Research Brief

**Shared Leadership and
Student Achievement**

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Introduction

The purposes of this literature review are to describe ways of thinking about sharing school leadership and to examine the possible link between shared leadership and student achievement. It is hoped that this information will be helpful to schools engaged in improvement efforts.

While bureaucratic and scientific management theories—top-down views of school leadership—dominated the education landscape during most of the 20th century, many now believe that the days of the principal as the lone leader of the school are over (Hart, 1995; Lambert, 2002). Standards-based reform efforts that emphasize instructional improvements and student achievement as the measures of leadership success created an impetus for change in the way schools are led (Elmore, 2000). Because the typical principal's working day is consumed by managerial tasks having little or no direct bearing on the improvement of instruction, a single administrator cannot fill all of the leadership roles in a school without substantial participation by other educators (Elmore, 2000; Olson, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

This review examines four different approaches to school leadership that involve more than a single individual. These four were selected because they were most widely represented in the writings on leadership:

School-Based Management (SBM)

This approach decentralizes decision-making authority from the central office to the local schools, giving more control over what happens in schools to a wide array of school constituents—administrators, teachers, parents, and other community members (Wohlstetter, Mohrman, & Robertson, 1997). Though delimited by state standards and accountability measures, SBM teams are able to make many decisions that affect the everyday life of the school's instructional program. Further, shared instructional leadership is a primary goal of

SBM, which involves the active collaboration of administrators and teachers around curricular, pedagogical, and assessment issues (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Teacher Leadership

A new understanding of teacher leadership emerged with the advent of school restructuring, school change, and professional and collaborative school cultures. Devaney (1987) provides a list of six ways in which teachers might provide leadership. This list appears to capture the variety of teacher leadership functions that are described in more recent literature as well. The list, which follows, was synthesized from a comprehensive review of the literature on formal programs for developing teacher leadership skills.

- Continuing to teach and to improve individual teaching proficiency and skill
- Organizing and leading peer review of teaching practices
- Providing curriculum development knowledge
- Participating in school-level decision making
- Leading in-service training and staff development activities
- Engaging other teachers in collaborative action planning, reflection, and research

The variety of roles and the lack of clarity of the meaning of teacher leadership, as well as the variability of functions and their performance, add a layer of difficulty to aggregating and interpreting the research on teacher leadership (Smylie, 1997).

Distributed Leadership

The concept of *distributed leadership* refers to a model that distributes leadership responsibilities andactivities widely across multiple roles and participants (Hart, 1995; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Gronn, 2000; Spillane et al., 2001; Wallace, 2002). Through the process of distributed leadership, multiple school members exercise instructional leadership in order to effect instructional improvement (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003). . Leadership is distributed not by delegating it or giving it away but by weaving together people, materials, and organizational structures in a common cause (Spillane et al., 2001).

Shared Leadership Within Professional Learning Communities

The term *shared leadership* is closely linked to the concept of professional learning communities in educational literature. The key notion is that leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively (Lambert, 2002). According to Lambert (2003), shared leadership is based on the following assumptions:

- Everyone has the right, responsibility, and ability to be a leader.
- How leadership is defined influences how people will participate.
- Educators yearn to be more fully who they are—purposeful, professional human beings.
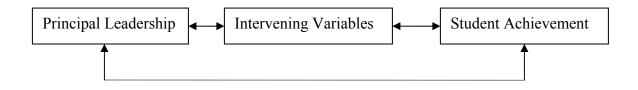- Leadership is an essential aspect of an educator's professional life. (pp. 38-39)

Being responsible for the learning of colleagues is at the center of shared leadership (Lambert, 2003). Further, asserts Lambert, by understanding that learning and leading are firmly linked within the school community, principals can take the first step in building shared instructional leadership capacity within their organizations.

The Link Between School Leadership and Student Achievement

Pitner (1988) offers a theoretical model and the understanding of the possible link between school leadership and student achievement. Called the *reciprocal-effects model* (Figure 1), it reflects the reciprocal nature of the interaction of leadership, intervening variables, and student achievement, and suggests various interactions through which principals might exhibit leadership behavior in schools over time. Any subsequent changes in the condition of the school would produce feedback that will, in turn, impact the principal's future leadership actions.

