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Stretching Leadership: A Distributed Perspective for School Counselor Leaders

Leadership is a central role of the school counselor. However, this role is often intimidating to school counselors and school counseling students when viewed as a solitary undertaking. In contrast to the view that leadership is an individual responsibility, the distributed leadership perspective offers a counterview in which school leadership is stretched over multiple leaders. The application of the distributed leadership perspective to school counseling practice might serve to alleviate school counselor apprehension regarding leadership, while contributing to an understanding of “how” this leadership occurs, as well as how it might be improved.

Over the past 20 years, there has been growing discourse regarding the importance of school counselors functioning as leaders in schools (Bemak, 2000; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; House & Hayes, 2002; House & Martin, 1998). Educational reform initiatives suggest the necessity for school counselors to serve as leaders (Brott & Myers, 1999; Education Trust, 1997; Erford, House, & Martin, 2003; Lambert, 1988, 1998). These reform initiatives are based on an imperative to address social and institutional impediments that limit academic achievement for students who have been traditionally underserved by public educational systems (Education Trust). Thus, the call for school counselors to exercise effective leadership skills is directed toward transforming systems and practices that potentially suppress opportunities for students to maximize their learning and academic achievement (House & Martin; Lee & Walz, 1998).

During much of this same period, the demand to improve student achievement has driven systemic school reform and has impacted educational theory, research, and practice. Many of these educational policy, scholarship, and preparation initiatives have emphasized issues of leadership in schools (McDonnell, 2004). This emphasis recently led to the emergence of educational leadership models suggesting that leadership in schools must not be the sole responsibility of the principal, but rather

might best be distributed among other professionals in schools (Spillane, 2006).

Instead of the imposing individualistic view that the provision of leadership should merely be shifted from principals to other school professionals such as school counselors, distributed leadership offers a perspective in which leadership is *stretched* across numerous school staff *including* counselors, thus expanding its potential impact on students while also serving to build a stronger sense of school community. When leadership is distributed among multiple leaders, their collective strengths and talents are better utilized. This shift in perspective then can serve to build leadership capacity and promote leadership density within schools. Additionally, an important corollary to this shift might be the reduction of anxiety that some pre- and in-service school counselors experience as they begin to view leadership as something beyond isolated, unilateral practices.

CONCEPTUALIZING SCHOOL COUNSELOR LEADERSHIP

As noted previously, there has been a growing body of scholarship regarding school counselor leadership. This literature has largely focused on the unique position and skills of school counselors to be leaders and descriptions of barriers to school counselors assuming leadership roles. For example, it has been suggested that the unique position, training, and skills of school counselors make them “natural leaders” (Borders & Shoffner, 2003), who might use their leadership to enhance the academic achievement of students, facilitate educational reform, and increase the effectiveness of their school counseling programs (Clark & Stone, 2000; Coy, 1999; Dahir, 2001; Dollarhide, 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; House & Hayes, 2002; Sears, 1999). Conversely, literature focusing on school counselor leadership also has explored impediments to school counselors’ roles as school leaders (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Baker, 2000; Cobia & Henderson, 2003; House & Sears, 2002; Martin, 2002).

Position and Skill Sets of School Counselors

School counselors are uniquely positioned to be educational leaders (Stone & Clark, 2001). The use of data is a key feature of school counselor leadership (Stone & Dahir, 2007). Few other school professionals have access to virtually all available data that are produced by and derived from students and the learning processes in which they engage (House & Martin, 1998). In addition to the formal data regarding students, school counselors are often also recipients of informal, anecdotal data regarding students through interactions with teachers, other educators, parents, and students. A key component of school counselor training is the assessment and interpretation of student data and the communication of these data in meaningful ways to other school staff, parents, and students. Given both their position at the fulcrum of information flow regarding students and their performance in schools and their training to communicate these data to others, school counselors act as leaders by collaborating and consulting with other stakeholders—teachers, administrators, family members, and community members—in the success and well-being of students (Cooper & Sheffield, 1994; Stone & Dahir, 2006).

