

## **Distributed Leadership and Courageous Conversations**

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### **Abstract**

Distributed leadership, which originally found recognition in education literature, is most commonly defined as leadership interactions and paradigms that are distributed throughout institutions involving multiple dynamic responsibilities and input of the stakeholders. Weinberger (2011) contended that, by definition, distributed leadership is a ubiquitous property and that it is decentralized so that people work for a common purpose without relinquishing their separate identities. Distributed leadership was tested in a school district referred to throughout this chapter as the Central River School District (CRSD). A Respect Committee was formed to address district-wide inequities in student achievement related to culture and diversity. The committee modeled distributed leadership and comprised representatives from CRSD, City University of Seattle, and a regional Native American tribe. The results showed positive shifts in the area of teachers holding one another accountable for cultural sensitivity and in areas that included the school's efforts to address responsiveness to cultural inequities. This distributive leadership model resulted in many efforts to engage and promote cultural equity projects in the district's schools and ultimately, an opportunity for university involvement in collaboratively determining the future of education within this context.

### **Distributed Leadership**

Definitions and conditions of leadership resonated urgency in David Weinberger's refreshing take on networks, knowledge, and change (Weinberger, 2011). Weinberger likened the distributive leadership and decision-making model to a micro-ecosystem (p. 166). "This world-wide ecology," he stated, "succeeds at solving urgent issues by distributing leadership as close to the ground as it can" (p. 168). Weinberger also contended that, by definition, distributed leadership is spread throughout the

organization: “leadership becomes a property of a unit the way robustness is a property of an organism” (p. 166) and that distributed leadership is decentralized so that people work for a common purpose without giving up their separate identities. Finally, he maintained that distributed leadership works best when decisions require local knowledge that is fluent and diverse (p. 169). In other words, decisions that in the past have been made by the person(s) at the top of an organization’s hierarchy will be increasingly made by networks of experience, wisdom, and innovation much closer to ground level.

This chapter will include discussions on applications of distributed leadership that are close to the ground in educational settings, and illustrations with action research studies (and one in particular) in a school improvement context. Distributed leadership, which originally found recognition in education literature, is most commonly defined as leadership interactions and paradigms that are distributed throughout institutions involving multiple dynamic responsibilities and input of the stakeholders. Distributed leadership as it pertains to education owes much of its evolution to James P. Spillane and his colleagues at Northwestern University (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). More recent research suggests positive relationships attributed to effective distributed leadership and learning gains. Woods (2012) claimed, “teacher leadership and collaborative inquiry by teachers promote professional development and new knowledge, with benefits for teacher and student learning” (p. 2). This notion of the interaction of distributed leadership and collaborative inquiry initiated the first steps of a district- and community-wide call to action.

### **Central River School District Respect Committee**

In response to the No Child Left Behind Act, together with evidence of a significant achievement gap between native and non-native students, Washington State’s Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) required that school districts begin implementing cultural competence training for all administrators and teachers. In 2008 a Washington State school district, which shall be referred to as the Central River School

District (CRSD) throughout the remainder of this chapter, began professional development training in cultural competence. Under the direction of the district superintendent, a collaborative CRSD Respect Committee was formed comprising district administration including the multicultural director and director of curriculum and instruction, university research faculty, and Native American tribal representatives. Each school site designed an action research project that would inform and improve the cultural competence of the teachers that would lead to increased student learning.

The following year, Site Respect Teams were formed at each school in the district. The Respect Committee facilitated the Respect work in the district by coordinating monthly professional development sessions focused on cultural competence understanding, action research skills, and site-based dilemmas. Meanwhile, the Indian Education Department of the Central River School District worked collaboratively with schools throughout the district to provide supplemental services for special education and culturally related academic needs for Indian students in the district. The *approach* for collaborative change was distributed leadership. The *catalyst* for collaborative change was the District Respect Committee, consisting of teachers and staff from each school site that met monthly as a whole. The *vehicles* for collaborative change were site-based action research projects.

