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Doing justice: The role of distributed leadership in transforming urban schooling

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore initial opportunities and challenges associated with the implementation of distributed leadership as one of multiple changes in a unique University/school partnership's comprehensive reform initiative. Data are drawn from a long-term ethnography and mixed methods social design experiment of this initiative, including survey and school data. Results of our analyses found that power produced generative frictions that animated change in understandings of leadership. Implementation of distributed leadership occurred in everyday interactions as these frictions were negotiated. This research contributes to ongoing research on distributed leadership by carefully documenting and interpreting how leadership practice is constructed in the everyday life of a school.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore initial opportunities and challenges associated with the implementation of distributed leadership as one of multiple changes in a unique University/school partnership's comprehensive reform initiative. Data are drawn from an ongoing participatory ethnography and mixed methods social design experiment (Gutiérrez, 2016) of this initiative, including survey and school data. We know from research that leadership needs to be grounded in activity rather than focused on individuals (Spillane et al., 2001). Some research has identified structures for capacity building and implementation for both district and building leaders (Elmore, 2000; Fullan,

2007, 2011). Hargreaves (2009) argues that distributed leadership is a critical component of what he calls "the fourth way" of change in which the goal is sustainability in a collaborative social democracy. We know less about how the day-to-day processes of constructing distributed leadership impact culture change and produce sustainability. This paper explores the opportunities and challenges of implementing distributed leadership as it is constructed in everyday interactions. We will discuss how this initiative impacted the partnership's goal to change from a culture of underachievement and negativity toward a culture of collaboration and excellence.

Data for this paper are drawn from a larger participatory ethnography of a unique University/school partnership. As a university faculty member, Larson was the principal investigator of the research and a key member of the team developing and implementing the partnership. The University of Rochester, New York Department of Education (NYSED), and East High School within the Rochester City School District (RCSD) embarked on a bold endeavor: to transform a comprehensive, public, open enrollment urban high school with dismal student outcomes into a model of urban education. The RCSD Board president approached the University in February 2014 about partnering to turn around the school so it would not be closed or converted to a charter school. University personnel engaged in several conversations with the school board, the Warner School dean, faculty with expertise in running schools, and with the University president that resulted in the University submitting a letter of intent to NYSED. A leadership team comprised of University faculty and school administrators gathered comprehensive input from a wide variety of stakeholders to develop a full proposal. We met with community agencies, Rochester's Mayor, parents, community members, neighborhood groups,

teachers, administrators, and students. We met with more than 2000 stakeholders over the course of six months. We received extensive input from approximately 1200 students across grades 7-12 at East by spending a full day in all social studies classes. We documented answers to questions about what they would like to see at East, what they thought needed changing, what classes they would like to take, and how we can better involve their families. After analyzing these data, we developed a full proposal that was submitted in December 2014. The University was approved to serve as the Educational Partnership Organization (EPO), a unique legal status available in this state (Education Law 211e, 2014), for East beginning July 1, 2015. We spent hundreds of hours that summer working alongside teachers, administrators, and support staff to develop curriculum, learn restorative practices, and rethink pedagogy. We opened the doors to approximately1300 students in grades 6-12 September 8, 2015. By becoming an EPO, we are working to transform the educational infrastructure and culture of underachievement of this school in ways that have not previously been documented in the literature on University/school partnerships. Our unique legal status as EPO suggests this partnership could impact how school reform policy is shaped at the state and national level.

EPO partnerships are innovative reform efforts in that the school and its partnership organization become a "district within a district" with its own superintendent and unprecedented control over all processes and practices of the "district." While University/school partnerships are not new (Goodlad, 1991), EPO legal status adds interesting complexities for researchers. Significant differences from other University-assisted autonomous school partnerships (Mehan, Worrell, Heckman, Quartz, 2007) occurred in our case: 1) intensive involvement of students, families, staff, and community

in writing the EPO proposal; 2) four renegotiated union contracts to change working

conditions and professional learning expectations; 3) unanimous school board support

and NYSED approval of partnership and budget; 4) partnering with a high-poverty,

comprehensive high school with no exclusive admissions criteria (e.g. not a charter or

magnet school); 5) control over hiring (we replaced 60% of the staff); 6) unprecedented

control over curriculum and instruction, budget, and school policies, including

disciplinary practices; 7) distributed leadership with a unique leadership structure.

