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Clearing a Path for Inclusion

Distributing Leadership in a High Performing Elementary School

ABSTRACT: The study presented here examines the efforts of one principal and the team she relied upon to create a more inclusive and high-performing school in a large urban school district. The goals, actions, and responsibilities of the team are described, as well as the daily challenges associated with school administration and special education. In doing so, this article highlights how a distributed approach to leadership can enable a principal and teachers to build teacher capacity, adapt to challenges, and ultimately serve all students in an effective and inclusive manner. The timeliness of this research is significant given an increasingly complex and accountability driven system that makes school leadership ever more difficult, particularly when attempting to promote inclusion. This study has important implications for how principals call upon school staff to support inclusive reform, and it also highlights the role principals can play when seeking to distribute leadership and enhance school capacity to serve all children.

KEY WORDS: Educational Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Special Education, School Administration, Inclusion

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) established an expectation that decisions related to how students with disabilities are served and the location of those services are collaboratively made among parents, teachers, school psychologists, the local school district, and the student. Embedded in this expectation is an assumption that each stakeholder has specific knowledge, expertise, and experience which meaning-

fully contribute to the development and implementation of an Individual Education Program (IEP), which directs how a student with a disability is educated and supported. Unfortunately, school-level actions and outcomes are not always aligned to the expectations of the IDEA. Critics of IDEA and critical disability scholars assert that, among other things, a lack of funding, the law's rigid disability classifications, other federal educational mandates, and deficit perspectives of teachers related to race, ethnicity, disability type, and class have created significant barriers to creating effective schools that serve all students in an inclusive manner (Haines & Turnbull, 2012; Sleeter, 2010).

Existing research has frequently examined the efforts of principals to create more inclusive schools which meet the needs of all students. These studies, however, have primarily focused on principals' orientations or leadership actions—typically defined as, or related to, instructional leadership and, more recently, social justice leadership (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Farrell, Dyson, Polat, Hutcheson, & Gallannaugh, 2007; Guzman, 1997; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Theoharis, 2007; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011). This article examines an alternative to what has been presented in existing research by viewing leadership as distributed and investigating how the distribution of leadership contributes to a more effective and inclusive educational program for students with disabilities. Focusing on the distribution of leadership is important because creating a more inclusive school requires building the capacity of educators in terms of assessment, instructional design and delivery, and legal and technical aspects of the IDEA and state and local policies (Billingsley, 2012). Theories of distributed leadership provide a rich conceptual framework for posing questions about and examining the efforts of a varied group of stakeholders engaged in creating a more inclusive school. These questions and examinations are relevant because the nature and complexity of implementing special education policies, best practices, inclusive service delivery, and general aspects of school reform, require a distribution of leadership actions, delegated work, and expertise across a school.

The study presented here examines the efforts and actions of one principal and the team she relied upon to create a more inclusive and high-performing school in a large urban school district. The goals, actions, and responsibilities of the team are described and then complicated by daily challenges associated with school administration and special education. This article highlights how a distributed approach to leadership can enable a principal and teachers to build capacity, adapt to challenges, and ultimately serve all students in an effective and inclusive manner. The

timeliness of this research is significant given an increasingly complex and accountability driven education system that makes school leadership more difficult (Spillane, 2012), particularly when attempting to promote inclusion in the context of accountability and compliance mandates (Christle & Yell, 2010). This study has important implications for how principals call upon school staff to support inclusive reform and highlights the role principals can play when seeking to distribute leadership and enhance school capacity to serve all children.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Competing research findings, various leadership models, a continuum of special education policy mandates, and moral arguments for inclusion complicate researchers' understanding of how leadership contributes to the development of inclusive schools. This section provides a foundational understanding of IDEA and the concept of inclusion. It also presents research on effective leadership in the area of special education and the development of inclusive schools, highlights the complexities of and barriers to creating inclusive schools, and defines and explores distributed leadership and how it relates to inclusive reform.

IDEA AND INCLUSION

IDEA (2004) and the law's prior reauthorizations established a framework of rights and expectations for how students with disabilities are to be educated. The educational rights include the following: (a) the right of all students to a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE); (b) the right to due process for a complaint or alteration in a child's placement; (c) an Individualized Education Program (IEP) created by a committee of teachers, service providers, parents, and the student, if appropriate; (d) discipline requirements that mandate that students with disabilities cannot be removed from instruction for an indeterminate period because of a behavior stemming from the student's disability; and (e) procedural safeguards for parents and guardians designed to protect the interests of students.

The LRE is perhaps one of the most controversial and difficult to implement components of IDEA. The LRE and inclusion are often incorrectly used interchangeably in schools or supplemented with theoretical arguments associated with equity and social justice. The word inclusion does

not exist in IDEA and is rarely used in case law. To date, no federal appellate court has held that inclusion in the general education classroom was required or a right of all students with disabilities, despite the fact that scholars often make a connection between inclusion and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that overturned the separate but equal doctrine. The legal impetus regarding inclusivity is described in the LRE component of IDEA and is subsequently clarified through the process of judicial review. The LRE does not assume placement will always be in the general education classroom; rather, IEP teams must be given a continuum of placement options to select from. IDEA includes the following text: "Each public agency must ensure that a continuum of alternative placements is available to meet the needs of children with disabilities for special education and related services" (§ 300.114). Rather than pushing districts to establish more inclusive schools, courts have further clarified the law and created additional leeway for schools in the area of inclusion (see *Hartmann v. Loudon County*).

Many educational scholars hold opposing and social justice-driven perspectives on inclusion and how students with disabilities should be educated. A continuum of inclusion definitions exists ranging from full inclusion of all students regardless of disability to definitions that assume full inclusion is more of an ideal that is somewhat unrealistic in the immediate future given the context of most U.S. public schools, districts, and federal funding (Katzman, 2007; Osgood, 2005; Udarvi-Solner & Kluth, 1997). Social justice driven arguments for inclusion are bolstered by historic educational inequities as they relate to how students with disabilities are placed into schools, the services they receive, and the outcomes of their educational experiences. Black and Hispanic students, as well as students who are living in poverty, are less likely to be educated in the general education classroom, more likely to drop out or be suspended for disciplinary infractions, and are ultimately less likely to meet the same academic standards as their peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Thus, the concepts of inclusion and exclusion can be tied to the historic marginalization of students who are non-white or from poverty stricken families.

Although there are real challenges to creating inclusive schools, principals are important in determining whether a school will be inclusive. They also have a range of opinions and orientations related to social justice and inclusivity (Praisner 2003; Salisbury 2006; Salisbury & McGregor, 2002). Principals may decide to promote a full inclusion program in which all students, regardless of disability or language skills, are included in the general education classroom. Others may not prioritize inclusion and utilize

pullout sessions in which students with disabilities are removed from the general education classroom for short periods of time to receive targeted instruction from a special education teacher. Finally, some principals may take steps to limit students with disabilities' access to general education classrooms; they may even work to remove students to more restrictive settings outside of the school. In reality, many principals' actions and orientations vary based on disability type, school resources, the individual student and his or her needs, and other variables (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Williams, Pazey, Shelby, & Yates, 2013).

