EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

Interactions shape distributed leadership

By Valerie von Frank

James Spillane wants to change the way educators think about leadership. He wants educators to understand that the practice of leadership is not just one person's actions, but a leader's *interactions*.

Ideas about leadership have included descriptions such as servant leadership, team leadership, shared leadership, participative and democratic leadership. What's different about distributed leadership?

"We typically think of leading and managing as the actions of the principal or grade-level leader," said Spillane, a professor in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern

University and a leading expert on distributed leadership. "Practice is equated with what the individual does. But that's not the case. The practice of leading is not just what the principal or team leader does; it is also how others react. The principal acts and somebody reacts. The practice is in the interaction, just as the practice of teaching is not what the teacher *does*, but the interaction between the teacher and the student."

Spillane likens the idea to teaching someone the dance, Texas Two-Step, by relating to them the actions of one dancer and then of the other. Without understanding the interaction between the two dancers, one will not be able to learn the dance. In addition, the music — or context — is important to understanding why the dancers are moving as they do.

School leadership, then, is the

TOOL: Build a leadership team using a checklist to assess the knowledge, attitudes, and skills team members need to support high-quality professional learning, pp. 6-7.

Effective instructional leadership puts research into practice

I remember the day I officially became an elementary school principal. While the district marked the occasion with a vote by the board, it became official to me when the building engineer handed me the keys to the building. He cried as he placed the keys in my hand. Referring to the building's previous leader, he whimpered, "If you are even half the principal she was, I'll be shocked." Thus, my principalship had begun.

While I made a few attempts to be an instructional leader the first year, I knew I wasn't quite ready to focus my attention on the core purpose of my school: effective teaching and learning. As year one ended, I had to accept

Having the keys to the building doesn't guarantee effective school leadership.

the building engineer's assessment and recognize I needed professional development to become an effective instructional leader and attain the skills of the previous principal…or at least half her skills. I also needed to learn to whom I could turn for support as I sought to increase teacher instructional effectiveness and improve student learning outcomes.

As a field, we've learned much about effective instructional leadership and the systems of support needed to ensure it happens at scale throughout a district. In 1996, the Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders were developed. These standards, which were updated by National Policy Board for Educational Administration in 2008, present a clear and concise picture of effective leadership practice. The recent study from researchers at the Universities of Toronto and Minnesota, *Learning From Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning* (Louis et al., 2010), provides the field with even more evidence of the specific leadership behaviors associated with generating effective teaching practice and, ultimately, increased student learning outcomes. The study's researchers reported that leadership makes its greatest impact largely by strengthening a school's "professional community" – the environment where teachers work together to improve classroom instruction. Learning Forward's definition of professional learning is very clear about how this can look. (See the full Learning Forward definition of professional learning at **www.learningforward.org/standfor/definition.cfm**.)

Recent research has also provided the field with a clearer picture of how district personnel can better support principals and their leadership teams. The University of Washington study, *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement* (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Morena, 2010), shares strategies for completely re-culturing central office and linking everyone's practice in ways that directly support the work of building principals.

Yes, the field has learned a great deal since 1995. As members of the largest nonprofit professional association committed to ensuring success for all students through staff development and school improvement, it's our collective responsibility to put into practice all that we've learned. If we can do this, perhaps…just perhaps… building engineers across the country can confidently hand those keys over to new building principals without shedding a tear!

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Honig, M., Copland, M., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A. & Morena, N. (2010, May). *Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement.* Seattle, WA.: Center for the Study of Research and Policy, University of Washington. Available at www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/.

Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Walhstrom, K.L., & Anderson, S.E. (2010, July). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning.* Minneapolis, MN: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota. Available at www.wallace-foundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/.

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Learning approach bolsters instructional practices for early readers

Teacher Study Group: Impact of the Professional Development Model on Reading Instruction and Student Outcomes in First Grade Classrooms

Russell Gersten, Joseph Dimino, Madhavi Jayanthi, James S. Kim, Lana Edwards Santoro. *American Educational Research Journal, 47*(3), September 2010, pp. 694-739.

