REFEREED ARTICLE

Shared Leadership: A Shift in Thinking

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Abstract

In a time when educators are questioning whether they have the energy to embark on a leadership journey, a different way of thinking about leadership is needed. Shared leadership demonstrates a shift in thinking. Shared leadership leads schools and divisions to function with multiple leaders by accessing, at differing times, individual strengths and talents. Although definite barriers to this model exist, a level of synergy can be experienced when shared leadership is successfully implemented. By investigating this new approach, we may improve our ability to attract educational leaders.

The definition of *leadership*, a term that has existed in education for years, has evolved and changed as society has, and leaders have evolved to rise and meet societal expectations. The role of educational leader has become more complex, demanding, and stressful. This challenging role lacks appeal for many educators and, as a result, educational leadership is once again being re-examined. Shared leadership has surfaced with the potential to broaden our perspective beyond the current practice of one leader and several followers. The days of one-person leadership are over, as it leaves the talents of teachers relatively untouched and school improvement relatively unstable (Lambert, 2002). Shared leadership has distinctive characteristics, specific roles for principals and teachers, advantages, and definite barriers, all of which need to be examined if school principals wish to implement shared leadership as their practice.

As much as educators have tried, they have failed to establish a model of shared leadership that can be spread across many different schools (Lindahl, 2008). Leadership today needs to initiate strategies for encouraging leadership from all members of a school community, regardless of their position (Frost, 2008). A roadblock is the lack of differentiation between the concepts of leadership and administration. Leadership involves leading people, whereas administration involves managing things (Lindahl, 2008). Shared leadership offers the opportunity to lead people in more ways than simply sharing administrative duties that teachers see as unsatisfying. It takes teachers beyond their classroom doors and transfers leadership roles from an individual to a school. In shared leadership, individuals are committed to improved student learning through participatory decision-making (Margolis, 2008). In order to be sustainable, shared leadership is not to be looked at as another practice, but rather a new way of conceptualizing current leadership.

At first glance, some may view shared leadership as another form of teacher collaboration. Shared leadership, however, is more than just collaboration, as it focuses on the results from an activity and not on the label given to the activity (Harris, 2004). For example, a study group of high school math teachers collaborate, ask reflective questions, and challenge their teaching practices in grade nine mathematics. As a result, new lessons are developed and the scores of the students improve. Shared leadership is identified as the result of the action, the increased scores, not the practice of the study group (Spillane, 2009). Shared leadership is concerned with professional knowledge, but is more concerned with teachers' roles in the creation of that knowledge, and in its transfer to other educators and students alike (Frost, 2008). The core of shared leadership involves educators being responsible for the learning of their colleagues, more than collaborating with each other.

Shared leadership has been identified as a practice of collective leadership, wherein teachers develop expertise by working together. Shared leadership focuses on engaging

expertise wherever it exists within an organization, rather than looking only to the people holding formal positions (Harris, 2004). The breadth of participation does not automatically result in an increased level of student achievement. It is not a scenario that has everyone in the school sharing responsibility for leading. Shared leadership involves all individuals leading, at one time or another, when their level of expertise is required. Shared leadership occurs when ownership is encouraged, sharing occurs, and learning is essential (Doyle & Smith, 2009). In summary, shared leadership involves spreading the leadership function among many people, thereby accomplishing tasks through the interactions of multiple leaders.

The principal has been the sole leader in schools for decades. Only if a school warranted a vice principal would there be shared leadership. In contrast, within a model of shared leadership, the principal must be prepared "to relinquish power to others" (Harris, 2005, p. 260). The ability to share leadership power rests in the principal's belief that engaging in shared leadership will result in sustainable school improvement. The principal must believe that teacher leaders, not just the principal, are also the drivers of change and catalysts for important work (Harris & Townsend, 2007). There is no pay scale built in for teachers; therefore, the principal needs to encourage teacher leaders and then be creative in how teacher innovation will be rewarded. A principal engaged in shared leadership must bear in mind the learners' views, but at the same time challenge them (Lambert, 2003). Shared leadership involves questioning the actions of teachers through reflective inquiry and dialogue. It is imperative that, prior to engaging in this type of activity, a principal builds trust among colleagues, fosters self-esteem in teachers, enhances personal professional competence, and gives staff responsibilities beyond those of teaching (Harris, 2004). Only when collegiality has been built can sharing leadership flourish among those beyond the office doors.

In shared leadership, it is a priority that the school principal be the primary person to articulate the vision so that staff members work towards a common goal. The principal, while working with members of the school community, must construct the shared vision (Lambert, 2002). This vision development is done by facilitating conversations, by keeping the focus on student learning, by modeling collaboration, and by posing questions that facilitate reflective dialogue. The early stages of shared leadership will require that the principal supports the teachers emotionally and guide them to embrace this new way of working together (Margolis, 2008). Research indicates that successful leaders are those who lead both the cognitive and affective lives of the school by developing clear goals, by building alliances, and by improving teachers professional development (Harris, 2004). These are gradual changes in principal leadership, which take time and work to achieve. Positive promotion and encouragement of shared leadership are conducive to a mutual understanding of the role of the principal.

