adding to the responsibilities of school staff who are already very busy. Bolden (2011) argued that the distributed model may very well be the 'emperor's new clothes' (see also Crawford, 2012) in that this new leadership model is not necessarily something new, but rather a function of the changing policy landscape. Similarly, Hartley (2010) cautioned:

> [D]istributed leadership is not about the expressive dimension of the school; it is not about enabling social and emotional bonds of a community. It is mainly about accomplishing the organizational goals which comprise the instrumental tasks and targets set by officialdom (Hartley, 2010: 281, as cited in Hall et al., 2011: 32).

Currently, the field of educational leadership lacks a clear and resolved definition of distributed leadership, thus limiting the ways in which the concept has been applied to systematic analyses. Despite the limited extant empirical research on distributed leadership, there has been a steady increase in its popularity among policymakers and practitioners (Bolden, 2011), and it is often sold as being more democratic and fair for teachers. However, simply enforcing a prescribed and rigid distributed leadership model does not necessarily mean that teachers can participate in what they consider meaningful and educative ways (Lumby 2013; Youngs, 2014).

The study presented herein extends this literature by calling into question one variety of distributed leadership that has been embedded within accountability reform efforts and policy frameworks. Invoking Youngs' (2014) warning against unitary definitions of distributed leadership, we investigated the experiences of mentor teachers who have taken on teacher leadership roles in order to question the way in which these mentors have experienced one policy-driven, top-down model of 'distributed leadership'.

Context

In 2006, the US Department of Education launched the TIF grants program, a five-year grant opportunity that sought to reform human capital management systems in schools by implementing performance-based compensation systems designed to reward teachers who increased student achievement in high-need areas. For this study, we focused on one TIF awardee – a consortium in the south-west region of the US made up of one large public university's college of education and ten high-needs school districts serving approximately 2100 teachers and 40,000 students. As a condition of participation in this particular TIF grant project, all schools were required to implement the TAP System, which also required a 75% teacher approval before implementation. Closely aligned with the requirements of TIF funding, the system consists of four main components: instructionally focused accountability, job-embedded professional development, performance-based compensation and multiple career paths. To date, the TAP System has been adopted in nine states, with over 200 US schools implementing it (niet.org, n.d.). Charter and public schools at the elementary, middle and high school levels in urban and rural districts have adopted the TAP System (Barnett et al., 2016). According to data collected from the TAP System website, over 200,000 educators and 2.5 million students have participated in it.

For this study, we focused on the role of the system's multiple career path component, with particular attention on the mentor teacher role – defined as being that of a full-time classroom teacher having 'expert curricular knowledge, outstanding instructional skills, and the ability to work effectively with other adults' (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2010). The

fundamental responsibilities of mentor teachers include: (1) supporting teachers with their instructional growth; (2) conducting evaluations and coaching conferences with individual teachers; and (3) assisting with weekly professional development delivered to teachers in a professional learning community format. In addition, TAP System mentor teachers were required to serve as members of a school leadership team, which was comprised of other teacher leaders (i.e. master teachers[2]) and the school principals. The south-west TIF grant required each school to maintain a ratio of one mentor teacher for every eight career teachers.

While the TIF grant was the primary driving force behind the implementation of the TAP System in these schools, it should be noted that other policy initiatives also had an influence on the local school governance structures, especially in terms of increased accountability-related data collection and reporting. The schools included in this study were also recipients of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waivers and Race to the Top (RttT) funds and, therefore, were required to implement new systems for quantifying and rewarding teacher effectiveness, as based on various performance measures (e.g. student achievement scores and multiple observations). In addition, schools were required to implement programs of ongoing professional development, thereby increasing the number of qualified individuals needed to facilitate raised expectations.

The mentor teacher role was of particular interest to us given the unique position in the prescribed distributed leadership ladder. As the first step into leadership, we saw the mentor teacher position as a compelling unit of analysis because it is the best demonstration of treating 'leadership' as an incentive, as high teacher performance was rewarded with leadership (or distributed leadership) responsibilities.

Method

Our primary interest was to understand how the TAP System's prescribed approach to distributed leadership discursively constitutes the 'mentor teacher' and how the teachers have taken up and experienced this position. To this end, we sought the input of mentor teachers to see how they talked about (1) the leadership system, (2) their experiences as mentor teachers, and (3) their positionalities as leaders among their peers. Approaching the project in this way, we were able to think about one form of distributed leadership, ie a prescribed, top-down structure, while also exploring it as a peopled practice.