SPECIAL EDUCATION AND INCLUSION LEADERSHIP

Creating an inclusive school which meets the needs of all students is a comprehensive reform project for most schools because so few are even close to being inclusive and high-performing at the same time. A small body of research focusing on special education leadership has emerged and begun to highlight common characteristics of effective inclusive schools (or schools that have made significant progress in short time spans). These sources provide descriptions of how leadership influences the development of inclusive schools (Farrell et al., 2007; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Mayrowetz & Weinstein, 1999; McLeskey et al., 2012; Theoharis, 2007; Ushomirsky & Hall, 2010). Findings across these case studies reveal that inclusive schools (a) are welcoming to all students; (b) have faculty and staff who embrace inclusive values and accept teaching all students as part of their job; (c) have formal structures in which groups of teachers utilize formal and informal data to track student progress, investigate data trends, problem solve when students are not meeting expectations, and make action plans with goals and interventions to ensure students meet expectations; and (d) utilize resources efficiently and flexibly to meet the needs of students. Findings also highlight that school personnel are engaged in these activities and take on leadership responsibilities. For example, McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling (2012) sought to identify factors which contributed to a highly effective inclusive elementary school, and in a single case study identified two overarching themes: student support and instructional quality and administrative and organizational features. The themes were generated from a variety of findings that highlighted schoolwide inclusive values which included high expectations for all students, a focus on high-quality instruction in the general education classroom, an efficient and flexible use of resources stemming from a strategically developed school schedule, and a shared decision-making process during

which teachers were not micromanaged, had access to data, and were held accountable by each other and their principal.

Embedded within this collection of research are examples of principals leading their schools through strategic, thoughtful, and social justice driven actions. These actions involve multiple individuals and are related to instructional leadership practices, including: (a) creating and promoting a school mission that encourages high academic standards for all students; (b) efficiently utilizing school resources through budgeting, scheduling, and other administrative tasks; (c) providing high-quality professional development; (d) ensuring teachers and professional learning communities (PLCs) utilize data to drive decision making; and (e) engaging teachers in leadership activities (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlsrom, & Anderson, 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Many of these same actions can be associated with social justice leadership as well. In a multi-case study focused on how principals enact social justice, Theoharis (2007) identified numerous strategies and actions principals took to create more inclusive schools for students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs). Principals in this study engaged in leadership with teachers that was focused on (a) improving school structures by eliminating pullout and segregated programs, detracking academic courses, and developing student portfolios to monitor student progress; (b) enhancing staff capacity through professional development on instructional strategies and how to better address issues of race, equity, and social justice; and (c) strengthening school culture and community by creating a warm and welcoming climate that invited parents and community into the school. In these studies, principals set the direction, helped manage expectations, and kept individuals on track, but much of the reform work was led or undertaken by teachers or teams comprised of teachers and administrators. Moreover, teachers are often in better positions to make decisions about these leadership related issues than are principals because they have first-hand knowledge of students and their needs.

Although these studies do not identify distributed leadership specifically, it is clear that when principals engage in leadership in the area of special education and inclusion, work and leadership responsibilities are distributed to teachers and other staff. In a study of three schools in a small school district, Mayrowetz and Weinstein (1999) found that multiple individuals in a variety of roles performed leadership functions to support the development of a more inclusive school. These individuals included parents, instructional aides, school psychologists, and teachers. In one example, parents, the student's previous teachers, and the principal worked

together to match the student with a teacher. The final decision was subject to the parents' approval. In another instance, a parent and teachers worked together to develop a life-skills curriculum and a program to prepare students with disabilities for the transition from high school to work. These examples highlight how the task at hand, a particular situation, or a meaningful relationship dictated who takes leadership or makes decisions about specific activities. Mayrowetz and Weinstein (1999) concluded that the complex nature of inclusive education requires principals to play a critical role in organizing reform; however, principals may not always be in the best position to lead certain tasks because of a lack of expertise.

COMPLEXITIES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

The framework and expectations provided in the IDEA appear clear, but implementation brings a complexity that requires collaboration and a distribution of tasks and leadership actions (Mantle, 2005; Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2003). These complexities can be classified into three broad groups: technical/legal, pedagogical/curricular, and collaborative. Technical and legal complexities are related to federal, state, and district policies which create standard operating procedures, compliance directives, and tasks related to general school administration and management (i.e., budgeting, developing bell schedules that provide for co-planning, co-teaching, and PLCs). Each of these actions requires a range of knowledge, expertise, and input from multiple stakeholders, especially when a principal is not familiar with IDEA or inclusion programs/models. For example, the development of a student's IEP must occur within a specific timeline, meet certain criteria (dictated by federal, state, and local education agencies), and incorporate assessment and observational data provided by teachers, parents, and diagnosticians; it must also, however, reflect the school and district's vision of inclusion and fit within its continuum of placements.

In this process, a single stakeholder cannot possess all the knowledge needed to make each decision of how to best serve a student with a disability. The distributed nature of the process requires stakeholders to work together to plan, coordinate, and consider various data points and perspectives; a process that cannot be micromanaged or unilaterally determined by a principal. Other leadership actions require teams to organize, share information and expertise, and make important decisions (e.g., manifestation determinations, eligibility meetings, resolution sessions, and annual IEP review meetings). Moreover, the technical and legal complexities are not only related to individual students, but also to educational programs

and how resources are managed and distributed within a school. Principals are responsible for hiring and evaluating teachers, making budgetary decisions, purchasing interventions, hiring additional staff, developing teacher caseloads, and setting school schedules that limit or promote opportunities for collaboration, co-teaching, and co-planning. A principal might consider the following questions: How many students in each class require specialized instruction? How much time do they require for each subject area? What time of the day will students be receiving these services? What is the special education teacher's class schedule? Is another social worker needed? When considering these questions, principals may find it useful to engage teachers in a shared decision-making process.

The pedagogical and curricular complexities of special education leadership are associated with how prepared teachers are to inclusively and effectively serve all students. Effectively serving all students in an inclusive setting requires tremendous skill and expertise—skills and expertise most staff might not have at the onset of reform (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler, 2010). Thus, principals must ensure that they enhance staff capacity in a number of areas including, but not limited to, developing and co-teaching lessons which meet the needs of all learners; managing behavioral, social, and emotional challenges associated with a student's disability and needs; providing and interpreting assessments which clearly identify and describe students' present levels of performance; managing and coordinating paraprofessionals and other instructional or behavioral support staff; utilizing assistive technology and specialized resources and intervention models; and establishing communities of inquiry and practice to effectively problem solve and create new interventions (Billingsley, 2007; Boscardin, 2007; DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014; Pazey & Cole, 2013).

Historically, teachers have been isolated, work with little supervision, and possess a high degree of autonomy in the classroom. Thus, the collaborative aspects of special education create complexities they may not be equipped to handle. Yet inclusive classrooms require collaboration. Co-taught lessons require both teachers to consider the grade level content and curriculum (typically, the general education teacher is an expert here) and the methods of differentiating and adapting instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners (typically, the special education teacher is an expert here) (Friend et al., 2010). When the lesson concludes, both teachers should reflect on the lesson, review informal assessment data, and consider re-teaching any content or skills that some or all students were unable to master. This process requires teachers to make time, engage in meaningful discussions, and apply their skills to create high-quality lessons

and instruction. Collaboration between and across various stakeholders, including parents, is also vital in a number of special education related situations (e.g., handling parent concerns and/or due process complaints, or incorporating other related services such as speech therapy or counseling into the general education classroom).

