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An Organizational Perspective of Distributed Leadership: A Portrait of a Middle School

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Abstract

Interest in the concept of distributed leadership has increased as evidenced in the recent literature. While there has been much discussion, there has been scant empirical evidence of distributed leadership in practice. This research study examines one middle school where educators practiced distributed leadership daily. Approached from an organizational perspective, the researcher gathered data from administrator and teacher interviews, organization context, and student outcome records. Findings from this qualitative case study form the basis for a model of distributed leadership. Organizational pre-conditions include: (a) leadership practice as support for organizational structure, (b) trust as strengthening organizational culture, and (c) relationships as the foundation for organizational affiliation. Organizational constructs of organizational structure, organizational culture, and organizational affiliation, in turn, lead to the organizational outcomes of (a) efficacy, (b) increased trust, (c) job satisfaction, and (d) teacher intent to stay.

Introduction

The lines of traditional leadership roles and followers are blurred. The complexity and size of school systems today are such that one leader cannot meet the demands of daily tasks and problems. Thus, a singular leader-centric school cannot operate as efficiently as one in which leadership roles are distributed. Those who study and those who practice the art of leadership are embracing a re-thinking of leadership practice as a collective effort.

Recently, the concept of distributed leadership has been at the forefront of the school leadership literature. Unlike the study of leadership, focusing on the individual, distributed leadership examines the construct as an emergent property of interacting individuals (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003). Distributed leadership is “the sharing, the spreading, and the distributing of leadership work across individuals and roles across the school organization” (Smylie, Mayrowetz, Murphy, & Seashore Louis, 2007, p. 470). Discussions of community building, the complexity of leadership as a construct, the need to share leadership in times of accountability, and the connection of distributed leadership to school

improvement (Doyle, 2004; Halverson, 2006; Harris, 2005; Hartley, 2007; Storey, 2004; Wright, 2008) have increased interest about this concept. While there has been much discussion, there has been little empirical evidence in the literature of distributed leadership in practice. District policy makers and practitioners of leadership at the school level need a model of distributed leadership practice from an organizational perspective. Such a model, based on an examination of distributed leadership in a school setting, can serve as a guide for school effectiveness.

This article offers an in-depth look at one middle school where leadership spreads throughout the organization and is regularly practiced by administrators, teachers, and staff. The following case study provides a rich description of perceptions and practices of distributed leadership enacted on a daily basis. The article also examines the construct through the lens of organizational operations; that is, the school culture, the organizational structure, and the organizational collegiality, as expressed through relationships, trust, and the daily practice of leadership. To guide this inquiry, the researcher considered the following questions:

1. What organizational components are necessary for successful distributed leadership?
2. What organizational outcomes are facilitated by successful distributed leadership practices?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the literature of teacher empowerment, distributed leadership, and the middle school concept.

Teacher Empowerment

The concept of teacher empowerment grew from the school effectiveness, school improvement, and school reform literature. Empowerment has been defined as administrative power sharing (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), a process for teacher growth (Short, 1994), and as an opportunity for autonomy (Lightfoot, 1986). Schools where teachers reported feeling empowered cited the importance of the leader. Gonzales and Short (1996) found that the more empowered teachers felt in their work, the less they believed that coercion and punishment were used by their principals to influence the work of teachers. Moreover, these teachers believed in the expertise of the principal and that their principals were responsive and caring.

Schools where empowerment is advocated create opportunities for teachers to develop skills and encourage risk taking and new ideas (Short, 1994). Shared decision making has also been found as a key component to teacher empowerment (Rice & Schneider, 1994; Rinehart & Short, 1994; Rinehart, Short, Short, & Eckley, 1998). However, teacher shared decision making, while critical, will only be embraced if teachers feel their opinions will have an impact on organizational outcomes (Short, Greer, & Michael, 1991).

Trusting relationships, organizational structure, and communication are notable elements of teacher empowerment (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002; Short, Greer, & Michael, 1991). Hoy and Miskel (2008) reported that trust in a school is based on the interdependence of the relationships of the members of the organization.

This is particularly true of the relationship between the principal and the teachers. Hoy and Miskel stated,

When the faculty has a high level of trust toward the principal, the faculty also believes that the principal is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open in interactions with teachers. (p. 192)

The culture of trust in a school is the collective trust between all parties; that is, the administrators, the teachers, the parents, and the students. Hoy and Miskel also pointed out that “the evidence is mounting that trusting relations among teachers, parents, and students promote student achievement and improvement” (p. 194).

Distributed Leadership

Distinctions and Definitions

To understand the concept of distributed leadership, it is important to consider what it is not. Delegation of tasks or dividing responsibilities according to role is not distributed leadership (Timperly, 2005; Watson & Scribner, 2007). In their case study research of distributed leadership, Watson and Scribner found the schools that purport to practice distributed leadership actually delegate “responsibilities without passing on the accompanying authority traditionally invested in those who perform such duties” (p. 457). Harris (2005) referred to this as “misguided delegation” (p. 261).

Distributed leadership moves beyond the single charismatic leader who transforms an organization to the idea that leadership is “stretched over” many individuals in the organization. In such organizations,

the tasks of leadership are performed through the interaction of multiple individual leaders (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). The interactions of the organization's members are a key aspect of distributed leadership. Equally important are the contexts where these interactions occur (Harris, 2005; Spillane et al., 2001). Smylie and associates (2007) referred to this as leadership sharing, spreading, and distributing involving "multiple actors across multiple roles and multiple levels of school organization" (p. 475).

