

Distributed leadership: Something new or something borrowed?

by Teri Talan

Distributed leadership is a hot topic in the educational leadership world. Much has been written about taking a distributed approach to leadership in K-12 schools, but does this approach add value to our understanding of effective leadership in early childhood programs? If so, are there lessons to be learned from the extensive research on distributed leadership that can help program administrators improve their leadership practice in early childhood settings, both in centers and in schools? The short answer is *yes* and *yes*.



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I have been immersed in the practice, research, and teaching of early childhood leadership for more than 20 years. I have been a director of an NAEYC-accredited early childhood center. I now teach and support directors across the country through my work at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, at National-Louis University. Over the past six years I have conducted training on the *Program Administration Scale*, a research-based tool for measuring and improving early childhood leadership and management practices in 25 states, as well as in Canada and Singapore. One thing I know for certain — the need for effective early childhood leadership has never been greater than in this time of global economic crisis, demand for standards-based practice, and increased accountability for program outcomes.

What is new and exciting about distributed leadership is that it puts *leadership practice* front and center. Most of what has been written on the topic of leadership is actually focused on leaders — their traits and characteristics. The vast majority of leadership literature quickly moves from the study of leadership to an examination of leaders; leadership is understood as leaders who are bold and dominant, charismatic and influential, or visionary and transformational. A distrib-

uted approach to leadership widens the lens to focus attention equally on leaders, followers, and specific situations. This broader perspective allows us to see the interdependencies between all three, which is the practice of leadership.

When leadership is understood as distributed, it is leadership practice that is stretched over leaders (the 'leader plus' is an important element), followers, and a particular situation (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). If this seems too abstract or theoretical, think about leadership practice as a dance — let's say a waltz or a tango. While the skill of the individual dancer is undeniably important, the quality of the dance is defined by the relationship between the dancers. We have all seen examples of poor quality dancing (if not, just turn on the popular television show "Dancing with the Stars") where one partner is truly outstanding, but the other lacks talent and grace. Or perhaps you have watched a dance where each partner demonstrates remarkable moves, but they seem to compete with each other rather than work as a team.

Dance, like leadership practice, is about the interdependency between the parts. With dance it is the relationship between the dancers, the music, and the audi-

ence. With leadership practice it is the relationship between leaders, followers, and the particular situation. Let's look at each of these aspects of leadership practice — leaders, followers, and situations — in greater depth.

Leaders

In a distributed approach to leadership, there is always more than one leader. Leadership is distributed among individuals who may or may not have role authority. In many early childhood programs, administrative supports have been greatly reduced or even eliminated. Where once there may have been an assistant director and an education coordinator to assist in program administration, in the current economy there is likely to be only one administrator at the helm to supervise, train, and support staff; build partnerships with families and the community; and oversee fiscal management and center operations. The obvious advantage of this 'leader plus' component of distributed leadership is that a program administrator gets support; no one leader has to do it all.

Followers

In distributed leadership, followers are a critical component. Sometimes the program administrator is the leader, and sometimes the follower. The same holds true for teachers and other staff members. Who leads and who follows depends entirely on the leadership activity being carried out. Leaders influence followers and followers influence leaders. Another way to say this is that leadership is not something that is done to followers, but rather, leadership is done with followers interacting with the situation.

Situations

The last component to consider is the particular situation. In a distributed leadership approach, the situation is

defined as the routines practiced and the specific tools and structures used in a program to carry out leadership functions (e.g., to create a unity of purpose or achieve identified program goals). In early childhood programs there are many routines practiced and structures or tools used. For example, there are classroom routines such as circle time, outdoor play, lunch, and napping activities; there are classroom tools and structures such as attendance logs, calendar, and curriculum plans. Our interest, however, is only with those routines, tools, and structures that support leadership functions.

What's new about distributed leadership?

You may be saying to yourself, "Big deal!" Shared decision-making (some may call it by a different name such as democratic leadership or participative management) is a familiar leadership approach that has been around a long time. However, distributed leadership is not a 'borrowed' leadership concept, but is truly something new.