Theoretical framework

   To understand and interpret the data, we used an interdisciplinary theoretical

framework that draws on theories of distributed leadership, culture, and power. A theory

of distributed leadership requires a shift from emphasizing the work of an individual

leader towards acknowledging and validating, as a collective, the work of multiple

individuals in activity within the school (Spillane, 2008; Spillane, Camburn, Pustejovsky,

Pareja, & Lewis 2008; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Given we are examining

how culture changes over time with the EPO, we need a theory of culture that can

account for those changes. We define culture as practices that are mutually constituted

between people as they participate in valued activities (Duranti, 1997). To understand

how social and power relations are transformed as the culture changes over time, we use

Foucault's (1990/1978) concept of power as a complex set of force relations in which

power produces. Foucault specifically notes that power produces both oppressive and

positive relations. We use an analytics of power that traces how social relations are

transformed given our understanding of distributed leadership and culture as participation in activity.

The larger, ongoing study from which data for this paper are drawn is participatory ethnography. Building on participatory designs in qualitative research, we adapted participatory ethnography as a methodology that has been shown to be particularly well-suited for complex organizations (Darrouzet et al., 2009). Often used in complex corporations, participatory ethnography aligns with the critical literacy framework of Freire (1979) with its focus on researching with participants, not *at* or *for* them (Kinloch et al., 2016). When the complexity of an organization is as massive as a school's, it is disingenuous to think a single researcher will walk away with an understanding of that complexity. Instead, participatory ethnography focuses on building understanding within the system, alongside the participants, and positions all parties as knowledge builders and actors of change within the system. Furthermore, the critical participatory stance we adapted to this methodology explicitly positions the research as emancipatory and the researcher as full participant in that emancipatory work. As such, participatory ethnography in this study moves past building capacity in participants because of the organization's complexity (Darrouzet et al., 2009) toward working alongside the East community to co-construct justice and equity in urban education. We also use a mixed methods social design experiment in our study design to structure an iterative process whereby analysis shapes future data collection that is focused on an equity oriented social change agenda (Gutiérrez, 2016; Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010). The EPO is, in effect, the "design experiment" we are documenting.

There are 38 formally enrolled participants in the larger ethnography: 9 administrators; 14 teachers; 15 students. The racial, ethnic, and gender makeup of the adult participants (teachers and administrators): 57% are white, 35% African American, 9% Latinx; 57% are female, and 43% are male. Adult participants' experience in teaching and/or leading ranged from 27 years to first year teachers and administrators. While the research is ongoing, the full data corpus at this point includes: field notes (~350) of participant observation in classrooms, leadership and staff meetings, hallways, cafeterias, auditoriums, full day shadowing of key participants, lesson and unit plans and video (~24 hours) from a co-teaching experience in a 9th grade English class; formal (~40) and informal interviews (~200) of officially consented study participants (N=38); school wide administrative data; documents including: emails (~3800), newspaper articles, meeting minutes (~1500); research and teaching memos (~40); photographs; and, annual climate surveys of teachers, staff, students, and families. The survey data corpus is illustrated in figure 1.