A linear, hierarchical model of leadership gives way to a model of leadership built on task expertise and the context of the problem at hand. Thus, distributed leadership focuses on the goals of the group, rather than the actions of one (Copland, 2003; Gronn, 1996). Sharing goals and a purpose requires a shift in thinking where leadership is concerned. This new thinking embraces a redistribution of power, allocating tasks to those who hold the greatest expertise (Copland, 2003). Halverson (2006) discussed two dimensions of the distribution of tasks, social distribution and situated distribution. Social distribution "describes how tasks are defined, shared, and co-constructed among actors in schools," while the situated distribution of tasks "describes how structures are configured to shape the practices of teaching and learning in schools" (p. 3). The way in which leaders use these dimensions to shape school structure does much to determine the success of the teaching and learning which takes place in the organization (Halverson).

Copland (2003) set forth preconditions that must exist in the organization if distributed leadership is to be successful. These include:

- The development of a culture within the school that embodies collaboration, trust, professional learning, and reciprocal accountability.
- Strong consensus regarding the important problems facing the organization.
- A need for rich expertise with approaches to improving teaching and learning among all those working in the school. (p. 379)

Research has pointed to the importance of trust in an organization practicing distributed leadership (Bennett et al., 2003; MacBeath, 2005; Smylie et al., 2007). Relationships built on trust can operate at the individual, interpersonal, whole school or community level (MacBeath). Organizational trust is the foundation for those elements necessary

for successful distributed leadership; that is, collaboration, communication, joint problem solving, and honest feedback (Smylie et al.).

The Middle School Concept

A discussion of the middle school concept as articulated in *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) and *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) provides a necessary lens for viewing the middle school in this study. The Carnegie Corporation of New York established the 1987 Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents to examine the conditions of young adolescents (youth ages 10 to 15 years old), which resulted in recommendations for the educational improvement of these youth and their development (Jackson & Davis). Recommendations from this task force centered on eight principles: (a) small learning communities, (b) a core of common knowledge, (c) an organizational structure for success, (d) teacher and principal responsibility for decision making, (e) expert teachers for this age group, (f) promotion of adolescent health, (g) alliance with families, and (h) partnerships between school and community (Jackson & Davis).

In practice, these recommendations took shape as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory groups, common planning time for teachers, and instruction emanating from a core curriculum. Jackson and Davis (2000) furthered these ideas through their discussion of alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as an emphasis on relationships for learning, shared decision making, the importance of professional development, and representative participation in school governance. National Middle School Association also identified these characteristics in *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003) and *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010)—position papers on middle school education.

Methodology

Yin (1994) cited the case study as a research strategy useful when the focus of the study is on "a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (p. 1). This study sought to investigate the phenomenon of distributed leadership through an examination of the relationships and practices of the members of one school within the context of that organization. This case study was part of a larger

study on leadership that took place in a southeastern U.S. state. The researchers contacted the school districts in counties surrounding the state’s flagship university with a request to nominate schools that exhibited leadership distributed across school personnel. Principals and teachers were interviewed regarding their perceptions of leadership, as practiced in their schools. Following school observations and interviews with 11 principals, 2 assistant principals and 49 teachers, one middle school, Autumn Lake Middle School (ALM)¹ emerged as an effective model of distributed leadership. Upon request, the school agreed to serve as a case study site.

To provide a rich thick description of Autumn Lake, additional data were gathered. These data included demographics, contextual observations, and statewide standardized test data. The researchers conducted interviews with the principal, the assistant principal, and nine teacher volunteers, approximately 25% of the total faculty (see Table 1). Contextual observations triangulated findings from the interviews. Interviews were analyzed using QDA Miner 3.0.3, a qualitative analysis software program. Transcribed verbatim interviews were independently coded by two researchers. After three iterations of coding, data analysis led the researchers to identify

three themes related to the ALM organization: (1) leadership practices, (2) climate of trust, and (3) positive relationship building. Each of these themes encompassed constructs practiced daily at ALM. This research documents the practices of this school and the perceptions of the principal and teachers regarding the organization in which they work. The researcher used member checks to ensure validity of findings. Following the documentation of findings, a model of distributed leadership for middle schools is presented.

Autumn Lake Middle School

School Context

Autumn Lake Middle School (ALM) is part of the Mountain Ridge School system, located within the city of Mountain Ridge. During the 2007–2008 school year, 507 students attended this fifth through eighth grade school. This population included Caucasian (74%); African American (20%); and Hispanic, Asian, or Pacific Islander (6%). Of these students, 42% were economically disadvantaged students, 1% of the students were English Language Learners, and 13% were students identified with disabilities. The staff included 35 licensed and highly qualified teachers, 10 paraprofessionals, one guidance counselor, and two administrators (Fox, 2007).

Table 1
Context of Respondents

Respondent	Gender	Position	Grade Level Taught	Years of Experience
Teacher				
1	Female	Social Studies	5th	22
2	Male	Physical Education	5th–8th	14
3	Female	English/Lang. Arts	6th	8
4	Male	Math	8th	24
5	Female	Math	7th	21
6	Female	Reading	5th	13
7	Male	Technology coordinator	5th–8th	9
8	Male	Special Education		
		Reading and Math	7th–8th	8
9	Female	Reading	8th	6
Administrator				
1	Male	Principal		36
2	Male	Assistant Principal		28

¹Autumn Lake Middle School and Mountain Ridge are pseudonyms, used to ensure confidentiality.

About 29% of students enrolled were from outside the school district and paid tuition to attend this public school, a phenomena associated with an “open district;” that is, willing to accept tuition paying, out-of-district students. Because schools in the Mountain Ridge School District have reached capacity in every grade, tuition student enrollment was halted to reduce overcrowding in the classrooms. For example, Autumn Lake Middle School was designed for 125 students per grade. In 2007, both the seventh and eighth grades enrolled 135 students per grade (Fox, 2007).

