

Schools as Professional Learning Communities: Simplistic Fad or Worthwhile Process?

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Abstract

There are multiple factors that affect student learning. As a means of dealing with these multiple factors, many governments have imposed top down accountability measures in the form of high stakes testing. This approach is viewed by some as being overly simplistic and counterproductive as it inadequately addresses the complex and systemic nature of the factors that either inhibit or facilitate student learning. At the same time, there is growing empirical evidence in support of the professional learning community (PLC) framework as a more meaningful approach to school reform. Unfortunately, the terminology, PLC, has been co-opted by many schools as the current label of choice where its implementation is little more than a pronouncement. This paper is an empirical study that explores the complexities of implementing the PLC framework and the role of formal leaders in the facilitation of collaborative leadership, an essential component of PLCs. It reports on the reanalysis of data and findings from six selected studies that the author and his colleague have conducted over the last decade or so (Brown & Sheppard, 1999; Sheppard, 1996, 2003; Sheppard & Brown, 2000a; 2000b, 2007). Four of these were case studies, one was a mixed method study, and one was a survey, non-experimental study. Findings reveal how formal leaders can facilitate collaborative leadership and how such leadership can contribute to the elimination of traditional barriers to the development of schools as PLCs.

Keywords: collaborative leadership, professional learning community, organizational learning, dialogue, shared decision-making, school reform

INTRODUCTION

In recognition of the systemic nature of the multiple factors that inhibit or facilitate school improvement, there has been a growing body of evidence that organizational learning is a promising vision for bringing about meaningful school reform (Fullan, 2005; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Hall & Hord, 2006; Mulford et al., 2004). As it applies to schools and school systems, the term *organizational learning* has been largely replaced by the term *professional learning community* (PLCs) with the latter term referring to a community of practice, such as a school or school board, which is engaged in organizational learning. While I share the optimism related to the potential of the PLC framework, I have observed that similar to previous terms, PLC has been co-opted by many schools and school districts as a simplistic recipe for success (Hall & Hord, 2006).

In reality, PLC is a complex innovation that must, itself, be implemented and that implementation is an inherently complex process. Essential to the PLC framework is the recognition of collaborative leadership that is distributed throughout the organization (Ogawa & Bossert, 2000); and is largely defined through “the interaction of leaders, followers, and situation” (Spillane, 2005a).

p. 149). The view of leadership as collaborative¹ or distributed is a particularly challenging aspect of PLCs (Kouzes & Posner, 2004; Sheppard, 2003a). Shifting away from the traditional hierarchical approach to leadership appears to be outside the existing knowledge structures of most school professionals, and even those who appear to be willing to accept its potential often have difficulty making the shifts required (Harris, 2005; Leavitt, 2003; Murphy, 2007; Sheppard, 2003a). "There are few precedents, few models, and no guidelines" (Lieberman et al., 2000, p.348) for those who wish to make the shift. Recognizing such a reality, Harris (2005) concludes that "it would be naïve to ignore the major structural, cultural, and micro-political barriers operating in schools...that make distributed forms of leadership difficult to implement" (p. 260). She suggests that formal leaders have a role in breaking down those barriers, stating that, "distributed leadership depends upon more formal leadership structures, [and that, in fact] distributed leadership is unlikely to flourish unless those in formal leadership positions positively promote and support it" (p. 261). The central purpose of this paper is to develop better understandings of the role of formal leaders in schools and school districts in the facilitation of collaborative leadership and organizational learning.

FORMAL LEADERS AND COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

In this paper the collaborative leadership approach refers to leadership that is transformational, inclusive, value-based, and focused on fostering organizational learning (Bass & Riggio, 2006; O'Toole, 1996; Sheppard & Brown, 2006). Inherent in this approach are two categories of leaders, the formal leaders and informal leaders or constituents² (Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Spillane, 2005b). The formal leader must attend effectively to the technical core as an instructional leader, and must attend as well to the administrative, managerial, and institutional systems that include the financial, legal, political, human resource, and symbolic roles (Barth, 1990; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Guided by a collaborative leadership approach, a formal leader is expected to establish and maintain credibility, understand the theoretical frameworks related to organizations, administration, and change, and be able to apply theory to practice within the differing contexts.