## **Application**

### **Project Examples**

The application of the leadership model resulted in several completed action research projects throughout the school district as listed below. Moreover, one in particular will be described more fully to provide credence to the action research process as an integral component of distributed leadership in an educational setting.

- Minority students attended Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) after-school club to accelerate learning and achievement.

- Teachers were trained in skills and dispositions to better help English language learners (ELL) and special education (SPED) students succeed.
- Parents attended monthly parent-teacher meeting to address adult issues of inclusion.
- Students were involved in civic responsibilities as part of a Meaningful Work Program (MWP).
- Staff and teachers participated in tribal community events and learned traditional educational practices.

**Kyak Elementary School's project.** At a selected school in the CRSD, which shall be referred to as Kyak Elementary School, the principal, district multicultural director, the author Dr. Judith Gray from City University of Seattle, and five Kyak staff members prepared the work that was carried out during staff development sessions at the school throughout the 2009–10 school year. Kyak Elementary was a public, Title I school, located on an Indian reservation located within the district. As of May 2009, the date of the most recent published school demographics at that time, the school had a population of 315 students with 44.8 percent of the students being of Native American descent. The school provided special education services to a population of fifty-two students in the resource room. The members of the certificated staff met the highly qualified standards of the No Child Left Behind Act. The average duration of teaching experience was ten years with 51.6 percent of the staff holding at least a master's degree. Most recent standardized test scores indicated that the school had not met adequate yearly progress (AYP) and was currently at step two for improvement. In Washington State, AYP is a yearly measure of student progress in reading and mathematics (State of Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [OSPI], n.d.).

Kyak School was committed to a learning environment that honors cultural differences, supports differentiated learning and teaching styles, confronts bias, stereotypes, and prejudicial attitudes, and displays respect for diversity. Nevertheless, despite a highly

qualified staff who implemented research-based interventions for math and reading, along with the coaching of math and literacy experts, community supports, grants tailored to improvements in education and prior research endeavors, the achievement gap concerns had not been resolved. The staff, moreover, attended regular staff meetings, professional development training as well as “neighborhood invite” meetings twice a month to discuss issues and seek solutions for underperforming students. Of greatest concern were state reports indicating that Native American students at Kyak were consistently underperforming their non-native peers on state standardized tests and local district assessments by over 50 percent.

Teachers at Kyak Elementary School were concerned by the cultural implications of the assessment data and there was reason to suspect that an underlying current of unacknowledged racism may have been a contributing factor. The purpose of Kyak’s action research study was to raise the cultural awareness and responsiveness of teachers at the Kyak Elementary School site so that they could more competently serve their diverse body of students. The change process consisted of teacher conversations centered on personal perspectives about race, culture, and diversity led by the Site Respect Team, who previewed the action research intervention strategies before distribution to the staff and teachers. The Kyak Site Respect Team members also served as facilitators to oversee conversation protocols at professional development meetings. The participants in the action research study consisted of the school principal, assistant principal, K–5 teaching staff, school math and reading coaches, librarian, counselor, two special education teachers, music instructor and the Native American Liaison for a total of thirty-seven adults.

**Courageous conversations.** Kyak teachers met five times over a period of five months to view segments of the video, *Race: The Power of an Illusion* as well as to discuss readings from articles that pertained to race and diversity. Teachers used protocols to discuss the video and articles. Teachers were assigned a group with a facilitator. Each facilitator became a part of Kyak’s Respect Committee. Kyak’s Respect

Committee decided to go through the process of viewing the video or reading the articles and applying the protocol to themselves before each session with the teachers. Exit slips were collected at the end of every session. These consisted of teacher responses to the prompts related to session content, relevance, and next steps. At the conclusion of the study, a cumulating reflection was administered to, and collected from, each participant. Thus, there were three main instruments employed to collect data and frame the work. The first was the *Readiness to Benefit* survey designed by the Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE) and, in particular, the five survey items related to culture and race. (See Appendix A.) The second data collection instrument for the study comprised the exit slips distributed to the participants at the end of each session that asked the questions: “What?” and “So What?” and “Now What?” The third source of data included the culminating reflections, which comprised teacher responses to the open-ended prompts: “I used to think . . .” and “Now I think . . .”

