

Sustaining Distributed Leadership:

*Lessons learned from a case study
of Delaware middle schools*

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Introduction/Background

- School administrators who engage in top-down, coercive management styles without allowing for discussion or negotiation risk engendering negative atmospheres and resentment (Law, Galton, & Wan, 2010; Rice, 2006; Storey, 2004).
- What feasible alternative approaches to “traditional” leadership styles exist?
- 2005: Wellbrook SD received 3 year, \$25,000 DEDOE mini-grant to implement **distributed leadership**

Distributed Leadership

- “...not a blueprint for leadership but rather a framework for thinking about leadership” (Spillane & Orlina, 2005)
- A culture of professional collaboration (Angelle, 2008; Klar, 2012; Law et al., 2010; Park & Datnow, 2009)
- A supportive, constructively critical, collegial professional environment with multiple, pervasive opportunities for professional growth (Angelle, 2008; Helterbran, 2010; Klar, 2012; Law et al., 2010; Mascall et al., 2008; Park & Datnow, 2009)
- A wide spread of decision-making authority (Angelle, 2008; Leech & Fulton, 2008; Park & Datnow, 2009)

Distributed Leadership

- Clearly defined mission and vision, including common vocabulary and agreement on what constitutes progress theretoward (Goldstein, 2007; Park & Datnow, 2009; Rice, 2006)
- High degrees of trust and open lines of communication between teachers and formal leaders (Angelle, 2008; Harris, 2003; Helterbran, 2010; Hulpia et al., 2011; Mascall et al., 2008; Park & Datnow, 2009; Rice, 2006)
- High degrees of investment in implementing distributed leadership, from both teachers and formal leaders (Angelle, 2008; Harris, 2003; Helterbran, 2010; Park & Datnow, 2009; Timperley, 2005)

Problem Statement

Nearly ten years after Wellbrook received a grant to implement distributed leadership practices throughout the district, it was unknown if the promising practices still existed in the district.

If so, which ones, and why?

Purpose of the Study

- To provide a thick, rich description of distributed leadership practices at a mid-size suburban Delaware school district
- To explore, per Spillane et al. (2004), the *hows* and *whys* behind building-level distributed leadership practices
- To examine staff attitudes and perceptions relative to the impact of distributed leadership practices on school climate in their district

Need for the Study

- No studies conducted since Buttram & Pizzini (2009)
- Research literature emphasizes theory, not practice (Dean, 2007; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Spillane et al., 2004)
- Gaps in research literature on concrete examples of successful distributed leadership practices (Dean, 2007; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Spillane et al., 2004)

Research Questions

- How is distributed leadership practiced in Wellbrook School District?
- Why does Wellbrook School District engage in distributed leadership practices?
- What are faculty and administrator perceptions regarding the impact of distributed leadership practices on school climate in Wellbrook School District, and do they vary by sub-group?

Literature Review

Value of Relationships

**Impact of Teacher
Perception on DL**

Procedural Concerns

Research Design

- **Mixed Methods**
 - Qualitative and quantitative methods complement each other
 - Mixed methods research designed specifically in response to “observed limitations of both qualitative and quantitative designs” (Caruth, 2013, p. 113).
- **Descriptive, single case study: Wellbrook School District**
- **May – July 2014**

Participants

- **Quantitative Phase: May-June 2014**
 - Current district employees from two middle school buildings in WSD: Aponte MS and Banniman MS
 - Distributed Leadership Readiness Scale [DLRS] completed by 68/135 possible respondents (50.37%)
- **Qualitative Phase: June-July 2014**
 - District: Superintendent & assistant superintendent
 - Aponte: Principal, assistant principal, five faculty
 - Banniman: Principal, assistant principal, three faculty

Sampling Strategy

- **Quantitative Phase**

- **Purposive sampling:** derived from populations specifically chosen by the researcher in order to gain insight into or better understanding of phenomena (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007)

- **Qualitative Phase**

- **Purposive & snowball sampling**
 - Snowball sample increases likelihood of finding willing participants; deeper & more open interviews than with random interviewees (Small, 2009)

Data Collection: Quantitative

Distributed Leadership Readiness Scale (DLRS)

- Mission, Vision, & Goal
- School Culture
- Leadership Practices
- Shared Responsibility (Gordon, 2005)
- Additional items on school climate

Data Collection: Qualitative

- **Comparison**

- Interviews conducted via online videoconference or in person
- Field notes
- Small group interview