The role of the second category of leaders, the constituents, is essential to collaborative leadership. If constituents do not view the formal leaders' leadership behaviours to be appropriate, if they do not share a common vision, or if they feel ignored by the formal leader, they will neither share leadership, nor follow voluntarily (Blase & Blase, 1998; Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Lord & Maher,

¹ I refer to collaborative leadership as that which is required to facilitate organizational learning without any claim that this terminology best identifies all the characteristics articulated in the emerging research related to leadership or that it should be employed as the nomenclature for an ideal leadership model.

² I use the term *constituents* rather than *followers* consistent with Kouzes and Posner (2003) who believe that it better represents current understandings related to the relationship between formal leaders and others who within the traditional hierarchy have been viewed as followers.

1990; Marks & Printy, 2004). In fact, it is not unusual for disenfranchised constituents to lead in directions that contradict those anticipated by the formal leader. On the other hand, when constituents perceive that the formal leader holds high expectations for their leadership role, when they feel valued and supported, and are given opportunities to engage in dialogue, they develop individually and collectively as leaders and thereby contribute to the organization's leadership capacity and to organizational learning (Senge et al., 1994). High expectations, however, most often are confused with top down accountability that is focused on conformity and control. This top-down approach to high expectations creates stress, and is negatively associated with the development of constituents' leadership capacity (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Hendry, 1996). In a PLC high expectations are based on an assumption that "in the right atmosphere, people will contribute and make commitments because they want to learn, to do good work for its own sake, and to be recognized as people (Senge et al., 1994, p. 200). In order to create this "right atmosphere" it is essential that a formal leader consider the fundamental values and perspectives of constituents and demonstrate respect for them by "always [practicing] the art of inclusion" (O'Toole, p.37). Integrally linked to high expectations, respect for constituents and their perspectives, and their genuine inclusion as collaborative leaders is the existence of dialogue. Dialogue can only occur when equality exists (Bohm, 2007, Freire, 2004; Isaacs, 1999) and when constituents feel meaningfully involved, and valued and respected for their views.

METHODOLOGY

As a means of assessing how formal leaders can influence collaborative leadership practices in schools and school districts, I reanalyzed data and findings of six selected studies related to collaborative leadership and PLCs that my colleague and I have conducted over the last decade. Study One (Sheppard, 1996) was a survey non-experimental investigation focused on understanding the transformational effect of leadership behaviours of school principals. Study Two (Brown & Sheppard, 1999) was similar in design to Study One, but included both qualitative and quantitative data from a sample of 13 schools of differing types and sizes. It was focused on determining the relationship between collaborative leadership and organizational learning.

Study Three (Sheppard & Brown, 2000a), Four (Sheppard & Brown, 2000b) and Five (Sheppard, 2003b) were school case studies. Study Three was a two-year case study of an alternate school for young offenders where we employed a participatory action research model (Whyte, Greenwood, & Lazes, 1991) focused on understanding the factors that either inhibited or facilitated organizational learning. In Study Four, we developed causal networks (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in order to understand how leadership contributed to the success of two high schools that had national reputations as innovative schools. Study Five (Sheppard, 2000b) was a case study of 15 schools that

had been involved in a national project directed at the integration of emerging technologies into teaching and learning. The purpose of this study was to determine differences in leadership in three categories of schools: innovative, moderately innovative, and static. Finally, Study Six (Sheppard & Brown, 2007) was a five year case study of one school district superintendent who had committed to collaborative leadership and the development of the school district as a PLC. We employed an action research approach and assumed the role of critical friends in both the data gathering process and analysis.

Following procedures as outlined by LeCompte and Preissle (1993), I assembled and summarized data by individual study in order to identify central themes related to the interaction between formal leadership, constituents, and the situation. I compiled all identified themes in a matrix in order to detect commonalities or contrasts across studies that allowed for the development of conclusions that contribute to the understanding of the role of the formal leader in facilitating collaborative leadership and organizational learning.

