

Exploring How Teachers Assume Leadership Roles in the Era of Accountability

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Abstract

Many schools in the United States have adopted different types of distributed leadership to meet the increasing administrative and accountability demands of policy requirements. Distributed leadership places teachers in different positions based on different times and tasks, and gives them different authority to engage them in the most valuable leadership practice tasks. The federal government encourages teachers across the country to take on formal leadership roles while also retaining their classroom status. This paper explores the practice of leadership using a distributed leadership theoretical framework by exploring two case studies such as H Middle School to gain insight into how leadership is achieved by individuals' idiosyncrasies and the context in which they are located.

Keywords: distributed leadership, empowerment, teacher leadership

1. Define the Relevant Concepts

1.1 Empowerment

As British educational scholar Kirk said, "The quality of education depends on the quality of teachers, and all efforts to improve the quality of education or make schools more dynamic must be based solely on the improvement of teachers' abilities" (Gordon Kirk, 1988). Since the 1990s, empowerment as an important term has appeared in the literature of American education. Empowering teachers is conducive to promoting teachers' participation in teaching and management decision-making. At the same time, teachers will enhance their self-confidence, discover their own advantages, and think that they have professional knowledge and skills because leaders empower them. In this way, teachers can give full play to their strengths, participate in the decision-making of school affairs, promote school progress and improve school performance. According to Foix, teacher empowerment is "empowering individuals, having their opinions valued, influencing decisions or plans that concern them, and using their experience in the workplace to improve their own performance and, in turn, the performance of the organization" (Foy, 1994). In my opinion, empowerment is a dynamic process in which the objects of empowerment can be constantly adjusted according to different tasks. Its basic value lies in assisting the relatively disadvantaged members of the organization to enhance their own potential through actions and improve the surrounding environment and structure, so as to encourage the disadvantaged members to explore their own potential and jointly complete teaching activities.

1.2 Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership is a new educational leadership theory proposed in the 1990s and favored by many scholars and experts. Its basic idea is to rely on a variety of leadership resources within an organization to guide and complete tasks of different scale, complexity and scope (Gronn, 2002). In this view, he believes that in a specific organization, people work together to combine their efforts and talents, so that the collective results of the group are greater than the efforts of individuals, just as a Chinese proverb says — "The fire is high when

many people add wood.” Ogawa and Bossert believed that all members of an organization are capable of leading, and that leadership functions go far beyond the functions shared by each individual in the organization (Ogawa & Bossert, 1195). According to Gibb, distributed leadership is in other words a mode of collective leadership, a function shared by the group (Gibb, 1954). In contrast, James Spillane et al define distributed leadership as follows: In order to create an environment for teaching and learning, leaders cooperate with others to acquire, arrange, coordinate and utilize social, material and cultural resources in a specific environment, so that the various behaviors of all people in a school can reach a unified leadership sum (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, 2003; Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003). As can be seen, the focus of his analysis is on the practice of leadership, which is defined as “identifying, acquiring, allocating, coordinating and applying necessary social, material and cultural resources in order to create conditions for possible teaching and learning.” However, the principal and related leaders cannot succeed alone, so formal and informal leaders and their subordinates need to be mobilized to accomplish the changes that are significant to the school. Spillane also identifies three types of distributed leadership: collaborative, collective, and collaborative. Cooperative distribution is when several leaders work together to perform a specific task, and the results of one leader’s practice become the basis for the other leader’s practice. In this type of distribution, there is a reciprocal dependency relationship among leaders; Collective distribution refers to a practice of leadership in which two or more independent and interdependent leaders pursue a shared goal of common action. Collaborative distribution means that in order to complete certain leadership functions, in different leadership practices, different leadership tasks must have a specific order, that is to say, the dependencies between tasks and the responsibilities of leaders who have not completed tasks are sequential.