For the analyses presented in this paper, we began by focusing specifically on culture change based on initial results from climate surveys of teachers that we administered in January 2016 and January 2017. With permission, the surveys were adapted from the widely-used Consortium on Chicago School Research's (CCSR) *My Voice, My School* instruments. Analyses of the first-year survey results from teachers (N=132) revealed mixed perceptions among teachers both within and across school levels (i.e., Lower School serving grades 6-8 and Upper School serving grades 9-12) related to the Consortium's theme of effective leadership, which included items related to both formal leaders' and teachers' support and/or influence. This finding of mixed perceptions

led to the development of a qualitative, open-ended survey we collaboratively constructed

with the administrative staff and teacher union representatives to better understand

teachers' and staff members' perceptions and ideas for moving forward. The 8-question

open-ended survey was given on the last day of school for full staff (N=191) in June

2016. Through qualitative analyses, we developed key themes regarding the opportunities

and challenges associated with early implementation of distributed leadership in the

school. We triangulated the data with the larger ethnographic data corpus and through

member checking with teachers and administrators. This analysis led to the development

of actions that administrators focused on implementing during the summer of 2016. We

revised the climate survey to include specific suggestions from teachers and actions

administrators developed and implemented in the 2016-17 school year. The second

iteration of the climate survey was given in January 2017. This combination of data is

what we report on in this paper.

	2016		2017	
Group	# of respondents	Response rate	# of respondents	Response rate
Teachers	132	80%	153	90%
Non-teaching staff and administrators	20	36%	45	82%
Students	678	52%	579	53%
Families	51	4%	46	4%

Figure 1: Survey data corpus

What we found

Results of our analyses found that power produced generative frictions that animated change in understandings of leadership in general and distributed leadership in particular. Building on previous research, we argue that what power produced at East are generative frictions (Larson et al, in press). Social and power relations involved in generative frictions are not binaries, nor are they oppositional. These identified processes are in relation to each other and are mutually constitutive and fluid. The social and power relations we find at the end of year one will not be the same as we find in year two, for example. Frictions produce energy and change, which in turn produces more frictions. They are generative in that they animate transformative change that results from the ongoing negotiation of frictions.

We have identified generative frictions related to distributed leadership that the paper will discuss: 1) empowerment/compliance; resistance/all in; old culture/new culture, which further includes multiple other generative frictions such as: a) taking responsibility/assigning blame; b) new ideas/status quo; c) trusting relationships/betrayal; d) experiential knowledge/unknown knowledge. The overarching theme that ties all these frictions together is building trusting relationships; without these relationships, distributed leadership cannot take hold.

Generative Frictions	Description	What produced
Empowerment/compliance	Frictions around whose job it is to accomplish something;	Confusion around decision making; risk-taking; positive and negative reactions to decisions; commitment to moving beyond compliance; increased understanding of distributed leadership
Resistance/all in	Frictions around the workload and what it means to be "all in"; work/life balance	Competition about who is "all in"; frustration; shifts to finding work/life balance;
Old culture/new culture	Frictions between what was and what the EPO has brought in; us/them binary between teachers and administrators	Lots of meetings and peace circles☺; crying; improved relationships; risk-taking

• Assigning blame/taking responsibility	Context and situation dependent alternations between old/new	Initial tendencies to look for blame that shifted to taking responsibility
• Status quo/new ideas	Resistance to change; describing "new" as not relevant to urban education	Resistance/fear of the new; revelations about vulnerability; risk-taking; trying something new
• Trusting relationships/betrayal	Learning to trust each other but with bumps in the road	Early tensions between old/new that transitioned into increased trust
• Experiential knowledge/unknown knowledge	What practitioners know from experience related to what researchers or new teachers bring	Skepticism about UR knowledge; increased understanding of the connection between research and practice; risk-taking

Figure 2: Generative frictions around distributed leadership

Our data clearly indicate that authentic and sustainable school culture change that includes a distributed leadership model needs trusting relationships to begin and to sustain. Key models for building trust are found in the administrative team. One leader explained that they build trust by being willing to do what they are asking others to do:

> Um, I think the first thing is never asking anyone to do something you're not willing to do yourself … If I want staff to greet students at their door, then I should be greetin' students at the front door when they come through. Um, if I want staff to understand that there's gonna be times I'm overly busy or times that I'm irritable, then when they're overly busy or irritable, I have to—to be flexible (Interview, July 2015).