FINDINGS

In Study Two, we found that collaborative leadership was not a common phenomenon. Most viewed PLCs as just another project, and even when school principals appeared to accept that PLCs would facilitate meaningful change, they were uncomfortable with shifting to a more collaborative leadership approach as they understood it to mean that the hierarchy would cease to exist and feared that it would result in chaos. Also, we found that it was nigh impossible for teachers to engage in genuine collaborative leadership activities without the endorsement of the school principal. In one school, for example, when asked to draw an image of leadership in the school, a member of the school development team drew an inverted triangle (see Figure 1). She placed the principal at the widest point of the triangle and explained that the width of the triangle base represented power. She placed herself as a tiny dot outside of the triangle tip at the bottom of her figure and explained that neither she nor other members of the school development team had any real influence. This revelation was disruptive to our thinking at the time. We had assumed that the development of a committed collaborative leadership team in a school could overcome obstacles imposed by the most dominant of school principals. While this might fall within the realm of being possible, it is an unlikely occurrence as the engagement of even the most enthusiastic constituents as leaders appears to be highly dependent upon the behaviours of the formal leader.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Study One provides further insight into the interaction between constituents and formal leaders revealing that the impact of the principals' leadership behaviours on the level of teachers'

commitment, professional involvement, and the extent to which they were innovative was contingent upon the extent to which teachers accepted the leadership behaviours or actions as being appropriate. The finding suggests that rather than something that can be imposed by the principal, the engagement of teachers as leaders result from an interaction of formal leadership behaviours and the teachers' existing "corridor of beliefs" that provide a filter through which they determine the appropriateness of the formal leader's behaviours. If teachers deem the behaviours or actions to be appropriate, they are more likely to engage as leaders in support of them.

Study Six findings are supportive of those in Study One. In Study Six we found a statistically significant positive relationship between constituents' perception of the extent to which the formal leader was supportive of a collaborative leadership approach and the extent to which they felt engaged in leadership activities in their school. Specifically, the level to which individual constituents perceived that the formal leader was supportive of collaborative leadership accounted for 44.8% of the variance of their feeling valued ($p < .001$); 33.3% of the variance of their perceiving to be engaged in dialogue ($p < .001$); and 16.8% of the variance of their feeling that formal leaders held positive high expectations of their contributions to the organization ($p < .001$).

In spite of the positive findings related to constituents' perceptions of collaborative leadership in Study Six, our qualitative analysis in the same study revealed that engaging constituents in leadership was quite challenging. Most school and district-level constituents were quite cynical of any mention of shared leadership and shared decision-making. They had heard previous commitments of this nature, but in practice, decisions were made through a hierarchical system of power and authority based on formal organizational roles (Bimber, 1994; Dunlap and Goldman, 1991; Hansen & Roza, 2005). As for dialogue, there was no precedent for it, and most perceived it to be synonymous with discussion or debate. We observed, however, that this scepticism and lack of trust was somewhat diminished through the development of two shared decision-making matrices (Wynn & Guiditus, 1984) initiated by the district superintendent. During the development of these matrices, formal leaders and constituents learned about and engaged in dialogue and consensus building processes, and the completed matrices redefined the power relationship between the district and schools and between formal leaders and constituents.

In Study Three, the most pronounced inhibitor to organizational learning was the absence of trust among constituents and between constituents and the formal leaders. Of seven distinct leadership groups, each appeared to be suspicious of the other, and only 16% thought that everyone's ideas were given equal weight. Intervention by one of the divisional directors led to the initiation of a PLC initiative and the establishment of a leadership team representing all constituent groups. Over the course of the two year period of the PLC initiative, the leadership team learned about organizational learning and focused on increasing the level of collaborative leadership.

Toward the end of this period, the leadership team was somewhat engaged in dialogue, levels of trust and the extent to which individuals felt valued had improved throughout the organization and the resulting improvement of the organization's performance was noted in a provincial government publication. Without the leadership of the divisional director and the assistant administrator's willingness to engage in a PLC initiative, it is highly likely that the lack of trust and dysfunctional behaviours would have continued. This finding suggests that formal leaders, other than just chief executive officers (CEOs), have an important role in the facilitation of collaborative leadership if they are empowered to do so. Even after realizing considerable success, employees varied greatly in the degree to which they were willing to engage as leaders, and the CEO continued to struggle to overcome his deeply ensconced mental model of hierarchical leadership that prevented him from meaningfully sharing leadership beyond the assistant administrator.