Figure 1. Modeling school leadership effects on student achievement

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Reciprocal Effects Model

Source: Pitner, 1988, pp. 105-108

The reciprocal-effects model assumes that some or all of the relationship between administrators and student achievement occurs through interaction with features of the school organization (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). This is consistent with the notion that principal behaviors are ultimately related to student performance through their interactions with other people, most notably teachers. Theoretically, the principal is both a dependent and independent variable (Pitner, 1988). As a dependent variable, administrative behavior is subject to the influence of other variables within the school, such as teachers, students, organizational culture, and parents. As an independent variable, the principal influences the actions of teachers, the school, and student achievement (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1990).

School-Based Management and Student Achievement

In an extensive syntheses of 83 empirical studies examining the relationship between SBM and student performance, Leithwood and Menzies (1998) concluded that "there is virtually no rigorous, scientifically based research about the direct or indirect effects of SBM on students . . . the little research-based evidence that does exist suggests that the effects on students are just as likely to be negative as positive" (p. 34). Similarly, Fullan's (1993) analysis

of empirical studies found that "school-based management, in its present form, does not impact teaching and learning" (p. 454).

Smylie and Hart (1999) found substantial support for the conclusion that teacher participation in shared decision making is related positively to instructional improvement and to student academic achievement when they conducted a study of teacher involvement in decision making, instructional improvement, and student learning over a 5-year period. These findings are supported by other investigations of successful involvement of teachers in decision making (White, 1992; Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994). As the findings from new longitudinal studies become available, a more comprehensive understanding of the efficacy of involvement of teachers in decision making may emerge (Smylie & Hart, 1999).

Teacher Leadership and Student Achievement

As with SBM, the picture is mixed. A study by Marks and Louis (1997) that examined the relationships among teacher empowerment, instructional practice, and student academic performance indicated that teacher leadership is associated with pedagogical quality and student academic performance indirectly, through enhancements to the school's organization for instruction. According to the authors, school organization for instruction begins with professional community.

A relationship between teacher leadership and a variety of school-related outcomes was reported in Smylie's 1997 review of 208 international studies, which examined the state of the art in teacher leadership. According to Smylie, relatively few of the studies specifically targeted the outcome of student learning. Of those studies, approximately half (Bryk, Deabster, & Tum, 1994; Jenkins, Ronk, Schrag, Rude, & Stowitschek, 1994; Lee & Smith, 1994; Sebring et al., 1995; Taylor & Bogotch, 1994), including both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses, found no evidence that teacher leadership is related to student achievement on standardized tests or to teachers' reports of student academic performance. The other half (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988; Ramey & Dornseif, 1994; Smylie & Hart, 1999) found positive relationships to academic achievement. In addition, Taylor and Bogotch (1994)

reported a positive relationship between teacher leadership and student attendance. Smylie and Hart (1999) found positive relationships between participation and teachers' reports of increases in students' responsibility and enthusiasm for learning, and problem-solving skills.

Smylie (1997) acknowledges that there are many flaws in the teacher leadership literature. For example, he points out that the research varies widely in design, methodology, and context. Further, it is mostly descriptive, lacking strong conceptual definitions; is not guided by formal theory; and is plagued by serious problems with regard to validity and reliability. Smylie also notes that these general shortcomings come into pronounced focus in the research on student learning outcomes. Further, the research on student learning outcomes of teacher leadership has been conducted within a relatively short period of time after the establishment of new leadership roles, perhaps too short a period to reasonably expect these outcomes to occur. Unfortunately, most studies rely on perceptual measures of change, and few examine closely the manner in which teacher leadership is exercised (Smylie, 1997). On a positive note, however, Smylie finds that "the most well-designed studies—those that examine longer periods of implementation, rely on more objective data, employ multiple measures, and take role performance variation into account—tend to reveal the most positive outcomes" (1997, p. 576).

Distributed Leadership and Student Achievement

A 2003 survey of the distributed leadership literature conducted by the National College for School Leadership concluded: "The relationship between shared leadership and learning is a crucially important issue, but there are no empirical data at all on this" (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003, p. 12). The following year, however, Leithwood and colleagues (2004) published a review of the literature on how leadership influences student learning and concluded that there is an association between increased student learning and leaders who develop and rely on leadership contributions from a diverse constituent base within their organizations.