The success of shared leadership also relies on building leadership capacity in teachers. For leadership capacity to increase, teachers must believe that all members of the faculty have unique information to share, and be willing to contribute enthusiastically (Maznevski, 1994). During reflective conversations, when current teaching practice is being challenged, teachers must have both high morale and a tolerance for conflict while working towards the betterment of student learning. Professional development should be led by inspiring leaders, as they are able to make theory come alive in practice. They can show current examples of student work, and they know the reality of how things work in the classroom (Margolis, 2008). Teachers have classroom credibility for offering professional development to their colleagues, which the principal lacks. Although the principal articulates the vision, it is the teachers who assist in developing it, by bringing it to life in their classrooms and by providing ongoing assessment throughout its implementation (Lindahl, 2008). Teachers are growing and contributing to shared leadership when they increase their involvement in school-based decision making, improve student learning, organize and lead in-services, and mentor other teachers.

Several positive factors are associated with leading through a shared leadership model. Once effectively introduced, a school under shared leadership has lower resistance to change, more teacher control over the work place, greater self-efficacy, and greater readiness to

promote the common school goals (Addi-Raccah, 2009). Schools are often places where teachers work in isolation, with little conversation about the happenings in their classrooms. Teachers who believe that their school is led by a cooperative leadership team, characterized by group cohesion, are more committed to working together towards their school goals (Hulpia et al., 2010). In a shared leadership model, teachers who believe they have a voice in decision making also feel more connected to their administrator, and less professional apathy (Heller, 1993).

The greatest benefit of shared leadership in education is the likely improvement of student outcomes, as teachers become empowered in areas of importance to them (Harris, 2004). This improvement occurs as a result of teachers' listening and contributing as a collaborative group. The actions are spearheaded because of the rightness of what is being said. As leadership capacity grows, so does the importance of student leadership in the school, which leads to greater student achievement. Once that leadership capacity in a school has been built, a point may come when there is a willingness to lead without a principal (Lambert, 2006). Other positive side-effects in schools that lead through shared leadership are the increased level of teacher confidence, built-in professional development through collaboration, and less vulnerability to organizational change. These benefits encourage the teachers to continually reflect on their teaching practice in order to enhance student learning.

Shared leadership, however, is not without barriers. Changing tradition always comes with struggle. Educational leadership has traditional hierarchies with positions and pay scales that are not instantly responsive to a more fluid approach. There are inherent threats to status as well as to the status quo (Harris, 2005). A principal may feel vulnerable and experience a loss of control after distributing leadership tasks. If shared leadership is misconstrued as delegation, it will not work, so a principal must think carefully about what tasks will be selected and to whom they will be delegated. Teacher relationships may be affected, as teacher leaders may feel disrespected and disregarded. Others may become resentful as significant challenges to teaching practice take place (Timperley, 2005). In the early stages, shared leadership may involve smaller groups of leaders who come across as trying to represent the whole and, as a result, skepticism may creep into the thoughts of those not involved (Kirby et al., 1992). A major pitfall to shared leadership is the time that it takes to involve more teachers. Dedicated time to ensure that reflective conversations occur is difficult to find. For success to be encountered, shared leadership has implications that must be overcome.

There are a few specific ideas for a principal to consider when implementing shared leadership. Principals need to begin by involving others in some shared decision making with regards to budget and policy items in the school (Harris, 2004). They should look for teachers who naturally build skills and confidence in others, nurture a culture of success, and have follow through. Selected teachers could be allocated important tasks and leadership responsibilities rotated among them, possibly through study groups, vertical learning communities, or leadership teams. There are three ways to view shared leadership implementation: division of labor, whereby jobs are split to achieve a goal; co-performance, whereby individuals work together to achieve a goal; and parallel performance, whereby colleagues work alongside each other to achieve a goal (Lindahl, 2008). Each method is chosen based on the needs of the school, and more than one arrangement may occur at any given time. Factors to consider when determining which arrangement may work in a school include the school culture and setting, and staff ages, motivation, morale, and turnover. Shared leadership should not be implemented when many other initiatives are underway, as it requires a significant amount of dedicated energy (Kirby et al., 1992). Careful consideration is important when implementing shared leadership, in order to see its full benefit.

Research on shared leadership, and on its effect on student learning, is relatively sparse. More research is needed into approaches, models, and forms of practice wherein shared leadership can flourish (Harris, 2005). It is important that school leaders work at developing a support group of critical friends to assist in the maintenance of energy, and to maintain

enthusiasm throughout the implementation. Although a shared leadership model may be effective in rural schools with small staff numbers, little research has been done in that venue. A beginning step to working towards shared leadership is to educate staff on what good conversation is, in order to develop "ways of being" in communication, including silence, which allows action answers to surface (Doyle & Smith, 2009, para. 34). Shared leadership is an emerging concept that needs to continue to evolve, with research coming from schools currently engaged in its practice.

Shared leadership is not easy, nor is it prescribed. It takes courage and work on a daily basis, but in the end it is very rewarding. Leadership is the professional work of everyone in a school, and shared leadership is the vehicle to building a culture wherein all members of an organization are expected to lead at an appropriate point. When people work efficiently together in authentic relationships, focused on a shared purpose, they create synergy (Lambert, 2003). Synergy regenerates people instead of draining them. Synergy arises from conversations that are collegial in nature and in the resulting actions. Educational leaders today are in highly stressful and demanding positions, and are looking for renewed energy. The notion of shared leadership suggests that principals think differently about their leadership. It suggests that they extend the leadership function over multiple people, in order to create synergy to build sustainable school improvement and to empower others. Shared leadership demonstrates a shift in thinking about leadership, which ultimately makes a principal's position more appealing and effective.

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