To sum up, distributed leadership focuses more on the independent or consistent behaviors of many individuals. This leadership framework provides a way to study the complexity of how many independent individuals and principals participate in improving teacher practice and student learning outcomes. Each individual in the school organization should have a clear understanding of their common leadership tasks and shared values, cooperate and trust each other, and break the tight hierarchy to establish a mutually trusted team, and jointly improve the quality of education and management of the school through purposeful management and effective communication.

1.3 Accountability System

The accountability system, as its name implies, is “to explain responsibility”. The accountability system of American public universities refers to the necessary reporting, explanation, proof and demonstration of the resources used and behaviors made by public universities to internal and external stakeholders, such as the federal government and the state government, based on their own mission and responsibility, so as to gain the trust and support of internal and external stakeholders. Information disclosure system to promote universities to better engage in teaching, scientific research and serve the society (Gao Linfeng, 2010).

1.4 Professional Development of Teachers

Teacher professional development is a process in which teachers, as professionals, continuously develop and improve in professional thoughts, professional knowledge and professional ability, that is, from novice teachers to expert teachers. The professional development of teachers requires teachers to become learners, researchers and collaborators; It requires teachers to have the autonomy of development, and emphasizes the development of individual personality and expertise, so as to give full play to individual potential (Hu Yi, 2009).

Since the 21st century, due to the intensification of competition for students in American colleges and universities and the looseness of enrollment scope and admission standards, the quality problems of American higher education have been obviously exposed. In 2000, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education Research released the “Higher Education Report Card by State” for the first time, assessing the performance of US states in five aspects (including school readiness, participation, retention and completion rates, educational outcomes and returns). The focus on the accountability of institutions of higher learning has changed from the rational use of funds to the measurement of educational output and results (Yanming Han & Mingguang Zhang, 2017).

2. Case Study

2.1 Illustration of Case 1 — Taking H Middle School in the United States as an Example

H Middle School is a mountain school located in Tennessee, USA. The school has eight grades. In 2007-2008, there were 507 students in fifth grade, of whom 74 percent were white, 20 percent were African American, and 6 percent were Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Islander. Of those students, 42 percent were born into economically disadvantaged families, 1 percent needed to learn English, and 13 percent had a variety of learning or physical disabilities. The school’s faculty staff includes 35 highly licensed teachers, 10 paralegals, one counselor and two administrators. Even after the establishment of the new campus, the school gymnasium still displays the honor of

a legendary former basketball coach, who was successful because of his ideals. The school uses this event to teach students the importance of ideals and character. (Fan Fan, 2011)

It is understood that teachers in this school can decide the time and order of teaching by themselves, and consult with teachers in other disciplines. The principal will ask teachers to set aside one hour a day for meetings, which will cover students' learning goals and learning status. The school recruits new teachers every year to meet the corresponding teaching needs. The principal requires teachers to establish a good cooperative relationship with the team first, and tells each teacher to love and be compassionate to children, regardless of their social background and economic conditions; Second, they should visit their families at least twice a year and actively keep in touch with parents.

2.2 Case Study — Application of Distributed Leadership

First of all, the principal of H Middle School gave teachers the right to freely decide the teaching content and consult others, which shows that the management of the school is democratic, and the management department relies on a professional team of teachers, knows the students closely, and personally meets all the reasonable needs of the students. In interviews, several teachers said that the principal was flexible and relaxed, shared teaching methods with them, did not interfere too much in teachers' decisions, and was present whenever needed, which also improved the effectiveness of teachers' self-management. If a student makes a mistake, the school will inform the parents and discuss together how to solve it, rather than leaving it up to the teacher to decide individually. Before the situation is resolved, the teacher informs the principal of their plan so that the principal can make appropriate recommendations. It follows that Secondary H's organisational structure is based on teacher empowerment and trust, and the interviewed teachers believe that this organisational structure improves not only student achievement, but that of the school as a whole. This organizational structure eliminates traditional hierarchies and is a work environment where teachers can speak up and stand out without fear of suspicion and jealousy. Instead, the structure is proactive, with teachers voluntarily reporting to the principal on their work during the school year, while the principal makes suggestions in order to make improvements that will enable the school to move forward.