The legal/technical, pedagogical/curricular, and collaborative complexities are not comprehensively described here, but are outlined to highlight how difficult inclusion reform can be, along with demonstrating the important role collaboration and the distribution of effort is in creating a legally compliant, inclusive, and effective school. Ultimately, it is incorrect to think a single, heroic principal can manage or lead all aspects of a special education program; rather, leading and managing must be distributed across various stakeholders in order to capitalize on a school's expertise, strengths, experiences, and work capacity (Grubb & Flessa, 2006).

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

Distributed leadership provides a conceptual and analytical framework to study leadership across an organization. Although research focused on distributed leadership in the area of special education and inclusion reform is minimal, analyzing inclusion reform using a distributed framework can help clarify the varied roles assumed by principals, teachers, and other staff and explain how their actions contribute to inclusive change (Billingsley, 2012). In a distributed framework, leadership is spread across an organization, involves concerted action across various traditional and non-traditional leaders, and extends beyond simple task delegation to deeper levels of interactions and collective action (Gronn, 2009; Heikka, Waniganayake, & Hujala, 2013). Theories of distributed leadership vary but typically present a "post-heroic alternative . . . encompass[ing] conceptual discussions, empirical investigations, and a handful of studies which measure the impact of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2009, p. 383). Traditional leadership roles and organizational hierarchy are less important, especially as communities of practice and inquiry-based teams develop and refine their practices and capabilities (Harris, 2004). Who leads and who follows is not only related to organizational hierarchy but to what the problem, task, or situation dictates (Copland, 2003). Patterns of distributed leadership have been found to influence organizational performance, but typically only after careful consideration by the principal. Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) highlighted two key features of successful leadership distribution. First, leadership must be distributed to individuals who are capable of leading or who have the technical ex-

pertise required to complete a leadership task. Second, when leadership is distributed, the expectations and actions should be planned ahead of time.

Theoretical descriptions of distributed leadership take two distinct forms: uncoordinated or person-plus. Uncoordinated forms can be organic, unplanned, and often contribute little to the organization (Locke, 2003). Spillane (2012) presented a person-plus model that does not remove the principal from the primary leadership position and instead emphasizes a consciously managed process in which leadership is strategically distributed by the principal or other traditional leaders. The strategic distribution of leadership into the hands of capable and knowledgeable non-traditional leaders can enhance levels of autonomy and interdependence, allowing effective personnel to manage challenges, assignments, and tasks without needing constant supervision. However, it is important to note that distributed leadership is not always beneficial because problems will multiply if incompetent or unprepared individuals assume leadership positions (Timperley, 2005).

The small but emerging body of empirical research which seeks to describe and analyze distributed leadership is scattered across different aspects of leadership actions, is conducted in different types of school settings, and measures leadership impact and outcomes differently. For example, Camburn, Rowan, and Taylor (2003) studied how teacher leadership was promoted and how this increased leadership opportunities, but it did not thoroughly investigate whether an increase in leadership opportunities translated to improved student outcomes, nor did it address what specific practices were associated with distributed leadership and a more effective school. Mayrowetz (2008) identified some broad ways that leadership can be distributed across a school but did not connect these practices to school improvement. As Spillane and Healy (2010) noted, empirical research lacks the descriptive work "necessary to improve our understandings of how leadership is distributed in schools" (p. 254).

Although descriptive analyses of distributed leadership are currently limited, research conducted on comprehensive school reform and teacher education has insightfully explored the daily practices associated with distributed leadership. Research from comprehensive school reform programs that focus on reorganizing school structures, how schools are managed, and how instruction can be improved has shown that distributing leadership opportunities to teachers can create instructional improvement (Cambrun & Han, 2009). School improvement literature has historically connected teacher engagement with leadership decisions, strong relationships across a school, and school improvement (Little, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989). Recent research has focused on PLCs, their positive impact on

instructional change, and how leadership is distributed within and across these communities (Louis & Marks, 1998; Morrisey, 2000) has contributed to an understanding of how leadership can be distributed to promote instructional change. Findings reveal that general and special education teachers improve their instructional practices when working in PLCs, that students have improved outcomes when teachers effectively collaborate through PLCs, and that principals play a key role in supporting and sustaining the work of PLCs (Curry, 2008; Little, 2003; Perez, 2011). Related to PLCs is how patterns of distribution and collaboration can foster the diffusion of expertise, or what Spillane et al. (2001) called distributed cognition, across PLCs, other teams, and the school itself.

As noted earlier, findings from research on instructional leadership can be applied to inclusion reform, but it also directly or indirectly emphasizes collaboration, teacher leadership, collective action, and problem solving—actions and characteristics associated with distributed leadership. Some instructional leadership actions that have been found to influence student achievement and potentially involve a distribution of leadership include the following: (a) establishing a school vision and mission; (b) ensuring a safe and orderly learning and working environment; (c) providing professional development opportunities; and (d) setting and maintaining high expectations for student learning (Cotton, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). In daily practice, principals can engage in these actions collaboratively by sharing their own values, beliefs, commitments, and feelings about inclusion (Salisbury & McGregor, 2002; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011); fairly distributing special education teacher caseloads and responsibilities based on feedback from teachers and staff (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Youngs, 2007); developing in-house training, curriculum development, and assessments to support instruction (Marks & Printy, 2003); and connecting novice teachers with veteran teacher leaders (Youngs, 2007). The impact of this type of engagement can improve teacher-administrator relationships, as well as make teachers feel included in decision-making processes and more likely to adopt new practices and follow up with administrators with questions or concerns (Cambrun & Han, 2009).

Currently, connections between distributed leadership theories and other areas of educational leadership research are necessary to draw meaningful conclusions about how distributed leadership can be associated with special education leadership and inclusive reforms. This is mainly because so few empirical studies investigate these areas and because existing research is broad and difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from (Harris, 2008; Hartley, 2007). Empirical research does not

sufficiently explore how principals distribute leadership, the types of leadership responsibilities given to varied stakeholders, descriptions of leadership practices, and challenges associated with these approaches.

METHODOLOGY

This article examines how one elementary school principal and a team of teachers engaged in leadership activities to increase inclusivity and academic performance in an already high-performing urban school. The purpose of this research was to examine how leadership was distributed, the actions taken by varied stakeholders, and the challenges related to creating a more inclusive school. The findings presented in this article are from a secondary analysis of data from a larger study of how five principals understood and implemented inclusion in their schools. In the larger study, a qualitative case study method (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009) was employed to examine principals' leadership in one school district over the course of the 2010–2011 academic school year; five school leaders were selected for having made progress in implementing inclusion at their school. This article reports on the practices of one of the five principals, as this principal's work raised issues related to distributed leadership and inclusive school reform.

INITIAL DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data collection process for the larger study spanned the 2010–2011 academic school year (August 2010–July 2011). Data collection consisted of in-depth interviews with principals and staff over the course of the school year, school observations focused on principals, observations of teachers and staff collaboratively implementing inclusive reforms, and documents collected from each of the participating schools, the school district, city council hearings, court proceedings, and the district's Office of Special Education. Policy documents, district memos, and training presentations were also reviewed and analyzed.

Interviews were structured and semi-structured and took place over the course of the school year. Each interview was approximately 95 minutes long. A dramaturgical interview approach was used in the initial interview to establish rapport between the researcher and the participant (Berg, 2007). Generally, interviews were conducted using protocols to guide conversations and focused on (a) the principal's orientation, values, and con-

ceptions of inclusion and how it relates to their leadership role; (b) how
the school's inclusion program was developed and implemented; (c) chal-
lenges to inclusion and student achievement; (d) the history of inclusion
and achievement at the school; and (e) specific principal actions related to
creating a more inclusive school.

