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# Shared Leadership for Teacher and Student Learning

*The article synthesizes research findings from studies examining how principals and teachers contribute to shared instructional leadership and the relationship of shared instructional leadership to teacher and student learning. Principals and teachers contribute to the leadership equation in each school in different ways, according to school context and personnel, but an important finding is that the ways in which teachers and principals lead are in tension. It is this tension, however, that is characteristic of leadership in schools that make steady, incremental, and effective instructional improvement. Teachers learn more when teachers and principals find balance in the gradual movement between the status quo and intentional change. Two other factors enhance teacher learning: the shared belief that teachers can and must educate every student, and respectful and open relationships among colleagues. With these conditions, teachers learn to be better teachers and student achievement increases.*

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PROMPTED BY CHANGES in how work is managed in schools and in response to heightened expectations for student learning, scholars have focused inquiry on shared forms of educational leadership. In schools, teachers frequently work in teams, but without formal leadership. Such teaming structures are often interdisciplinary, with various members contributing differing kinds of curricular or instructional expertise. School administrators may or may not be connected to these endeavors. As educational scholars rethink the instructional role of school leaders, the concept of shared leadership has moved to the forefront of leadership approaches (Murphy, 2002). This move results primarily from the recognition that teachers and principals have leadership impact on the learning that occurs in schools.

We have investigated how teachers and principals contribute uniquely to shared instructional leadership. In our view, teachers contribute to instructional leadership when they interact productively with other adults in the school around school reform efforts, learn with their school colleagues, seek to improve their own professional practice, and expect others to do the same. As instructional leaders, principals invest teachers with resources and instructional support and maintain the congruence and consistency of the educational program.

Principals put teachers who wish to learn in contact with other innovative teachers, support organizational processes for discussion and consideration of curricular issues, and provide feedback based on student learning outcomes (Marks & Printy, 2003; Printy & Marks, 2004; Printy, Marks, & Bowers, in review). An important finding of our work is that the ways in which teachers and principals lead are somewhat in tension. It is this tension, however, that is characteristic of leadership in schools that make steady, incremental, and effective instructional improvement.

In this article, we highlight what we have learned about shared instructional leadership through several studies.<sup>1</sup> First, we discuss three historical trends that give primacy to shared leadership orientations in schools. Next, concentrating on ways in which leadership influences teaching and learning, we make five observations about shared leadership that seem important for all schools. Each observation emerged as a pattern in our quantitative research. We accompany these comments with details of shared leadership from an elementary school and a high school that we have studied closely, to give a picture of what these patterns look like in actual school settings. Finally, we conclude the article with a discussion of the tension resulting from the unique leadership contributions of teachers and principals and consider how that tension contributes to better teaching and learning.

### **Shared Leadership**

Although shared leadership has extensive historical underpinnings in the organizational literature, it remains poorly understood (see Pearce & Conger, 2003, for a review of the relevant literature). In charting thematically the change from emphasis on an individual leader to recognition of the potential of shared leadership, Fletcher and Käufer (2003) traced three shifts in leadership thinking. The first shift describes leadership as distributed and interdependent. Rather than a set of attributes or behaviors found in formal, hierarchical leaders, leadership is a set of practices or tasks that can, and should, be carried out by people

at all levels of the organization (Firestone, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). The second shift points to leadership as embedded in social interaction. Essentially, leadership is created by leaders and followers together (Burns, 1978). It is a dynamic, multidirectional, collective activity that takes place in and through relationships and webs of influence among individuals who have common interests and goals (Drath & Palus, 1994; Wenger, 1998). The third shift emphasizes leadership within a process of learning—undertaken by individuals and by groups—that results in greater shared understanding and, ultimately, positive action (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Printy et al., in review). Leadership for learning calls attention to the importance of individual skill development (e.g., instructional strategies, self-awareness) and group process and relational skills (e.g., approach to conflict, openness, and vulnerability). Our approach to shared instructional leadership incorporates these three emphases as we seek to understand the instructional leadership contributions of teachers and principals.