The original middle school was at one time a high school, which housed the African American population of the area. Built in the 1920s, this facility fell into disrepair. The current middle school was redesigned as a state-of-the-art facility in 2002 and built adjacent to the current high school. When the new school was completed, grades five through eight were moved together to become Autumn Lake Middle School (Fox, 2007).

While the facility is relatively new, history remains a significant part of the school culture. Murals in each hallway represent historical areas of the town of Mountain Ridge. The commons area of the school used trusses and bricks from an old community school, demonstrating the importance of preserving the past as a vital component of the future. The gymnasium honors a former legendary basketball coach at the high school, a coach known for modeling the ideal that character is more important than winning (Fox, 2007).

Student Outcome Data

In an effort to provide a holistic picture of Autumn Lake Middle School, additional contextual data are provided. Student outcomes provide a window into the results of organizational goals and objectives as well as a distal link from leadership to the classroom.² Table 2 summarized the 2007–2008 school year disciplinary data. Only suspension data were included in the table, because no students were expelled during this school year.

The value added gains for each subject area are found in Table 3. Value added data were measured by grade and by subject. These data were an indication of the school’s annual influence on a child’s academic achievement. Gains were calculated from the state’s criterion referenced test (CRT) and reported as a three-year average. State CRT gain reports were based on the CRT normal curve equivalent (NCE)

Table 2
Autumn Lake Middle School Disciplinary Data (2007–2008)

	# Suspensions	% Suspensions
Suspension by Ethnicity		
African American	7	7.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0
Hispanic	1	3.7
Native American	0	0.0
White	7	1.9
Suspension by Gender		
Female	4	1.7
Male	11	4.1
Suspension by All	15	3.0

from 1998. NCE percentiles were used to provide consistency between the value added report and the achievement report. The state assign letter grades based on the amount of mean gain calculated for students in each subject and grade for the three most recent years and for a three-year average gain. This letter grade was determined by the school’s student gains compared to the expected gains of students from across the state.

ALM achievement data are listed in Table 4. The achievement scores were based on a possible 99 points (99 indicating no questions missed on the comprehensive achievement test). Like the letter grade assigned to the value added scores, letter grades were also assigned to each school based on the school’s student academic achievement CRT scores compared to students from across the state. These letter grades, like the value added grades, stemmed from a range of scores determined by the state (J. L. Fox, personal communication, February 4, 2009).

The annual yearly progress of Autumn Lake Middle School’s subgroups is shown in Tables 5 and 6. Table 5 outlines the progress of students in math, while Table 6 delineates the progress of students in reading, language arts, and writing. Both tables provide the percentage of students in each subgroup scoring below proficient, proficient, and above proficient at

²All outcome data and accompanying explanations are retrieved from Tennessee Department of Education found at <http://www.tennessee.gov/education/> unless otherwise indicated.

Table 3
Autumn Lake Middle School Growth Data (Value Added)

Subject Tested	2007		2008	
	Status	Mean Gain*	Status	Mean Gain*
Math	A	4.3	A	3.7
Reading/Language	A	5.3	A	5.5
Social Studies	A	3.9	A	2.3
Science	A	5.2	A	3.5

*CRT 3-year average reported in state CRT NCE's basis 1998

Table 4
Autumn Lake Middle School State CRT Academic Achievement Data

Subject Tested	2006		2007		2008		2008 State	
	Score	Grade	Score	Grade	Score	Grade	Score	Grade
Math	62	A	64	A	66	A	58	A
Reading/Language	62	A	65	A	68	A	57	A
Social Studies	66	A	68	A	69	A	55	B
Science	64	A	66	A	67	A	56	B

ALM as well as the most recent percentage of below proficient, proficient, and above proficient at the state level. In addition, the current, two- and three-year average for the combined proficient and advanced scores are provided for ALM and for the state. These percentages allow for easy comparison of Autumn Lake Middle School students to students from across the state. Finally, the annual target percentage is given for the school and the state in both math and reading/language arts/writing.

The Middle School Concept as Practiced at ALM

Autumn Lake Middle School embraced many of the elements advocated by *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) and *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 2003, 2010). Teachers were members of at least two teams, the interdisciplinary grade level team, consisting of teachers at one grade level who instructed the same group of students, and the subject area team, consisting of all teachers at all grade levels who teach the same subject. Some teachers were also members of the leadership team, the cross-school group that met once a week with the principal. These teachers were elected by the teachers in their grade

level, were paid a stipend for their time, and rotated off the leadership team, only when they chose to do so. The goal of this group was information gathering and decision making. Decisions were made only after information was taken to the grade level teams, which sent their decision back to the leadership team through their representative. All decisions were made through consensus, with the principal's opinion carrying equal weight with the other members of the team. Representatives from grades, special activities, staff, and special education all participated. Decisions ranged from curriculum programs to budget to school policy.

Interdisciplinary teams were required to meet once a week during their common planning times. These teachers made their own schedules, with the lunch period the only item that could not be changed. Student progress and problems, home visits, and family conferences were part of these meetings, in addition to instructional planning. Frequent monitoring of state mandated testing data assisted the teachers in their instructional planning. Subject area teams met before or after school, as needed, for