Observations confirmed that this administrator followed through on this idea. Their presence in the building is visible to all. Teacher survey data triangulated this finding. A small number of questions on both the 2016 and 2017 surveys asked teachers to rate using a four-point Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) their agreement with statements related to trust among teachers and trust of school leadership, most notably their principal. We examined teachers' responses to these questions overall and by years of teaching experience at East High School, differentiating teachers with no more than 3 years versus those with 11 or more years of experience based on qualitative

findings regarding tensions between "new" and "old" cultures in the school. As figure 3 demonstrates, the majority of teachers, regardless of tenure in the school, trusted one another in the first year of the partnership and this trust continued in year 2. Trust among teachers was high from the beginning, with about three-quarters of teachers agreeing with the statement that "Teachers in this school trust each other", and showed no significant change between the 2016 and 2017 surveys.
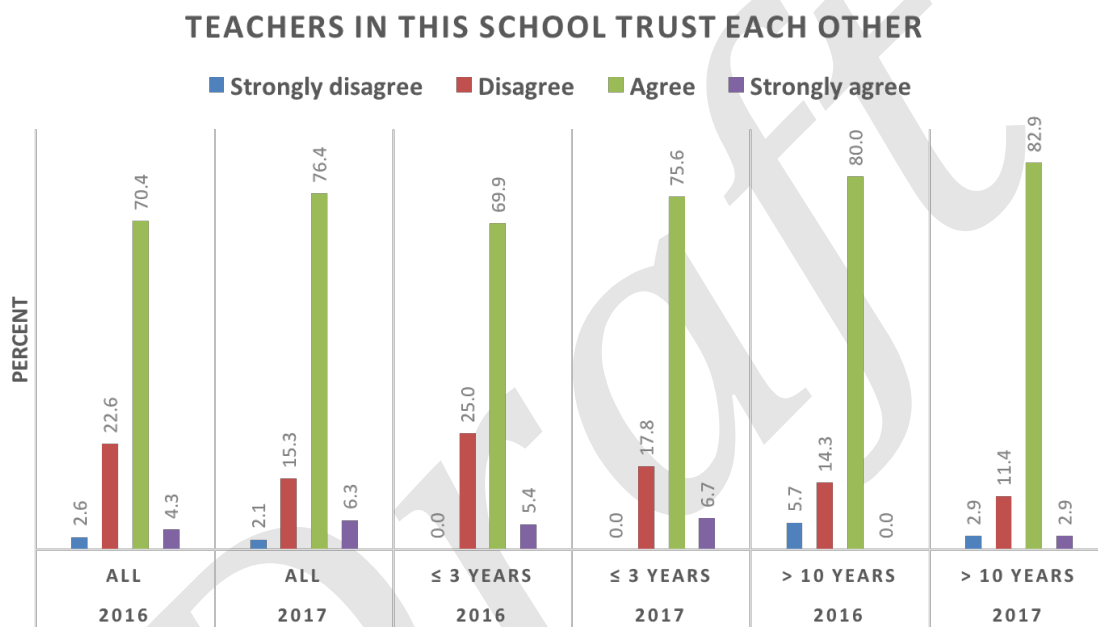

Figure 3: Trust among teachers

In contrast, figure 4 shows that teachers' trust of their principal improved significantly from year 1 to year 2 for teachers overall and for those who were relatively new and highly experienced at East. Part of this change in trust can be attributed to a change in principal at the Upper School level in the middle of year 1, which coincided closely with our administration of the 2016 survey. The then Lower School principal took over the entire school (lower school, 9th grade academy, and upper school) for the remainder of

the school year. Even with this change, the rise in trust among teachers in their principal by the 2017 survey was significant for teachers overall, for both upper and lower school teachers (not shown in figure 4), and for new versus experienced teachers. By year 2 of the partnership, nearly all teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I trust the principal at their word."