Data

To better understand the ways in which this prescribed distributed leadership structure defines the mentor teacher, we collected interview data via focus groups with TAP System mentor teachers. Spread over three sessions, 29 (of the invited 67 mentor teachers) participated, representing 5 of the 10 TIF school districts within the TIF grant partnership. Ideally, we would have included more mentor teachers and districts in our analysis and, while we cannot speculate as to why some mentor teachers chose to participate and some did not, we acknowledge that not including more may have changed our results. However, we do not intend for these findings to be representative of all TAP System mentor teachers or teacher leaders more generally; rather, we offer heuristic value by demonstrating how these participants' experiences as mentor teachers challenge commonly purported claims and presumptions about prescribed distributed leadership.

Session 1 was held within one school district that had a professional development day that incorporated the focus group session into the day's events (mentor teachers were not required to participate). The second and third sessions were openly advertised to all mentor teachers in the TIF grant who were attending a TIF professional development workshop held in a central location. Each participant received a professional development book for taking part in a focus group session. Each session averaged approximately 45 minutes and focused on: (1) their experiences and practices as teacher leaders; (2) their participation in decision-making processes at their school sites; (3) their relationships with their colleagues; and (4) any other issues related to their roles as mentor teachers. The focus group members were encouraged to interact with one another, allowing the researcher access to a rich purview of participant experiences and opinions (Berg, 2004).

Data analysis

Data analysis was both an ongoing and reflexive process. The lead researcher conducted the focus group sessions and, after each one, we immediately transcribed the session using HyperTRAN-SCRIBE software. Each of us then separately coded the transcript following Saldaña's (2013) open coding techniques. Next, we met as a group to discuss our codes and initial thoughts. During this time, the lead researcher kept analytic memos to track the group's thinking, questioning and theorizing (Saldaña, 2009). After the three focus group sessions and initial analyses were complete, we met as a group to conduct cross-sectional and categorical indexing to build on the individual sessions by noting similarities, contradictions and other patterns (Mason, 2002). This interpretive process led us to draw conclusions about how the mentor teachers were interpreting their experiences as teacher leaders. It must also be noted that we did not necessarily try to get at the 'true' experiences of these mentor teachers; rather we were trying to understand the way they have come to constitute and understand their positionalities as leaders discursively.

Findings

The participants articulated three major areas that function to define their positionalities as mentor teachers within the distributed leadership structure: (1) systematic conditions and resource allocation; (2) competing conceptualizations of 'leadership'; and (3) mentor teachers' capacities for participation in decision-making. While the mentor teachers expressed frustration with the system, they also expressed a dedicated commitment to their schools, mentees and positions. We describe each of these areas in the following sections.

Systematic conditions and resource allocation

It is well documented in the literature that building capacity and sound logistical conditions are a necessary precursor for teacher leaders to be successful in their positions (Anderson et al., 2014; Huguet et al., 2014; Lai and Cheung, 2015; Mudzimiri et al., 2014). This was also a consistent theme across the focus group participants, as the mentor teachers repeatedly referred to time and other resource constraints that made doing their jobs difficult, at best, and impossible, at worst. Given the fact that these mentor teachers serve in dual capacities – both as classroom teachers and mentors – there is a structural necessity for them to be able to get cover in the classroom in order to carry out their responsibilities. However, the participants talked about a severe lack of consistent

and reliable cover to enable them to perform out-of-classroom duties. For example, one mentor teacher explained that:

> Specials [teacher] can cover, but if the specials teacher's not there then it's just, 'oops, no, you can't do [teacher support] follow-up today'. Almost like, 'we want you to do it, but it's not that important that you do it'.

Not only was there a failure to ensure the time for the mentor teachers to perform these duties, but concerns were also expressed with regard to the fact that they were treated as subordinates by their 'superiors'. In most of these situations, the participants were asked to abandon their mentor-related responsibilities in order to fulfil other school-related responsibilities, such as serving as substitutes for absent teachers. One participant explained that she is often told, 'Oh you're language arts today . . . Oh, you're going to go in the math room today', forcing her to give up her classroom preparation time.

There were other conditional constraints that the mentor teachers expressed as hindrances to their growth and overall success. As Camburn et al. (2003) argue, ongoing professional support and training is a necessary pre-condition for teacher leaders to be successful. During the focus group sessions, one recurring issue was that of professional development and the lack thereof. One participant remarked:

> This will be my fourth year and I've never once received [feedback], they do this [evaluation] survey on you and I think it was even a question in the next interview like, okay, 'so how did you take what you needed into [account]' and I'm like, 'nobody told me [how I did]'. Like no feedback whatsoever. We're not supported.

