Assessing Distributed Leadership and the Successful Implementation of Evidence-Based Practices

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It is a distinct honor to have the opportunity to comment on Kelly and Halverson's highly readable article addressing the assessment of distributed leadership factors linked explicitly to student achievement and outcomes. Their contribution is a timely one. As the authors point out, while there are several existing measures of leadership practices in schools, few focus especially on distributive leadership practices that are essential to what I label, "leadership contagion." It is highly unlikely that a more centralized focus on organizational leadership and instructional leadership, while necessary, is sufficient to address the need for leaders at every level within a school to ensure consistency in meeting school goals, responding to individual differences in the expertise of both students and teachers, and building a culture of collaboration. Likewise, as the authors also point out, existing leadership assessment models, strategies, and data acquisition capabilities are limited in the extent to which responses to survey questions are analyzed and then rapidly linked to relatively detailed feedback to educators in the building.

This linkage from assessment data to recommended strategies to improve student achievement not only takes the time burden for analysis and interpretation of data off of school leaders and teachers, but the design most likely also serves in a subtle way as a professional development tool in and of itself. It is well-known that in our current focus on assessment, we have learned how to administer measures of leadership skills and instructional factors, but are less adept in explicitly linking patterns observed in the data to the formulation of specific instructional and leadership behaviors essential for student success. CALL provides a concrete framework for such linkages, thus providing a model and demonstration of the assessment to feedback relationship.

To be sure, CALL has been developed carefully, is psychometrically sound, and enjoys the input of major stakeholders in the education world. Are there gaps in the assessment content of the CALL that may limit its power despite its strengths? Possibly, but no assessment can cover every important leadership domain in sufficient detail. The larger question for me is whether or not CALL, or any assessment of leadership skills for that matter, is providing fundamental information relevant to the leaders' and teachers' understanding of evidence-based practices, critical barriers to implementation fidelity, and professional communication. Let me take each in turn.

While the term "evidence-based" practices is frequently used in education today, I am not convinced that the majority of leaders at any level share a common understanding of the phrase. For example, do building-level leaders, teachers, and staff understand the research criteria

to employ when adopting a particular curriculum or specific program? Do our leaders and teachers understand what constitutes trustworthy evidence, or do beliefs, untested assumptions, and anecdotes play a significant role in the selection of instructional practices, leadership models, school reform initiatives and the like? Given that the CALL assesses the extent to which evidence-based practices are used, we need to know if educators within the school share a common understanding of the concept.

The CALL also addresses to some degree implementation practices in its survey design. This is important. Effective implementation of any new evidence-based instructional practice or initiative is essential if students are to reap the benefits of a new practice. A school can have the most qualified teachers and the most effective programs, but without a consistent and well-planned implementation strategy, consistent and continuous improvement of student achievement will not happen. Unfortunately, ensuring implementation fidelity is one of the most complex and intensive leadership skills at any level. When one asks whether the essential conditions are in place to install a new innovation in a school, leaders must ask many common sense questions. For example: (1) do teachers and staff understand the contributions of the new initiative and how it will benefit their students? (2) What is the extent of teacher "buy-in?" (3) Are there other new initiatives being implemented at the same time? (4) Do we have a highly specific implementation plan? (5) As a leader, have I made the case that successful implementation rests on the non-negotiable fact that the new initiative will only work if it is initially put in place exactly the way it was designed? (6) Do we fully understand that we must continue the implementation as originally designed long enough to learn the nuances of its applications and determine if a possible change will improve student achievement? (7) Have we sought out expertise on how to implement the new improvement accurately and with fidelity? And, (8) very importantly, do our teachers and leaders have the necessary professional knowledge and skills to ensure successful implementation? I am not sure whether CALL can help us with these more specific questions, but to do so would advance implementation efforts. To be credible in guiding teachers and staff in the selection and implementation of academic programs in schools at all levels and across all content areas, leaders must spend a great deal of time in classrooms observing teachers, modeling good teaching practices, coaching teachers on the best research- and evidence-based instructional routines, and closely monitoring teachers to make sure that practices are implemented. This takes us to the need for a common language.

It is interesting to note that education is one of the few, if not the only, decision-making fields that does not have a common professional language. Leaders and teachers come into schools from many preparation entities that may or may not share the same philosophies, reliance on evidence-based decision making, and essential content, among other proven principles and practices. This is unfortunate, given that teachers and staff have greater respect for leaders who "understand" what they are trying to accomplish in the classroom and the strategies they are using to improve student outcomes. But the "professional shorthand" brought about by shared concepts is typically not observed in school settings. Thus, when assessments of leadership in schools are conducted, to what extent are we asking whether a common assessment and instructional language exist? There is, of course, the argument that leaders cannot know everything that a teacher knows and does, but the issue is not one of detail but instead the need for shared professional and guild knowledge and the ability to communicate effectively in addressing organizational, assessment, and instructional challenges. It is hard to envision leaders and practitioners in business, the military, the law, and medicine not having a shared vocabulary and working knowledge of the content and application of the content essential to the success of their endeavors. In my experience new initiatives in schools are set up for failure without this.

Kelly and Halverson are to be congratulated on their contribution to the field. They are strong leaders in education in their own right, and I have no doubt that their efforts will improve the state of education as reflected in improvements in student learning and achievement. The points I have raised in this commentary are general in nature and may have well been considered in the development of the CALL. But something has been missing in our analysis and assessment of leadership behaviors essential to the implementation of new initiatives in schools. It is difficult to lead new initiatives effectively if you cannot appreciate the complexity of what teachers do and collaborate with them to make data-based adjustments in curriculum, assessment and instructional practices. Confidence in leadership requires that we know that our leaders can support us through meaningful and trustworthy input and recommendations. This requires a common professional language based on shared knowledge at a level of detail we may not have considered necessary before.