- **Recording**

- 14 interviews audio recorded, 12 interviews video recorded

- **Transcripts**

- All interviews transcribed and provided to interviewees for review & clarification

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative**

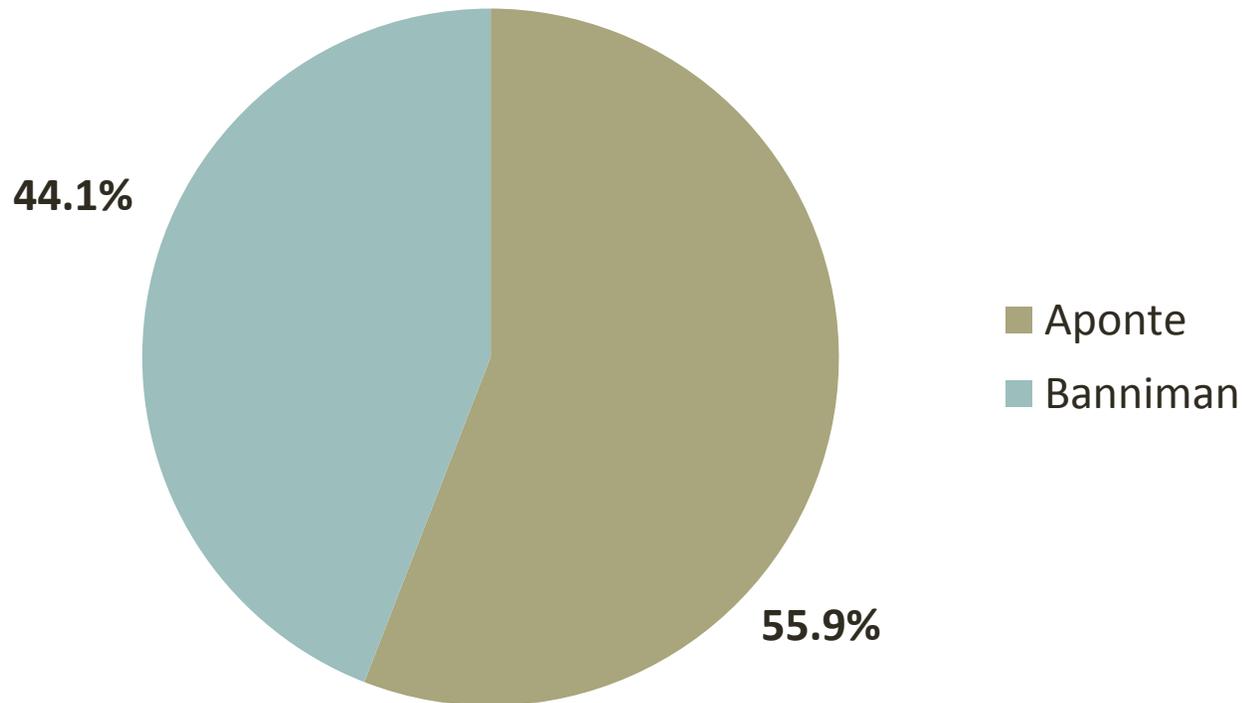
- Highest & lowest rated items per domain
- Compare high and low responses between multiple sub-groups
 - Admin v. non-admin
 - Aponte v. Banniman