### **Shared Instructional Leadership**

In a number of studies, we have found strong relationships between leading, learning, and teaching. In this section, we distill our findings into five observations about shared instructional leadership and bring the comments to life by looking inside two schools, an elementary and a high school, where shared leadership is highly developed. The first observation establishes a point of departure for thinking about shared leadership, the second and third observations elaborate teachers' and principals' leadership contributions, and the fourth and fifth observations discuss some results of shared leadership.

### **Interaction is the Basis for Learning and Leadership**

In schools with high quality teaching and learning, teachers interact regularly with their

colleagues: their teaching team, grade level team, members of their subject department, or the entire school faculty and administrative staff (Marks & Printy, 2003; Printy & Marks, 2004). Through their discussions and shared experiences, teachers establish a purpose for their work together, they develop clarity about what is valued and what their focus for the future is, and they establish ways of working together (Wenger, 1998). In effective schools, teaching is a social practice, not an individual one, and interaction with school colleagues is a primary source of teacher learning.

To benefit from learning opportunities within the school and provide opportunities for teacher leadership, relationships among administrators and teachers must be open and equitable. Our case study schools show evidence of this openness. At Ashley Elementary School, a K–5 urban school located in the deep South, faculty members comment on the encouragement, support, recognition, and appreciation they receive from other faculty members, as well as from the principal. They identify multiple sources of motivation—teachers who inspire them to tackle difficult problems just as the principal does. At Flinders High School, a large urban school located in the West, the principal is in and out of classrooms frequently, speaking individually with teachers. Openness among teachers reflects their desire to learn with and from each other. Professional development is organized and presented on-site by teaching colleagues, peer observations are frequent, and mentors work with inexperienced or struggling teachers. At both schools, equalized resources encourage collegial relationships. For instance, the Ashley principal took funding designated for the gifted/talented program and applied it to a schoolwide initiative instead. Flinders mentor teachers gave their release time to other teachers so the teachers could visit the classrooms of faculty members who offered to help them learn. Our case study schools offer evidence that trust, a defining characteristic of each school's climate, facilitates interaction. It also appears that trust deepens or becomes stronger with consistent interaction.

### **Teachers Make Important Contributions to Instructional Leadership**

Teachers need to talk with each other to better understand how to approach their work, including such things as what expectations they should have for their students, how to teach the new mathematics curriculum, what the revised professional development policy really means, and how they should respond to changing state standards (Printy & Marks, 2004). Depending on the topic of discussion, teachers meet with different groups, or communities, of teachers to learn how to be better teachers. Leadership within such learning communities is often informal and emergent; in fact, designated or formal leaders typically do not guide discussions (Drath & Palus, 1994). Rather, in helping fellow teachers make sense of the realities of their professional lives, certain individuals within the group come to be understood as leaders by other members of the group. These informal teacher leaders help their colleagues to clarify values, frame problems, set goals, argue respectfully, construct and test theories, reach agreement, and design documents that guide their work. Leaders are able to translate private or collective meanings publicly in a way that creates new frameworks for interpretation and understanding. Framing various contingencies in new ways helps teachers make sense of their situations. Skilled participation in such sense-making discussions makes leaders out of teachers.

At Ashley, for example, teachers freely ask questions at regular meetings of the School Advisory Council. Before prematurely taking sides on issues, teachers dialogue and seek to understand others' perspectives. The principal indicated that almost all conversation in the school is related to professional concerns. "We do a lot of it ... we're not afraid to ask about anything. We keep people well informed with the politics, budget, school board." Teacher initiative and participation in important decisions often takes place on smaller committees related to instructional processes. For example, fifth-grade teachers decided to hire full-time aides for their classrooms and to keep class sizes a bit larger rather than hiring another

full-time teacher. In another case, teachers arranged an isolated 2-year multiage loop to better serve a group of at-risk students and still meet district requirements for special education. Ashley teachers step into leadership roles in specific domains such as professional development, grant writing, scheduling, or advocating for at-risk students. According to the words of a teacher, “Every teacher has ... her own little story, her own little horn, her own something about her, and she wants to grow even more fully. I think we all have some unique something about us that we can share and give here.”