Observations were conducted throughout the course of the year, and
each lasted from 120 minutes to 200 minutes. Observations were used to
triangulate data gathered from interviews with the school leader. They also
helped the researcher become more familiar with the key stakeholders,
organizational structures, school culture, and interventions present in the
schools. All observations were conducted in the presence of the principal
in various settings, including (a) classrooms, (b) IEP meetings, (c) parent-
administrator conferences, (d) grade-level team meetings, (e) and special
education team meetings, and (f) community meetings at the school. A
variety of documents were collected and analyzed, including (a) district
accountability reports, (b) state accountability reports, (c) meeting agen-
das and meeting notes, and (d) professional development presentations.
After each observation, the researcher and principal debriefed to discuss
the principal's perceptions of what had occurred.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously over the course
of the larger study. Data that were collected and analyzed early in the
school year directed further data collection and analysis. Data were ana-
lyzed using Nvivo 9 software in two primary phases. Early in the analysis
phase, data were coded according to (a) school leadership actions, (b)
school leadership approaches and orientations, (c) communication and
relationships with staff, and (d) technical skills and expertise around in-
clusive educational practices and serving students with disabilities. In later
coding phases, additional inductive and deductive coding processes were
employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1999).

SAMPLING FOR DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Dewey Elementary School was the focus of the analysis and was selected
using a purposeful sampling strategy (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Maxwell,
2005) from the five schools which participated in the larger study. Three
criteria were used to select the leader for the secondary analysis: (a) the
principal had a demonstrated commitment to implementing inclusion at a
school wide level, (b) a distributed approach to school leadership existed
within the school, and (c) the school was effectively supporting students
with disabilities (the achievement gap between students with disabilities
and their non-disabled peers was 10% less than the district-wide gap).

The first criterion meant the school had made significant progress in appropriately moving students from highly restrictive environments to less restrictive environments. The second criterion meant that observations and interviews revealed that the school leader developed new leadership opportunities for staff and encouraged staff to take leadership outside of her presence. Only one school leader of the five in the larger study met the selection criteria.

FINDINGS

The findings for this study are presented in five sections. First, a brief description of the school is presented to provide context for the study. Next, background information will be given about the principal, Mrs. Smith, because of her important role in creating a more inclusive school and in prompting distributed leadership in the school. The subsequent section describes how Mrs. Smith and a teacher leader helped to set the conditions for an inclusive school and a distributed approach to leadership. Then, findings related to how teachers engaged in leadership are described. Finally, the findings section concludes with a micro-level example of an IEP meeting during which a team, including the principal, worked together to solve a special education related problem and promote inclusion.

DEWEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Dewey Elementary School is a pseudonym for a high-performing and well-resourced school situated in a large urban school district. This district is under corrective action for non-compliance with special education mandates and failing to meet academic targets. Most schools in the district serve low-income communities, lack adequate resources, and are low performing, but Dewey ES was different from the others. Dewey ES was located in a high-income neighborhood that was geographically and economically isolated from the rest of the city. The school had approximately 277 students with a diverse student population (White: 72%; African-American: 13%; Asian: 9%; and Hispanic or Latino: 6%). More than one-third of the student population was born outside of the United States and students spoke a range of languages at home including Russian, Korean, Amharic, Italian, Japanese, French, Vietnamese, and Chinese. Students' religions also varied and included various Christian denominations, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism. A small portion of the students at the school lived in the

city's poorest neighborhoods and gained access to the school through a lottery system within the district. Just 4% of students qualified for free and reduced meals. Sixteen of the 277 students (about 6%) at Dewey ES had IEPs primarily for speech and language, though others were identified as having emotional or behavioral disabilities and learning disabilities. Disability appeared to be normally distributed across race, ethnicity, and family income. Ninety-four percent of all students were proficient or advanced in reading. Students with disabilities trailed behind by less than three percentage points at Dewey ES, but in other elementary schools with proficiency rates at or above 90%, the gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers was about 12%. The district's achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers was 28%.

Dewey had 10 grade-level teachers not including art, music, and physical education teachers; two special education teachers; and two ELL teachers. The school also had a handful of instructional assistants. A veteran special education teacher, Mrs. White, served as the school's special education coordinator, which meant she taught a full teaching schedule but also managed the special education process and procedures for the school. Mrs. White had over 35 years of experience working at Dewey ES, and teachers and Mrs. Smith described Mrs. White as an important leader in the school. The other special education teacher, Ms. Davey, was in her second year as a teacher. Dewey also had a team of related service providers, some of whom were assigned to other schools as well. The school psychologist, Mrs. Everett, had been working at Dewey for eight years. The speech and language pathologist, Ms. Davis, had worked at the school for approximately four years. A social worker, an adaptive physical education specialist, and an occupational therapist also visited the school to provide services approximately one to two days a week. Mrs. White was the leader for special education and managed all the related service provider schedules and ensured special education meetings (e.g., IEP meetings, eligibility meetings, manifestation determination reviews) were coordinated and scheduled without conflict. Mrs. White and Mrs. Smith both described working very hard year after year to recruit and retain the best service providers.

It is important to note that the school did not embrace inclusion before Mrs. Smith arrived. Instead the school conformed to a rigid schedule that included pullout sessions for specialized instruction and related services. According to Mrs. Smith and Mrs. White, teachers did not differentiate instruction because they expected parents to pay for tutors and were typically not prepared to provide specialized instruction for students with disabilities, ELLs, or struggling general education students. The implications

of failing to support these students had only a limited impact on test scores considering that these students made up only a small percentage of the total school population. When Mrs. Smith became principal, she worked to change this structure. She began by inviting parents and the community into the school and classrooms. She encouraged shared decision making which incorporated parent leaders. She also worked with Mrs. White to slowly remove the pullout classrooms for students with disabilities and ELL students. Mrs. White explained that the obstacles were not removing the classes from the schedules, rewriting IEPs, or getting parents to agree to inclusive placements; instead, the problem was "finding the right staff to provide great instruction in the regular class." This meant recruiting special education service providers, an additional special education teacher, ELL teachers, and general education teachers who were open to provide quality services and instruction in the general education classroom.

Mrs. Smith and Mrs. White recalled the importance of time and staff turnover to the early school reform process. Dewey ES was a high-performing school, and teachers were generally effective in ensuring students scored well on tests. Classrooms were always well managed and learning was taking place for most students. Mrs. Smith noted that this made change all the more difficult and very slow in her early years. She stated,

> It's hard to make change when you are in the high 90s (student achievement levels). The teachers believed they had evidence that they were great teachers and this made change difficult. Teachers would ask me, "Why change, why do this inclusion? Things are fine the way they are. Everyone is happy here." Of course, my response was about the best interest of all students, not most students, but it was still difficult. It's hard to remove a teacher in general; try moving an effective one [based on test scores].

Thus, it took time to change teacher behaviors, ideas, habits in an effort to increase their ability to serve all students. In a group conversation, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. White shared stories of their recruitment efforts and teacher interviews, along with the struggles they had in identifying and hiring teachers who were open to co-teaching, co-planning, and educating all students. Later, recruitment efforts would shift toward finding teacher leaders; Mrs. Smith believed that the school was inclusive but that teachers still struggled to work together and take ownership over supporting all students by working together to collectively problem-solve rather than looking to administration to provide all the answers. Neither Mrs. Smith nor Mrs. White believed they had all the answers, and both agreed that answers on how to best support students should be a product of collaboration and data-driven discussions and decisions. Both recalled stories of contacting local and national colleges of education, attending teacher recruitment

fairs in a 300 mile radius, finding out who the best teachers were in the area, and then recruiting them to Dewey.