Table 5
Autumn Lake Middle School Annual Yearly Progress Math Subgroups

Subgroup	Autumn Lake Middle School 2007							Autumn Lake Middle School 2008							State 2008						
	Target 95%	Target % Proficient & Advanced = 83%						Target 95%	Target % Proficient & Advanced = 89%						Target 95%	Target % Proficient & Advanced = 89%					
	% Tested	% Below Prof	% Prof	% Adv	% Prof & Adv	% Prof & Adv 2 yr Avg	% Prof & Adv 3 yr Avg	% Tested	% Below Prof	% Prof	% Adv	% Prof & Adv	% Prof & Adv 2 yr Avg	% Prof & Adv 3 yr Avg	% Tested	% Below Prof	% Prof	% Adv	% Prof & Adv	% Prof & Adv 2 yr Avg	% Prof & Adv 3 yr Avg
All Students	100	7	37	56	93	95	95	100	4	33.3	62.4	96	95	95	100	9	45.4	45.6	91	91	90
African American	99	17	49	34	83	89	88	99	11	46.7	42.4	89	86	89	100	16	57.7	26.1	84	83	82
Asian Pacific Islander	100	*	*	*	*	*	*	100	*	*	*	*	*	*	100	3	26.7	70.4	97	97	97
Hispanic	100	22	48	30	78	84	*	95	20	50	30	80	79	83	100	11	54	34.7	89	88	86
Native American	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	100	*	*	*	*	*	*	100	7	49.2	43.6	93	93	91
White	100	3	33	64	97	98	97	100	2	29	69.3	98	98	98	100	6	40.9	52.8	94	93	93
Econ Disadvantaged	100	14	48	38	86	91	88	99	9	47.5	43.2	91	89	91	100	14	55	31.4	86	86	84
Students with Disabilities	100	38	49	13	62	75	71	98	22	68.5	9.3	78	70	76	99	32	50.7	17.2	68	65	62
Limited English Proficient	100	34	53	13	68	*	*	91	30	70	0	70	68	*	100	18	58.4	23.9	82	80	78

Table 6
Autumn Lake Middle School Annual Yearly Progress Reading/Language Arts/Writing Subgroups

Subgroup	Autumn Lake Middle School 2007							Autumn Lake Middle School 2008							State 2008						
	Target 95%	Target % Proficient & Advanced = 83%						Target 95%	Target % Proficient & Advanced = 89%						Target 95%	Target % Proficient & Advanced = 89%					
	% Tested	% Below Prof	% Prof	% Adv	% Prof & Adv	% Prof & Adv 2 yr Avg	% Prof & Adv 3 yr Avg	% Tested	% Below Prof	% Prof	% Adv	% Prof & Adv	% Prof & Adv 2 yr Avg	% Prof & Adv 3 yr Avg	% Tested	% Below Prof	% Prof	% Adv	% Prof & Adv	% Prof & Adv 2 yr Avg	% Prof & Adv 3 yr Avg
All Students	100	4	36	60	96	96	96	100	3	32.1	65.1	97	97	96	100	8	46.1	45.9	92	91	90
African American	99	9	56	35	91	93	94	99	3	50.2	46.3	97	94	94	100	13	59.2	27.7	87	86	84
Asian Pacific Islander	100	*	*	*	*	*	*	100	*	*	*	*	*	*	100	4	31.3	64.5	96	96	95
Hispanic	100	27	38	35	73	80	*	95	24	42.9	32.7	76	75	78	100	15	52.5	32.8	85	84	82
Native American	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	100	*	*	*	*	*	*	100	8	46.7	44.8	92	92	91
White	100	1	31	68	99	99	98	100	1	26.7	71.9	99	99	99	100	6	41.3	52.9	94	94	93
Econ Disadvantaged	100	9	50	41	91	92	93	99	5	45.5	49.3	95	93	93	100	12	56.4	31.3	88	87	85
Students with Disabilities	100	16	72	12	84	86	87	98	16	68.7	15.7	84	84	85	99	26	57.3	16.6	74	72	69
Limited English Proficient	100	45	42	13	55	*	*	91	46	53.8	0	54	55	*	100	26	57.4	17	74	72	70

special topics concerns, such as the social studies fair or the annual poetry contest.

Each day began with the ALM television program broadcast from the school’s television studio, starring the principal. Announcements, birthdays, and a daily special message, story, joke, or song from the principal were part of the television program. Following the television program, students met daily

in an advisory group with their advising teacher or staff member. The groups were small, 8–10 students, and the content of advisory was left to the advisor.

Distributed Leadership Constructs at Autumn Lake Middle School

Data analysis revealed three elements that permeated and shaped the organization of Autumn Lake Middle

School and include leadership practice, trust, and relationships. For purposes of these findings, the leadership practices are ways of “organizing the organization.” How members own the management of the organization is the focus of the construct of organizational structure. Trust strengthens the construct of organizational culture. Where distributed leadership is a part of the culture, mutual trust is critical. Organizational affiliation is that construct based on positive relationships. Teachers, students, and parents who feel an affiliation to the school have a particular connection to the organization. Relationships are the foundation for this attachment.

Organizational Structure

The way in which ALM operates stems from the philosophy that teacher groups should make the decisions regarding the structure of their group; that is, teachers determine schedules, the order in which classes are taught, and negotiate their planning time with the other members of the group. Within that structure, the only standardized units of time across the school are lunch and specific school-wide activities, such as pep rallies and homeroom. The principal asks that the teachers set aside one hour once a day to meet together as a team, but the meeting time is arranged by the team. The principal explained his role in the structure of the organization as the central repository of information.

I do not set the schedule. They decide about their schedule. They make every decision about what they purchase for their team. They come back to me and discuss it with me. They meet together once a day. They have two planning times and one of those times has to be set aside to meet together to discuss children’s issues, whatever they need to discuss. All the decisions that govern what they do as a teacher ... they do what they need to do. (Admin 1)

The administrators relied on the expertise of the teachers, believing that these in closest proximity to the students have the most accurate understanding of their students’ needs and the best practices through which to meet these needs. Respondents perceived that the principal held expectations that quality teaching and learning would occur, that he would provide what was needed for this to occur, but had confidence in the teaching staff to deliver instruction. Teacher 6 articulated a typical response.

