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Making Sense of Distributed Leadership: How Secondary School Educators Look at Job Redesign

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Abstract

This paper examines how teachers and administrators who were involved in a multi-year effort to engage in distributed leadership interpreted their experiences. We lay out and apply an argument for using an interpretive perspective to study distributed leadership. Collective sensemaking around distributed leadership is illustrated by an in-depth analysis of a single high school. The school was part of a larger study of six schools, and was selected to illustrate sensemaking over time in a large, complex school. There were three years of on-site interviews, observations and document analysis. We found that distributed leadership is a potential "disruption" to traditional patterns of leadership, work performance and influence in high schools. One-quarter of the school's faculty engaged with the "disruption" but all had a chance to process the change. The end result was that many became sense-givers and kept the momentum for teacher leadership going during significant personnel turnover among faculty and administration. The success of the efforts to create more broadly distributed leadership was facilitated by its integration into an existing improvement initiative.

Keywords: Distributed leadership, collective sensemaking, job redesign

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Dar Sentido al Liderazgo Distribuido: Cómo Afrontan los Profesores de Secundaria el Rediseño de su Lugar de Trabajo

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza cómo interpretan sus experiencias profesores y administradores que participaron en un proyecto de varios años para lograr un liderazgo distribuido. Se defiende el uso de una perspectiva interpretativa para estudiar el liderazgo distribuido. La creación de sentido colectivo en torno al liderazgo distribuido se ilustra con un exhaustivo análisis de una escuela secundaria. Dicha escuela forma parte de un estudio de seis escuelas y se selecciona para mostrar la creación de sentido a través del tiempo en una escuela grande y compleja. Se realizaron entrevistas in-situ, observaciones y análisis de documentos durante tres años. Se descubre que el liderazgo distribuido puede suponer una "alteración" de los patrones tradicionales de liderazgo, desempeño profesional e influencia en las escuelas secundarias. Una cuarta parte del profesorado de la escuela se involucra en la "alteración" pero todos tienen la oportunidad de procesar el cambio. El resultado final muestra que muchos siguen dando significado y apoyando el liderazgo del profesorado durante un proceso importante de rotación de personal y en la dirección. El éxito de los esfuerzos para crear un liderazgo cada vez más distribuido se ve facilitado por la inserción dentro de una iniciativa de mejora ya existente.

Keywords: Liderazgo distribuido, creación de sentido colectivo, rediseño profesional

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This paper examines how teachers and administrators who are involved in a multi-year effort to engage in distributed or shared leadership interpret their experiences. We start by laying out an argument for using a sensemaking or interpretive perspective to study distributed leadership. We then apply our framework to describe a school that deliberately chose to change leadership patterns. Our analysis focuses on distributed leadership as a potential "disruption" to traditional patterns of leadership work performance and influence.

Distributed Leadership: A Job Redesign Perspective

Of all the big ideas now on the landscape of educational leadership, few are more prominent than "distributed leadership." Over a few short years, distributed leadership has evolved from a theoretical consideration of a naturally occurring social influence processes in school organization (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001) to a mantra for reshaping leadership practice. Today, policy makers at all levels of government advocate for distributed leadership and more and more schools and school systems are attempting to develop it.

With the rapidity of its spread, the term "distributed leadership" has earned an elastic quality, meaning different things to different people. Our definition of distributed leadership is grounded in both our experiences studying how six secondary schools utilized funds earmarked specifically for distributed leadership development and from the literature. To define leadership, we follow Firestone and his colleagues' work describing leadership as a set of functions rather than a property embedded in a particular role (Firestone, 1989; Heller & Firestone, 1995; Mayrowetz & Weinstein, 1999). To define distributed, we rely on Spillane, Scribner and their respective colleagues who view distributed leadership as leadership activity spread over leaders, followers, and a school's context (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). In short, we see

distributed leadership as the sharing and spreading of leadership functions across individuals and roles throughout the school organization. In order to accomplish this, often the work of teachers and of administrators must be redesigned or redefined (Mayrowetz, Murphy, Louis & Smylie, 2007).

As part of the re-organization of leadership work, distributed leadership calls on teachers to conceive of their roles differently and to assume different responsibilities, mostly beyond the classroom and often for purposes of school-level improvement. As teachers' work becomes redefined so too does administrators' work, not only with regard to distributing particular leadership functions but also supporting redefined teacher work and creating conditions conducive to its success (Murphy, 2005).

Elaborating Hackman and Oldham's (1980) job characteristics model (JCM) which hypothesized a relationship between job redesign and more effective work performance, we have created our own conceptual map of how distributed leadership might improve schools (Mayroweth et al., 2007). We believe that our adaptation of the JCM reflects distributed leadership development in the following ways. First, the design assumptions in any deliberate efforts to initiate distributed leadership will affect whether people who are take on new work will see meaning in it, take responsibility for it, and understand its consequences. Second, meaningfulness, responsibility, and knowledge concerning the work of organizing and leading schools are likely, based on our model, to relate to learning, sense-making, and motivation, which also shapes the way in which leadership work is carried out. Finally, how distributed leadership work is performed will relate to outcomes achieved (See Figure 1).

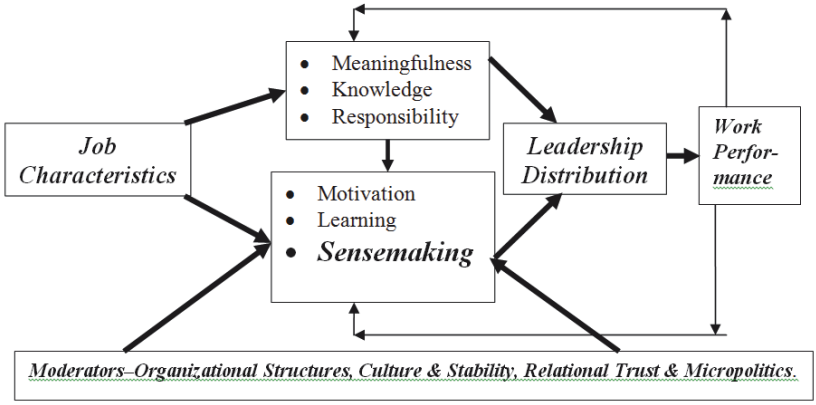

Figure 1. Distributed Leadership and Organizational Performance (Simplified Model)

In this article, we focus our attention on how sensemaking works as an interacting "driver" of work performance. We believe that when jobs in schools are redesigned and educators are asked to assume new responsibilities, they will likely engage in a process of sensemaking of that disruption. School organizational context variables will moderate that sensemaking process. The product of sensemaking in that context will be a particular pattern of leadership work performance distributed among members of the school community.