OVERVIEW

Researchers examined the impact of a particular professional development model, the Teacher Study Group, on 1st-grade teachers' instructional practices and knowledge in reading comprehension and vocabulary and on student achievement in these areas.

STUDY APPROACH

In the Teacher Study Group model, the researchers incorporated elements of research-based professional development, including the integration of conceptual understanding and practical application, sustained learning over time, collaborative peer interaction and support, and recognition of and coherence with existing demands and systems.

Selected findings

The Teacher Study Group model under examination included two 75-minute learning sessions a month, before or after school. During the sessions, teachers reviewed common material and discussed teaching strategies for vocabulary and reading comprehension. Teachers collabora-tively debriefed a previous lesson and planned a future lesson.

Impact on teaching practice: The teachers in the Teacher Study Group schools compared to those in the control schools showed significant improvements in teaching practice.

Impact on teacher knowledge: Teacher Study Group teachers out-performed control group teachers in teacher knowledge about vocabulary instruction.

Impact on student learning: Analysis of student results in the experimental group show marginally significant effects in the area of oral vocabulary.

Participant feedback on the experience: Most participants (97%) felt that the Teacher Study Group model was more useful than other professional development they had experienced; 72% of teachers felt that the model helped them in teaching reading.

Implications for school leaders

The researchers' literature review indicated that improving reading comprehension and vocabulary instruction are urgent priorities in reading. At the same time, they found that most professional development in reading doesn't cover these key topics. This indicates a clear need for high-quality professional development to fill this gap.

A goal of the research project was to help teachers use research-based instructional strategies within their existing curriculum, and the immediate applicability of the lessons made the learning experience useful. Consider how carefully integrated teachers' learn-ing opportunities are with their curriculum and instruction responsibilities.

The learning model was applied with the greatest fidelity in schools that had a core reading series. Without a core reading series, teachers didn't have common lessons to discuss and implementing collaborative lesson planning wasn't as meaningful. Consider how such experiences impact learning team composition in various contexts.

Researchers found that the role of the facilitator was critical in keeping study groups on task and in ensuring that all participants understood the main points of the research material. Consider the support and professional learning facilitators may require in team learning contexts.

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Key idea:

"Ultimately, improvements in student reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge may depend on designing interventions that are similar to the Teacher Study Group but are more intensive and provide a good deal of support in helping teachers learn how to think aloud about the comprehension process, how to provide feedback to students that encourages them to think through the material they read, and how to use student responses to promote increasingly sophisticated dialogue amongst each other about the meaning of the text and the meanings of words they are learning" (p. 729).

Continued from p. 1
interaction of the leader, followers, and the situation or context. The interaction is the crux of the matter when it comes to understanding the implications for professional learning and change, Spillane said.

"We typically think of professional development as taking a person, giving them new knowledge, dropping them back into school, and expecting them to transform practice," Spillane said. "They may have learned new actions, but when they go back into school, what they are doing is only part of practice because people react in particular ways. What those practitioners learned may not play out in the ways that they hoped for."

THE MEANS TO CHANGE

Spillane bases his concept on a five-year research project in Chicago elementary schools. The schools used tools, routines, and structures that led to change, from the school improvement planning process, to memos, scheduling procedures, and evaluation protocols.

"We always think about changing practice by giving people new knowledge or changing them in some way," Spillane said. "But we can also change practice by changing the situation.

"These everyday things we take for granted, like the protocols we use to observe teachers or curriculum meetings are not accessories to practice, are not about letting us practice more or less efficiently," he continued. "They change how we practice, change the nature of everyday practice. And we have to be cognizant of that."

For example, he discussed one school in which students kept folders for their teachers of their writing. Each teacher selected one work by each student for the principal to read every month, and the principal provided written feedback to the student and teacher, making the writing folders a leadership tool grounded in student learning.

"Principals, then, should consider how they use tools, routines, and structures that are the basis of the interactions of their leadership practice," Spillane said. "New organizational routines, such as learning walks or a principal reviewing writing folders, fundamentally change practice because they have the power to connect the work of leading and managing directly with what's going on in the classroom. They take principals into the classroom to see the work students are doing in a highly-structured way."