In addition to school counselors' important positioning at the center of data flow involving students, others have asserted that school counselor training prepares them with knowledge and skills that can affect broader educational issues that impact schools and the students within them (Clark & Stone, 2007; Kern, 1999). Borders and Shoffner (2003) have suggested that school counselor preparation sets school counselors apart from many other school personnel because of their more extensive preparation and training in a number of areas. The authors reasoned that school counselors are "natural leaders" in schools because they receive thorough training in areas including human relations, problem solving, change processes, human and career development, group work, learning theories, and program evaluation (Borders and Shoffner, pp. 52–53). Importantly, it has been asserted that the development of leadership skills is a continuous and evolving process that occurs over the years (Stone & Dahir, 2006).

Barriers to Leadership Inclusion

Despite their unique position, a considerable number of school counselors do not yet serve in this role within their schools (Baker, 2000; Cobia & Henderson, 2003; House & Sears, 2002; Martin, 2002; Sears, 1999). Although the need for school counselors to function as leaders has been proposed by many, a number of barriers to the actualization of a leadership role for school counselors exists (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Some possible impediments to school coun-

selor leadership include role confusion among school counselors, limitations to school counselor roles resulting from constricted relationships with principals, and a lack of specific leadership training. Schools often contribute to role confusion for school counselors by defining their work as quasi-administrative (Henderson & Gysbers, 1998). Notably, there is sometimes a disconnect between the perceptions of the duties of the school counselor, with principals and schools counselors sometimes disagreeing on counseling roles and responsibilities (Amatea & Clark; Fitch, Newby, Ballester, & Marshall, 2001; Lampe, 1985; Murray, 1995; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000).

Many of the tasks that principals sometimes ask school counselors to perform, although important to the management of the school, take the school counselors away from the tasks and roles for which they were trained (Niebuhr, Niebuhr, & Cleveland, 1999). It has been noted that these tasks are often clerical and/or administrative in nature and are given to school counselors by principals who are overburdened by their own work-related demands (Amatea & Clark, 2005). The disagreement on counselor roles and responsibilities is further magnified by the influence that principals have on shaping those roles and responsibilities (Janson, Militello, & Kosine, 2008; Ponec & Brock, 2000).

The omission of school counselors from inclusion in decision making around key educational issues in schools (Stone & Clark, 2001) perhaps limits school counselor leadership more significantly than the assignment of tasks deemed inappropriate for school counseling. Many factors seem to contribute to the exclusion of school counselors from being more highly involved in school leadership. Explicit leadership training is not always a focal point of school counselor preparation. Additionally, even when more direct leadership training is embedded into school counselor preparation, lack of awareness on the part of other school personnel regarding this preparation persists.

RETHINKING HOW WE CONCEPTUALIZE SCHOOL COUNSELOR LEADERSHIP

As stated earlier, there has been important and growing professional literature on the position, roles, and skills of school counselors functioning as educational leaders. This literature represents a solid foundation for current as well as future examinations of school counselor leadership. It is extremely important to build understanding of the capacity of school counselors to be leaders as well as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to acquire in order to lead.

However, leadership in complex systems such as

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schools does not occur through one individual. Rather, leadership is best understood as a collection of collaborative practices *among* professionals within schools and the communities in which they are located. Thus, there are limitations to focusing only on positional leadership capacity and leadership skills of school counselors. Possibly the most significant limitation is rooted in the de-contextualized nature of such approaches.

Leadership theory has long focused on the characteristics, skills, and behaviors of individual leaders. Many authors have criticized these conceptualizations of leadership—particularly within educational settings. For example, the idea that principals are the only figures who do or should behave as leaders is an assumption that is now widely disputed (Lambert, 2002; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Pounder, Reitzug, & Young, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1992). Spillane (2005) further challenged the narrative of the “heroic school leader” by pointing out two problems with this persisting story. One problem, he argued, rests with the notion that school leadership is enacted by heroic individual leaders who are most commonly principals. A more accurate examination of school leadership, Spillane noted, is that it invariably involves many key personnel who employ existing school structures and tools in their efforts. The second problem, in Spillane’s (2006) view, is that these “heroic leader” stories focus too much on the roles and functions of school leaders, and too little on leadership practices. In other words, the “what” of school leadership is important, but the examination of the “how” of leadership might better contribute to improved practice.