Similarly, another mentor teacher stated, 'I don't think we're developed professionally. I think we're just mentors, and that's what they want . . . . There's no growth for us'.

These logistical issues are worth acknowledging, but perhaps we should consider whether they represent a canary in the coalmine, signifying greater conditional problems that are indicative of system priorities. These example statements call into question whether the mentor teacher role is prescribed in a way that fosters leadership skills, opportunities or sustainability. According to these participants, the system forces these mentor teachers to prioritize actions, which has implications for the way in which 'leadership' gets defined in this particular area.

In the light of this, and coupled with the participants' recurring attention to logistical constraints, we came to see resource allocation (specifically as it relates to the leadership team) as a way of thinking about system values and leadership constitution. Given the frequent mention of time as a limited resource, we sought to understand the way in which time was allocated and spent. We looked at how the mentor teachers described their balance of responsibilities, giving particular attention to how they prioritized their practices and justified their choices.

The mentor teachers discussed at length the balance between evaluator actions (e.g. observing teachers, collecting and reporting data, etc.) and mentor actions (e.g. coaching, modelling, etc.) and how the system forced a prioritized approach to these activities. Above all, they noted a desire to do more mentoring and relationship building and less evaluating, yet they expressed a pressure to prioritize their evaluation duties above others. They repeatedly emphasized this as a contradiction to what they expected their leadership role to be like.

One participant called the mentor teachers 'glorified evaluators', while another explained the discrepancy here:

> I would like to get into the classrooms because I haven't been able to do as much of the mentor portion of the mentor job. I'm doing a whole lot of evaluating, I've got that down because we have to, but the mentor piece I really don't feel like I'm there for the teachers . . . We want to say we love our campus, we love what we do, we love our team. But I haven't been able to do that mentor portion of mentoring, which is kind of why I took the position. But now can I eval [uate]?!

Another mentor teacher stated:

> I would love to see the coaching piece and the evaluation piece going hand in hand. I think that's how it should be. I feel like for my situation, it was, evaluation was much heavier than coaching, which is what my struggle was, because I wanted to do the mentoring. My role, I think, I am called a mentor, but I feel like I should have been called an evaluator because I really didn't get to spend a lot of time mentoring.

This was echoed by another mentor teacher here:

> [Mentoring] should be being able to do more team teaching and more actual mentoring, and instead it's more evaluative. You know, that's when we are able to get coverage for evaluations, and then the completing of them is usually done in my kitchen, after 9:00 at night, after my son's in bed.

Of significance here is the distinction the mentor teachers made between the mentor and evaluator components of their positions. While they placed higher value on the mentoring portion, they expressed a need to accommodate the evaluation-related tasks first. These are the tangible, objective tasks that can be performed by any trained individual and can also be checked off on an accountability list. The mentoring tasks, however, are more fluid and elusive in that they are context specific and can take on various forms and functions based on individual teacher need. This makes documentation and reporting difficult, and it does not help meet the immediate, external policy demands for which the schools are responsible (e.g. teacher effectiveness reporting as per RttT). As previously stated, this ran counter to the mentor teachers' perceptions of what a 'leadership' role was supposed to be like, highlighting the differences between the system's definition of leadership and their own.

Competing definitions of 'leadership'

In holding the prescribed distributed leadership structure in juxtaposition with the mentor teachers' discussion of their experiences, it became apparent that the two defined 'leadership' in competing ways. 'Leadership', as defined by the structure, was related to carrying out accountability tasks and explicit data collection and reporting (e.g. teacher evaluation), while 'leadership', as defined by the mentor teachers, was related to relationship building, and coaching. Specifically, this was apparent in the mentor teachers' discussions of their relationships with their colleagues.

When the participants spoke explicitly about their relationships with their mentees, they emphasized their ongoing efforts to build trust and systems of support. They particularly highlighted the necessity of acting as a co-partner with their mentees. For example, one mentor teacher stated:

I want my teachers to know that I am there, and that my feedback is there to help them, and that I'm going to share my struggles, and I'm going to learn from my practice, and I'm going to hopefully help you guys, and I want that to open dialogue.

However, given the fact that the system prioritized evaluating over mentoring, opportunities for relationship building were limited. Thus, the interviewees found that more of their time was spent as evaluators than as co-partners (mentors). This also interfered with the mentor teachers' relationships with and contributions to their respective leadership teams. One mentor teacher explained his/her perception of the 'team' as such:

[A]s a [leadership] team, we do talk, and we do get along, . . . we call ourselves a team, when we're writing to each other we say oh this is a team, this is a team, and then when the, when our administrator writes to us on the email, she says 'okay, team, let's do this'. So I thought we [could work] as a team, [at] this workshop today, but, I thought we could collaborate [more] . . . get together and learn, share our learnings.