Leithwood and Jantzi (1998) conducted one of the few correlational studies of distributed leadership. Nearly 3,000 teachers and 10,000 students in 110 schools in a large district were asked about their perceptions of the effects of various school leaders on student engagement in school. The primary finding is that neither principal nor teacher leadership were perceived as having important effects on student engagement. Leithwood and Jantzi concluded that leadership distributed to teachers is perceived to have greater direct effect on students than does that of the principal because teachers are directly involved with the students. This result is consistent with Ogawa and Hart's (1985) finding that principal leadership explained 2-8% of the variation in student performance. The perceived effect of distributed leadership is small compared to other school and environmental factors, but the findings provide support for continued distribution of leadership functions beyond the principal.

Shared Leadership and Student Achievement

To date, quantitative studies linking shared leadership to student learning are virtually nonexistent (Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). A search through the peer-reviewed, scholarly journals and the ERIC database reveals only a handful of articles that list shared leadership in their title or descriptors. Those that do are very much what Smylie would term "mostly descriptive, lacking strong conceptual definitions and overreliance on perceptual data" (Smylie, 1997, p. 574). As such, the quantitatively verifiable merits of shared leadership remain to be seen. While at present there is scholarship on the topics of school-based decision making, teacher leadership, and distributed leadership, the emergence of professional learning communities, and the shared leadership model inherent within them, is much more recent.

Marks and Printy (2003) emphasized the importance of shared leadership in eliciting the instructional leadership of teachers for improving student performance. This shared leadership approach may help galvanize a school around ambitious academic goals and establish conditions that support teachers and facilitate student success (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Togneri and Anderson assert that principals who share leadership responsibilities with others will be less subject to burnout than principals who attempt the challenges and complexities of leadership alone. Further, principal leadership that elicits high levels of commitment and

professionalism from teachers, and works interactively with the school staff to share instructional leadership capacity, is associated with school organizations that learn and perform at high levels (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Summary

This review closely examined four approaches to involving teachers in school leadership. The terminology used by various researchers obfuscates the extent to which the concepts overlap one another. Each approach incorporates multiple constructs related to leadership, and there is overlap in the constructs used to define each approach. Researchers are urged to increase the specificity with which they study leadership in order to bring clarity to our understanding.

The performance expectations and accountability measures built into the No Child Left Behind Act are driving the need for a more systematic understanding of the ways that leadership may impact student achievement. Many studies have found an association between principal leadership behaviors and student academic performance (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Mazzeo, 2003; Waters, 2003). For example, Waters (2003) examined 70 leadership studies and identified 21 leadership behaviors that are most strongly correlated with improved student achievement. The behaviors, whether demonstrated individually or collectively in a school, need to be tested using rigorous research methods to determine their effect on student achievement. Further, such studies need to examine the effect of leadership in different contexts such as in urban schools or low-performing schools (Harris, 2004).

While a substantial amount of qualitative research exists on the subject of sharing leadership (see Conley, 1991; Murphy & Beck, 1995), only a small number of studies examine the instructional benefits, and the findings of those studies yield ambiguous results (Smylie, 1997). Some studies show a positive relationship between shared decision making and student achievement (Ramey & Dornseif, 1994), but others find no relationship (Bryk et al., 1994; Taylor & Bogotch, 1994). The lack of consistent and conclusive evidence about the

instructional outcomes of sharing school leadership may be explained by the level of implementation—even the best-designed structures are not likely to achieve their intended outcomes if they are not put in place, implemented well over a substantial period of time, or provided adequate resources (Smylie, 1997). Another possible explanation suggests that the ambiguous evidence on instructional outcomes may be explained by weaknesses in the studies themselves (Smylie & Hart, 1999). For example, scholarly reviews consistently point out that the SBM literature consists primarily of position statements, project descriptions, and status reports (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Murphy & Beck, 1995). In addition, only a small proportion of studies consist of systematic investigations with identifiable questions for inquiry, specified methodologies, and collection and analysis of original data; and most shared school leadership literature is descriptive, suffering from an over reliance on anecdotes, perceptual data, and post-hoc measures (Smylie, 1997). The next phase of research on sharing school leadership should move beyond description and focus more on explanation, and incorporate longitudinal studies that capture change over time.

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