- **Qualitative**

- Constant comparative method
- Open coding
- Axial coding
- Selective coding

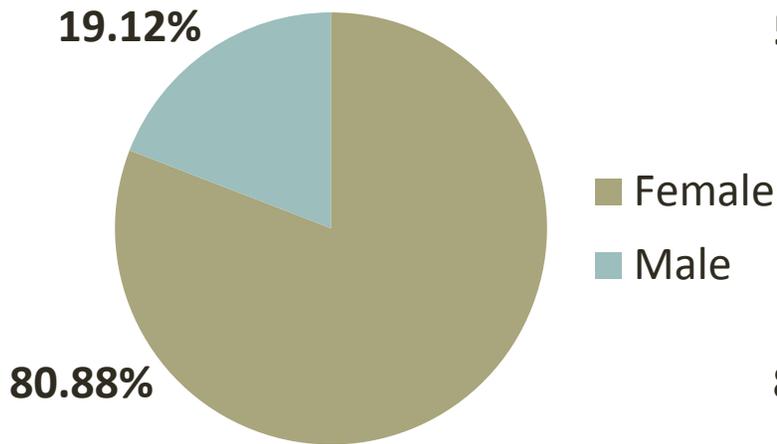
Participant Demographics

DLRS Respondents by Building

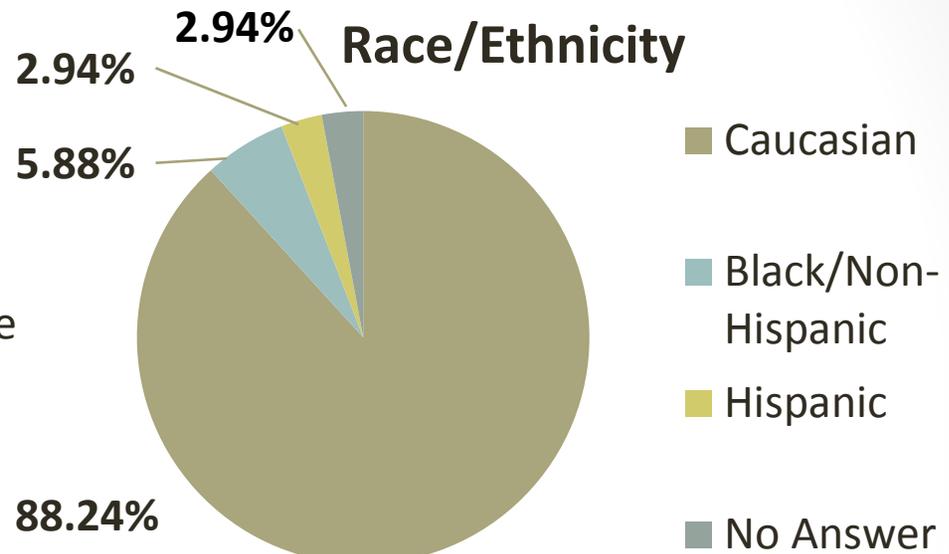


Participant Demographics

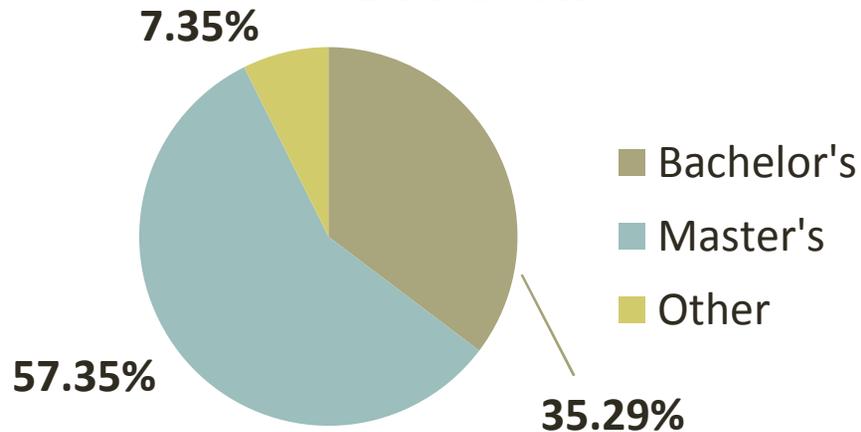
Gender



Race/Ethnicity



Education



Results

ITEM	PERCENTAGE 4/5 RESPONSES
The school has clearly written vision and mission statements.	97%
The school's curriculum is aligned with the state's academic standards.	97%
Teachers and administrators understand and support a common mission for the school and can describe it clearly.	90%
The principal actively participates in his or her own professional development activities to improve leadership in the school.	96%
My principal's practices are consistent with his words.	91%
The school supports using new instructional ideas and innovations.	88%

Results

ITEM	PERCENTAGE 4/5 RESPONSES
The school provides teachers with professional development aligned with the school's mission and goals.	76%
Informal school leaders play an important role in the school in improving the performance of professionals and the achievement of students.	72%
The school has expanded its capacity by providing professional staff formal opportunities to take on leadership roles.	71%
Teachers and administrators have high expectations for students' academic performance.	99%
The school makes available a variety of data (e.g., school performance) for teachers to use to improve student achievement.	96%
The school's daily and weekly schedules provide time for teachers to collaborate on instructional issues.	89%

Results

ITEM	PERCENTAGE 4/5 RESPONSES
Teachers at our school build and maintain strong relationships with students.	90%
Teachers take pride in being part of the school community	85%
Efforts are in place to ensure that ALL students have some meaningful connection to the school community.	76%