Similarly, another mentor teacher said:

Even though mentors are supposed to be part of the leadership team, there is often the feeling of not really being part of the team, mentors are informed sometimes of what's coming next, changes, etc. but there's a feeling of being valued less. Some masters [i.e. next-rung teacher leaders] let it be known that they're right up there with administrators, sort of an air of superiority.

The mentor teachers' relationships with their leadership teams also had implications for the extent to which they were able to participate in decision-making processes at their respective schools.

Mentor teachers' participation in decision-making processes

If participating as leaders, the mentor teachers should be able to make decisions and act upon their own principles and values (George, 2003; Shamir and Eilam, 2005). This includes their ability to participate in decision-making processes at their schools. To the contrary, the focus group participants discussed a lack of participation in this capacity. This limited contribution to leadership decisions appeared to manifest itself in different ways, depending on various factors, such as the leadership team dynamic, teachers' schedules and the like. Some mentor teachers described this in terms of how they were unable to take part in the planning of professional development (PD) workshops, even though they were required to participate in the execution of such sessions and the accompanying follow-up training. One mentor teacher described the situation as such:

I feel talked down to, and I've been teaching for many moons, and I feel like um we're not always spoken to like adults . . . And it's like a control issue. Like I don't teach anything, I'm the Vanna White, I just write things down on a chart.

Similar subjugation was expressed in reference to how responsibilities were distributed among the leadership team. As one mentor teacher explained (all capital letters represent emphasis by the participant):

> [The administration] expect[s] us to be problem-solvers, but we only have so much authority. Like what can I do? What can I do? I can't do anything other than take MORE responsibilities. You know, kind of, okay, I'LL do cluster [weekly PD workshops], and I'LL do field testing.

Here, the mentor teacher appears to have conceded his/her place in the leadership hierarchy. Paradoxically, however, he/she described feeling pressure to make authoritative decisions, despite having any real authority to do so.

Another example of how the mentor teachers expressed a lack of voice in the leadership team was in their discussion of leadership training, as was expressed here:

> [This leadership training workshop] was supposed to just be a master [teacher], administrative thing . . . and that happens many times throughout the year where there's things that just masters and admin go to. [W]hy do they get that extra training? Why do they get those extra seminars if, we're a team, right? Shouldn't it be a leadership team seminar so that we're always on the same page? We always know what's going on together? . . . but, I'm stuck here, and I'm not getting as much training as this master is getting, and why not? Why is my position not as valued? Is my position not as important in the team?

There was also discussion of superficial versus actual contributions to decision-making processes, as was articulated by one participant here:

> I feel like when I say stuff at the leadership team [meeting], they do take it seriously, and they write it down, make notes, and I do feel validated in that, 'oh, that's a great idea,' so I feel like they're really receptive. But sometimes we don't take those ideas and actually implement them. But it's not because of, you know, that I came up with them, or whatever. I feel heard during it, but it would be nice if we could actually go through with them then.

This quotation only highlights further the lack of leadership authority this mentor teacher perceived to possess because, similar to the way the position has been written into policy and protocol, the mentor teacher expressed the feeling that he/she was being treated as a leader only superficially, at the same time lacking any leadership authority.

Another important point is that not every mentor teacher shared in this experience. For example, one mentor teacher talked about the way in which his/her leadership team fully supported his/her involvement in leadership decisions and responsibilities, as described here:

> Myself and my master teacher worked hand in hand, our classrooms were connected, we planned every single aspect, we planned cluster together. We have been told many times, you cannot distinguish between the master teacher and the mentor because it was very much like we were very in sync. We were very involved with every aspect of field testing together as well as deciding critical attributes . . . Our follow-ups were pre-planned prior to cluster and then tweaked based on what we saw in cluster.

Above all, however, there was a persistent discrepancy between the prescribed distributed leadership structure and the opportunity for the mentor teachers to contribute in what they perceived as legitimate, or educative, leadership ways. This was in contradiction to the expectations the mentor teachers expressed as their reasons for being leaders, highlighting the differences between the system's and the mentors' leadership values. This is also a function of an attempt to take school leadership – a very complex social process – and simplify it to a set of tangible tasks, which is consistent with the new, market-based conceptualization of education (Ball, 2003; Rose,

1999). But, despite these challenges, the mentor teachers expressed a devotion to their positions, even when it called for personal and professional sacrifices.