Sensemaking, change, and distributed leadership

There have been a variety of attempts to define sensemaking. For the purposes of this study, we view sensemaking as a collective, social process in which a group of individuals respond to an external triggering event that presents at least a mild disruption to their understandings of their work and/or workplace. While the sensemaking process is continuous and on-going, it is brought into boldest relief when individuals react to information that is starkly different from their usual routines or previous experiences. Individuals or groups must come to grips with the stimulus and develop new and/or retreaded

interpretations.

At the intersection of sensemaking and change in the educational leadership, one finding is clear: When educators are confronted with a reform, their interpretations of it will determine whether they engage in significant change, incremental change, or resistance, and many studies examine the prevalent reaction of simply ignoring or deflecting efforts from outside to induce change (Gold, 2002; Louis & Dentler, 1988).

Furthermore, individuals respond to disruptions or demands for change differently, and some studies describe the cognitive processes used by individual teachers to understand new information that is inconsistent with what they already know (Broadway, 1999; Zembylas, 2003), or the role of context and culture as conditions mediating individual change (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000; Blase & Blase, 1997; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Harris, 1994). Our focus is, instead, consistent with a recent direction in the sensemaking literature -- the development of *collective* interpretations of demands for change in school leadership. In this article, we treat sensemaking as the process by which groups evolve *shared* understandings of their work (Boje, 1991; Coburn, 2001, 2005; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Weick & Roberts, 1993).

To give a simple example, 20 years ago female students in U.S. and European schools did not wear headscarves. At some point, a student showed up with one and it prompted teachers to ask what it meant. Was a headscarf like a baseball hat (prohibited in most U.S. schools)? Was it a religious expression and possibly protected by constitutional law? Was there a need for a new policy to govern headscarves that was separate from existing ones? As educators in individual schools discussed these and other issues, they were beginning to "make sense" of the changes in dress of a new group of students who were arriving in their schools, and deciding, both individually and as a group, how they felt about these changes, and how they should respond, individually and collectively. At this point, in schools with more than a few Muslim students, no one needs to "make sense" of the head scarf; it is simply part of the normal variations in clothing that are found in a modern school setting.

On any given day, most groups ignore all sorts of events or activities that might, under different circumstances, trigger sensemaking; whether

an event becomes an opportunity for sensemaking is largely a function of other contextual factors. Sometimes people and groups are too preoccupied to notice what is going on, while under some circumstances disruptions may trigger individual but not collective sensemaking. Another simple(but common) example occurs when a small elementary school enrolls its first English Language Learner. The teacher who has that student may spend a lot of time considering her own pedagogy and classroom social structures, but teachers as a group may pay little attention. If 10 immigrant children arrive at the same time, however, chances are that collective sensemaking will quickly begin. The arrival of 10 new immigrant children in a larger more linguistically diverse school facing a wide variety of problems might, on the other hand, produce a much more limited sensemaking (and substantive) response because individual and organizational procedures for working with them are already in place.

The Collective Manifestations of Sensemaking.

As we already mentioned, lately scholars have started to concentrate their research efforts more on collective rather than individual sensemaking. *Individual* sensemaking occurs when a person pays attention to something in his/her surroundings that does not fit within the usual routines and that person must draw upon experience to find patterns that help to explain the new situation. Similarly, *collective* sensemaking occasionally can occur as part of a deliberate activity (like strategic planning), but more often emerges from informal communication among multiple individuals that leads to common actions or agreed upon activities (Coburn, 2001; Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986; Weick & Roberts, 1993).

One reason we decided to utilize the collective sensemaking approach is because in schools, despite widespread individual sensemaking (Kruse, 1997), the nature of professional communities and dialogue has emerged as a powerful factor determining three important elements of our model of distributed leadership development, (1) sensemaking of new initiatives (Coburn, 2001; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002), (2) organizational learning, and (3) the creation of organizational culture (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999). Second, it is

hard to imagine studying the development of distributed leadership,when educators will be asked to do more and different kinds of work with the goal of altering traditional patterns of responsibility and leadership in the school, without witnessing educators engaging in collective work and collective interpretation.

Connecting Sensemaking, Change, and Distributed Leadership

In most schools, significant and sustained efforts to alter patterns of influence and responsibility through changing what it means to be a teacher or a principal should represent a disruption. The disruption could stimulate changes in or be influenced by, the school context (i.e., our model's organizational moderators) which may then trigger the sensemaking process. Once the group has considered what is going on, and how it can be handled, they may choose to do nothing, or they may, with more or less coherent deliberation (i.e., collective sensemaking), change the way in which the leadership is distributed in the school. Sensemaking, in other words, is not an event, but is ongoing, focused on extracted cues, driven by emerging plausibility and tied to evolving identity construction (Weick, 1993). We depict this process in Figure 2.