Second, in terms of organisational culture, every school shares common performance goals. The principal of H Middle School stated that his working philosophy is to work with others. In an interview, the principal said, "I need to put my arms around my faculty and make them work together as a team, and teachers need to embrace their students and teach together in the same way." In this case, the principal's daily meetings discuss student performance and learning goals. The teachers believe that such a team is similar to a football team, where all the members are working together in the same direction. The teacher provides positive support not only to the students, but also to the school and the community as a whole. (Fan, 2011) The reputation of the school is getting better and better in the whole community, prompting more and more parents to send their children to the school, forming a virtuous circle, in this circle, the teachers of H Middle School feel the trust from all sides, resulting in a sense of achievement, and all stakeholders in the organization are moving in the same direction. The principal is willing to delegate power and encourage his subordinates to practice leadership, which not only taps the potential of teacher leadership, but also promotes teacher professional development. On the contrary, if the principal is unwilling to give up his rights and despotism to his subordinates, he will also fail to gain the subordinates' recognition and gradually lose their self-confidence, forming a negative working atmosphere, which is not conducive to the development of the organization.

In H Middle School, decisions are always made by everyone through discussion, thus creating a culture of honesty and mutual help. As we all know, trust is particularly important in distributed leadership, which is related to how the leader should assign work and whether subordinates will accept the work. In H Middle School, teachers strongly believe that their voices can be heard by their superiors, so they often actively make suggestions to the school on how to improve student performance, and their suggestions are correctly evaluated. The principal and leaders also believe that the original intention of teachers is to put students first and improve student performance as the starting point. They firmly believe that the suggestions provided by teachers are the best choice for the school.

Although the daily work is intense and many students need special attention in study and life, the teachers never complain and finish their work in a happy time.

Thirdly, from the perspective of interpersonal relationship, when new teachers come to school in general schools, the principal will tell them the goals they need to accomplish in the year, especially the efforts to improve students' exam results and the relevant school rules, which makes the teachers feel greatly stressed. In this case, it is pointed out that after a new teacher enters the school, the principal will first tell him to establish a cooperative relationship with the team, so as to establish a harmonious interpersonal relationship with the team members, which will make the teacher feel that his personal initiative is respected, and following the rules and regulations of the school is also for the better development of the school. The teacher feels a sense of ownership

in the management of the school, and then shows this sense in the work. When a teacher accidentally makes a wrong decision, the principal and his team members will not blame but help at first, arranging for a teacher who is good at this skill to communicate and negotiate with you. At the same time, you can also learn from the mistake and prevent such mistakes from happening again.

The principal's first priority is not to directly improve classroom teaching and student performance, but to set goals, nurture a culture, and develop a learning community with shared values. As can be seen from this case, the practice of the principal of H Middle School is conducive to the development of teachers' leadership. Teachers are willing to contribute their time to assume leadership responsibilities, and they have acquired skilled skills under the long-term democratic and free working atmosphere. Teacher leadership often exists in a variety of formal and informal cooperative environments. The teacher team of H Middle School works together for the development of the school and develops in a better direction. The principal will often provide teachers with some methods to promote their success, encourage the work of teachers, teachers will get the support of the school; The school will also promote the cooperation among teachers through various activities to promote the formation of a good interpersonal relationship between teachers.

2.3 Effect of Distributed Leadership Implementation

To sum up, distributed leadership has a good effect in H Middle School in the United States. As can be seen from the case, the school not only has a large number of racial students, but also has no racial conflicts. Moreover, students get along well with each other, and teachers and leaders can also coexist harmoniously. From the outside, such an atmosphere can be easily created. In fact, it is not easy to create such a working and learning atmosphere, but it needs a leader who is willing to delegate power, easygoing and encouraging teachers' behavior. Such a working atmosphere encourages teachers to make suggestions for the development of the school and devote their own time to serving the school. The social image of H Middle School has been praised by parents and the community, and the development of the school is getting better and better. Such an effect is hard-won.

