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Reflections on Education Reform and Team Leadership

Tricia Browne-Ferrigno and Lars G. Björk

University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA

During recent decades, the notion of team leadership has emerged as a central theme in the international discourse on systemic education reform. This issue of *Research in Educational Administration and Leadership* not only captures a collective sense of commitment to education as means for advancing national social, economic, and political wellbeing but also reflects a changing nature of leadership across a wide spectrum of educational organizations and contexts. Given the increasing complexity of 21st century education, effective leaders at all levels tend to rely less on bureaucratic, hierarchical structures and more on relational approaches to accomplish tasks. In this regard, teamwork has become an indispensable characteristic of organizational life, and depending on the task, teams may involve a wide array of stakeholders (e.g., superintendents, school board members, district support staff, principals, teachers, parents, students) or a select few representing specific constituencies to address specific issues.

Having a greater diversity of perspectives within teams enable them to identify and solve complex problems, coordinate work, facilitate communication, resolve conflict, and build commitment to

accomplish shared goals (Edmondson, 2012; Handy, 2005; Parker, 1990). Teams are "potentially the most versatile performance units of any organization" (Katzenbach & Smith, 2007, p. 223) because their collective learning embeds "new thinking and practices that continuously renew and transform the organization in ways that support shared aims" (Collinson & Cook, 2007, p. 221). The resulting systems learning creates new knowledge, enhances organizational decisions, and generates resiliency in responding to external forces (Choo, 2006; Fullan, 2004; Senge, 2006). The authors contributing articles for this special issue provide important insights about the nature and impact of team leadership within diverse organizational types, contexts, and cultures.

The confluence of national education reform mandates, heightened interest in school culture, and postindustrial leadership perspectives contributed to creating complex organizational contexts. These circumstances heightened the importance of cooperation and teamwork in accomplishing large-scale systems change that is continuous and human centered rather than reactionary, episodic, and short term (Bjork, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014; Murphy & Datnow, 2002). Emphasis on cooperation and teamwork challenges traditional industrial-management perspectives that view subordinates as self-serving, motivated by earning rewards through avoiding punishment, and willing to comply with directives (Burns, 1978). In bureaucratic, hierarchical organizations, managers coordinated work and efficiently accomplished organizational goals with limited, if any, input from those doing the work. In recent decades, new perspectives emerged within research and professional literature suggesting that leadership is "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect

their mutual purposes" (Rost, 1991, p. 102). Leadership defined as such is not vested in a person but rather a process utilized by change agents to achieve specific goals. Transformation leaders empower others who in turn commit to accomplishing the work and through their efforts build a sense of community that changes an organization's culture (Bjork, Kowalski, & Young, 2005; Bolman & Deal, 2017; Kowalski, 2002).

The notions of re-culturing, cooperation, and teamwork emerged as key concepts in launching and sustaining educational reform. These ideas were informed historically by diverse disciplines, such as anthropology (Foley & Gamble, 2009), sociology (Selznick, 1957), organizational theory (March & Olson, 1985), and political science (Dittmer, 1977). Although Tooby and DeVore (1987) attribute human ecological success to superior cognitive abilities, evolutionary biologists and anthropologists suggest that culturally evolved, cooperative social environments offer an equally compelling argument for survival and adaptation. For example, Boyd and Richardson (2009) and Foley and Gamble (2009) describe human social behavior and cooperation as being central to successful adaptation when external environmental conditions change. They suggest that cultural evolution and adaptation are linked to the ability of people to learn from each other, create cooperative social environments, and transfer positive social behavior through natural selection processes. Simplistically, Darwin (1871/1981) explained rapid cultural adaptation in primitive societies as being in their "plainest self-interest" (1981, p. 155). From a modern sociologist perspective, Schein (2010) defines organizational culture as

> *a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and integration, which has worked well*

> *enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to problems.* (p. 18)

More simply defined, organizational culture is "the way we do things around here" (Deal & Kennedy, 2000, p. 4). In this regard, the culture of an organization was viewed as a powerful tool for both survival and adaptation to changing environmental contexts.

Discussions about organizational culture and evolution of cooperation also suggest that competition between groups not only contributes to the spread of social behaviors but also enhances collective adaptation (Boyd & Richardson, 2009; Foley & Gamble, 2009). Notions of conflict and competition were viewed by political scientists as inherent characteristics of society and organizational life. For example, Laswell's (1990) classical definition of *politics* refers to decisions about the allocation of goods in society or organizations (i.e., who gets what, when, and how). During the education reform movement, scholars studied implementation processes particularly with regard to the role of individuals and groups in reshaping or even resisting intentions of legislative bodies. In their regard, micropolitics was viewed as a central mechanism through which major organizational outcomes related to school change and reform are produced. According to Blase and Blase (2000),

> *An organization's political processes, for example, a school's formal and informal structure (e.g., organizational stakeholders and their power sources, interests, ideologies, and interchanges) as well as its political culture (e.g., patterns of interests, ideologies, decision making, power distribution) dramatically influence school outcomes, including teaching and learning. The degree to which political processes and political culture account for a given outcome (e.g., decision, policy, program, practice, events) varies, of course, from one school to another and, over time, within the same school.* (p. 10)

Blase and Blase further assert that micropolitical processes describe the political culture of school or district offices and may help explain how staff members influence stability and change. Although scholars acknowledge that micropolitics incorporates both cooperative and competitive processes (Ball, 1987; Blase & Bjork, 2010; Boyd, 1991; Cibulka, 2001; Mawhinney, 2000), its use in analyzing education reform in the past tended to emphasize conflict and competition rather than cooperation and teamwork. Although this perspective may contribute to an understanding of the formative stages of educational reform when externally-imposed change increased ambiguity, uncertainty, and goal disparity, it is not as relevant to implementing educational reform in 21st century contexts.

As evidenced by the articles in this special issue, a promising line of educational reform research focuses on organizational culture, cooperation, and teamwork as strategies for educational transformation. This body of work not only describes efforts to re-culture schools and districts but also reflects more broad-based notions of leadership. These scholarly papers provide important insights into leadership enacted by teachers, parents, and students as well as by superintendents, school boards, central office staffs, and principals—whose collective efforts play important roles in improving contemporary education. Team leadership and the resulting organizational learning and systems thinking can transform how educational organizations respond to mandated school reform—from past automatic adherence to externally determined processes to locally designed educational renewal strategies addressing the unique contextual features of the organization, its members, and most importantly, the locally identified needs of its students.

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About the Authors.

Tricia Browne-Ferrigno, PhD, is Professor of Educational Leadership Studies at the University of Kentucky. Her major research interests and work focus on leadership preparation and development, educational innovation and change. Email: tricia.ferrigno@uky.edu

Lars G. Björk, PhD, is Professor of Educational Leadership Studies at the University of Kentucky and the 2009 U.S. Fulbright Scholar to Finland. His major research foci include educational leadership, education reform, and the superintendency. Email: lars.bjork@uky.edu