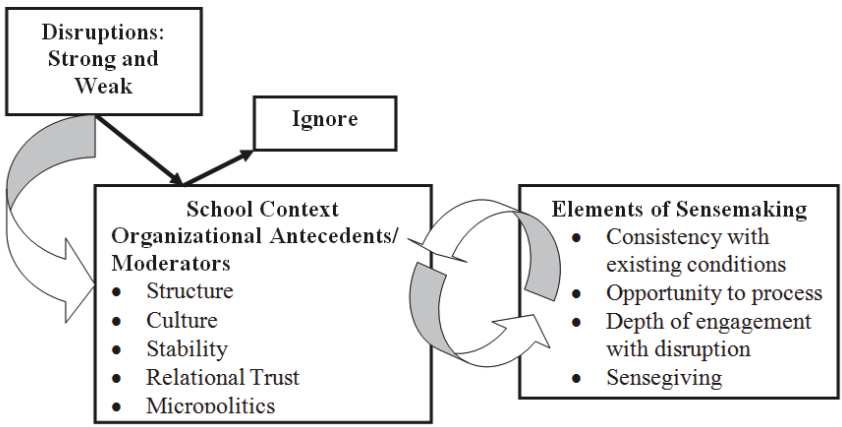

Figure 2. Sensemaking in Response to Disruption

Sensemaking is, in fact, the key process by which perceived disruptions are translated into organizational learning opportunities. However, we distinguish it from learning in that sensemaking is a shallower process. The product of sensemaking is "sense" which is likely tacit and perhaps more visceral. The product of learning is knowledge that is elaborated, retrievable, and demonstrable (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Figure 2 does not imply that the results of sensemaking are always positive for organizational performance. There is ample evidence from studies of crisis, for example, that the initial reactions to organizational disruptions often produce failures (Murphy & Meyers, 2007). For example, if there is an effort to introduce more teacher involvement in decision making in a low-trust setting where people usually work in isolation, the group may quickly arrive at a collective interpretation of that work redesign that emphasizes increased responsibility and workload inconsistent with the group's interests (Smylie, Mayrowetz, Murphy & Louis, 2007; Louis, 2007).Thus, the first reaction may lead almost inevitably to low change – not because the stimulus is ignored, but because it is resisted or interpreted in a manner inconsistent with original intentions. If the reaction is mixed or more positive, then a deeper process of sensemaking may begin, affected by factors such as the opportunity to talk about it, the consistency of the changes with previous experience, and the ability of some members to help others interpret what is going on. We elaborate on these factors in the next section.

Sensemaking and Consistency with Existing Conditions.

Making sense of any new change effort such as distributed leadership is affected by the public discussions surrounding the construction of the initiative, and by the initiative's alignment with existing conditions in the school (Firestone, Mayrowetz, & Fairman, 1998; Spillane, Reiser et al., 2002). Both involve building an understanding of how the past is related to the anticipated future during a period of change. In some cases, this may be straightforward because the connections are clear and supported by experience. For example, a school that has successfully incorporated a new reading program probably will not require a lot of

discussion about an expansion of the initiative to include writing in the upper grades. But in most cases, statements about new expectations do not, by themselves, construct knowledge for teachers and administrators. In the case of distributed leadership, if the focus is only on changing leadership structures and the teacher's work roles, teachers may not see any connection to their main task, which is supporting student learning. If distributed leadership is framed, on the other hand, as an opportunity for teachers to change school and classroom conditions so that they can carry out their main job more effectively, they are more likely to see it as central to their work rather than an "add on," like lunch duty or hall monitoring.

Sensemaking and Opportunity to Process a Disruption.
Sensemaking requires cognitive engagement with the implications of a new practice like distributed leadership. In peer groups with a high rate of member interaction, values and attitudes can be redefined through frequent contact. Social expectations from peers are a very effective form of pressure to change cognitive maps and behavior, especially relative to external policy or other control mechanisms (Warren, 1970). Time to meet and talk allows teachers and administrators to construct interpretations of distributed leadership and to draw implications for their work.

Sensemaking and the Depth of Processing.
Collective sensemaking is a form of social processin, but not necessarily deep processing. Many studies of sensemaking rely on looking at micro-interactions and cultural narratives. However, casual conversations and narratives can reflect superficial behavior expectations rather than addressing core assumptions about how the school should function (Craig, 1995). In order to create more fundamental change, both time and deeper challenges to embedded assumptions are needed (Huy, 1999; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). As Hofstede demonstrates, assumptions about leadership are deeply embedded in both organizational and national cultures (Hofstede, 1991). Because they are fundamental to our assumptions about how work settings operate, any significant change to patterns of leadership

(beyond minor "leadership style" differences between individuals) is likely to be more disruptive and possibly controversial because it does strike at the heart of the fundamental characteristics of the job. Particularly for older teachers, who may have had little experience with sharing with other teachers, much less taking on responsibilities outside the classroom, distributed leadership may feel like a sea change.

Sensemaking and Sensegivers.

Building connections when they are not obvious is aided by the presence of "sensegivers" – people in the setting who understand the change goals, the school's culture and history, and who are capable of communicating scenarios of consistency to others. Recent work has focused on the role of administrators' story-telling as part of the collective interpretation process, which emphasizes the importance of leaders as "sensegivers" in their organizations (Dunford & Jones, 2000).

The paradox of distributing leadership is that it may require a significant "push" from the top of the organization (the principal) in order for more initiative to be taken up by other school professionals or even students and parents (Murphy & Datnow, 2002). It is this paradox that has led some people to talk about "sensegiving" as typically the job of a formal leader at the beginning of a change process (Fiss & Zajac, 2006). The role of principals in creating the conditions for both distributed leadership and learning how to enact distributed leadership are rather obvious. First, they play a central role in determining the opportunities for sensemaking because they have a good degree of control over the organizational conditions in which sensemaking occurs like structures (time to meet and talk), culture, and the allocation of other resources to any change activity (Marks et al., 2002; Spillane, Diamond et al., 2002). Second, because they have traditionally been regarded as the "head" of the school and the person with the greatest legitimate influence over school operations, their behavior will determine the degree to which teachers' trust that taking on new leadership roles will be rewarding and have long-term benefits to themselves and others.

While formal leaders can play this role, it is just as likely to occur through informal storytelling, often carried out by mentors and "wise

elders" (Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Louis, 1994; Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001). Of course, some sensegivers and storytellers may provide negative images of change, so attention needs to be given to the variety of stories circulating throughout the school.