Many of the Flinders teachers served on a committee charged with establishing a set of educational specifications for the start-up of the school some years earlier. In the context of that committee, they provided initial leadership for school reform practices, the development of interdisciplinary units, and the piloting of the math curriculum. Flinders teachers value participation on committees, attendance at meetings, and other forms of involvement. One teacher exclaimed, “I love to be involved in decision making. ... I can be as involved as I want to. I think that’s true of other people. It’s a process that culls potential leaders and gives them a route to become leaders—like the team leaders. Good leaders are emerging from that.”

### **Principals Play a Pivotal Role in Instructional Leadership**

How school principals engage their teachers in school initiatives and concerns is critical in developing extensive shared leadership. Principals create conditions for teacher interaction, including structures and policies that formalize ways in which teachers are expected to work together and processes for doing so (Printy, 2002; Printy & Marks, 2004). Whether by invitation or appointment, principals control, to some degree, who sits on various committees or participates in other decision making settings. They establish teaching schedules that provide common planning time. They use and encourage processes that facilitate democratic decisions. For instance, at Flinders, a process protocol intended to bring discipline to the

exchange of ideas and to reduce personality conflicts is used without exception for all meetings. At Ashley, the staff feels fully involved in the decision-making process: “[Participation] makes you feel like a professional and also makes you feel responsible for the whole school, not just your class of students.” When the staff or committee is unable to reach a decision, the Ashley principal often refuses to make one, turning the matter back to her staff.

In addition to establishing structures and processes for teacher involvement, principals set goals and expectations for the school as a whole. When principals are involved in matters of instruction, curriculum, and assessment, they signal the importance of activities related to teaching and learning. When Ashley teachers propose something new, the principal asks a series of questions: Will the kids learn? How acceptable is it to parents? How will you inform the parents and the district? Speaking of this conversation, one teacher commented that the principal’s final agreement with a plan is accompanied by accountability for results. The principal’s expectations are clear and in the open, and there is general acknowledgement that her high expectations trickle down to teachers. The principal, in fact, believes that teachers provide each other feedback that leads to an internal sense of accountability. She says, “I think our pressures are internal. ... We could do half of what we’re doing and be successful, but it’s not enough for us.” The Flinders principal establishes expectations in large part by disseminating information related to academic matters:

I want to make sure when I’m [speaking to teachers at faculty meetings that] I’m talking about student achievement and what they are doing to help our kids be the best they can be. ... I have to keep it out there in the forefront. Grade distribution, GPAs. ... All of this information I’m bombarding them with so that they will know that this is important for us here at Flinders High.

In both schools, the principals monitor student learning closely to see that schoolwide expectations for learning are met, and they regularly pro-

vide feedback on the results to the entire teaching staff and to individual teachers as necessary.

Finally, principals who can inspire and motivate teachers are more likely to share leadership with teachers. One way they do this is by formulating a clear and simple vision for the school that encourages buy-in from teachers. Such a vision is often rather generic and open to individual interpretation. At Ashley, for instance, the vision most often expressed is: "All students can learn and teachers are responsible for helping them learn." At Flinders, the vision that the faculty communicate is: "Make success an everyday occurrence for all students." Although teachers say that they have common understandings about these statements, the ways teachers explain the vision vary widely within each school. Teachers interpret the vision situationally, in a way that makes sense for them. It is important that in both schools, the vision statements and the values that underlie them address student learning and equity. The statements focus attention and resources on instructional processes and also express the goal of academic achievement by all students. No matter how brief or how ambiguous, these commonly understood visions have moral power. It is perhaps the moral import of shared understandings that encourages teachers to extraordinary efforts even as they are subjected to relatively close supervision and monitoring. The moral component of a vision might be an explanatory factor in whether or not a principal is able to motivate teachers to engage in the difficult work that leadership for learning entails.