**Analysis.** Results from the data-gathering instruments were analyzed collaboratively in line with the distributed leadership philosophy and model. Qualitative data (exit slips and culminating reflections) were interrogated using Richard Sagor’s collaborative thematic analysis process (Sagor, 2000).

More teachers felt that they were indeed culturally responsive in their daily interactions. In other words, scores remained roughly the same (no change) for all components in the *seldom/almost never* responses to questions related to curriculum, responsiveness, teaching strategies, and training with the exception of the school’s efforts to address cultural issues. This number dropped significantly from 24 percent to 15 percent.

The data interrogators teased out five dominant themes:

*Awareness:* Most teachers welcomed the opportunity to begin open and safe conversations about race and diversity—issues that had increasingly beleaguered the teachers over time.

*Equity:* Issues and concerns around equity underscored the initial teacher responses and grew more contentious over time. The teachers at Kyak started to become more aware of the endemic nature of the inequities present in their building, and most were willing to acknowledge or consider that racism was the root cause.

*Beliefs and values:* As teachers developed a context of honesty and safety in their small groups, their own deeply held beliefs and values began to emerge. The early conversations were contemplative and tentative and, for the most part, were grounded in the belief that all schools are exposed to some form of racism, no matter where they were located in the district. At the start, most teachers valued the time to examine their beliefs and deconstruct their values with colleagues. However, this disposition was rejected by a small number of the teachers.

*Practice/Pedagogy:* Not surprisingly, some teachers were anxious to immediately apply the learning from the conversations to their own classroom practice. Teachers were impatiently motivated to do something about the problem in their classrooms as soon as possible.

*Resistance:* Despite the general support for, and willingness to participate in, the conversations around racism, it was possible from the first exit slips to detect elements of resistance, skepticism, and anger. Attendance, after all, was mandatory. Nonetheless, these oppositional voices provided important perspectives and a reminder that issues of racism resonate at a vulnerable personal level.

### **Culminating Reflections**

*Awareness:* The post-intervention exit slips were dominated by teacher comments related to cultural awareness and sensitivity. At a personal level, teachers were intensely concerned with their own cultures. “I want to know who I am,” “My plan to trace my roots back and take a walk through history,” and “those barriers exist within me and I am in that journey to discover and remove them.” Moreover, there was evidence of a collective consciousness of race and culture as teachers sought to

constructively understand other cultures. “My understanding of my own culture and identity will help me understand others.” The shifts in teachers’ perceptions of culture were most significantly evident in their new appreciation for their own cultures. The contextual relationship of cultural awareness and cultural equity was raised as one of race and poverty. Overall, teachers’ cultural awareness had been heightened.

*Equity:* Issues of equity emerged more concretely and honestly, a testament to the growth of cohesion and safety in each group. “How do we shift the system so that all groups have access?” and “I fear that in a way I am perpetuating the cycle of inequality.” Changes in perceptions of cultural responsiveness were encouragingly thoughtful and profound. There was a tendency among the teachers to be more understanding, informed, and accountable.

*Beliefs and values:* Teachers appeared to value the conversations and the opportunity to express their beliefs and perspectives. Furthermore, they believed that they had an obligation, a “moral duty” to acquire knowledge and understanding of each student’s cultural heritage. Teachers felt they needed to be clearer about their own beliefs, and they valued the personal growth associated with becoming truly culturally accepting. “We all need to value ourselves, others, individuals, and community identity.” Teachers signaled an increased commitment in terms of building relationships, fully understanding the cultures in the classroom, and actively connecting with every student.