I TRUST THE PRINCIPAL AT THEIR WORD

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

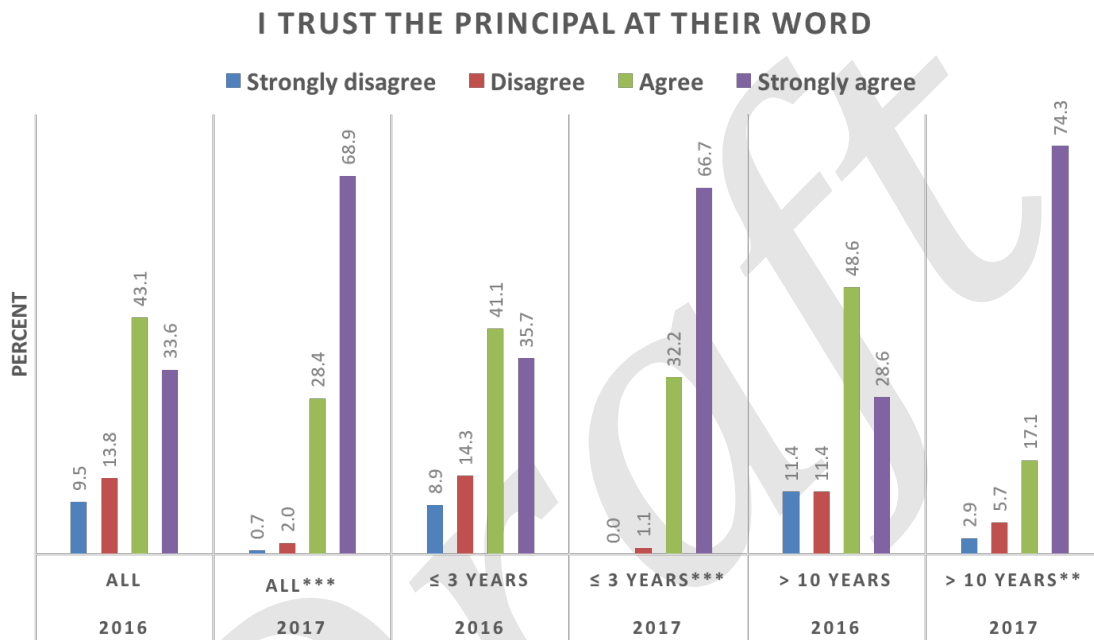|	ALL	ALL***	≤ 3 YEARS	≤ 3 YEARS***	> 10 YEARS	> 10 YEARS**
	2016	2017	2016	2017	2016	2017
Strongly disagree	9.5	0.7	8.9	0.0	11.4	2.9
Disagree	13.8	2.0	14.3	1.1	11.4	5.7
Agree	43.1	28.4	41.1	32.2	48.6	17.1
Strongly agree	33.6	68.9	35.7	66.7	28.6	74.3

Figure 4: Trusting the principal

As even further evidence of teachers' increasing trust in their principal between the 2016 and 2017 surveys, figure 5 reveals substantial increases in the percentage of teachers, overall and by years of experience at East, who strongly agreed with being able to express concern and frustration with their principal. By 2017, less than 5% of teachers overall indicated that they could not share concerns with their principal compared to about one quarter of teachers in 2016.