Personal commitment and sacrifice

The mentor teachers, as a whole, expressed a disenfranchisement from the leadership system. They noted feelings of being undervalued, underpaid and overworked. However, most of them have committed to at least one more year of such work. Thus, we inquired as to why the mentor teachers were willing to deal with such challenging conditions in order to conduct their jobs. The most commonly stated reason was that it was out of loyalty to their schools, mentees and administration. Having been granted leadership roles, the mentor teachers expressed an obligation to live up to the associated expectations, regardless of the necessary sacrifices to do so. For example, one mentor teacher stated:

> A good teacher is always learning. And, I tell the teachers, and I think no matter how long you've taught, short time or a long time, teachers need to know hey, I'm doing a good job . . . I mean that's always sorta [sic] been my job as a cheerleader, that's the reason that I stay with it . . . [T]hen there's also this little twinge of, maybe it's old school, but I feel a little guilty about not doing it because of the investment that's been made in me . . . [I]n three years all the things that we have learned and have implemented, and then to just let go, I feel a little bit like that's really going to hurt the kids and teachers and morale, and lots of things.

In this example, the mentor teacher compared her school to a team and herself to a cheerleader who was there to keep up morale. She also referenced the need to pay back the resources that had been spent on her. Other mentor teachers expressed their desire to quit, but felt that nobody else would do their jobs, as was discussed in the following exchange between participants:

Participant A: I think we would all quit. But no one would take our place.
Participant B: (interrupting Participant A) Exactly.
Participant A: (continued) at our school.
Participant C: There's no one else.
Participant B: I would not do this again.
Participant C: I tried to quit twice, but no one else wanted the job.
            (participants laugh)
Participant D: There is, and I always stay on board because if it wasn't for [the other mentor teachers, I would have quit] because this is my first year in the district and in TAP. If it wasn't for these two helping and supporting me. At the beginning my blood pressure was up, I had to get a stress test, cardiologist, all these things, and I really thought, is this money even worth? I pay more in medical bills than [the] 4000 dollars [I get as a mentor teacher]. So, I weighed the pros and cons, and I almost quit. And then, with the support of [the other mentor teachers], I'm like, okay, they help me with the questions and the support, so that's how I end up staying.

Not only have these mentor teachers faced conditions that make acting as leaders difficult and that are contradictory to their perceptions of what mentoring leadership should be like, but they were also working within a system that promoted sacrifice and exploited personal commitment. Even in times of wanting to quit, they feared the alternative and the potential negative

consequences that could affect their schools if they left. This form of team loyalty is a key feature of the reconceptualization of schools as market enterprises. This feature, employed with the other managerial techniques, fosters a system of accountability and self-regulation that is a function of the remaking of public schools as fashioned by private sector logics (Ball, 2003).

Discussion

As Ball (2003) reminds us, school actors perform in response to a regulative culture that incorporates both material and symbolic rewards to incentivize individuals to manage themselves. The prescribed distributed leadership model that was implemented to meet the requirements of the TIF grant is specifically designed to reward merit with 'leadership' responsibilities. As a product of private sector logics, the system is founded on a managerialist rationality (Peters et al., 2000) that relies on performance measures and evaluative practices that: (1) create a system where school staff are self-regulatory (Foucault, 1977, 1980); and (2) require more human capital than traditional school leadership structures (Lumby, 2013). Thus, leadership tasks are distributed among a group of school actors, where 'leadership' is treated as a tangible object that can be bestowed upon deserving teachers.

Once granted 'leadership', the mentor teachers of this study assumed new roles in the leadership hierarchy, but they expressed limits to their capacities for what they have articulated as meaningful mentoring practice. They valued relationship building over evaluation-related actions, yet they described working within a system that stifles their opportunities to do this in favour of managerial tasks. Ball (2003) described the manager as such: '[T]he work of the manager, the new hero of educational reform, involves instilling the attitude and culture within which workers feel themselves accountable and at the same time committed or personally invested in the organization' (Ball, 2003: 219).

The TAP mentor teacher position first incentivizes teachers to perform against a set of quality measures and indicators in order to earn 'leadership' and, then, once earned, places the mentor teachers in positions that require immense time and personal commitment to the organization. This was repeatedly reinforced by the participants who talked about the personal sacrifices they had made in honour of their positions and their devotion to their schools, despite expressions of frustration and exhaustion.