In Study Four (Sheppard & Brown, 2000b), both schools in our study had been transformed from traditional bureaucracies with low student achievement into high achieving PLCs through the active intervention of school principals who were committed to a collaborative leadership approach. While competent leadership provided by the initiating principals was important in both schools, sustainability of each school's success over a 10 year period was highly dependent upon the engagement of constituents in collaborative leadership and the appointment of successive principals (formal leaders) who were committed to building "systemically on what his/her successor had accomplished" (Sheppard & Brown, 2000b, p. 313).

In Study Five, six schools that had been identified as innovative displayed collaborative leadership approaches, more so than the other nine non-innovative schools. This study revealed that while the formal leader was important to the successful implementation of emerging technologies in teaching and learning, the leadership influence was greater when it was distributed. In schools that were most successful in altering classroom practices, the principals were champions of distributed leadership, rather than champions of the specific change initiative. In contrast, in both static and moderately innovative schools, leadership remained primarily the responsibility and prerogative of formal leaders who employed the traditional hierarchical approach to leadership. Without the encouragement or support of their school principal, teachers with the required expertise assumed little responsibility for leadership of the implementation outside of their own classrooms and when these individuals departed the school, implementation stalled.

CONCLUSIONS

Results of this reanalysis of six selected studies reveal that shifting to a collaborative approach to leadership and engaging constituents as leaders will not occur automatically as a result of decree or by just providing the opportunity. Formal leaders have a pivotal role to play in

facilitating the development of shared images of the role of formal and informal leaders and the interactions of those leaders within a collaborative leadership framework as it is applied to their specific organizational context. In the absence of such shared images both constituents and the formal leaders themselves are likely to be overwhelmed by “the inertia of deeply entrenched mental models” (Senge, 1990, p.77) of hierarchy. Evidence from the six studies reviewed in this paper suggests that it is highly likely that a formal leader who is committed to a collaborative leadership approach will encounter resistance from other formal leaders and constituents who remain webbed to the traditional hierarchy. The evidence is equally strong, however, that in spite of any anticipated resistance, a formal leader can facilitate the engagement of constituents as leaders by engaging in leadership behaviours that constituents perceive to be appropriate, by establishing a culture of collaboration and trust, by working with constituents to develop shared images of the organization they wish to create, and by eliminating the barriers imposed by the structures and processes of the traditional hierarchy.

Another finding from this work is that leadership is not zero-summed. In Study Two, Study Four and Study Six, an increase in constituents’ involvement in leadership did not lead to a decrease in the formal leader’s influence; rather, the opposite occurred. As leadership became more distributed over a larger group of constituents and as their level of influence increased, the extent to which the formal leader was perceived to provide leadership grew accordingly. While this is not a new finding, it’s importance must not be understated within the context of deeply held mental models of the traditional hierarchical structures in our schools and school boards that perpetuates a pervasive fear that chaos will result if formal leaders “give up” power in order to share it with constituents.

Findings presented in this paper suggest that formal leaders who are committed to collaborative leadership can influence constituents’ level of engagement in leadership. However, the facilitation of a meaningful level of collaborative leadership whereby both formal leaders and constituents are actively engaged in the facilitation of organizational learning requires much more than a simplistic pronouncement by either the formal leader or the constituents. Such a shift in leadership represents a complex “disruptive innovation” (Schlechty (2005) and attention must be given to the complexities related to its implementation. Simplistic adoption of the lexicon of collaborative leadership and PLC, and approaching implementation as an event is likely to result in a conclusion that “the new approach does not work” (Hall & Hord, 2006, p.5) when, in fact, it was not implemented in the first place.

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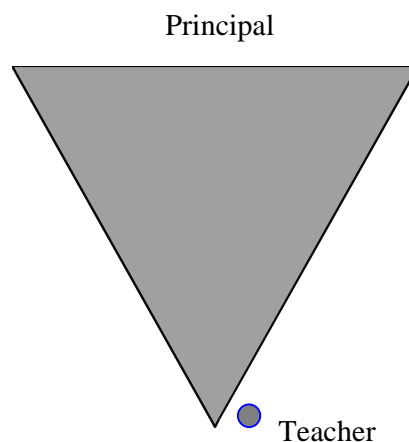


Figure 1: A Teacher's Depiction of Leadership