Sensemaking As A Tool For Investigating Distributed Leadership

Over a decade ago, but well into a decade-long effort to pour funds into "school restructuring" efforts, many authors began to raise serious question: Why is it so hard to create real (permanent) change in the institutional characteristics and culture of schooling, such as short, fragmented blocks of time for teacher planning and the 7 period day? (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995; Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Miles, 1995). Others, however, pointed out that the problems of change cannot be fully accounted for by institutional rigidities, but are also affected by how individuals and groups experience reform (Hargreaves, 2002; Little, 1996). Our approach assumes that the institutional characteristics reflected in school-organizational conditions and sensemaking are conditions that interact to influence distributed leadership.

Current calls for distributed leadership, including substantial funding provided by governments and foundations, suggest that it is an effort to disrupt the "grammar of schooling" in high schools. Sensemaking is a crucial mechanism that sits at the heart of developing and exercising distributed leadership, but it occurs in a context that has been resistant to fundamental change. Sensemaking is best exposed as disruptions hit the school as a social system and its members respond to that disruption. We limit our discussion to those disruptions that are related to distributed leadership. Elements of the social system refer to several of our organizational moderators like organizational structures, culture and stability along with relational trust, and micropolitics.

Based on the framework presented above, we propose a simple descriptive question for investigation: *How do teachers and administrators make sense of distributed leadership in a school where conditions reflect fertile ground for enacting it?*

Methods

We explore this question in a case study of an American high school that participated in a state initiative to promote distributed leadership under a grant from the Wallace Foundation. We chose the case from among six that we have been studying because it was a school in which distributed leadership was layered on top of a pre-existing effort to promote active teacher involvement in school-wide change efforts through professional learning communities (PLCs).[1] In short, the idea of sharing leadership fell on what appeared to be moderately fertile soil in this school. Here, we explore how sensemaking evolved during a three-year period at Overton High, a pseudonym for a vocational-technical high school, located in a lower to moderate-income first-ring suburb, and viewed as "successful."

Overton is unusual in at least two respects. First, it is one of four schools in a secondary only district, so that all of its students come from middle schools located in other districts. Second, despite a steady 50 year decline in vocational education enrollments and offerings in U.S. comprehensive schools (Benavot, 1983; Thomas, 2004), Overton and its sister schools are oversubscribed as schools of choice for the metropolitan area that they serve. The expanding district enrolls approximately 4,000 students among the 4 schools (one of which is new and had only a 9th grade class at the time of data collection). Overton had approximately 1,500 students in 9th – 12th grades, with a faculty of over 110 teachers.

Approximately 50% of the students were low income and slightly more than 50% were either African American or Hispanic. Overton students' performance on state tests indicated that at the time our study started, the school was slightly above average in writing, reading and science, but slightly below in mathematics. In 2006, the school did not make "Adequate Yearly Progress" because on state tests special education students performed significantly less well than their peers, but did well in the other categories. By 2013 it was named one of the top schools in the state.

Overton High School was visited annually over a three-year period for a total of 12 days on site. Telephone interviews were conducted on

several occasions to "catch up" between site visits. During each site visit, one-hour interviews were conducted with a wide array of teachers (some new and some previously interviewed teachers each year) for a total of 23 interviewees as well as repeated interviews with school and district administrators. Faculty meetings and some classrooms were observed and documents provided by the school were analyzed. Interviews were transcribed each year, and a running case was developed around the themes of the study.

To analyze data for this article, the first author read through the running case notes and then turned to the interview transcripts. Illustrative quotes were highlighted for each of the key themes of the sensemaking process and the development of distributed leadership (Figure 2). A holistic analysis was drafted initially (Stake, 1995), and the highlighted portions of the transcripts were re-examined for additional confirmation or disconfirmation of the ideas.

Organizational Conditions for Distributed Leadership

Earlier, we noted that Overton had "fertile soil" for distributed leadership so before we relate how educators made sense of distributed leadership at Overton, we begin our story by reviewing some of the organizational conditions that existed before the school received the $25,000 grant from the Wallace Foundation to initiate distributed leadership. In our model of distributed leadership development, these conditions serve not only as moderators but antecedents to job redesign (Mayrowetz, Murphy, Louis & Smylie, 2007). In other words, sensemaking in schools typically occurs in a dynamic environment, in which a "new" initiative is not unique and cannot, therefore, be studied in isolation. Rather, because schools present a rich environment for both macro- and micro-levels changes, new initiatives must be connected with other ongoing activities that are also at various stages of implementation and/or institutionalization.

Significant restructuring and reculturing efforts at Overton began with the promotion of the current superintendent in the late 1990s from an associate superintendent position. He then promoted the principal who

led Overton during the first two years of our study from his former position as vice-principal. The commitment to mentoring and promotion from within is an unwritten policy in the district, and contributes to a sense of continuity and support among administrators, and a sense among teachers that there will be no radical changes in policies.

When the new principal was appointed, Overton's curriculum was outdated but there was and continues to be a strong mission to prepare students for work. One long-time faculty member described its former reputation as "a last chance school." During the seven years before we started our study in 2004-5, Overton educators made three significant changes in the school's structures while also encouraging a dramatic shift in school culture.

The first structural reform focused on the school's vocational offerings, when the principal began a gentle but clear effort to close programs inconsistent with the demands of the modern labor force and to open new ones.[2] Newly hired vocational coordinators were recruited from industry (often without previous teaching experience), and brought with them both a sense of commitment to teaching students who were "like us when we were in high school." They were given a free hand to develop new programs and were often provided with supplemental funding to reequip facilities. A teacher who had completely rejuvenated her program described the process:

> The teacher that was there prior to me had been here for a long time. He wasn't relevant; he was not keeping up with technology. And the first thing I did was bring the dumpster around the back, and I thought that anything that's not relevant to today's work environment is going to the dumpster. And we just threw it out…[The principal] supported me all the way.