IT'S OK IN THIS SCHOOL TO DISCUSS FEELINGS, WORRIES, AND FRUSTRATIONS WITH THE PRINCIPAL
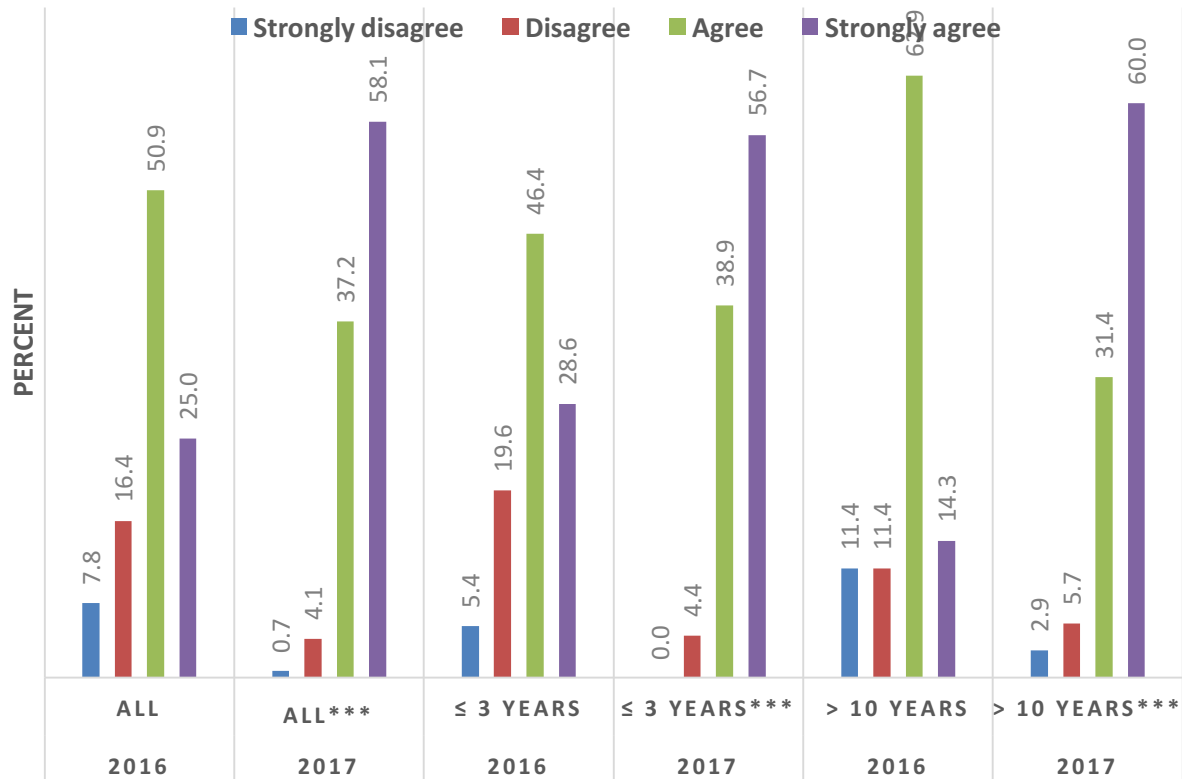

Figure 5: Trusting the principal

Leading in the context of justice work

Traditionally schools are led by a principal with an ideology that is forced on staff/or one who has no ideology and who let things happen without much guidance. In this model, one person assigns tasks, tell people what to do and they do it. At East, leadership is about identifying the moral fabric of the school and finding ways to support that. Leaders are the people who are held accountable for how these things occur. The moral fabric must be co-constructed with the full community; our mission vision work was an attempt to identify the moral fabric of East.

To develop capacity with distributed leadership, Nelms did not give a single pathway toward accountability in year one on purpose. He did this to observe the leadership team's capacity to take initiative. They had all read and committed to the EPO which made them aware of what at we want to do as a school. The goal was for them to figure it out. Following the status quo or old culture of the school, leaders wanted a responsibility chart which Nelms did not provide. Each leader was assigned to content or to an area, not a "job", which he conceived as bounded autonomy. We identified the generative friction associated with how Nelms implemented distributed leadership as compliance/empowerment. Initially, administrators and teachers were resistant to the idea of feeling empowered:

> Because there does seem to be this weird, everything's a fucking committee and then people are like, 'Well, you're empowered.' Okay, but I'm not empowered if everything's a committee (Interview, July 2015).

Staff were not accustomed to being broadly accountable to the school's mission within an area of responsibility. They were used to being assigned tasks or jobs to do in ways that were not authentically connected to other jobs or to the school as a whole. Some worried about things that they knew needed to be done but they were not sure who was supposed to do them:

> um, the thing is—like, the testing—like, the thing is there's all these things that have been parts of our jobs for the past six years that haven't been addressed yet. We don't know who's doing them…We don't know who's responsible for doing them (Interview, July 2015).