Results

- **DL was consciously embraced by district leaders**
 - “...the more successful administrators... have distributed... to the people that have the talents to do that”
 - “DL is not delegated responsibility, it’s shared responsibility”
 - “Any principal cannot do the role by themselves, you need a nucleus of people”
- **Mission & vision focused & drove initiatives**
 - “*15 for 2015*... has four overarching goals... with 15 measurements...”
 - “The district initiative...is to create global citizens & lifelong learners... all the strategies and PD we do is to promote that overall goal”

Results

- **Improvement efforts were driven by data analysis & practitioner reflection**
 - “...every year, we have our overview from our research guide who will say, ‘This is how we did this year, this is what we said we wanted to do – look at where we measure from our goals from last year.’”
 - Walk-throughs “have been validating... I have made changes based on feedback...”
 - “[Lesson plans] probably weren’t as detailed as they are this year... I was much more on the ball this year [as a result of reflection]”
- **Decisions were shared and solutions implemented locally**
 - “[Leadership Team] gives feedback from different perspectives...once we narrow down our answers we’ll bring that information to the departments”
 - “I want them to say, ‘We discussed this, what do you think?’ And then have their own conversation... Just making sure everybody somewhat feels part of the discussion”

Results

- **Climate & culture consciously considered & addressed.**
 - “Distributed leadership is a culture that has to be established... on trust... and you have to continually work on it.”
 - Culture is “very structured... you always know what to expect, what [the principal’s] expectations are.”
 - “Targeting specific people who are a negative force... trying to actively bring them more into the fold”
- **PD was embedded, ongoing, & valued.**
 - “We... give the principal the autonomy to say, ‘My school needs *this...*’”
 - “We trained LFS trainers, so... there is now a person in every building distributing.”
 - “We were given substitutes and time... goal for next year is to increase the frequency and widen the pool”

Results

- **Formal leaders established culture through example.**
 - “There is a true desire in our building to make leaders... and to help teachers see their roles as leaders.”
 - Building admins “are right there, backing us up and working as hard as they would expect us to work. That leads to a more positive environment.”
- **Teacher leadership was promoted and supported.**
 - “We need those leaders who drive instruction, because even as a principal you don’t have all the answers, and can’t...”
 - Aspiring Administrators program “much stronger [than ed leadership grad work]. It was practical... I couldn’t have traded it for the world”
- **School actively involved multiple stakeholders.**
 - “Our custodial staff has done a really good job of reaching out to eighth graders and allowing them to take ownership of different areas..”
 - “Parent-teacher conferences are no longer, now they’re student-parent-teacher conferences... the teacher is the facilitator.”

Conclusions

- **How was distributed leadership practiced in WSD?**
 - Collaboration
 - Autonomy in realizing mission/vision
 - Shared decision making
- **Why did WSD distribute leadership?**
 - Conducive to continuous improvement
 - Conducive to sustainable initiatives

Conclusions

- **Did faculty and admin perceptions of DL & school climate vary?**
 - Overall, perceptions were largely consistent between administrators and non-administrators
 - Some teachers at Aponte reported viewing admin walk-throughs differently than administrators
 - Both groups indicated a positive climate
- **Banniman vs. Aponte**
 - Banniman may share responsibility more frequently and have a more positive building culture than at Aponte
 - Some Aponte staff members view the function of the Leadership Teams differently than Banniman staff

Limitations

- Study did not include all three WSD middle schools
- Study did not examine DL practices districtwide
- True triangulation of qualitative data not achieved

Implications

- More focused outreach work necessary with regard to parent/student familiarity with Wellbrook's mission & vision
- Negative perception of Leadership Team at Aponte potentially damaging to building culture
- Plans to expand distributed leadership will require targeted conversations, buy-in efforts

Recommendations

- Address mission & vision more explicitly in communication with parents & students
- Leadership Team: Examine proportionate representation of novice, mid-career, & veteran teachers
- Administer DLRS in other Wellbrook buildings
- Promote Banniman & Aponte as DL models
- Consider expanding developmentally appropriate authentic leadership opportunities for students

Future Research

- Longitudinal study of DL implementation – beneficial for districts seeking to initiate cultural shift
- Comparative study of school improvement outcomes in DL vs. non-DL districts or buildings
- Comparative study of successful DL practices in a variety of settings (urban/suburban/rural, high SES/low SES, etc.) to identify context-specific best practices
- More focused study of roles of students, parents, and community leaders within DL framework

***Emphasize qualitative approach –
let them tell their stories.***