Along with this structural change, an entrepreneurial spirit took strong hold in the school.

The faculty initiated a second major structural change at roughly the same time. A small group of teachers concerned about the behavior of freshman students (who accounted for the majority of disciplinary

problems in the school) developed a 9th grade academy to link career counseling/choice of vocational specialties, support in academic learning skills, and a strong advisory system. The success of their efforts mushroomed over a five-year period into the development of academies for the upper grades as well. This academy structure was universally popular as a core subject teacher noted:

> The work that they do with the kids coming in makes my life so much easier. It's a boot camp, that's what I call it. It gets [students] focused on why they're here.

The structure also provided an important bridge between the academic/core subjects teachers who were most affected by behavior and low academic performance and the careers/vocational education teachers who wanted students to make more informed choices. Thus the structural change, along with very purposeful strategizing by Overton administrators, addressed a persistent professional culture problem at this high school -- a lack of coordination and occasional friction between the vocational and "regular" or academic teachers. The two camps of teachers were literally and figuratively located in different parts of the school and rarely collaborated (Little, 1995). But through the new structure, as one experienced academic teacher pointed out, the opportunity to see the students in other role was energizing:

> In my classrooms sometimes they're silly. But when I walk down the hall where they're the carpenters, the plumbers, there's that pride. You see them differently. So it's a great school that way.

Thus, the usual gulf between careers and academic teachers that is present in many vocational high schools is still visible at Overton, but is characterized, in most cases, by a willingness to work together for students. A number of very experienced teachers noted that this culture had evolved over some time, facilitated by strategic hiring practices:

> …when I came here [15 years ago] it really was a big division. Even the academic teachers not knowing what shops were [or]

> where they were located…and some of the retired shop teachers really resented the academic…I think what had helped in the last few years [is that] we've had a significant turnover of staff because of retirements…With the exception of 2 or 3, mostly everybody is a new shop teacher. And that's helped.

Still, the integration of the two halves of the school—vocational and academic— remains incomplete, and leadership positions, other than those with clear administrative responsibilities, rarely transfer across the boundaries.

The third and most recent structural change before the distributed leadership grant was the creation of a re-invented governance structure and multiple task forces in Overton. Although the traditional administrative leadership team remained intact, the principal created a larger "Steering Committee" composed of the 4 vice principals, all department/program chairs and a number of other key faculty members who met weekly with him to brainstorm and think strategically about the school's future. A careers teacher and steering committee member pointed to the change:

> It used to just be a department chair meeting, and all of the chairs would sit around, they would say, 'Do you have any problems? Do you have any problems?'…[Now] specific committees handle problems…and basically we're supposed to be part of the visioning for the future of the school…
> [The principal's] the engineer. He's sitting on the engine, and he's moving the train, but he doesn't pretend to know it all. He's very good about hearing us, and his advisers, and his [administrative] team. And they'll say, 'Well, you know, this is big enough that we'd better call in more people and look at it from a lot of different angles.' And that's what the [steering] committee does.

The other committees that administrators created focused on topics from student service to faculty morale to scheduling to technology.

Most significant in terms of restructuring school governance was Overton's commitment to begin professional learning communities

(PLCs) just about the same time as the introduction of distributed leadership. In 2004, the school's administration conducted a full-day staff retreat to introduce the concept of PLCs to the faculty. In fact, the school's grant proposal for the distributed leadership funds emphasized their existing efforts to develop PLCs.

All of these structural and cultural changes occurred deliberately and in a well-regulated manner. A big reason why these changes that seemed to favor distributed leadership took hold was the stability in values among the school and district administrators. Both the superintendent and Overton's principal, who were clearly predisposed to share leadership with others, purposely undertook the challenge of preparing the novice vice principals to carry the message when they moved up.[3] This meant giving each of them opportunities to exercise leadership of different kinds, and the allocation of responsibilities among them was varied to include some direct supervision of departments, some responsibility for student issues, and some supervision of non-teaching staff. With role definitions that were less clear than in most schools because all administrators dealt with curriculum, student programs, teacher supervision, discipline, lunch duty, etc., it is instructive to hear how a relatively recently appointed vice principal, with significant experience at another school in the same district, reported her interpretations of administrators' values at Overton:

> … when I got here, I felt that I was welcomed, just jumped right in, started working with the team, and we had a couple of summer interns. And then we kind of sorted through this, who's going to do what. I thought I was very supported… I immediately discovered that [the principal] was very much a visionary, and he had a direction … he knew where we were going. And everyone else on the team knew.

She went on to say that in her previous school, the administrative team functioned well, but quite differently. There,

> [The principal's] job description was his job description and he did that. And mine was mine and I did that. And Bill was over in

> guidance, and he did his thing. In this team, there's a flow … To a certain degree what you supervise is what you supervise -- But they're not afraid necessarily to cross boundaries.

Another ingredient that enriched the soil for distributed leadership at Overton was the relatively high levels of trust and respect among all parties, with the exception of a few disgruntled veteran teachers. Most teachers believed administrators would give them the resources they needed to improve the school. Typically, teachers thought:

> …if you really can show that there is a need, not because of the state test, but because that's what the kids need, then [administrators] are going to find a way. And if we can't find a way, [the principal] will say, 'we'll go someplace else and we'll help you get what you need.' And they don't pretend to be experts in it…they say, 'You're the expert.'

Another new careers teacher, recruited after a long career in a Fortune 500 company said:

> I'm trusted with what I'm doing in my classroom. My supervisor is [a vice-principal] and he occasionally comes in. But he realized that I can handle my thing…he just allows me to be a leader in my classroom.

A special education teacher, with experience in other districts, demonstrated remarkable trust in district administration:

> There is no comparison, which is why I say 'I'm holding onto the door, I'm not leaving here.' Whatever goes right or wrong, I'm going to do what I have to do in order to stay. Because for all of her problems, this district is head and tails above the other two that I've been in. Forget it.