[The principal] has been extremely accommodating, and he's also been very flexible

and lets us have the independence that helps us to be creative and to enjoy our teaching as well. ... He gives us all the tools we need to be successful and the freedom to run our programs in a successful way without intervening too much, but he's there if we need him.

The practice of teacher self-governance also extends to discipline. While issues of serious disciplinary infractions are sent to the main office, each team handles less serious issues and the consequences of those issues. Moreover, the team also handles informing the parents about the infraction and decision(s) regarding that infraction. The group rather than the individual teacher carries out discipline.

We try to take care of any disciplinary measures within the grade itself unless it is of such [magnitude] that it needs to go to the principal or assistant principal and then we, you know, then we quickly send it there. But, we try to resolve the situation within each grade level. And, then inform the assistant principal and the principal what we have done. (Teacher 1)

The way in which ALM is structured bears largely on the feeling of teacher empowerment and trust, constructs that will be subsequently discussed. Those teachers interviewed believe that the organizational structure ultimately contributes to increased student achievement.

So it’s not a hierarchy type thing. I think that is the biggest, most important thing to understand. There’s just so much jealousy that can occur if you make it that this one person makes the decisions. ... And that’s where [the principal] is so good. He doesn’t make the decisions. ... The only thing that we are told—*told* to do is when you’ll have lunch and when you’ll have activities. And what we want to do in between, well, it goes back to us. Of course, our test scores have shown that we can do that. (Teacher 5)

In general, teachers believe that this mode of operation reflects the practices of the leadership, without whom the structure would fail.

Organizational Culture

All teachers interviewed were consistent in their belief that distributed leadership was successfully implemented in their organization. Shared goals and agreement of their greater purpose throughout the school community was at the heart of the work

of this school. Moreover, all teachers attributed the success of this leadership model to the practices of the principal. The ALM principal stated his leadership philosophy in terms of those with whom he works.

My philosophy is that I need to embrace, to put my arms around my faculty, for them to work as a team. Then the teachers need to embrace and put their arms around their students. As a result, that's working together. We go out into our community and our stakeholders and embrace them ... working together for a common goal. (Admin 1)

Interestingly, the respondents in this study articulated this same philosophy in somewhat similar terms. When asked about his goals for his students, Teacher 8 responded,

I feel like we are on the team and as team players we all want to achieve the same goal which is have the kids to be the individual and best student they can be and, by doing that, we're not only providing positives for the student, we're providing positives for the community. In return, it's a cycle that feeds right back into us because hopefully one day they'll be either sending kids here or providing opportunities for this school.

This response and others like it indicated that members of the ALM community felt a shared purpose for their work. All stakeholders in this organization were moving in the same direction.

The teachers perceived that a model of distribution worked well in their school because the principal was willing to relinquish power often reserved for the administration. When asked her opinion of how distributed leadership might work in other schools, one teacher observed,

You would have to have somebody who is willing to give up that power and empower the staff ... [our principal] is just, I think he is a strong leader without being a power monger. He does it through relationships. I think a good leader has to be able to let go of all the power. I think his philosophy is that if he takes care of the teachers and the teachers have a good relationship, then we'll take care of the kids. (Teacher 3)

The concept of power was reiterated by a teacher also asked about the key to successful distributed leadership. She stated,

I believe it is dependent upon the administration. Some administrators, I don't believe, are willing to give up a lot of the power that they have ... it's not about the power. It's about making each student feel they have the potential to do [what they are capable of]. A great strength of the administrator is that I can, right today, go in and say I think this needs to change and I'm asked why. It's not just, do it. I am quizzed so the understanding from my part is understood by administration. You know, in other systems, I could not have done what I've done here. (Teacher 1)

In addition to sharing power, teachers generally described their principal as fair and understanding. All teachers reported feeling supported by the administration, though this support was defined in different ways. Teacher 7 identified supports within the confines of the classroom by noting that "enough latitude to do your own thing" was given "as long as you understand the standards and are working toward them and helping the kids," support was given. Teacher 2 described the support in the more general terms of professional decision making.

[The principal] allows us to make decisions. Allows us to do what we need to do. He backs us 100%. You know, why would I go behind his back and do something without letting him know first? He'll listen to it first and give you his input on it, and then he'll let you go with it. Unless you're talking about doing something pretty crazy. He just takes care of us so well and backs us 100% all the time.

An organization where power is shared, where decisions are jointly made, and where teachers lead alongside the principal, can only occur within a climate of trust. Smylie and associates (2007) emphasized the importance of trust from a distributed leadership perspective when they found that the level of trust in an organization was related to how distributed leadership was perceived and how well it was accepted.

Teachers at ALM trusted that they would be "taken care of" by the principal. They believed that their voices were heard and that their opinions were valued by the administration. Teacher 7 spoke of the trust that the principal puts in the teachers in terms of "opportunity to teach"; that is, trust that the teachers will provide the instruction needed by the students,

trust that the teachers will act in a professional manner without the administration informing them how they should teach and act. The principal trusts that “the decisions that we make are all based on the best thing for the school,” which forms a connection to the organization, because “when you have a part of anything, you have a buy in and you feel that you have helped to make whatever it is be that way.” (Teacher 1)

The teachers who participated in the interviews generally agreed that their school was not a perfect place. However, because of the level of trust that existed, when disagreements arose or problems surfaced, they didn’t “have a fearful feeling of things” because there was such “a strong sense of ownership in what we do and pride in what we do ... so, for the most part, we work together and support each other.” (Teacher 2)

From his perspective, the principal stated that trust in the organization eases any concerns he might have about the students. He explained,

I’m not one of those principals who says that the children are the most important thing to me. I don’t have to say that because they are the most important thing to my teachers. I trust that [the students] are taken care of. I feel secure about that. The kids know that I am there for them. But I don’t have to worry about them being taken care of or them not getting what they need, because I am sure that is happening in the classroom. But I have to take care of my teachers.