### **Shared Leadership Provides Coherence and Stability**

When teachers interact with each other frequently and when they share leadership responsibilities with administrators, strong norms and standards for their professional work take shape over time (Printy & Marks, 2004). Although individual teachers might employ different instructional strategies, common agreements tend to emerge about the content of courses, the pacing of instruction, and the level of rigor or intellectual challenge. These norms serve as a stabilizing force,

as they persist across academic years (Wenger, 1998). Principals, who have a broader view of the instructional program across the school, play an important role in assuring that teachers offer students a coherent educational experience.

In both of our case study schools, teachers earned their positions because they were perceived to be expert teachers. Recognizing their level of expertise, principals set high expectations for teaching, learning, and achievement, and hold themselves accountable for providing teachers the necessary resources and support to do their work appropriately. Teachers also establish more informal expectations for colleagues as to the kind of effort that earns affirmation and approval. At Ashley and Flinders, slack is not tolerated, and nonconforming teachers are largely ignored or pressured to leave. Concerned about the consistency of courses at the same level (e.g., Algebra 1), departmental leaders at Flinders encouraged the use of end-of-year exams to pressure lax teachers into meeting agreed-on standards. At both schools, teachers and administrators monitor student progress closely; at Flinders a school-wide committee also serves an oversight function.

Teachers, as this example shows, hold each other accountable to the social contract that emerges in the course of day to day practice. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999, p. 185) described this type of leadership: "It depends on granting the same liberty and opportunity to others that one claims for oneself, on telling the truth, keeping promises." By working together to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning remains at the standard that has been agreed on (even if informally), teachers and principals who share leadership ensure coherence and stability of the instructional program.

### **Shared Leadership is Essential for Innovation**

The powerful interpersonal dynamics described partially explain why schools are more likely to demonstrate incremental improvement than undergo substantial reform. The tendency to maintain the status quo through shared under-

standings and expectations actually serves to slow down learning that might result in dramatic, perhaps unwarranted, change. Nevertheless, innovation and improvement do occur in schools with shared leadership, with encouragement for change coming from principals and teachers (Marks & Printy, 2003).

The extent to which teachers interact with colleagues has some relationship to innovation. Formal learning arrangements (e.g., professional development, curricular committees, or problem solving sessions) put colleagues together to struggle with uncertainties and receive support, mentoring, and coaching—and ultimately—to learn new technologies that will improve their practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Even without formal arrangements, instructional improvement is more likely if teachers have the opportunity to meet with other teachers who have different ideas, such as teachers from other teaching teams, grade levels, or schools (Coburn, 2001; Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1995). In contrast, teachers who spend time with the same small group of teachers regularly are more likely to continue practices that have worked for them in the past (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). This is one reason why schoolwide involvement is an important contributor to change in educational practice.

Ashley Elementary and Flinders High School have structured occasions for teachers to present their ideas for feedback, help other teachers learn, and plan together. The entire Ashley faculty meets regularly during School Advisory Council meetings, where teachers report speaking freely. Due to the large number of teachers in the high school, all-faculty sessions are rare at Flinders; instead a core of teacher leaders (perhaps 20% of the faculty) serve on three or four committees each. This overlapping membership spurs the flow of information throughout the school and keeps teachers involved in, and abreast, of changes.