Finally, there was very little behind-the-scenes negative micropolitical behavior at Overton because, according to most teachers, there was a

belief they could influence the school's decisions and directions. An administrator commented:

> They know that they will be heard, and they know that we will listen to them with an open mind and take heed of what they're saying; we're willing to share.

Indeed, almost all staff voiced their appreciation for the many opportunities that professionals were given to shape their own work and to contribute to the school's development. As one science teacher said:

> [In my previous school]…there was just this divide between administration and teachers. If you wanted to study a control group for Overton, if you want the opposite, that would be your best bet….[I] loved the kids, but…I wanted to do all these things, trips, and programs, and environment science club, and they just won't let you do anything…I'll retire here. I love it. They could put me in a closet and I would love it here…It's just empowering to work [here] with people you respect.

A new teacher who was asked to rejuvenate one particularly moribund careers program made the same point, noting that he had expressed concerns about the performance of a teachers' aide in his class, and that the principal allowed him to make the decision about whether to let her go:

> And what I really liked about [the principal' reaction], and again, I respect him so highly for this, he empowered me to make that decision. He said, 'Here's the deal. Keep her, don't keep her. But you have to live with the decision.'

Making sense of Distributed Leadership at Overton

Because of the high levels of relational trust, the stable administrative disposition toward sharing leadership, the lack of dysfunctional politics,

and the supportive structures and culture at Overton, distributed leadership had seemingly optimal conditions to thrive. Indeed, that's exactly what we saw, as we will explain below. However, the more fascinating phenomena that we witnessed were: (1) educators made sense of distributed leadership in such a way that folded it into their understanding of other initiatives,specifically PLCs; and (2) the conditions for distributed leadership remained high over the three year period in which we studied Overton despite a continuous flow of new teachers, the retirement of the much-loved principal, his replacement with a much younger person from another school in the district (teachers were involved in the interviews and concurred with the choice), and the departure of three of the four original vice principals. This level of personnel change might have overwhelmed an initiative that was less well-integrated into the school, but DL was reinforced during the transitions rather than undermined.

Consistency of Disruption With Existing Conditions

Precisely because of all of the teacher engagement work that occurred before the Wallace Foundation funds were earned, the actual awarding of the distributed leadership grant was not perceived as a major break from the status quo at Overton. School administrators and a few teacher leaders who wrote the grant viewed the new money as resources to pursue the idea to which they had devoted a full day staff retreat the previous year, professional learning communities. At that retreat, teachers generated twelve topics of concern and then they were asked to serve on a committee addressing one of them that would come up with recommendations and plans for change. Each group had co-facilitators, one from the vocational and one from the academic faculties. Thus, the PLCs were the main focus of the administrators' efforts to improve the school and they viewed the committees on campus that were composed of administrators and teachers from both halves of the school to be the PLCs.

The principal deliberately selected committee co-chairs who had not previously held a leadership position in school. All were trained in group facilitation skills and given the responsibility for creating deeper involvement of others with the topic of concern. In the minds of

administrators and the co-facilitators, this dramatic expansion of the leadership cadre, as well as each group's responsibility for generating school-wide programs and policies, was how they made sense of distributed leadership. The entire effort, PLCs and distributed leadership, became visible to everyone. A co-facilitator and teacher recently recruited from industry pointed out that the only teachers who were reluctant participants were a few veterans who had been burned by a weak effort to increase teacher involvement many years before. However, despite an undercurrent of skepticism, a facilitator and social studies teacher, said:

> I let [my group] know right away that I'm not the smartest person here. That others are. And this is just my chance, because I haven't been asked in a while to be in front. So you're going to be asked the next time....

In addition, a number of the facilitators noted that they had not thought about taking on such a visible teacher leadership role before. One careers teacher, who had been at the school for five years, said:

> I felt honored. At first I was afraid...[but] there's not one person who complains or moans…when I saw that [a highly respected math teacher] was in my group, I was like, 'Oh my God, I don't want to let her down.'

Facilitators were supported over the period of a year with monthly planning meetings that were led by two of the vice-principals. The careers teacher quoted above went on to say:

> I think that those meetings prior to our actual PLC [i.e., standingcommittee] meeting are the key. I was a little overwhelmed in the first meeting…'cause I just didn't know what was expected of me. Yeah, and I was worried…Now I get it. I understand what they want from me [and my co-facilitator] as a team. This is easy. We can do this.

In short, at Overton, administrators and other members of the school's Steering Committee combined the potentially major disruption of distributed leadership with the notion of Professional Learning Communities. As a consequence many teachers, especially those who were committee facilitators, made sense of distributed leadership as being part and parcel of the PLC initiative. For many at Overton, the sense they made was that the two notions were fused and inseparable.

Opportunity to Process the Disruption

Opportunities to engage with the idea of distributed leadership occurred at two levels for teachers – and most teachers implicitly distinguished among them. First, as noted earlier, teachers had already been given enormous opportunities to change whole programs, not just their own classrooms, even for years before the DL/PLC disruption. Departments bandied about ideas for improving practice. For example, academic departments struggled with issues of curriculum coherence and how best to adapt state standards to the vocational students. At one meeting, the Social Studies and English departments came together to brainstorm about ways they could integrate themes across courses. Also noted above, administrators trusted academic and careers teachers to make key decisions without excessive oversight. Interestingly though, teachers who took responsibility for improving teaching and learning conditions outside their classrooms did not, however, interpret these actions as distributed leadership work, perhaps because they had no official role designation, such as "co-facilitator" of one of the 12 committees, as they carried out that work.

On the other hand, those who were appointed as committee facilitators universally noted that this DL/PLC disruption was very different from anything they had done before. Part of their sensemaking experience was spurred by the fact that for the first time they were expected to manage the initial skepticism that met the school-wide visioning and planning effort conducted through the committee work they were overseeing:

> People were concerned that we were just going through the motions…and also, people looked at us, myself and the other

> facilitator, and wondered why we were selected.