This reciprocal relationship of trust and professionalism permeates the ALM organization. While agreeing that many of their students needed extra care, both academically and socially, as well as admitting that many parents of these same students faced daily challenging circumstances, teachers expressed satisfaction in their work. When asked to characterize their work environment, responses included “we like to be here,” “great place to work,” “awesome place,” and “in other systems, I could not have done what I’ve done here.” Teacher 5 summarized the connection between the organization, the leadership, the teachers, and the children.

We spend a great deal of time together. Our grade level teams spend a great deal of time together. [The principal] gives us things on our birthdays. At faculty meetings, he’s playing games with us. We laugh a lot. He’s a good person to make us feel good. In turn, when we

feel good, we’re going to go back to our teams feeling good. Then that trickles down to the kids. When you have a group of happy people, you sure are going to treat those kids different.

Organizational Affiliation

The heart of distributed leadership practice at ALM rests in the relationships that are built throughout the school community. The teachers at ALM perceive that they are cared for; in turn, they make caring for the students a priority. As Teacher 4 explained,

[The principal] cares about the teachers and then expects the teachers to take care of the kids. A leader that builds relationships, who truly cares about his teachers that makes the workplace fun, and you want to be there.

Teacher 4 further explained that the unwritten philosophy that permeates the school is that rules will be followed if relationships come first. This teacher shared that there is discussion among teachers at other schools that ALM is different from most schools.

You hear a lot of times about the difference between our school and other schools ... those principals have come into those schools and said, ‘I’m the boss. Do what I say or you’re out of here. And we’re going to improve test scores.’ And they do it by threats. I think our success is that we haven’t done it by threats. We don’t threaten people. It’s done by relationships. ... If I just come in and throw out a bunch of rules, they’re going to rebel. Teachers are going to rebel against the leader. Students are going to rebel against the teachers. But if I come in and build that relationship and show I care, they’re going to follow because they have that relationship. They’re going to want to succeed because of that relationship. I’d say that’s the key to leadership and teaching and effectiveness.

The principal further explained,

If you don’t have a good relationship with somebody, you’re not going to get the best out of them. You’re not going to get the best out of a middle school kid. If a middle school kid doesn’t like the teacher they’re working with, which I stress daily, they won’t work. They’ve got to feel good about who they are working with. If somebody doesn’t build me up, I’m not going to do my best. So, it’s about relationships.

The importance of relationships is a cornerstone of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2005). Within the social context of the organization and the connections of the participants, the construction of knowledge and the demonstration of leadership occur. Positive relationship building is a result of social interactions and mutual influence. As participants build these relationships, they naturally feel empowered to make decisions and step up to leadership roles.

The teachers at ALM reported that the principal holds high expectations for them. Several teachers noted that they are “responsible” for decisions, for student achievement, for classroom management, and for meeting the state standards in their discipline. However, the teachers reported that with that responsibility comes empowerment. Overwhelmingly, teachers at Autumn Lake repeated that they were empowered to make decisions that they believed were in the best interest of the child.

While teachers perceived that they were allowed to make decisions, most believed that these decisions were not made in isolation, referring to the process for decision making as a group effort. Moreover, teachers believed that their input was not only sought out but also valued by the school leadership. The organizational structure of the school, combined with the leadership philosophy of the principal, gave teachers permission to lead.

What happens in this school is that [the principal] puts it to the teachers to be in control of management. We develop our own schedule. We handle our own discipline. We make school wide decisions. If there is an amount of money to spend, we are brought in to the decision. (Teacher 4)

This method of operating the school organization instills a confidence in the teachers. In addition, teachers begin to feel ownership in the success or failure of that organization. One teacher noted that the process of empowerment was a circular one that ultimately benefitted the school as a whole.

The principal has basically given the teachers the responsibility of ‘what works well for you and the students.’ If the students are happy, basically, the teachers are happy. So it filters down from top to bottom. The principal, basically says to us, ‘do what’s best. Keep the students happy.’ And he does what’s best to make sure that we are happy and informed. (Teacher 1)

The sense of empowerment at ALM goes beyond decision making. Teachers feel a sense of ownership in the school’s success. This ownership then extends to “pitching in” when tasks need to be completed. In the midst of preparing a self-assessment for an impending accreditation visit, one teacher provided an example of confidence in taking a leadership role.

Just this morning I finished a thing for our [accreditation visit], because we have to update it often. I’m not even the chair of that committee at all, but something needed to be done. So I grabbed it, took it, and got it done. It needed to be done. I have a little more time than the others, so why not? (Teacher 2)

Teachers and administrators extended the idea of taking ownership for success to include all stakeholders. Respondents in this study realized that reaching out to parents and community was an integral part of improving their school. The assistant principal explained this way of thinking when asked what made the teachers at ALM effective.

Number one I think you have to like kids and you have to have their interest at heart. You have to be a caring individual and realize that they all come from different backgrounds, different socioeconomic levels, and you’ve got to be able to reach outside of school into the community to let the community know that you care. ... We require the teachers to do at least two home visits a year. They have to make positive phone calls every week. That helps to have a rapport with people in the community.

The desire and ability to work in this way is an organizational ethos established by the principal. Teacher 2 explains that the feeling of empowerment embraced by the faculty and staff is due to teachers

Having a leader who is very understanding, very supportive of the staff, and who allows you to make decisions, right or wrong. He is able to come back and help you if you make a wrong decision. Someone who is open, very willing to talk [about decisions made], and will let you do what you gotta do.

Teachers repeatedly responded that they felt empowered, because they were allowed to take risks. Teachers were confident in trying new instructional methods or organizing work groups because they knew if the method or work group did not succeed,

the principal would be open to processing the outcomes both to learn from the experience and to discuss options for the future. This feeling of safety was both a comfort and a motivator as teachers searched for ways to improve student achievement.