As testing or other events approached, administration and teachers worked together to make sure were accomplished. Not all of these events went smoothly, but testing did happen and we all learned a lot about how they could be improved.

We added questions to the teacher survey in year 2 to determine the extent to which teachers agreed with statements regarding this new leadership model at East. Based on a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, from two-thirds to over 90% of teachers overall agreed or strongly agreed that the new leadership model had changed their understanding of leadership, created new opportunities for them to exercise leadership, improved relations between themselves and administrators, and positively contributed to efforts to improve East's culture. At the same time and consistent with our qualitative findings, two-thirds of the teachers acknowledged that the enactment of distributed leadership had created tensions related to individuals' responsibilities and roles (see figure 6).
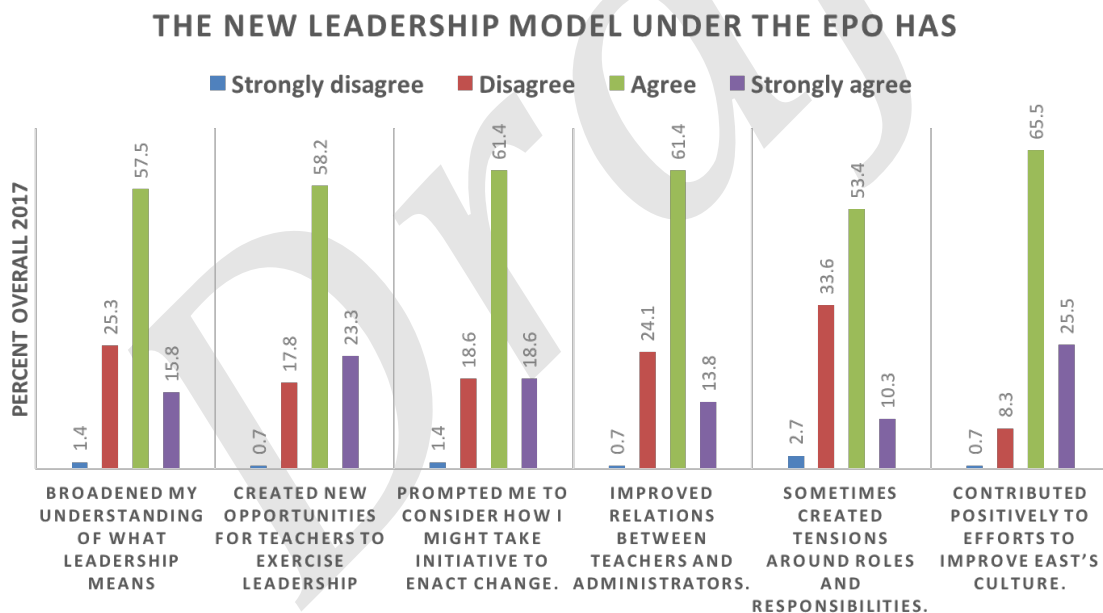

Figure 6: Perceptions of distributed leadership

At the end of year 1, one administrator noted a change in perspective in which generative frictions around responsibility remained:

Um, I think for me personally, the biggest challenge has been the size of East, and because there's so many people and working parts, you have to rely on others, and I don't like to rely on others when it comes to something that in the end I'm the person accountable, and so I have found it very difficult to give things out to others and not have the same control that I've had in the past because there's not enough time in the day to have the same control (Interview, June 2016).

Observations document that this administrator can spend more time with students and in classrooms now that so many of the leadership duties required previously were now being done by others in the leadership team and teacher leaders. As noted in the interview, the size of East warranted letting others do some of the work because there simply wasn't time for one person to do it all.

Conclusion

In our model, leadership in the context of justice work means that justice is the moral fabric. Equity and access is in everything we do, especially for students. Everyone – leadership, teachers, and staff - is accountable for this moral fabric. Our challenge has been to ensure that we don't let a focus on the individual take over. This work is not about one person's needs, it's about the good of the whole community. At East, leaders must follow because they are leaders.