Distributed leadership has played an important role in promoting teachers' professional development. Teachers in H Secondary School have greatly enhanced their own professional development capacity through empowerment, such as:

First, the supplement of academic knowledge. In order to improve students' performance, it is not enough to only teach the knowledge in textbooks, but also to expand extracurricular knowledge, improve students' hands-on ability, exercise their innovative thinking, and train their logical thinking. This requires teachers to supplement their own professional knowledge, with their own unique teaching methods to impart knowledge to students, but also to improve their own theory and scientific research level.

Second, the improvement of self-regulation ability. As a middle school teacher, they need to face a huge workload and work pressure every day. It is understood that middle school teachers can hardly go to work on time, which causes teachers' burnout in the long run. The overloaded workload makes teachers unable to carry out teaching management practice after class. At this time, you need a relaxed and harmonious working atmosphere to relieve such pressure, so that teachers feel in the pleasure of work, is conducive to the teacher's physical and psychological dual adjustment, with a positive state to meet the work of the next day.

Third, improve teachers' leadership skills. The management of the school generally follows the bureaucratic organizational structure, with a clear authority level with clear powers and responsibilities. Each post at a higher level controls and supervises the post below it, and there are written rules and regulations at all levels of the organization to control the behavior of members, which makes it impossible for teachers to directly participate in the real management. After the implementation of distributed leadership, teachers are free to put forward suggestions on school management and development, which is conducive for leaders to pool their wisdom, gather ideas from all sides, comprehensively consider pros and cons, and finally integrate and form implementable measures. It is conducive for teachers to understand the work of leaders and obstacles encountered in work, and to think about various aspects in their own shoes. It not only exercises their organizational and management ability, but also can better complete their own work.

Fourthly, it is also conducive to improving students' academic performance and school performance. In the final analysis, the various measures implemented by the school are for the development of students, thus improving the performance of the school. When students see the cooperation and communication between teachers, they will imitate their behavior and establish a cooperative relationship with their classmates. In this way, communication between students and teachers will be strengthened. During the class, the teacher will not lecture all the time, but will teach the autonomy of learning to the students, let the students participate in teaching, independent exploration, not only expand the students' thinking ability and improve the enthusiasm of learning.

2.4 Illustration Case II — The Principal of Cedro Primary School

This case was conducted in a large urban school district in Southern California. Principal Altavia (not her real

name), a former teacher, instructional coach, and assistant principal, has been principal of Sedroe Elementary School (not her real name) for six years, where 72 percent of the high-poverty, predominantly Latino students, 99 percent of the student body, are enrolled. 50% of the students are identified as English language learners (Jack L. Gardner, 2019).

Principal Altavia now faces the daunting challenge of stemming the decline in student achievement and closing the gap between them, and has seriously reflected on how to engage teachers as leaders in a collective and focused way to address this gap. He then developed two initiatives, namely purposeful goal setting and periodic analysis of data, which he believes will have a direct impact on teaching improvement and teacher practice over time.

The SMART teaching goals implemented by Principal Altavia prompt teachers to maintain a focus on teaching and hold teachers accountable for student progress. He advocated eliminating barriers and depriving teachers of opportunities to practice. Over time, the principal established a quarterly data analysis cycle for dialogue with teachers, and teachers formed a common teaching focus to improve teaching and promote student progress. Gradually, the principal saw that the teachers started to share, started to take responsibility, started to lead and develop strategies, and that was the key to how we started to see student achievement improve. The Principal encouraged and supported teachers to take responsibility for creating and leading professional development activities at grade and staff meetings as a way to build their capacity and enhance their ability as leaders, and he believed that professional development at work was conducive to developing the belief in teacher leadership. After a few months, many teachers began to take up Principal Altavia's call to assume leadership roles in the school (Jack L. Burwell, 2019).