Over the years, the school became highly inclusive and was recognized in the district for its strong inclusion program. At the time of the study, all but one student with a disability received their specialized instruction and support in the general education classroom. On a few other occasions, students received speech and language services in a separate room since this required a quiet atmosphere. Although inclusion was the norm at Dewey, teachers and staff still struggled to implement IEPs and meet the demands of other special education related issues. For example, Ms. Davey, the newer special education teacher struggled with compliance and developing quality IEPs that other teachers could easily understand and utilize for instruction. Certain special education teachers and general education teachers struggled to collaborate and consequently had rocky relationships. Students with behavioral and learning disabilities posed classroom management challenges at times, and the school often received due process complaints and other compliance related paperwork due to a unique district policy context associated with private and religious schools and tuition payouts by the district. In sum, despite the fact that Dewey was well resourced, problems existed, the pace of work was fast, and high expectations and demands made work stressful. Dewey ES was a great school, but not a perfect one.

MRS. SMITH

The unit of analysis in this study was the school, but Mrs. Smith was its leader and played a prominent role in creating a more inclusive school that incorporated a distributed approach to leadership. Teachers and staff described her as the "heart and soul" of the school. Mrs. Davey said, "Without her, things just wouldn't be the same . . . it's just her presence and her leadership. . . . She makes us engage, think, and work." Mrs. Smith was a seasoned principal in her early fifties. She had been principal at Dewey ES for fifteen years. Prior to her experience at Dewey ES, she had worked as a principal at a private preparatory school and as a principal mentor and clinical faculty member at a major research university. She held an undergraduate and master's degree from an Ivy League university and continuously engaged in professional development activities locally and across the United States. Her energetic and engaging manner was revealed in observations. It was also clear that teachers and staff positively responded to her presence. Observations also revealed that Mrs. Smith typically did not lead meetings; she was very collegial with teachers and was on a first-

name basis with most staff members. She often attended professional development sessions during the summer, spring, or winter break with other teachers at the school and throughout the region.

Mrs. Smith was highly visible in the school and attempted to attend every meeting or activity; however, in most instances she did not seek to lead, manage, or take control of conversations. In fact, she was frequently a passive observer or a guide posing questions. She allowed teachers to make choices, and in meetings, she was a listener who encouraged staff to take leadership roles, and even encouraged staff to question her own decisions (in an appropriate time and manner). Mrs. Smith was actively engaged in the special education department despite her limited expertise. She looked to her staff in meetings to provide her with important information and to clarify legal or assessment jargon. While observing IEP meetings, she asked critical questions, cited technical information from evaluations and reports as if she were an expert, and did not shy away from conversations related to placement, IEP goal development, or disability classification. In one meeting, a new district employee thought Mrs. Smith was a teacher.

Mrs. Smith also brought a powerful awareness to her school that provided moral purpose to creating an inclusive school. She was well aware that her school and the surrounding community were isolated from many of the problems and circumstances of the city, such as its violence, poverty, and budgetary constraints. She told teachers they were lucky as a school community to have so much (e.g., an engaged and financially supportive parent–teacher association, resources, parent engagement, most students having basic needs met each day, parents who are able to pay for tutoring). For Mrs. Smith, this luck came with responsibility.

> We must serve each and every student fully and completely. We don't turn kids away in need, and we take on challenges here because we refuse to burden another school with our failures and we refuse to sacrifice children for test scores or fear of change. Whatever student that comes to our door, regardless of where he or she lives, regardless of disability, we will serve him or her and serve him or her well . . . It would be unconscionable for us to turn away a child from any place in this city given what we have here. . . . Obviously, we don't have the capacity to take every student, but we take everyone sent to us and we serve them well.[1]

PROMOTING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Historically, Dewey ES provided a high standard of services and support to all students. However, two years prior to the study, Mrs. Smith realized teachers were not actively engaged in leadership within the school and

were always seeking help rather than solving their own problems. Mrs. Smith explained this context.

> They were constantly looking for answers but not engaging. . . . I invited folks to meetings and if they showed up, their voices were heard. I just wasn't getting a lot of teachers to show up. . . . As you grow as a leader, you look for ways to improve your school; this was our next step.

Mrs. White noted similar concerns, so the impetus for creating a more distributed approach to leadership stemmed from Mrs. Smith and Mrs. White's desire to create a faculty that was more capable of solving its own problems, more able to adapt to classroom challenges, and more likely to give input and participate in leadership decisions.

When Mrs. Smith was asked about how she went about encouraging teacher leadership, she described a number of actions and areas of focus, which included: (a) selective hiring; (b) modeling a transparent approach to leadership; (c) engaging in democratic decision making; (d) maintaining an open-door policy and being highly visible; (e) creating leadership opportunities; (f) participating in activities with teachers as a colleague; and (g) providing coaching and feedback to teacher leaders. Selective hiring and teacher induction were important for Mrs. Smith; she believed that effective hiring would contribute to creating a school filled with engaged teacher leaders. In an interview with Mrs. Smith and Mrs. White, both discussed attributes and experiences they looked for in potential candidates. Mrs. Smith, in particular, said

> I look for teachers who have previous leadership experience. Experience can be playing college sports or coaching, volunteering for a cause, starting a non-profit, or having previous experience managing projects. . . . When I interview, I specifically ask about the types of activities they would like to be involved in outside of the classroom. I make it known that this type of work is important. Then, when we bring them on, in our first meeting we talk about how they might work with others or take on a leadership role . . . This doesn't mean that I want them to start on their first day, but I want them to know it's a priority of mine.

Once teachers were hired, Mrs. Smith explained that she would regularly meet with new teachers and push them toward leadership opportunities. She also believed a school culture and climate needed to promote teacher leadership for new and veteran teachers alike (see Table 1).

Mrs. Smith believed that "if teachers feel safe and feel like they have a voice they will collaborate, engage, and even lead." Thus, she engaged in a number of actions to create a safe and open school environment. Two years prior to this study, Mrs. Smith began to hold her administrative team meetings after school rather than early in the morning so teachers could

Table 1. Building a Climate for Teacher Leadership

Action	Description
Selective Hiring	Select teachers with project management experience or interest in taking on leadership opportunities.
	New teachers are guided to engage in leadership activities, which set expectations for leadership early in the teacher's career.
Transparent Leadership	Open all administrative team meetings to faculty.
	Present new budget proposals and other items to faculty.
	Share challenges and constraints related to district policies with faculty.
Democratic Decision-Making	Allow staff to give input on all decisions.
	Share with faculty the reasons for a unilateral principal decision.
Open Door Policy/ Impromptu Conversations	Teachers and staff are able to speak with the principal at any time of the day or call after hours.
	The principal is highly visible and conducts informal check-ins with staff to gain insights and build relationships.
Creating Leadership Opportunities	Establish professional development venues.
	Propose leadership ideas, activities, and opportunities to prospective teacher leaders.
Engage in Teacher Activities	Engage and participate in groups with teachers during professional development activities.
Coaching/Feedback	Provide formal and informal feedback to teacher leaders after activities or meetings.
	Model effective management and leadership etiquette.

attend. She encouraged faculty to actively participate in the meetings. At first only about 5 or 10% of the staff would show up, but by the end of the 2010–2011 school year, attendance ranged from 50% to 75% of the staff, depending on the meeting and what issues were on the agenda. Yet, Mrs. Smith was not satisfied with only attendance. She wanted meaningful engagement and discussion in the meetings and saw the meetings as opportunities to further encourage leadership. She recalled how the meetings encouraged some teachers to engage in leadership.