Facilitators also noted, however, that after the first shock of being treated like a peer leader, other committee members took on the responsibility for making the group work well, including some who were more experienced with effective group process because of their previous professional life outside of schools.They also pointed out the importance of the group interaction as a means of increasing social cohesion. With some exceptions, teachers reported enthusiasm with the work in their groups, ranging from satisfaction with meeting and interacting with teachers they didn't previously know, to a sense of accomplishment over setting an agenda for future activities. A facilitator noted that he already belonged to an empowered PLC because of his co-location with other new faculty members who had been brought in to revitalize programs in a specific industry. He stated, however, that working in the mixed group taught him something:

> My needs, my concerns, my ideas, aren't the same as an English teacher's… their ideas are not lesser than mine, they're just different…It was great for us to get an opportunity…to see other people's perspectives about where this whole distributed leadership's going…I thought we wouldn't be able to agree on anything…[but] we have more in common than came out the first time that we met.

Some of the facilitators also understood that just as they were given special opportunities to learn because of their training and the monthly facilitator's meetings, they could also expand that learning within their groups:

> I told [my co-facilitator] that we really should have other people in the group do the writing for our report…so we try to draw those leaders out as we go, you know?

Although the imminent departure of the beloved principal was a source of concern for many of the teachers, for a significant minority of those

interviewed it was identified as another opportunity to learn and to grow, as well as a potential threat to distributed leadership. One teacher summarized this perspective:

> My thing is, when I think of a new principal, I think of a renaissance…Sometimes in order to get a rebirth you need somebody from the outside to look in..

Depth of Engagement with Disruption

A key issue for Overton is how teacher leadership is defined. Because of the restructuring and reculturing that occurred before the DL/PLC disruption, when we first arrived for most in the school it meant entrepreneurship and individual initiative in program development rather than involvement in larger collective work. But three years into their existence, school-wide PLC committees were just beginning to be understood by most as a vehicle for exercising influence.

During the first visit to the school just after the distributed leadership grant was awarded, many teachers (and administrators) in the school had difficulty identifying distributed leadership as a distinctive initiative. Although a name was given to it in order for the school to qualify for state funding that helped to support faculty retreats, distributed leadership was inseparable in most people's minds from the effort to develop more intense conversations among faculty around solving problems that were identified by faculty – and everyone was able to identify PLCs as a feature of the school's work because it had been the focus of all-day staff retreats. Teachers were more likely to talk spontaneously about the support that they had for stretching, taking on new challenges, and being creative than they were in identifying themselves as leaders. As the chair of the math department pointed out, she often had to tell teachers when they were being leaders because they saw what they were doing, whether chairing a committee or mentoring a new staff member, as simply part of their job. Three years later though the number of teachers who could talk about the difference between individual empowerment and distributed leadership had increased enormously because more people had taken on or experienced direct teacher leadership behavior.

The understanding of the power of the school-wide PLC initiatives, as contrasted with the empowerment of individual and small groups teachers to carry out reforms that initially touched fewer people appeared to be best understood by careers teachers who had recent experience in industry. For many of these individual, personal experiences with "bad leadership" in for-profit settings made a particular contrast with their experiences in Overton. As one individual reflected:

> I'm hoping with this whole PLC-Distributed Leadership that we're phasing out the "they and we" and it's more of an "us." Have we gotten there yet? No...I'm hoping with gradual change that the [teachers] will have more buy-in, more influence…With momentum and change, you're going to get more people that are going to jump on this bandwagon, if they can see something tangible coming out of it. If something tangible doesn't come out of this thing, then some of these nay-sayers are going to say, 'This is just another initiative.'

Those with experience outside of education were more likely to have thought deeply about the 'meaning' and potential of leadership work at Overton. A special education teacher with 6 years of experience discussed, for example, how difficult it was to facilitate her group, which had the largest number of the "whiney, picky" people who were skeptics about distributed leadership. She noted that the effects of the program were greater for the 24 teachers who were co-facilitators than those who were group members, and suggested that the training and responsibility they were given had changed them in ways that could not be reproduced for the other members:

> I don't think that [the teachers in my group] ever came out of our meetings feeling like I did coming out of my co-facilitator meetings…that touched 24 people…in order to try to reach all of the staff, to have the buy in that I got because, before I was tapped, I was sitting out there in the auditorium just like everybody else going, 'yeah!' Now I sit up front…so maybe in they picked 24

> other people….On the one hand, there is merit for us to be the leaders again next year. But on the other hand, it would be great if we got some new blood next year.

Sensegiving

When the disruption of distributed leadership came to Overton in 2004 the role of "sensegiving" around the DL/PLC initiative seemed largely confined to two key actors in the school: the principal and a long-time teacher who was the chair of an academic department and deeply respected by all. Few other teachers seemed to have a clear understanding about the characteristics of distributed leadership, or how it might affect the school. Even teachers who were already leaders – the designers of the 9th grade academy, for example, did not see themselves as leaders as much as a dynamic duo of curriculum designers for a specific group of students. As they said, "we run ourselves…we are not empowered." At that time, they defined empowerment as control over budget and personnel.

Two years later, the patterns of sensegiving were more diffuse and perhaps also more complicated. At the end of a year of all-school meetings and committees in the spring of 2006, there was still skepticism about distributed leadership among some, largely because of the retirement of the principal. The following comment reflects an almost uniform sense of uncertainty among the teachers who were interviewed:

> They see meetings, they see this vision statement being developed, they see this whole distributed leadership thing. But there's nothing tangible yet…they want something tangible, something they can actually see….And they realized that [the principal] is going to retire in the next month, and I think there's some reservations when he leaves the building, the PLC, the distributed leadership is going to go with him.

A year after the new principal arrived, teachers had overcome the understandable anxiety that a new principal would alter patterns that they had come to value, and some had even come to reflect that it was,

perhaps, time for a change and a fresh perspective on the school. The commitment of the new principal to the distributed leadership efforts was apparent to everyone.