2.5 Case Study

First, from the perspective of teaching improvement, in this case, Principal Altavia understood the importance of maintaining improvement in teaching, improving academic performance over time, and consciously improving their practice in dialogue with teachers to influence students' learning. Strategic use of programs such as goal setting, data analysis, and ongoing data dialogue to connect himself and the teacher in personal ways to maintain a focus on teaching and goals that affect student learning. The leadership practices resulting from implementing these measures help strengthen the commitment of administrators and teachers to improving teaching and learning (Bredeson, 2013; Spillance, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

Second, from the perspective of supervising classroom teaching, the principal in this case formulated the teaching improvement framework and teaching objectives, and conveyed to the teacher that the purpose of setting teaching objectives was to make the teachers' reflective questions start from why the students did not make progress, set relevant objectives to help them make progress, and put forward suggestions for the teachers' practice, asking them to improve the teaching methods and the leadership of the students. After teachers feel the support of the principal, they will feel that their behavior has been paid attention by the principal, and they all agree with the leadership culture of the school, which encourages teachers to actively innovate and assume leadership responsibilities, and helps teachers to actively improve their teaching methods to further improve the quality of classroom teaching.

Thirdly, from the perspective of promoting cooperation, in order to create a better learning atmosphere in the school, teachers can not only participate in data analysis, but also teach each other how to use data to determine the goal of improving teaching. Principal Altavia provides teachers with the opportunity to participate in planning, goal setting and data analysis, so that they can learn about the way the school is managed, develop their leadership potential and increase their self-confidence.

Fourth, in terms of supporting teacher leadership development, distributed leadership plays a particularly important role in improving teaching and learning. In this case, Principal Altavia asked teachers to promote the faculty meeting, instead of relying on the principal to promote it, which could be used as a method to build teachers' leadership ability and promote teachers' autonomy in teaching improvement. Instead of making decisions alone, the principal tries to create an equal opportunity for dialogue between himself and the teachers, allowing the teachers and their team members to participate in the classroom improvement work, which not only keeps the teachers teaching, but also cultivates the teachers' leadership and practical ability. And Principal Altavia has identified the key to closing the gap in student achievement — with strong leadership, providing opportunities for everyone in the school to take direct responsibility for and influence classroom improvement efforts, and establishing accountability.

From the organizational level, each school has a complex affairs and a huge system, and it needs to add members with various talents to the leadership team to strengthen the management of the school and promote the efficient operation of administrative tasks. Distributed leadership emphasizes the situational nature of leadership action. Environment and context are not external factors of leadership behavior, but one of its constituent factors.

Distributed leadership mainly refers to the daily work of school leaders, such as monitoring class quality, analyzing student achievement, and formulating teaching strategies. Second, distributed leadership emphasizes the openness of leadership boundaries and is practiced under the interaction of leaders, followers and their scenarios. It requires that leadership power be distributed scientifically and reasonably among multiple leaders. This distribution is dynamic and varies with the style, school culture, scale and other factors of leaders. For example, the two cases in this paper are based on the democratic leadership model. It can be seen that this kind of leadership model has narrowed the communication between principals, teachers and their subordinates, and is more conducive to promoting the innovative development of schools, breaking the rules and regulations of traditional leadership.

To sum up, school leaders must possess certain leadership skills and knowledge that enable them to cope with a variety of challenges. Through the analysis of the above two cases, it can be seen that the use of distributed leadership is beneficial to provide school leaders with opportunities to narrow the gap between students, provide teachers with opportunities to participate in school management, improve language learning ability and enrich cultural diversity, and that teachers demonstrate leadership through observation and participation, and support the establishment of leadership practices in their teams.