In this system, leadership is treated as a finite object that can be distributed among worthy school actors, and 'contrived collegiality' hinders a 'more genuinely collaborative teacher culture' (Hargreaves and Dawes, 1990: 238).[3] This potentially constricts more organic or democratic manifestations of leadership within the school. As expressed by the mentor teachers in this study, the system hinders the mentor teachers' opportunities for building meaningful relationships and instead prioritizes accountability-related tasks that are of immediate precedence given the current policy landscape that is driving local school governance structures. To uphold the policy demands related to the human capital components of their TIF grant award, NCLB waiver and RttT monies, the schools in this study have been forced to report explicitly on personnel matters related to teacher effectiveness and evaluation, requiring school leaders to complete an unprecedented number of tasks. The only way to meet this requirement is to expand the number of those qualified to carry out such demands. The TAP System helps answer this call by creating a structure that enables teachers to rise in the hierarchy and serve in dual capacities as both classroom teachers and school leaders. However, even with additional new leaders to help accommodate the accountability needs, there is still little room left in terms of time and resources for more valued forms of educative

leadership (e.g. mentoring and relationship building), which is necessary for fostering efficacious teacher leadership (Lai and Cheung, 2015). Thus, the mentor teachers of this study identified themselves as 'glorified evaluators', who were there to carry out administrative duties rather than the mentoring practices they assumed their titles suggested.

As noted by Bolden (2011), Hatcher (2005) and Lumby (2013), distributed leadership does not necessarily equate with distributed power or authority. As demonstrated here, highly prescribed leadership roles might help schools respond to external policy demands, but they do not necessarily nurture opportunities for leadership growth. Rather than arguing that there is something inherently or ethically wrong with the TAP System and other similar distributed leadership models, we argue that treating leadership as a reward, as these models do, might create a system that oversimplifies the complex social practice of leadership. In turn, leadership is remade into a commodity that can be used as an incentive and sanction for self-improvement, accountability and regulation. We also recognize the line of argument that some bureaucratization of leadership is necessary to organizing administrative responsibilities and addressing ineffective school management (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). However, we agree with Youngs (2014; 100) that 'the popular one-size-fits-all label of distributed leadership' must be problematized, especially given the popularity of distributed leadership coming from state and federal incentive programs and policies. This article demonstrates that prescribed, incentive-driven distributed leadership might place teacher leaders in precarious positions that demand more of their time, while limiting their capacities to participate in the leadership practices they deem most valuable. While this study was limited to one group of teacher leaders, within one type of distributed leadership model, we beseech more scholars to challenge critically the conditions that prescribed distributed leadership models create for teachers, as well as the oft-cited claims that such practices are more democratically fair for teachers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. It should be noted that this study is not a critique or endorsement of the TAP System. Instead, it is leveraging the opportunity to learn more about teacher leadership and distributed leadership through the highly defined leadership roles that are outlined in the TAP System.
2. The master teacher position is the next rung on the leadership ladder. Master teachers typically have full release from their teaching responsibilities in order to serve as evaluators, school-based professional developers, coaches or administrators at their schools.
3. Lavié (2006) offers a detailed description and analysis of various teacher collaboration conceptualizations.

References

Anagnostopoulos D, Rutledge SA and Jacobsen R (2013) *The Infrastructure of Accountability: Data use and the Transformation of American Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Anderson G and Herr K (2015) New public management and the new professionalism in education: Framing the issue. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 23(84): 1–6.

Anderson R, Feldman S and Minstrell J (2014) Understanding relationship: Maximizing the effects of science coaching. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 22(54): 1–25.

Badaracco JL (2001) We don't need another hero. *Harvard Business Review* 79(8): 120–126.

Ball SJ (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy* 18(2): 215–228.

Barnett JH, Hudgens TM and Alexander JL (2016) *TAP Research Summary Spring 2016: Examining the evidence and impact of TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement*. Santa Monica, CA: National Institute for Excellence in Teaching.

Bennett N, Harvey JA, Wise C and Woods PA (2003) *Desk Study Review of Distributed Leadership*. Nottingham, UK: National College for School Leadership.

Berg BL (2004) Focus group interviewing. In: Berg B *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Boston, MA: Pearson, pp.123–144.

Bolden R (2011) Distributed leadership in organizations: A review of theory and research. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 13(3): 251–269.

Briggs KL and Wohlstetter P (2003) Key elements of a successful school-based management strategy. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 14: 351–372.

Camburn E, Rowan B and Taylor JE (2003) Distributed leadership in schools: The case of elementary schools adopting comprehensive school reform models. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 25(4): 347–373.