Increasingly, on the other hand, teachers became forthright story-tellers supporting the important role of teachers as leaders in the school. We heard again about the heroism and the importance of the group that developed the 9th grade academy not only from the involved individuals, but from others. We learned about the renewal of the science department's curriculum not from the chair of science, but from a math teacher. Others commented about how people had stepped up to make their PLC group productive. There were also stories about successful activities and tangible work products that were emerging from some of the PLC committees that were talked about beyond the administrative group. We heard from facilitators who saw their role as helping other teachers to "step up."

The new principal underlined the importance of participatory "sensegiving." When he arrived at Overton, he felt there were too many PLC committees so he cut a number of them. Still, he expanded the Steering Committee to include the former co-facilitators of those PLC work groups. He argued that the somewhat unwieldy growth of the Steering Committee to include more teacher leaders was important for symbolic reasons, as well as giving an opportunity for more people to contribute to discussions about the school's future. Moreover he felt that this expansion served to put teacher leadership issues at the forefront of that Steering Committee and consequently the school.

While it would be a stretch to say that teachers had become the primary sensegivers in the school, with an almost entirely new administrative team, they were the keepers of the stories about the school's transition from traditional to teacher-powered.

According to the key storytellers, Overton is not yet a participatory democracy. As the new principal points out, administrators still have decisions to make, and teachers still spend most of their time in classrooms. There are still curmudgeons and those who want to be left alone to teach. The depth of formal and informal leadership participation among the faculty is, however, unusual for a large high school, and the spirit of collective responsibility for creating new

programs and getting the work done suggests a fuzziness of boundaries between the roles of teacher and administrator that corresponds to the similar flow and flexibility within the administrative team.

Discussion

We chose to write about Overton High because this case provides a unique vehicle to examine the importance of sensemaking in the development of distributed leadership. In almost all of the other five schools we studied, distributed leadership was seen as a major disruption and in those environments it usually became an add-on initiative and tangential at best, to school improvement. In those circumstances, the sensemaking process was diverted toward other issues that were perceived as more pressing (see, for example, Louis, Mayrowetz, Smylie & Murphy, 2009).

In some ways, Overton presents a much more telling story because there distributed leadership was neatly folded into existing initiatives (the PLCs) and fairly well exploited for the development of teacher leaders. In fact, teachers were important sense-givers at the introduction of distributed leadership and two years later during an extensive turnover in administration. The importance of teacher-to-teacher connections through the development of co-facilitators from different departments, and the deliberate assignment of leaders who had not previously "stepped up" to major committee chair positions developed a much larger cadre of storytellers and peers who were able, in part because of their development as a group, to spread the story of the potential of distributed leadership to enhance the success of the school.

To explain this outcome we point to the reciprocal relationship we outlined in Figure 2 between key organizational conditions and important elements of the sensemaking process. Collective sensemaking around distributed leadership occurred in a context favorable to its development. In turn, the sensemaking was seen as only a minor disruption. Only one-quarter of the faculty engaged with the disruption deeply (as committee chairs or facilitators), but all had a chance to process it (through regular cross-disciplinary PLC meetings).

The end result was that many became sense-givers and kept the momentum for teacher leadership going during a temporary period of significant personnel turnover among faculty and administration.[4] This process impacted the organizational conditions again. The cultural mores that existed in the school rewarding teacher initiative were strengthened and through the committee structures, those mores began to shift to favor teacher activity that was collective and crossed disciplinary boundaries and even what is traditionally the administrative sphere.

Looking at the original model that stimulated our investigation of sensemaking (Figure 1) we are struck by a limitation of an apparently successful program to change a school's culture. Although teachers' involvement in leadership over the course of the study was clear, distributed leadership did not, as the overall model suggests, lead to rapid and consistent improvements in student learning. In 2008, Overton again failed to meet the the Annual Yearly Progress standards set by the state. In 2009, it bounced back, but in 2010, it again did not meet the improvement goals for both reading and math[5]. Given that the DL/PLC initiatives failed to focus on student achievement as a school goal, this is perhaps not surprising. However, it does point to the need for greater leadership initiative, either from teachers or administrators, to focus on student outcomes that go beyond the (still impressive) retention, graduation, and "ready for college or career" results that were part of the school's internal story of success.

This brings us to an observation about the need to examine distributed leadership initiatives over the long haul, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged populations. Relational trust was built in the school because administrators tended to stay out of teachers' classrooms and gave them a high degree of autonomy with program development. This fostered the sense of entrepreneurship that was palpable in the school but is at odds with current efforts to promote instructional leadership from principals. Our visits to classrooms (which were not systematic) suggested that exciting instruction was occurring in many parts of the school—but not all. On our last site visit, a new vice principal relayed that he was impressed that the school had many teacher leaders but was concerned that their energies were not sufficiently harnessed into

improving student achievement. Though this comment was unique to him, we wonder whether Overton administrators, who had not yet addressed their role as "instructional leaders," might soon want to cross boundaries themselves, into the traditional sphere of teachers' work. We also wondered what organizational conditions would be necessary for teachers not to make sense of that type of disruption as a violation of their autonomy and a breach of trust.

Notes

1. Overton High School was briefly described in a previously published paper (Louis, Mayrowetz, Murphy & Smylie, 2009) that draws on some of the same data. This paper is based on additional data collection and analysis and a distinctive analytical framework.

2. We refer to this as "gentle" because program directors were either counseled out or chose to retire.

3. During the third year of our study Overton got a new principal, a man who had been a vice principal at another school in this small district. Also, one of Overton's vice principals was appointed as a principal at another district school, and two other vice-principals rotated to other schools. The "new" principal was still there as of spring 2013.

4.The principal appointed in the 3rd year of our study is still there, as are several of theof the assistant principals. Teacher turnover continues to be low, and the same Superintendent and Associate Superintendent were in place as of spring, 2011. The Superintendent retired and was replaced by a former Assistant Superintendent with 22 years of experience in the district, which again fostered continuity of leadership.

5. Based on a new state testing system, Overton met AYP in 2012.

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