> Early on, some teachers would show up but wouldn't say much. I saw there was some comfort issues, or I should say, discomfort issues. I constantly encouraged them to share ideas during the meetings. I asked lots of questions. I also tried to talk with them outside of meetings and encourage them to bring up an idea or share an experience in the next meeting. After a while, and when [the teachers] saw others actively engaging in the meetings, more teachers would feel comfortable engaging. Once there in, then you see people beginning to take leadership over a variety of things.

Observations during the year of the study revealed that teachers were more comfortable in engaging in and taking ownership of leadership. For

example, during administrative team meetings teachers had opportunities to share ideas, discuss challenges, and collectively problem-solve. Mrs. Smith would openly share constraints the school confronted. In one meeting, Mrs. Smith shared that the district had cut a part of the after-school budget, so she asked for support in continuing the program. One teacher recognized that Mrs. Smith's job was more difficult than she had once thought. A teacher shared her thoughts with another colleague: "I was surprised . . . I didn't know the district didn't pay for that program. . . . After listening to some of the challenges, I can help more." What emerged across these meetings was how transparency inspired and motivated teachers to become more interested in problem solving and more likely to support initiatives. General examples include teachers leading fund-raising activities, school-wide class trips, professional development sessions, and new teacher support groups.

During an administrative team meeting, Mrs. Smith shared a significant issue related to the special education program, one that illustrated how teachers became more engaged in leadership and decision making at the school. In years past, Mrs. Smith worked hard to hire and keep a second special education teacher in the school because it was difficult for one special education teacher to provide inclusive support across six grade levels (K–5). However, the school was presented with its new budget, and the district had only allocated funding for one special education teacher, which meant a decision had to be made to either (a) go without the second special education teacher or (b) make cuts elsewhere to maintain the salary of the second special education teacher. First, Mrs. Smith asked Mrs. White to share her concerns, and then she set basic parameters for discussion and asked for teacher input and ideas. Mrs. White explained her concern: "I have to schedule meetings, respond to lawyers, attend district training, fax paperwork, and do an ongoing bunch of work, not to mention I have to teach my caseload. It's unbearable alone and I can't keep up. It makes me worried."

Mrs. Smith volunteered to help with the paperwork if someone would teach her. Another teacher chimed in and asked the special education coordinator, "What is your biggest challenge? I mean, what could we take off your plate to make it work?" The coordinator responded, "The legal stuff, dealing with the attorneys." Another teacher joined the conversation and stated, "I'm a lawyer. I never practiced special education, but if you could teach me and help me, I would be willing to help." The school's secretary added that she was willing to schedule meetings. Afterward, Mrs. Smith reflected on what occurred.

Oh my gosh, what you saw there was splendid wasn't it? We didn't solve the entire problem, but did you see how they came together? As a school we have a budget problem. That problem impacts our special education program. A teacher probed to find out what type of help she really needed. Then another teacher said she could help. . . . And what's better, a teacher with legal expertise will learn about the special education, and the special education coordinator will benefit from working with a trained attorney. Even better, there is a greater ownership and collective responsibility for special education. It's exciting to see folks come together.

By alleviating the administrative workload for Mrs. White, she would be able to spend more time in classrooms supporting students and teachers.

Mrs. Smith also maintained an open-door policy and allowed teachers to walk into her office without advanced notice. She believed the benefits of such a policy would promote teacher leadership and advance instruction. She described why this policy was important and how it benefited the school.

A lot of times teachers want to share with you a success or [that they] are struggling with an issue. Maybe they are struggling to help a student, or they had a lesson go wrong, or maybe they had a huge breakthrough. Whatever it is, for me, it's an opportunity. If it's a problem, I can connect that teacher with a veteran. For example, if I know a teacher is struggling with a particular student and know that his teacher last year had great success with the student, I can say, "Hey, you should really talk to Ms. Whoever."

Time and time again, observations revealed that Mrs. Smith was always available to discuss an issue or to listen to a teacher success. Typically, conversations were related to an instructional or behavioral related problem with a student or obstacles to collaboration. Both types of conversations were frequently related to inclusive practices and serving students with disabilities or ELLs.

The open-door policy was about keeping the ship moving along at full speed, and in these sessions, Mrs. Smith would problem solve, pose critical questions, or just be a listener. She also viewed herself as a teacher and a connector of resources; so many conversations ended with a recommended strategy, book, or plan for a follow-up meeting to discuss how to improve practice. Mrs. Smith also encouraged teacher leadership through a daily thirty-minute block of time for professional development. Observations consistently revealed that this time was used for school-wide or group meetings and professional development sessions. Teachers would present on topics or challenges or provide trainings. Mrs. Smith worked to facilitate meetings but also worked as a member

of the group. Her motivation was two-fold: "I want teachers to share best practices, of course, but I also want them to talk with each other and support each other when I'm not around so when a teacher is struggling, they don't need me; they can just go across the hallway and think through the problem." During a meeting a teacher echoed Mrs. Smith's sentiments: "It's a great school to be in because you're never lost; people are always here to help you. You can go talk with your principal, but you don't have to; you can go next door and get help, too."

Although Mrs. Smith was always encouraging teachers to take on leadership roles, she recognized that not everyone wanted to be a leader, or at least not right away. She emphasized that she was more concerned with student achievement and student happiness than anything else. She stated, "I understand, some teachers just want to teach and, you know what, that's fine. That's their job. If they don't want to do some of the things other staff do, so be it. Or if they don't feel comfortable with it, that's fine, too." She didn't push people into leadership roles, and she recognized that some teachers or staff didn't have the best disposition for leadership.

COACHING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

As teachers became more and more engaged in leadership and decision making, Mrs. Smith was able to further distribute leadership. However, it is important to note that she did not simply delegate tasks. She observed, coached, and supported teacher leaders as they engaged in leadership activities, struggled, and learned to lead. Observations revealed that teachers were leading a number of activities, which included IEP team meetings, professional development sessions, student support team meetings, parent conferences, and segments of the school's administrative team meeting. Table 2 demonstrates how Mrs. Smith provided coaching to build leadership capacity.

Teacher leadership in special education and inclusion were prevalent and encouraged. IEP meetings or IEP preparation meetings (no family present) were frequently observed, and they provided opportunities for teacher leadership. Mrs. White chaired almost all IEP meetings, but Mrs. Smith was an active participant in the meetings who posed critical questions to the group and helped solve issues that emerged in the often contentious IEP meetings. At times, Mrs. White would become flustered, overwhelmed, or upset with aspects of IEP team meetings, despite her years of experience. Afterward, Mrs. Smith would always debrief with Mrs. White and other teachers about how the meeting went and how it might have

Table 2. Building Leadership Capacity with Staff

Activity	*Coaching Support*
IEP Team Meeting	Encourages the meeting's chair to have a clear agenda; share and adhere to the agenda; ask critical questions to engage the team; organize ideas and facilitate discussion; to manage time effectively; share or explain important information; and critically reflect on the meeting.
Professional Development Session	Encourages presenters to have a clear agenda; use effective instructional practices to deliver content; and develop engaging activities.
Student Support Team Meeting	Encourages the meeting's chair to have a clear agenda; guide discussion using data and not assumptions; engage all meeting participants; and ask critical questions and challenge teacher assumptions.
Upset/Concerned Parent Meeting	Encourages teacher to understand parent's perspective and concern; think about how a partnership can be forged; reflect on meeting outcomes; and end meetings with a plan and follow-up schedule.
Administrative Team Meeting	Encourages team members to ask questions; take on new responsibilities; share experiences or expertise; pose critical questions; and identify next steps or ongoing issues for future meetings.

been better. These debriefs were more reflective than critical and were focused on improving processes. Mrs. White always appeared to desire the feedback and opportunity to discuss the meeting. Mrs. Smith explained her focus and motivation for attending IEP meetings and giving feedback.