Campbell PF and Malkus NN (2011) The impact of elementary mathematics coaches on student achievement. *Elementary School Journal* 111: 430–454.

Crawford M (2012) Solo and distributed leadership definitions and dilemmas. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 40(5): 610–620.

Crowther F, Ferguson M and Hann L (2009) *Developing Teacher Leaders: How Teacher Leadership Enhances School Success*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Eacott S and Norris J (2014) Managerial rhetoric, accountability, and school leadership in contemporary Australia. *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 13(2): 169–187.

Elements of Success (n.d.) Retrieved August 01, 2016, from http://www.niet.org/tap-system/elements-of-success/

Falabella A (2014) The performing school: The effects of market and accountability policies. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 22(70): 1–26.

Foucault M (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by A. Sheridan, London: Allen Lane.

Foucault M (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon.

George B (2003) *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.

Graetz F (2000) Strategic change leadership. *Management Decisions* 38(8): 550–562.

Griffin GA (1995) Influences of shared decision making on school and classroom activity: Conversations with five teachers. *Elementary School Journal* 96(1): 29–45.

Gronn P (2002) Distributed leadership as a unit of analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly* 13(4): 423–451.

Grubb N and Flessa JJ (2009) A job too big for one: Multiple principals and other non- traditional approaches to school leadership. In: Leithwood K, Mascall B and Strauss T (eds) *Distributed Leadership According to the Evidence*. London: Routledge, pp.137–164.

Hall D, Gunter HM and Bragg J (2011) The discursive performance of leadership in schools. *Management in Education* 25(1): 32–36.

Hargreaves A and Dawe R (1990) Paths of professional development: Contrived collegiality, collaborative culture, and the case of peer coaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 6(3): 227–241.

Hargreaves A and Fullan M (2012) *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching In Every School*. Teachers College Press.

Harris A and Muijs D (2005) *Improving Schools Through Teacher Leadership*. London: Open University Press.

Hartley D (2009) Education policy, distributed leadership and socio-cultural theory. *Educational Review* 61(2): 139–150.

Hartley D (2010) Paradigms: How far does research in distributed leadership 'stretch'? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 38(3): 271–285.

Hatcher R (2005) The distribution of leadership and power in schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 26(2): 253–267.

Heck RH and Hallinger P (2009) Assessing the contribution of distributed leadership to school improvement and growth in math achievement. *American Educational Research Journal* 46(3): 659–689.

Holtz R (2004) Group cohesion, attitude projection, and opinion certainty: Beyond interaction. Group Dynamics. *Theory, Research and Practice* 8: 112–125.

Huguet A, Marsh JA and Farrell C (2014) Building teachers' data-use capacity: Insights from strong and developing coaches. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 22(52): 1–28.

Hulpia H, Devos G and Rosseel Y (2009) The relationship between the perception of distributed leadership in secondary schools and teachers' and teacher leaders' job satisfaction and organizational commitment. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 20(3): 291–317.

King MB (1996) Participatory decision making. In: King MB (ed.) *Restructuring for Authentic Student Achievement: The Impact of Culture and Structure in 24 Schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Koyama JP (2011) Generating, comparing, manipulating, categorizing, reporting, and sometimes fabricating data to comply with No Child Left Behind mandates. *Journal of Education Policy* 26(5): 701–720.

Lai E and Cheung D (2015) Enacting teacher leadership: The role of teachers in bringing about change. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 43(5): 673–692.

Lavié JM (2006) Academic discourses on school-based teacher collaboration: Revisiting the arguments. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 42(5): 773–805.

Leithwood K, Jantzi D and Steinbach R (1999) *Changing Leadership for Changing Times*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Leithwood K, Mascall B, Strauss T, Sacks R, Memon N and 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.

Lieberman A, Saxl ER and Miles MB (2000) Teacher leadership: Ideology and practice. In: Lieberman A, Saxl ER and Miles MB (eds) *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership*. Chicago, IL: Jossey-Bass, pp.339–345.

Liljenberg M (2014) Distributing leadership to establish developing and learning school organisations in the Swedish context. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 43(1): 152–170.

Lingard B (2011) Policy as numbers: Accounting for educational research. *The Australian Educational Researcher* 38(4): 355–382.

Lingard B, Martino W and Rezai-Rashti G (2013) Testing regimes, accountabilities and education policy: Commensurate global and national developments. *Journal of Education Policy* 28(5): 539–556.