Conclusion

Interviews with the two administrators at ALM and with approximately 25% of the faculty provided a portrait of a middle school organization where leadership was successfully shared. Leadership practices supported the structure of the organization, for example, the manner in which schedules were constructed and planning times occurred. Middle school specific structures such as team meetings and student advisory were a part of this construct. A critical element of leadership practices as support for the organization was the deference to the expertise of the teacher in knowing what was in the best interest of the child. ALM was an organization built on trust. Mutual trust between the administration, the faculty, the students, the parents, and the community strengthened the organizational culture. The shared goals of increasing student achievement were viewed as not only the purpose of the organization but the responsibility of its members. Finally, strong positive

relationships were the foundation for organizational affiliation. Relationships reinforced the collegial atmosphere. Teachers felt empowered to lead, to improve, and to make a difference in the lives of the students and each other. This, in turn, increased their confidence and satisfaction in their work.

Based on these findings a model for distributed leadership was constructed. This model provides a graphic representation of the three elements that are necessary pre-conditions to distributed leadership; the constructs in the organization, which emanate from the pre-conditions; and the organizational outcomes that result.

A Model of Distributed Leadership in a Middle School

This research focused on one middle school in a southeastern state; therefore, broad generalizations should be approached with caution. However, an examination of this school can provide guidance to other middle schools as distributed leadership is considered. A visual model of distributed leadership as it might work at the middle school level is helpful in looking at the broader aspects of the organization (see Figure 1).

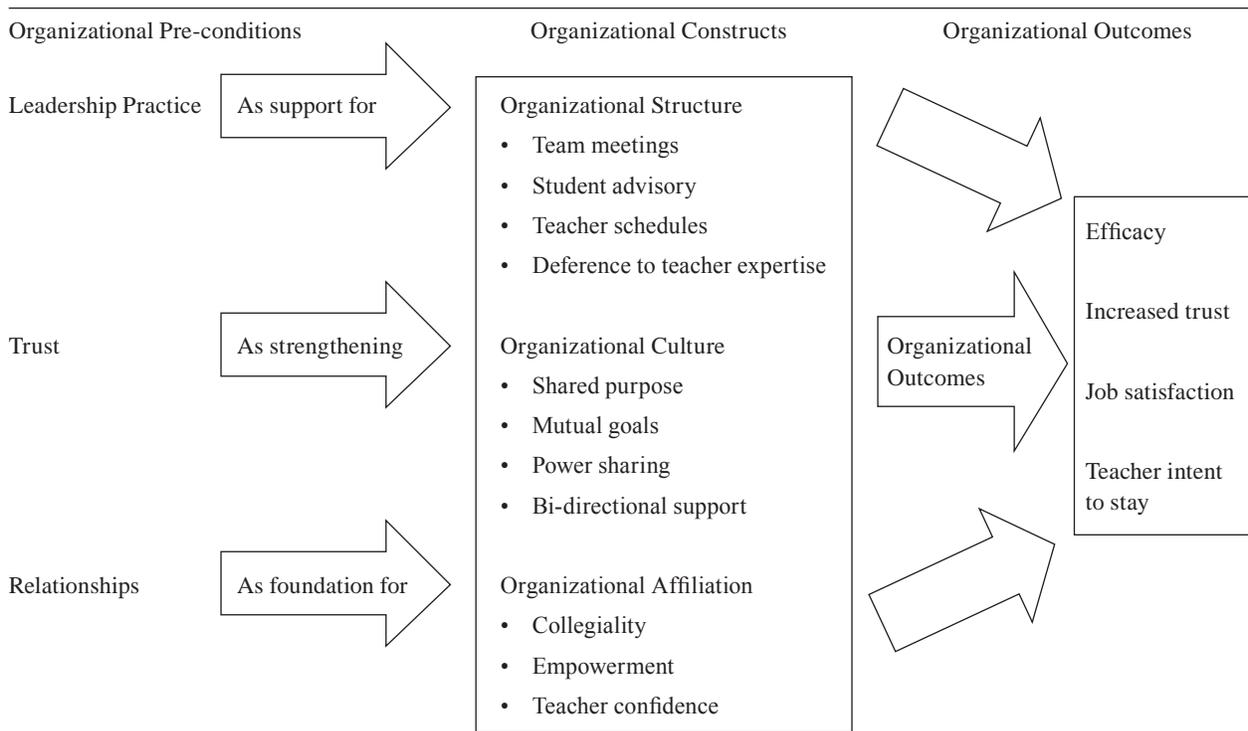


Figure 1. A Model of Distributed Leadership for Middle Schools

While Copland's (2003) research noted three pre-conditions for distributed leadership, including a collaborative culture, a consensus about the organization's problems, and expertise regarding teaching and learning, this research also found pre-conditions were necessary. The perspective of pre-conditions in this study emanated from a somewhat broader view point. The conditions found at ALM that were the basis for successful distributed leadership included:

- Leadership practices, which supported the organizational structure.
- An atmosphere of trust which strengthened the organizational culture.
- Positive relationships, which were a foundation for organizational affiliation.

Leadership practices at ALM deferred to the expertise of those closest to the students. When decisions were made regarding teacher schedules, the time of team meetings, content of advisory, the administration deferred to the teachers. Their expertise regarding teaching and learning, based on the needs of the students, became the priority, rather than the expertise deferred to the role and title of the principal. The school actually ran on several schedules, each set by the teachers in the grade levels. The principal, at the organizational level, only mandated the time of lunch, around which each grade level team worked the schedule that best met the needs of the students. In addition, the teachers negotiated alterations to this schedule based on evolving needs of instruction, individually or as a whole. If a science teacher needed extra time for a lab experiment, time might be negotiated with the social studies teacher to "repay" the time on another day.