*Practice/Pedagogy:* There was perceptible shift in the tone of informing their practice. Rather than expressing a desire to immediately return to their classrooms to institute new ideas, teachers became more contemplative and willing to be led. “The progression for me would be to continue to explore what is needed by my students for educational equity,” “I want to know what to do.” A pervasive theme related to teacher practice in

the post-intervention culminating reflections was one of hope and possibilities. Curriculum reform was one area where teachers felt they could make a difference.

*Resistance:* If anything, expressions and indications of resistance became more intractable. Two teachers declined not to complete their exit slips as a form of protest, while another claimed, “This feels superficial and very distant from my job.” There was a sense of hopelessness. “We can’t make people change.” Teachers tended to blame parents, but this disposition came under increased scrutiny as cultural responsiveness was further deconstructed in the conversations.

### **Cultural Practice/Pedagogy**

The habit of consciously practicing culturally sensitive, responsive, and authentic pedagogy was seen as beyond the purview of teacher practice when they first embarked on conversations about race. Nevertheless, they were willing to admit that there was cultural competency learning to be attained and skills to master. When teachers looked back in time, their initial beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions indicated that they were poised on the tip of an iceberg, some more precariously than others. That iceberg represented the true meaning of cultural competency and the ramifications for all learners at Kyak Elementary School. Overall, the prompt responses revealed significant growth and development in teacher thinking about their role in the multicultural classrooms of the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, the data analysis suggested that teachers were open to the further self-examination of their own and others perspectives on race and culture in order to increase their own awareness of the issues. During the first conversations their beliefs and values began to surface and the deeper issues of equity emerged, tentatively. There was a sense of urgency around translating the practical aspects of the conversations into immediate use with students and families. Finally, some teacher resistance was exposed in the forms of skepticism, anger, defeat, and denial. Eventually, the original small

number of naysayers appeared to have diminished. Clearly, the conversations resulted in improved cultural awareness and some degree of greater openness and more intense self-searching. Notwithstanding, underneath the surface was a current of uncomfortable helplessness with the knowledge that inequities persisted and, indeed, had become institutionalized. Teachers truly believed that they had a moral duty to initiate and support cultural pedagogical changes and valued the opportunities to be open, focused, and collaborative on cultural issues. Cultural practice and pedagogy, therefore, became an unchartered area of concern and possibilities.

The culminating reflection prompts produced responses focused on cultural awareness, which in most cases was justified at this stage in the teachers' professional development of their cultural competency. Their cultural awareness grew from nebulous innocence to an almost overwhelming sense of professional and personal responsibility. The teachers' perception of *cultural responsiveness* took a steep upward curve as they realized their limitations and eventually vowed to correct and improve their responsiveness efforts. The most significant change in teacher perceptions came about in the area of *cultural curriculum*. Here, teachers voiced the need for incisive, authentic, and immediate changes in instructional content and delivery. Finally, comments regarding *cultural practice* suggested the need for building relationships with students and their families in the context of cultural respect and inclusion. Teachers agreed that there was work to be done and that they were ready and willing to increase their cultural competence.

### **Summary**

The distributed leadership approach integrated with action research has the potential to equip future teachers with vital and requisite leadership skills. Data showed positive shifts in the area of teachers holding one another accountable for cultural sensitivity due in part to indications that teachers had become more self-aware of their cultural history and perspectives. Another small but positive shift occurred in the area that addressed the school's efforts to address issues of cultural responsiveness in its daily work more so than previously. However, there was an across-the-board moderate shift

in the increase of negative responses to the questions related to the school's commitment to confronting cultural issues. This finding alone establishes fertile ground for distributed leadership growth, direction, and development. It seems fair to say that teachers were open to the further self-examination of their own and others' perspectives on race and culture in order to increase their awareness of the issues.

Much of the work prior to the action research investigations was the construction of a distributed leadership model that included educating, assembling, and training the site-based school leadership teams. These efforts ultimately resulted in several cultural equity projects in the schools. The goal is now to continue to support the application of distributed leadership with university faculty expertise, graduate student collaboration, and technical assistance. This kind of endeavor will be both viable and valuable toward building an evidence-based rich record of district-wide culturally competent practice.

### References

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