Little JW (1990) The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relations. *Teachers College Record* 91: 509–536.

Little JW (2000) Assessing the prospects for teacher leadership. In: Lieberman A, Saxl ER and Miles MB (eds) *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership*. Chicago, IL: Jossey-Bass, pp. 390–418.

Lumby J (2013) Distributed leadership: The uses and abuses of power. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 41(5): 581–597.

MacBeath J (2005) Leadership as distributed: A matter of practice. *School Leadership and Management* 25: 349–366.

MacBeath J, Oduro GKT and Waterhouse J (2004) *Distributed Leadership in Action: A Study of Current Practice in Schools*. Nottingham, UK: National College for School Leadership.

Mangin MM and Dunsmore KL (2014) How the framing of instructional coaching as a lever for systemic or individual reform influences the enactment of coaching. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 51(2): 179–213.

Mascall B, Leithwood K, Straus T and Sacks R (2008) The relationship between distributed leadership and teachers' academic optimism. *Journal of Educational Administration* 46(2): 214–228.

Mason J (2002) *Qualitative Researching*. London: SAGE Publications.

Mudzimiri R, Burroughs EA, Luebeck J, Sutton J and Yopp D (2014) A look inside mathematics coaching: Roles, content, and dynamics. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 22(53): 1–28.

Muijs D and Harris A (2006) Teacher-led school improvement: Teacher leadership in the UK. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 22(8): 961–972.

Murphy J (2005) *Connecting Teacher Leadership and School Improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (2010) *TAP Evaluation and Compensation Guide*. Santa Monica, CA: National Institute for Excellence in Teaching.

Oduro GKT (2004) Distributed leadership in schools. *Education Journal* 80: 23–25.

Osborn RN, Hunt JG and Jauch LR (2002) Toward a contextual theory of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly* 13(6): 797–837.

Peters M, Marshall J and Fitzsimons P (2000) Managerialism and educational policy in a global context: Foucault, neoliberalism, and the doctrine of self-management. In: Burbules NC and Torres CA (eds) *Globalization and Education: Critical Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, pp.109–132.

Rose N (1999) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Saldaña J (2009) Writing analytic memos. In: *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: SAGE Publications, pp.32–42.

Saldaña J (2013) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: SAGE Publications.

Sawchuk S (2015) Delaware eyes revamp to pay, creation of teacher-leader roles. *Education Week*. Available at: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat/2015/09/delaware_eyes_revamp_to_pay_te.html (accessed 24 September 2015).

Shamir B and Eilam G (2005) What's your story? A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development. *The Leadership Quarterly* 16(3): 395–417.

Spillane JP (2005) Distributed leadership. *The Educational Forum* 69(2): 143–150.

Spillane JP, Diamond JB and Jita L (2003) Leading instruction: The distribution of leadership for instruction. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 35: 533–543.

Strain M (2009) Some ethical and cultural implications of the leadership 'turn' in education: On the distinction between performance and performativity. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 37(1): 67–84.

Torrance D and Humes W (2015) The shifting discourses of educational leadership: International trends and Scotland's response. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 43(5): 792–810.

U.S. Department of Education (2014) Teach to lead: Advancing teacher leadership. Remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at the National Board on Professional Teaching Standards Teaching and

Learning Conference. Available at: http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/teach-lead-advancing-teacher-leadership (accessed 1 August 2016)

Woods PA, Bennett N, Harvey JA and Wise C (2004) Variabilities and dualities in distributed leadership findings from a systematic literature review. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 32(4): 439–457.

Youngs H (2009) (Un)Critical times? Situating distributed leadership in the field. *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 41(4): 377–389.

Youngs H (2014) Moving beyond distributed leadership to distributed forms: A contextual and socio-cultural analysis of two New Zealand secondary schools. *Leading and Managing* 20(2): 89.

Yukl G (1999) An evaluation of conceptual weaknesses in transformational and charismatic leadership theories. *The Leadership Quarterly* 10(2): 285–305.

Author biographies

Jessica Holloway, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Kansas State University. Her current research looks at the influence of market-based logics on education policy, especially as it relates to teachers and educational leaders.

Ann Nielsen, EdD, is the Associate Director in the Center for Advanced Studies in Global Education in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. Her current research looks at teacher professionalism and teacher identity in national and international contexts.

Sarah Saltmarsh, EdD, is is an Instructional Coach within the Center for the Art and Science of Teaching at Arizona State University. Her current research looks at the engagement of teacher leaders as implementation agents of school reform under such policies as Race to the Top and the Every Student Succeeds Act.