This method of structuring the organization was possible because of the level of trust that existed within the organizational culture. The goals and objectives of ALM were clear. The administrators and teachers embraced a shared purpose—to center their daily practice on the children within their care. All stakeholders in the organization worked to improve the academic achievement of the students at ALM. At times, this work took place within the classroom. At other times, meeting the needs of the children took place within the community, through either home visits or embracing community partners to solicit support for the work at ALM.

This like-mindedness was possible because of the relationships that had been built at ALM. The

principal stated that if he took care of the teachers, the teachers would take care of the students. There was mutual support for each other in an atmosphere in which informed risks were taken, then celebrated, if successful, or dissected, if not successful. Working in a organization in which teachers were encouraged to be creative, collaboration was expected, and challenges were shared promoted a sense of self-confidence in teachers. Respondents interviewed for this study were confident in their abilities to find ways to meet the needs of every child in the school, perhaps not easily or immediately, but they were certain in their beliefs that it was possible.

These findings suggest a model in which necessary pre-conditions for successful distributed leadership include a strong collaborative leader who practices shared decision making; a culture where trust permeates the organization; and continuous building of strong, positive relationships. These pre-conditions work through the organizational structure, culture, and affiliation to provide a system in which distributed leadership can flourish. Outcomes from this organization are a greater sense of teacher efficacy in their abilities to meet the needs of students, an increased level of trust among all stakeholders, and greater job satisfaction for teachers and administrators. This, in turn, leads to a loyalty to the organization, one in which all members feels ownership, thus increasing the teacher's intent to stay in the organization.

This model of distributed leadership is framed within the middle school concept. As part of the emphasis on collegiality and a climate of trust and strong relationships, the members of the organization negotiate meanings and understandings. These members become empowered through their social participation in the organization. Members report assisting each other when help is needed whether or not they are officially designated in the role. Team meetings, leadership meetings, and advisory are all vehicles for social participation where members of the organization gain knowledge and are empowered through their interaction with each other. Beyond meetings, respondents indicated that their social participation extends beyond the classroom to social gatherings where the members are congenial and comfortable with their colleagues on a more informal basis. In an organization such as this, leadership trust in the members and strong relationships with them begets more leaders. This culture of trust and relationships emanates from the interactions of the members.

The members also learn through communicating with other members and through participation in activities with the organization's members. The shared goals and purposes of the organization enhance this communication, thus strengthening the affiliation of the members to the organization. Power sharing and the leadership practices of the courageous collaborative leader (National Middle School Association, 2003, 2010) enable the organizational outcomes of increased trust, teacher self-efficacy, and intent to stay in the organization.

Discussion

Harris (2005) noted that leadership “resides in the human potential available to be released in an organization” (p. 256). Those placed in positions of leadership require three elements for success: the desire to lead others, the skills necessary to lead others, and the opportunity to be in a position to lead. By affording a wide span of possibilities for leadership at Autumn Lake Middle School, the principal afforded those who might not be deemed leaders in other school settings the opportunity to develop leadership skills. Working in the ALM culture, where leaders are nurtured, enhanced the desire to lead, giving rise to an organizational structure committed to valuing the expertise of the individual, rather than an assigned and formal title. Moreover, empowering teachers with the opportunity to lead increases self-efficacy and promotes a greater desire to serve the organization.

Developing leadership through providing opportunities, developing skills, and enhancing the desire to lead also engenders a joint responsibility for the purpose of the organization. ALM personnel who participated in this study shared common goals of student achievement and school excellence. An observed corollary to the commitment to the shared goals was a fierce loyalty to the organization. Moreover, all of these elements solidified a fidelity to the culture and structure of the school, which will likely sustain should the school leader leave the organization.

The work of others (Spillane, 2004; Timperley, 2005) examined how leadership is distributed; this case focuses on resulting implications for organization. Findings from this study bring to light those organizational elements necessary for distributed leadership to work successfully. In addition, this research also draws attention to those organizational outcomes likely found in schools that follow distributed leadership.

This We Believe (National Middle School Association, 2003, 2010) focuses on trust and relationships between high-quality teachers and adolescents. Successful schools are organized so that teams of teachers and small learning communities can foster such relationships. However, seminal middle school literature such as *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) and the *National Forum Vision Statement* (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2003) fail to address a critical part of these relationships and the element of trust; that is, the relationship between the school leader and the teachers. This research, as manifested in the model, notes that trust and collegiality at the principal or teacher level is equally important.

A final discussion focuses on student outcomes in a school where distributed leadership is practiced. Organizational outcomes as a result of distributed leadership found in this case study include teacher efficacy, trust, job satisfaction, and teacher intent to stay. Previous research has linked these constructs to increased student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Goddard, 2001; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Leithwood & McAdie, 2007; Seghers, Kirby, & Meza, 1997; Shann, 1998; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

While a direct link from distributed leadership to increased student achievement cannot be made, findings from this study allow a distal link to be made with confidence. Test scores at ALM indicate that students are achieving from year to year, including achievement of all subgroups, as indicated by the AYP scores reported in Tables 5 and 6. Therefore, while a definite case cannot be made that distributed leadership leads to increased student achievement, the findings from this study warrant future research to study the possibility of this link further.

The model for distributed leadership outlined here should be further tested to determine its applicability to other middle schools as well as elementary and secondary schools. Replication of the model at all levels should be tested to inform middle schools about the usefulness in light of school improvement models and fidelity to the middle school concept. The empirical evidence of the success of distributed leadership at Autumn Lake Middle School will serve to expand our discussions of the art of leadership as a collective effort.

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