3. Obstacles Encountered by Distributed Leadership in Practice

On the one hand, the development of globalization has gradually established close cooperation between schools in one country and schools in other countries. Coupled with the development of the COVID-19 epidemic, it can be said that team members or teams want to meet each other, which poses new challenges to schools and requires leaders to provide new information and communication solutions, such as establishing online conferences for regular communication. Distributed leadership empowers teachers to lead their teams to practice and formulate relevant policies. While improving their autonomy, distributed leadership may also lead to abuse of power by some teachers, damage the organizational structure, and may even lead to its collapse.

On the other hand, school leaders face great challenges in improving the quality of teaching and meeting the growing needs of students. Therefore, others must be attracted to participate in this work. If the work is concentrated on just one or two people because they have formal leadership roles, instead of widely distributing the work across the whole school, it is necessary to focus on them. The plan to accomplish the project objective is likely to fall flat or even fail. Let us know that the principal cannot take on the difficult task of improving the school as a lone practitioner. His leadership must focus on inspiring and empowering other individual organizations for effort, action and improvement. Then new problems arise. When principals communicate with subordinates, most of them can only be perceived by the common heart of school members, which is difficult to form words and difficult to understand, which requires teachers to constantly explore the meaning conveyed by superiors in practice, which is undoubtedly a challenge for leaders and individuals, and requires their constant run-in and communication.

Finally, the current organizational structure of most schools is still a bureaucratic organizational structure. The higher departments cling to their power and dare not delegate power to the lower levels, which is not only a major obstacle to the implementation of distributed leadership, but also hinders the pace of teachers' professional development. If distributed leadership is implemented, it is expected to break these decades-long organizational structures and re-establish a flexible mode of operation, which is another challenge for leaders.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

Under the traditional leadership model, the relationship between school members is mainly affected by power. For a long time, teachers' self-confidence and initiative have become the norm. Members of various departments focus on their own interests and lack communication and understanding, resulting in an untrustworthy relationship, resulting in low efficiency of administrative work and inhibiting teachers' professional development. Distributed leadership not only emphasizes the role of principals in school development, but also pays more attention to the collective role of school leaders, which is mainly carried out by empowering teachers to a certain extent. In the United States, teachers are empowered to increase teachers' professional knowledge from three aspects: management, school leaders and teachers themselves. Teachers help each other through continuous learning, and their teams form a learning organization on campus. In this organization, the leader empowers the teachers and ensures the active participation of the subordinates by creating a common vision. By exploring the two cases in this paper, we can find that distributed leadership can not only discover teachers' learning ability, but also have synergistic effects, which is conducive to the close combination of theory and practice. It pays more attention to not only the "what" but also the "how" of leadership, which enables teachers to discover how the "theory" of leadership works in practice. And they can intuitively discover its problems. The exemplary behavior shown by leaders helps to create an organizational climate related to lifelong learning and to facilitate

the creation, dissemination and development of ideas.

School administrators should lay down their shoulders, strengthen communication with subordinates, and master distributed leadership skills by sharing power and responsibilities. As a result of the transfer of power, the organization is freed from the centralized structure, and the efficiency of decision making will increase. In the organization, teachers who are given power and responsibility may be more willing to learn, from this point of view, distributed leadership makes sense, and the school staff will also consider them important, attach more importance to their professional development, and the motivation will increase accordingly. After being empowered, teachers should actively devote themselves to their work, give full play to their own strengths, accumulate professional knowledge, report their work to leaders regularly, boldly put forward their own suggestions for school development, and establish communication with students and parents. Only with the combination of these two, can the school move forward.

4.2 Suggestions

First, break the bureaucratic management system and abolish school administrative levels. Co-management of schools by principals and teachers should be advocated, and academic organizations should be sound and perfected.

Second, the system of open selection of principals should be implemented. The principals should be selected through election, adhere to the principle of openness and transparency, and select on the basis of merit to enhance their credibility.

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