Like the tradition of “heroic school leader” narratives that Spillane (2006) critiqued, the professional literature regarding school counselor leadership generally has focused on the individual school counselor as the primary unit of analysis. That is, most of the research and conceptual literature have focused on the capacity and will for individual school counselors to lead. There are a few key areas in the current literature that represent departures from this focus on the individual school counselor as leader.

There is, for example, some literature discussing and examining the relationship between school counselors and principals—including collaborative leadership practices (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Janson et al., 2008; Militello & Janson, 2007; Riddile & Flanary, 2008; Walker, 2006). In an article in which she challenged school counselors and principals to work together as part of a leadership team to build community and school multicultural capacity and competency, Walker proposed that the two sets of professionals must combine their skills and training in order to share leadership toward that aim. Walker argued that the “skills and areas of expert knowledge

of each leader are crucial in the work of a complementary team” (p. 121). Similarly, Riddile and Flanary posited that “successful schools share practices that support and enhance student performance, and one of the promising strategies is effective collaboration between the principal and school counselors” (¶ 5).

In their grounded theory study of 26 public school administrators’ conceptions about the school counselor role, Amatea and Clark (2005) found one role conception among some of the participants that placed premium value on school counselors functioning as an “innovative leader” (p. 21). The researchers further described the conception these administrators had of the school counselor role as including active membership on school leadership teams. Lastly, in a Q methodology study that investigated how 39 school counselors and principals perceived their professional relationship, Janson et al. (2008) described two emergent factors that each contained attributes of shared leadership. The researchers found that the viewpoints represented by those two factors, which were both composed of school counselor and principal participants, shared some common features, but were differentiated by virtue of one of them focusing on “collaboration with the expressed purpose of engaging in initiatives often associated with school improvement efforts” (Janson et al., p. 357). When Militello and Janson (2007) analyzed the factors from the same data set using a distributed leadership framework, they found that although none of the factors was completely devoid of attributes that might foster collaboration, one factor most clearly mirrored the collaborative nature of the distributed leadership model.

Most conceptual and research literature on school counselor leadership is concentrated on roles, capacities, and skills, rather than on practices. Understanding these aspects of school counselor leadership is very valuable. However, as Spillane (2006) explained, “understanding how leadership actually gets done in schools is imperative if research is to generate usable knowledge for school leaders” (p. 7). There are a handful of notable exceptions to this emphasis on the roles, capacities, and skills of school counselor leadership. The research instrument used by Janson and colleagues (2008) in their study of school counselor and principal professional relationships, and analyzed through a distributed leadership framework by Militello and Janson (2007), included items related to leadership practices. Importantly, DeVoss and Andrews (2006) identified and developed “integrated school counselor leadership model behaviors” that were gleaned from a variety of leadership theories and self-actualization concepts. DeVoss and Andrews characterized these 16 items as model behaviors, although some of the items seem also to include dispositional aspects of leadership.

More recently, another Q methodology study focused exclusively on how 49 high school counselors perceived their leadership behaviors (see Janson's "High School Counselors' Views of Their Leadership Behaviors: A Q Methodology Study," in this issue). Four factors emerged from this study, each representing distinct perspectives on how high school counselors behave as leaders in their schools.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

The distributed leadership perspective has experienced increasing popularity within educational communities in recent years. This perspective grew from the Distributed Leadership Study (Northwestern University School of Education & Social Policy, 2004) conducted in Chicago Public Schools (Spillane, 2005). The study developed and used a framework, which the researchers characterized as *distributed*, in order to analyze leadership practices in urban elementary schools (Spillane, 2006). Although distributed leadership has sometimes been positioned as a "cure-all" for schools and educational practices, its main developers and contributors have maintained that it is best viewed as a perspective for developing insights that can contribute to improved leadership practices, rather than a prescriptive "blueprint for doing school leadership more effectively" (Spillane, 2006, p. 9).