For many years I have taught center directors about shared decision-making and the democratic leadership approach. What I have found is that many program administrators have great difficulty sharing their power and influence. When this reluctance is further explored, a resistance to sharing power or delegating authority emerges based on a fear about the quality of the work delegated. Sometimes directors will express concern about overloading teaching staff who already shoulder responsibility for teaching and classroom management. I try to help these directors explore possible strategies to overcome their fears and concerns. I stress that by sharing their power, directors are more likely to improve staff morale, build collaborative teams, and retain effective teachers. I point out that by delegating when appropriate, directors are freed up to

concentrate on the work that only they can do.

What I have come to realize, however, is that even when administrators do collaborate with their staff about programmatic decisions or delegate responsibility for work, it is seldom the decisions or the work related to leadership that is being shared. Taking a distributed approach to early childhood leadership begins with identifying the key leadership functions — helping the organization clarify and affirm values, set goals, articulate a vision, chart a course of action to achieve that vision, and meet adaptive challenges — and then recognizing how staff (leaders and followers) engage in this leadership work depending on the situation.

In 2007, I completed a case study of leadership in an early childhood learning organization (Talan, 2007). The following excerpt from this study provides an excellent opportunity to look at early childhood leadership from the distributed leadership perspective. The excerpt paints a picture of leadership practice that is stretched over multiple leaders whose roles shift between leader and follower depending on the situation.

My study of leadership in the early childhood program at Erie Neighborhood House actually began off-site at the home of the Child Care Program Director, Sandy. I was there to observe the administrative leadership team retreat, which occurred one week before my scheduled site visit. There were 15 participants in the administrative leadership team retreat: four directors, six managers, and five assistant managers. I later learned from Sandy that the 15 members of the administrative leadership team met monthly and rotated both the planning and facilitation of agenda items. By the time I had completed my fieldwork, I realized that the administrative leadership team retreat had provided a snapshot of an early childhood

learning organization, foreshadowing the findings of the full research study.

“Upon entering, I am handed an agenda and learn that the retreat has a name: Sowing the Seeds of Change. By mid-morning I am aware of another surprise; there does not appear to be anyone in charge of leading the overall retreat. Different names are listed next to each agenda item; they provide the introduction to the agenda topic, facilitate small- and large-group discussions, and then debrief or summarize any decisions made. Each agenda item concludes as scheduled and the leader/facilitator of the next agenda item just speaks up — without being directed to do so. I can’t recall a meeting where shared leadership is so effortless, and so evident.

“Throughout the day, there is a balance struck between solving problems (those experienced by families living in fear of the changes in immigration enforcement and those experienced by staff responding to changes in the state’s system of determining parents’ income eligibility) and reflecting on personal as well as professional change. There is time for presentation of new information, brain-storming of ideas, true dialogue before decision making, reflection, and increasing each person’s self-awareness.”

Paula Jorde Bloom describes three assumptions about collaboration that apply to an organization demonstrating distributed leadership: 1) The whole is greater than the sum of its parts; 2) People have a right to be involved in making decisions that affect their lives; and 3) People involved in making decisions have a greater stake in carrying out those decisions than do individuals who are not involved (Bloom, 2000).

Staff at the administrative leadership retreat clearly expressed their belief

that they are involved in decisions that impact their work and lives. The retreat provided a glimpse at the synergistic effect of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. A difficult decision was made at the retreat regarding the need to terminate children’s enrollment if families lose their eligibility for the program. The decision made with all 15 members of the administrative leadership team participating was likely to be better than if it had been made with fewer members. When staff members participate meaningfully in making a decision, they more fully understand the decision, they are more likely to work for successful implementation of the decision, and they are less likely to sabotage it. At Erie Neighbor House, the administrative leadership team is responsible for making many of the center-wide decisions and they make these decisions collaboratively.

The administrative leadership team retreat provides a clear example of distributed leadership in action. Over the course of seven hours, leadership is demonstrated by multiple staff members (who sometimes lead and sometimes follow the lead of their colleagues) accomplishing the work of leadership — setting direction, maintaining commitment, and meeting adaptive challenges. The administrative leadership team, with its inclusive structure of directors, managers, and assistant managers and established routines for meeting planning and facilitation, encompass the situation.

In an increasingly complex culture of change, it is important to increase an organization’s leadership capacity. Understanding leadership from a distributed perspective, with its focus on leadership practice, enhances the possibility for those with role authority and those without role authority to function as leaders. The lesson to be learned by early childhood adminis-

trators is to examine their leadership practice and create routines that expand the opportunities to share their power and influence with staff on the work of leadership.

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