> IEP meetings are super important for me. I have the opportunity to learn about a student's need in great detail. This allows me to know whether or not teachers are really engaged with the student, so I do a lot of listening. I also watch and think critically about how the meeting is being run. I ask myself, is it organized, is there a real discussion or is it just talk. . . . Teachers shouldn't just present information; it should be discussed . . . so afterward, I sometimes talk to the team or to the meeting chair to give feedback or to have them reflect.

Based on what occurred in meetings, Mrs. White might schedule a meeting with a teacher to discuss their performance and level of engagement, and to prompt them to take a more critical role. After an IEP team meeting, she asked a teacher who presented data on the student, "Do you think the team really understood your data? Are you happy with what the team decided on, or did you just go with the flow? What else could have helped you get your point across better?" The teacher was able to be more reflective and appeared thankful for the discussion.

Other meetings led by teachers were also relevant to special education and inclusion. Teacher-led professional development sessions on co-teaching, co-planning, or specific instructional strategies were common, as were debriefs in which teachers were able to share their accomplishments and frustrations with inclusion. Mrs. Smith encouraged teachers to share their experiences and expertise, and to collectively problem-solve. A great deal of this encouragement started with impromptu conversations about a classroom success or a challenge and ended with Mrs. Smith recommending that the teacher does some reading or observing of another teacher, followed by sharing ideas for best practices. One example of a professional development session was on how to understand and interpret educational assessment results. The school psychologist partnered with Mrs. White to provide training on literacy assessments. The two provided examples of assessments, purposes of the assessments, how to interpret results, and how assessment results can inform instruction and differentiation. A second example was a second year teacher and a veteran teacher presenting on classroom management. Initially, Mrs. Smith paired the two together when the newer teacher was struggling. Mrs. Smith facilitated a few meetings to check in on the newer teacher and prompted the two teachers to provide training to the group on positive behavioral supports (PBS). The newer teacher would later take the lead on a school-wide PBS initiative.

Mrs. White worried about appropriately identifying students with disabilities and providing interventions for students who are not identified under IDEA before they fall too far behind. The school had always had a pre-referral to special education process, but Mrs. White was in charge and felt teachers did not meaningfully engage in the process. Mrs. Smith and Mrs. White developed what they called a student support team during the 2010–2011 school year. Each student support team consisted of teachers and staff working with two grades (Team 1: K–1st; Team 2: 2nd–3rd; Team 3: 4th–5th) and was led by a teacher leader from one of the two grades. Each team met once a week during the school day for 45 minutes and once a month after school for 60 minutes. Initially, teachers did not take ownership over the student support team process. Mrs. Smith then developed a handful of documents to guide the process. The documents included a meeting agenda, student discussion protocol, and an action plan development sheet.

In the initial meetings the team used the documents to discuss students using a data-driven process. A teacher could discuss any student (with or without a disability). Mrs. Smith shared that the early meetings were not very collaborative.

> Everyone expected me to run the meetings, come up with the ideas, and approve the action plans. . . . That was not my intention. My intention was that they would work together and I would just be a team member. . . . But I realized they weren't ready right away, so I did a lot of modeling. I also identified team leaders who I would support in the process.

Observations revealed that early in the process, the team leaders looked to Mrs. Smith for continual guidance and direction. The team leader asked during one meeting, "Are we doing this right? Is this what you mean? Is this filled out right?" During a debriefing, the team leader had additional questions.

After a few months, teachers began adapting some of the early documents created by Mrs. Smith. The student support teams became more collaborative, and Mrs. Smith slowly moved away from a direct leadership role. At a meeting that took place close to the end of the year, Mrs. Smith was not questioned on any procedural aspect of the meeting. She participated as an educator and not a manager or leader. An unintended but useful aspect of the meeting emerged: the special education teachers began to use the venue to discuss how IEPs should be implemented and to suggest new teaching strategies. Mrs. White noticed that more general education teachers asked critical questions about students' IEPs, and even began to recognize that certain strategies written into IEPs were useful for helping other students. In a meeting with Mrs. Smith, Mrs. White shared an observation:

> I think the [student support team] meetings are really started to help. Teachers are beginning to recognize that all students should have an individualized learning plan. . . . They are engaging more with special education teachers and related services providers. . . . I see in IEP meetings that the general education teachers ask more critical questions and are more likely to be involved.

Ms. Davey, who early in the school year struggled to collaborate with certain teachers, was increasingly becoming a leader. She became one of the team leaders of the student support teams and presented on topics related to co-teaching and co-planning. Mrs. Smith focused her attention on coaching the team leaders. She attended each meeting, and then met bi-weekly with the team leaders in a group meeting. They discussed obstacles, new ideas, and how the meetings progressed. Mrs. Smith also made each team leader aware of the strengths of the other team leaders so they could observe each other and share ideas.

> After weeks of attending these meetings, I saw that certain team leaders had different strengths, so I started recommending that they go visit another team

leader's meeting. . . . I also had them critique the meeting and provide feed-back. . . . By December, the team leaders were really into running effective meetings and developing improved documents and protocols. . . . I also saw other teachers looking to these teachers for help and support.

A MICRO-LEVEL EXAMPLE

One example that was observed and discussed during interview sessions was an IEP pre-meeting that occurred a few days before a contentious meeting. The events of the meeting and post-meeting reflections are shared in what follows.

Timothy was a White fourth grade student from a wealthy family who was identified under the IDEA as a student with a learning disability. He was about one grade level below his peers in reading and on grade level in math according to test results from his last special education eligibility meeting (approximately one year prior to the meeting). Most of his reading skills were age appropriate, but he struggled in a handful of areas. Dewey's IEP team, which included the parents, developed an IEP to support Timothy the previous year. Timothy received all of his IEP services and supports inside the general education classroom. Progress monitoring notes and report cards indicated that Timothy had made tremendous progress from the previous year. His previous IEP noted that when Timothy started at Dewey, he had a hard time making friends and was a bit awkward. A year later, Timothy had become one of the class's most popular students, but to the surprise of Dewey ES, the parents, with the support of an attorney, filed a due process complaint against the school district and requested that the school district pay for tuition at an elite private school that cost over 40 thousand dollars a year, but that did not have a special education program. They alleged that the school had failed to provide Timothy with a free and appropriate education under the IDEA and that a private school, which they had already visited, could meet Timothy's needs. The staff at Dewey strongly disagreed with the parents.[2]

The district required the IEP team to meet and attempt to settle the dispute prior to a hearing, but before the team could meet the parents pulled Timothy out of Dewey ES and began paying for his tuition at the private school. They would later sue the district for the tuition they had paid. Mrs. White wanted to have a detailed pre-meeting to prepare for the upcoming IEP team meeting. She reached out to the following individuals to schedule the meeting: Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Davey, Mrs. Davis, the school psychologist, Ms. Johnson, the speech and language pathologist, Mrs. Matthews and Mr. Dennis, the third and fourth grade teachers, respectively, and Ms. Epps, the art teacher. When the meeting convened, Mrs.

which leadership is distributed to others strategically and highlights that distributed approaches to leadership can be effective when principals carefully select teacher leaders and provide organization and structure that allows them to thrive in leadership positions (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010). Mrs. Smith's actions reflect her recognition that special education and inclusion are challenging and that a distributed approach to leadership supports the provision of effective, inclusive, and legally compliant special education.