Distributed Leadership Essentials

The distributed leadership perspective is a considerable departure from how leadership has traditionally been viewed in that it transcends the accounting of school leadership as the result of singular school leaders—most often the principals who turn schools around by sheer force of will (Spillane, 2005). Instead, the distributed leadership perspective acknowledges the reality that schools have multiple leaders (Harris, 2007) and that leadership practices are "stretched" over them (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, p. 23). The main focus of the distributed leadership perspective is that leadership practices can only emerge from the interaction of school professionals in both formal and informal roles (Harris & Spillane, 2008).

Shifting to Leadership as Practice

Critical to the concept of shifting our thinking about school leadership to the distributed perspective is the notion of exploring "practice as the unit of analysis, rather than an individual leader" (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 24). Traditional ways of viewing leadership focus on individual leaders in various ways—their roles, routines, and functions. Although the "what" of leadership is important, the exclusive

focus on the features of the leader neglects the "how" of leadership (Spillane, 2006). By exploring how leadership is performed in schools, knowledge might be developed that can aid school leaders in improving their practices. The focus on leadership practices may not be unique, but the view of leadership practice in the distributed perspective is distinct. Within the distributed leadership perspective, leadership practice is understood as a "product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation" (Spillane, 2005, p. 144). In this light, leadership mostly occurs through the interaction of two or more school leaders within their school context. It is the interactions among multiple leaders that are the key to understanding how leadership manifests itself in schools.

Leadership as Interactions Among People

School leadership is not a unilateral act. It does not take place without interaction among multiple school leaders and other school staff members, within the school context. Recent research has demonstrated that leadership in school most often involves more than one leader. For instance, in their study of more than 100 schools in the United States, Camburn, Rowan, and Taylor (2003) found that leadership initiatives and tasks were most often spread across three to seven people—often including specialists such as school counselors. The presence of leadership practices involving multiple leaders was also a key finding of the Distributed Leadership Study, which indicated that the number of leaders depended on the issue to which leadership was focused (Spillane, 2006). That is, leadership initiatives required greater or fewer number of leaders depending on the scope of the issue at hand.

Regardless of the number of leaders involved, leadership practices are composed of the interactions between at least two leaders and other school staff members. Interdependence is the bonding agent that unites the practices of leaders who may be working on separate or joint leadership tasks but who ultimately interact with each other to accomplish shared school goals. Spillane (2006) explained that the distributed leadership perspective does not prescribe how leadership interactions are structured or occur, only that it is informative to examine how they are spread—or "stretched"—across multiple leaders (p. 23). Regardless of how the specific arrangement and allocation of leadership tasks are stretched across the leaders involved, it is the interactions between those leaders that are at the essence of school leadership (Spillane, 2005).

Situational Context of Leadership

Leaders in schools interact not only with each other and school staff, but with unique situations in each

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EXAMPLES OF SCHOOL COUNSELOR DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

The distributed leadership perspective can help school counselors view themselves as natural educational leaders by recognizing how they are already contributing as distributed leaders. Such a perspective assumes a collaborative approach in looking for opportunities to join other school staff members in leadership practices critical to promoting success for all students. The following describes three traditional domains of school counseling that are opportune sites for distributed leadership and offers concrete examples of how school counselors are currently engaged in distributed practices.

Staff Development

Staff development is a key area for school counselor participation in distributed leadership. For example, school counselors can engage in distributed leadership by developing and conducting in-service training with other school leaders for teachers and parents in crucial areas such as educational planning, academic motivation, student appraisal and achievement, identification of and interventions for special needs students, and issues of student diversity and related attitudes. Although school counselors are knowledgeable and skillful in many of these areas, their role in staff development should involve the organization and planning of such in-services with other leaders both within and outside the school in order to gain optimal advantage from the diverse skill and knowledge sets in the broader school community.

A clear example of the distributed leadership perspective can be viewed in the interactive practices of two middle school counselors who collaborated with the administration to address student behavioral issues. After identifying parents' and educators' most frequently occurring concerns through a needs assessment, these middle school counselors organized and hosted a series of parent-teacher workshops with speakers from various community agencies who provided information and facilitated discussions on the topics of concern. Adults were further supported to attend the workshops through collaboration with the coaches who provided child care in the form of activities for their children. Each of the leaders in this process contributed to the goal of improving the educational lives of students. Their interactions were distributed in different manners—sometimes collaborated, sometimes coordinated, and sometimes collective—but the ultimate aim and impact was shared.