A DIFFERENT LEADERSHIP LENS

By understanding distributed leadership as more than sharing responsibilities among multiple people, explained Spillane, educators can begin to see implications for how leadership occurs and can be improved — to use the distributed concept as a diagnostic lens.

"Savvy principals know they have to engage other

Learning walks

When teams visit classrooms to observe specific practices, they help break down the barriers that often isolate some teachers and experience opportunities to see the bigger picture of effective practices.

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Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

Debunking leadership myths

According to Spillane, a number of common misunderstandings exist about the idea of distributed leadership, including:

Everybody's a leader.
"There's no reason everybody in a school *should* be a leader," he said. "A lot of teachers don't want to lead. That's not why they entered the profession, and we have to acknowledge that."

The more leaders you have, the better.
Research shows that at a certain level, more people involved yields diminishing returns. "It's about 'What's the task?' and 'Do we need more than one person to perform it given who I have available?'"

The principal's role is less important when leadership is shared.
"In every change," Spillane said, "the principal is the key figure."

Continued from p. 4

individuals in the work," Spillane said. **"**The buck still stops with the principal. The principal is legally responsible. That doesn't take away from the distributed perspective. There's tension (in delegating authority), but there's no way one person can have all the expertise necessary to do this job. If you work on the assumption that the buck stops with me, therefore I have to be responsible for everything, you're setting yourself up for failure."

School leaders identify where expertise resides and determine whether one person might be able to take responsibility for a task, or perhaps two or three people might be needed based on the demands involved.

"You have to acknowledge that you can't decree, 'We will do distributed leadership,'" Spillane said. "You have to create forums and opportunities for teachers to emerge as leaders and develop their leadership abilities."

For example, the principal in one school created opportunities for teachers to cycle through leadership roles by representing their grade-level teams in leadership team meetings, allowing them to develop their skills. At another, teachers in a breakfast club took on facilitative roles, and the principal began looking to the group to develop teachers' leadership skills. According to Spillane, an essential element is a sense of safety that allows developing leaders to be comfortable taking risks and sometimes failing.

"Most teachers get no leadership training," said Spillane, "so why would we expect them to have that?"

ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Spillane found that educators generally have become more grounded in their understanding of leadership. His research revealed that schools typically have four formally designated leaders. Policy makers, on the other hand, continue to look to a superhero principal to solve all a building's shortcomings, he said. One significant shift might be a policy approach that recognizes multiple leaders' responsibilities within the school in an adjusted legal framework.

In addition, understanding the interactive nature of leadership means that leadership development should move beyond an individual with a formal role to a school team, he said. His researchers are now working on professional development for groups from each school, including the principal, another administrator, and two teacher leaders, to implement a new organizational routine, a learning walk.

Finally, leader preparation programs need to prepare leaders to diagnose situations and design solutions, rather than simply to implement ideas, according to Spillane. "Leaders have to answer, 'What's the problem I'm trying to address?' and design a solution," he said. "A lot of schools say, 'Everybody else is doing this; we should, too.' Then you have the Christmas tree effect.

Distributed Leadership Studies

Spillane is principal investigator of the Distributed Leadership Studies, a program of research funded by the National Science Foundation, Institute for Education Sciences, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Spencer Foundation, which is undertaking empirical investigations of the practice of school leadership and management in urban elementary schools that are working to improve mathematics, science, and literacy instruction. For more information, see:

- www.distributedleadership.org;
- *Managing to lead: Taking a distributed perspective to diagnosis and design in school leadership and management*, by James Spillane and A.F. Coldren. Teachers College Press, in press;
- *Distributed leadership in practice*, by James Spillane and John B. Diamond (Eds.). Teachers College Press, 2007;
- *Distributed leadership*, by James Spillane. Jossey-Bass, 2006.

"There are lots of good ideas out there and we should use them," Spillane continued. "But that's inadequate. Diagnosis and design are at the very core of leading and managing schools."

Distributed leadership, Spillane notes, is more than a new label. It is not a blueprint for leaders to use in improvement, he said. Thinking about leadership practice as interactive, identifying expertise, using others' knowledge, and focusing on tools, routines, and structures can lead a school to be much greater than the sum of its parts.