The principal's attitude toward innovation is also a critical factor. The Ashley principal encourages teachers to take risks in their teaching. One teacher commented, "If you're not in change mode, you're not serving kids." From another, "[The principal] want[s] you to take risks, so if

you do and you fail, it's okay. [She] likes to hear the fact that you tried." A belief championed at Ashley is that there are many instructional paths teachers can follow to get to the same destination. Flinders seeks to hire teachers interested in innovation. The principal focuses on removing barriers and securing necessary resources. According to one teacher, "He is here to support teachers. You don't find many principals who have that kind of philosophy, who make sure you can get your job done so that the students can succeed." Without principal encouragement for innovation, teachers might shy away from taking risks.

### **Conclusion**

Our investigations of shared instructional leadership show that principals alone cannot provide sufficient leadership influence to systematically improve the quality of instruction or the level of student achievement. Nor can teachers, even collectively, supply the required leadership to improve teaching and learning. Best results occur in schools where principals are strong leaders who also facilitate leadership by teachers; that is, principals are active in instructional matters in concert with teachers whom they regard as professionals and full partners. Where schools have the benefit of shared instructional leadership, faculty members offer students their best efforts and students respond in kind; they are organizations that learn and perform at high levels (Marks & Printy, 2003).

The patterns apparent in our quantitative research and the images of schools we present from our qualitative work suggest that shared instructional leadership capitalizes on tensions apparent in educators' work environments. For instance, both principals acknowledge the instructional expertise of their teachers, yet they monitor teachers' performance closely through student progress indicators. Teachers accept innovation and improvement as part of their professional imperative, and they appreciate autonomy to teach as they see fit. They also accept the rather extensive supervision of their abilities as instructors, which is sometimes accomplished through their teaching peers, instead of an administrator. It appears that there is

common agreement among the faculty members that being professional requires continual improvement of their instructional practices and constant surveillance of instructional outcomes to maintain critical standards of success and identify student learning difficulties early on.

Our interpretation of these data is that school leadership influences that promote innovation, professional discretion, and autonomy are in tension with commensurate leadership influences, assuring that current standards of learning and expectations for instruction are maintained. There is a push in each school for coherence and stability equal to the push for innovation and change. The schools give evidence of what Deal and Peterson (1994) called the leadership paradox; that is, rather than canceling out or undermining the other, the contradicting leadership tensions support and complement one another. In essence, principals and teachers find a way of balancing these opposites, drawing a unified whole from the contradictory tendencies toward stability and change. The vision statements of the schools give insight into what this essential value that unifies teachers might be. Simply stated, it is that every teacher should give every student the best education possible every day. With teachers and principals unified in this belief, the schools do not undertake innovation purely for the sake of change. Nor do they rest on current practice.

How principals and teachers contribute to the leadership equation in each school varies according to context and personnel. The contradictory movement toward stability and innovation of instruction by teachers and principals is evident in our quantitative studies, which involve large numbers of teachers and schools, so we expect these influences to exist in most schools. The qualitative case studies help us understand how and why these influences occur. When teachers and principals can balance the contradictory influences toward the status quo and intentional change, teachers are encouraged to improve their practice. Particularly when teachers share the belief that they can and must educate every student and when professional relationships are respectful and open, they learn to be better teachers. The effect is incremental improvement, steady and sure, rather than

unquestioned abandonment of current practice and quick embrace of extensive change. When instructional quality moves steadily in an upward direction, student learning is likely to follow a parallel path.

### Note

1. Quantitative studies of how teachers interact with each other use teacher and administrator survey data from the second follow-up of the National Education Longitudinal Study (Printy, 2002; Printy & Marks, 2004). The sample for these studies includes 2,718 high school mathematics and science teachers and their administrators in 420 schools. The studies of shared instructional leadership draw on data from a national sample of 24 schools in the School Restructuring Study (SRS) conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, including data generated with quantitative and qualitative instruments (Marks & Printy, 2003; Printy et al., in review). Qualitative data come from extensive case studies prepared by teams of SRS researchers who spent 2 weeks (fall and spring of 1 academic year) at each school site. For a full description of the SRS project, its schools, and major findings, see Newmann & Associates (1996).

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