Mrs. White also played an important leadership role, as did other members of the school community. In the micro-level example, Mrs. White and the school psychologist played active leadership roles, despite the fact that Mrs. Smith ended up shifting back into the "heroic leader" role. Mrs. White identified problems, openly shared her worries, and helped the IEP team prepare for a contentious meeting. Mrs. Smith responded by leading the meeting, but both Mrs. White and the school psychologist played important roles in the actual meeting and later in the due process hearing. The analytical conclusions of these data are contentious and raise important questions about the nature of distributed leadership. Did Mrs. Smith shift back into a traditional position of hierarchical authority by taking the control over the meeting? Were her actions in conflict with theoretical or empirical descriptions of distributed leadership? What emerged from these questions is evidence of a continuum of distributed leadership wherein situations, context, and capacity affect the degree to which traditional leaders maintain formal authority (Copland, 2003; Harris, 2004; Timperley, 2005). In this study, distributed leadership did not equate to the dismissal of an organizational hierarchy, but rather, a hierarchy that becomes less important at certain times. The pressure of leading a difficult meeting with an aggressive lawyer worried a teacher leader, and Mrs. Smith made a decision to step in. Mrs. Smith's ability to know when to step in and how she was needed reflects a school context in which teachers can share their concerns, problem-solve, engage in leadership, and take collective action with the support of their principal.

Findings from this study also help to establish a link between distributed leadership for inclusion and other leadership models, such as instructional leadership and social justice leadership. Instructional and social justice leadership models highlight a heroic and skilled principal leading teachers to improve the quality of instruction in their classroom and the inclusivity of their school. Research on both of these models suggest that principals connect teachers with valuable training and instructional resources to improve the quality of instruction in their classrooms (Marzano et al., 2005; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). What

emerged in this study was how the principal was able to identify and capitalize on teacher expertise. Her ability to recognize this expertise allowed her to support teachers in providing in-house professional development to their peers. In this study, other examples emerged in which teachers were engaged in the decision-making processes and, as a result, took ownership and engaged in leadership that contributed to a more positive school environment that supported equity and inclusion.

Findings from existing research on distributed leadership have been mostly focused on its effectiveness to raise student achievement. In this study, outcomes of a more distributed approach to school leadership cannot be fully measured through quantitative assessments of student achievement and inclusivity because the school was already successful. However, it is important not to assume that state-mandated assessment scores or inclusivity ratings provided by the U.S. Department of Education are effective measures of the quality of instruction and the inclusivity in schools. State-mandated and accountability driven assessments typically only measure a baseline of educational attainment (Neal & Schanzenbach, 2010). Moreover, an inclusivity measurement of whether a student with a disability sits in a general education classroom for 80% of the day or more may not be a true measure of how inclusive a school or classroom might be. Obviously, a student with a disability in a general education classroom who does not receive appropriate services and supports is not being served well or inclusively; this is the case in many so-called inclusive classrooms (Nilholm & Alm, 2010; Waldron & McLeskey, 2011). Mrs. Smith and Dewey ES were concerned with increasing teacher capacity to better meet the needs of all students, and so they looked beyond test scores and continually pushed for improvements and reform, in part, by providing teachers with leadership opportunities through professional development, PLCs, and grade-level team meetings that used data to identify interventions for struggling students. Each of these actions, when implemented effectively, has been found to have a measureable impact on student learning and school inclusivity (Friend et al., 2010; Horn & Little, 2010; McLeskey et al., 2012).

IMPLICATIONS

This study has important implications for future research. Researchers should continue to investigate distributed leadership practices with a focus on special education because few studies highlight the leadership practices in effective and high-performing inclusive schools. This study

was limited by focusing primarily on the principal and a veteran special education teacher in a high-performing school. Interviews and observations were focused more on the principal than on other teachers. In addition, the principal had only recently been promoting a more distributed approach to leadership in her school. Future research should direct more attention to informal leaders in the school and investigate a school for a longer period of time in order to better understand how a distributed approach to leadership can further promote or impede an effective and inclusive school. Similarly, additional research is needed in schools which are less inclusive or effective, but that aim to improve. Dewey ES is a case of how distributed leadership helped to contribute to the success of an existing inclusion program and how leadership can be distributed to support students with disabilities. However, this study did not capture important elements related to turning around low-performing and highly segregated schools.

Finally, future research can delve much deeper into a case and explore how teaching practices, school relationships with parents, and formal structures which support special education and inclusion are improved through a distributed approach to leadership. Researchers may choose to give additional attention to other instructional positions, such as non-instructional staff (e.g., custodians, school nurses, front office staff, and attendance counselors) in creating more inclusive schools. Furthermore, additional studies in similar and different contexts will create a richer description of how distributed leadership is practiced, the actions associated with distributed leadership, and how they contribute or subtract from inclusive reforms. Finally, similar research is needed in areas related to other groups of students, such as ELLs or students who are struggling to deal with challenging issues in their home life (e.g., students in foster care; students who have experienced trauma or who are grieving).

This research also has important implications for practitioners and professors of educational leadership. Mrs. Smith is an example of a principal who wasn't trained as a special education teacher, but who still engaged in special education leadership rather than delegating that responsibility to others. It appeared that Mrs. Smith recognized the importance of her presence and leadership in the area of special education. She demonstrated a willingness to listen, learn, and engage in professional development with teachers. Practitioners and professors of educational leadership can learn from these actions and incorporate them into their practice. Principals and assistant principals should be comfortable with their lack of expertise and be willing to learn and grow alongside teachers and staff. They should also recruit and rely on teacher leaders who have important skills and expertise. Similarly, professors of educational leadership in principal

preparation programs should push students to engage in topics and experiences outside of their content areas and comfort zones. These programs may consider having students interview or observe teachers or assistant principals and principals who are assigned to managing special education. In addition, principal preparation programs must incorporate more meaningful learning experiences in the areas of special education and inclusion so that new principals and assistant principals are more prepared and comfortable to lead in this area. Examples of more meaningful learning experiences might be observing IEP meetings and collecting field notes to be discussed with special education experts, developing IEP goals and present levels of performance for a mock student based on assessment data, or providing teacher feedback from an observation of a co-taught lesson.

NOTES

1. Many of the students Mrs. Smith were talking about were from the city's poorest and most violent communities. Most of the students from these neighborhoods were African-American, and some came with disabilities.

2. The district was under a consent decree which required the district to pay for legal expenses for any complaints filed against the district. This caused frivolous lawsuits. More savvy parents used the attorneys to file complaints against the district in the hopes that the district would settle and pay private school tuition for high-cost private schools. Other elementary schools in the more wealthy neighborhoods had due process complaints filed for similar reasons. A federal judge overseeing the resolution of the class action lawsuit in the district recognized these frivolous complaints as a problem.

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