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Building a leadership team:
Assessing knowledge, attitudes, and skills
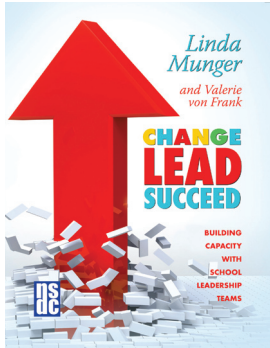
Change, Lead, Succeed: Building Capacity With School Leadership Teams shows school leaders and teachers in leadership roles how to redefine leadership in their schools and create capacity through school leadership teams that successfully coordinate professional learning.

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After you have developed a rationale to use with faculty and other stakeholders for why the school needs a leadership team, how the leadership team differs from other teams, and its role as a catalyst in school improvement and building capacity, you will need to begin selecting potential members for the team.

Use the descriptions of desired knowledge, attitudes, and skills in this tool to assist in selecting members who are clearly focused on student achievement through planning, implementing, and evaluating high-quality professional learning aligned with district and school improvement goals.

This tool will also help potential leadership team members understand the breadth and depth of their role, and help determine what ongoing professional learning they will need to continue their growth.

Purpose: To consider the attributes of potential team members and identify their strengths. Teacher leaders may assess their own knowledge, attitudes, and skills, along with areas for professional growth.
Time: 5 to 10 minutes.
Materials: Copy of the checklist.

Directions
1. Read each statement and check the box next to the description of knowledge, attitude, or skill in which the individual has a demonstrated strength.
2. Add to this list as team members continue to identify knowledge, attitudes, and skills in each other or qualities they feel team members need in order to support high-quality professional learning at the school.

Adapted from: Munger, L. & von Frank, V. (2010). *Change, lead, succeed: Building capacity with school leadership teams.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

The educator:

Knowledge	❑ Knows the standards for students, teachers, and professional learning. ❑ Knows how to collect and analyze a variety of student achievement data. ❑ Knows the demographics of the students and school that will inform decisions relevant to selection and/or design of professional learning. ❑ Knows how to select and provide effective professional learning through a variety of designs/methods. ❑ Knows how to plan and conduct formative and summative evaluation for professional learning.
Attitudes	❑ Believes that ongoing data collection of teacher implementation and student data allows for identifying strengths and areas for improvement. ❑ Believes that one role of a teacher leader is to nurture and support staff in implementing professional learning in the classroom.
Skills	❑ Is able to use student achievement data to identify strengths and areas of need to guide decisions about teachers' professional learning needs. ❑ Is able to use student and staff characteristics to guide decisions in planning professional learning (e.g. career stages to differentiate professional learning). ❑ Is able to design a school-based professional learning plan that is results-driven, standards-based, and job-embedded. ❑ Is able to engage in ongoing monitoring of implementation to provide feedback on the progress being made toward the goals of the collective focus. ❑ Is able to design an evaluation framework that includes evaluation questions, data collection methods, and data sources.

Adapted from: Munger, L. & von Frank, V. (2010). *Change, lead, succeed: Building capacity with school leadership teams.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

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JUST RELEASED

Teacher Professional Learning in the United States: Case Studies of State Policies and Strategies

In Phase III of our multiyear research study, the research team from the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education examined the policy frameworks supporting high levels of professional development activity in four states identified as "professionally active." The states – Colorado, Missouri, New Jersey, and Vermont – were selected based on evidence of high levels of teacher participation in professional development; a reputation in the literature for enacting reforms that are consistent with the research based on "effective" professional development; and improvements in student achievement as measured in the 2009 NAEP.

The report, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, provides informative snapshots from each state, key findings, and policy implications.
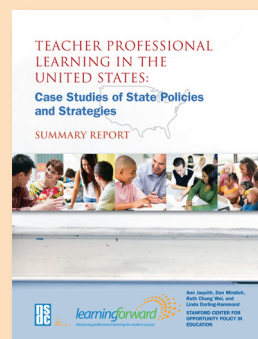
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