As mentioned, the most prominent theme we have found is the need for trusting relationships. Why is trust important? To make the kind of profound culture change we are attempting, we must build a context where it is safe to let go – to not be afraid to take risks. We are working against the cultural model of a hero who saves the day. The hero is not the University, nor is it Nelms. We are working against the fear of letting competence work, make mistakes, and rethink. Additionally, we seek to let students authentically

lead, which is something that has not happened at East but that is an explicit goal of the EPO.

To accomplish this, we are building spaces for people to think about their own thinking, to be more thoughtful, and to construct a shared language around justice, equity, and accountability. In this way, the moral fabric grows organically in the everyday practice of the school and builds trusting relationships.

Building theory from these analyses, we have developed an emerging model of how generative frictions animate change in everyday interactions (see figure 7). As the model illustrates, when trusting relationships are constructed, people engage in risk taking (making a leadership decision, trying a new pedagogy, taking leadership in an emerging idea). How the risk is experienced in terms of success/failure shapes whether confusion or coherence is constructed. This is an iterative, fluid cycle of experiences.
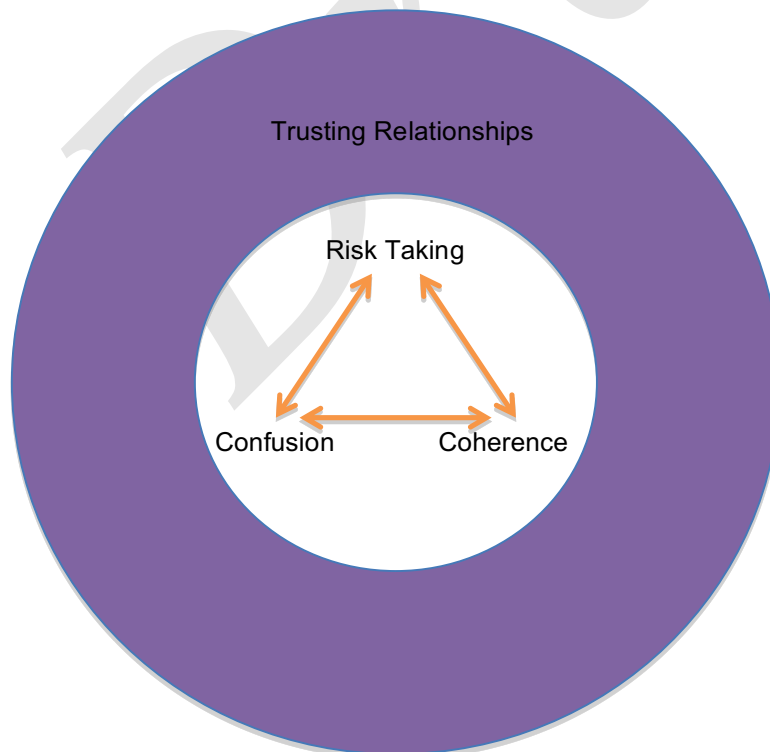
Schools in high poverty urban areas do not meet the needs of the populations they serve (Anyon, 2014; Lipman, 2004). Inequalities in funding between urban and suburban schools constitute a national shame (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Larson, 2014). Schools are labeled as failing in a society that relies on them to solve social problems that are beyond their control. Too often, the problems are seen as intractable, even as efforts at reform move forward. Federal and state laws attempt to improve these schools by legislating "restart" mandates when a school is considered persistently failing. One promising legal option for a school in New York State is to create an Educational Partnership Organization (EPO) (Education Law 211e, 2014). The partnership at the center of this project is the first partnership of this kind in the state, providing a timely opportunity to document the transformation of a struggling school in danger of closing into a successful model of urban education reform. Specifically, this paper contributes to ongoing research on distributed leadership by carefully documenting and interpreting how leadership practice is constructed in the everyday life of a school (Spillane, 2009).

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