Large-Group Guidance

Although too often viewed and performed as the sole domain of school counselors, large-group guid-

school. Within the distributed leadership perspective, the key features of the situation are tools, routines, and structures that permeate school life (Spillane, 2005). Some examples of these features of the situation are tools such as student achievement data, routines such as student referral meetings for alternative placement, and structures such as student course selection procedures (Clark & Stone, 2007). The distributed leadership perspective holds that “there is a two-way relationship between situation and practice” (Spillane, p. 149). These features of the school situation impact leadership practices and are impacted by them as well. The situations in which leadership practices mingle can either inhibit or allow those practices to take place. At the same time, leadership practices can serve to transform the situation in order to harness the structures or procedures that compose them for new and innovative uses. For example, student referral meetings for alternative placement might be transformed into mechanisms to identify systemic barriers for groups of students who are referred for alternative placements disproportionately by group such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or gender (Janson & Militello, in press).

SCHOOL COUNSELORS AS DISTRIBUTED LEADERS

Emergent trends in school counseling seem to be resonant with the paradigmatic shift embodied by the distributed leadership perspective. Just as this model has emerged, in part, “because of increased external demands and pressures on schools” (Harris & Spillane, 2008, p. 31), having such pressures has led to calls for increased school counselor involvement in school leadership practices (Clark & Stone, 2000, 2007; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Hayes & Paisley, 2002). It has been noted that because leadership has not been adequately explored and emphasized in both school counseling practice and preservice preparation, school counselors are not always given credit for their participation in leadership practices (Clark & Stone, 2007). In this regard, our understanding of school counselor leadership practices might be better conveyed through the distributed leadership perspective, which illuminates key areas of leadership practices that may have been previously unseen. In describing this purpose, Spillane (2006) wrote that distributed leadership can focus “attention to hidden dimensions of school leadership,” adding that “it can be a way to acknowledge and perhaps even celebrate the many kinds of unglamorous and unheroic leadership that often go unnoticed in schools” (p. 10).

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ance can be transformed within the distributed leadership perspective to have even greater impact. An example of this is school counselors working with math teachers and a media specialist in one school to incorporate more direct advocacy for student success. In this case, the school counselors and math teachers worked together to develop ways to incorporate the use of specific data to encourage a positive “mindset” for achievement and success for all students. These school counselors joined the math teachers in their classes to share statistics with students regarding how education affects lifetime salaries in order to encourage a higher degree of academic motivation and understanding of course relevancy. These interactions transformed the formerly mundane procedure of simply presenting course sign-up sheets for students to complete. Next, the school counselors worked with the school’s media specialist to provide the students with training on Web sites that gave students opportunities to explore data related to the income earning potential of various occupations. Each leader in this informal team brought his or her own unique skill sets and perspectives that were then “stretched” over the distributed leadership goals.

College Readiness and Advising

School counselors have traditionally shouldered much of the work and leadership activities involved with helping students navigate the college preparation and application processes. The distributed leadership perspective, however, offers an invaluable lens for how school counselors can interact with other school staff on leadership teams that can transform how schools build student college aspirations while also facilitating the application process. An example of this can be found in one urban high school in a high-poverty area that has made a commitment to require and assist students in applying for colleges and student financial aid (Militello, Schweid, & Carey, 2008). In this high school, school counselors engaged in leadership practices with teachers, administrators, and members of the school’s parent-teacher association (PTA). School counselors and the math teachers required students to bring in their parents’ financial data necessary for completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. The language arts teachers helped students to craft more effective personal statements for their college applications. The school counselor, PTA, and the assistant principal worked together to find funding for the college application process for students in need. Finally, this team of leaders changed the graduation policy requiring each student to personally deliver two completed college applications to the principal in order to graduate.

In this example, leadership was distributed across

school counselors, principals, content teachers, and PTA members. Each leader’s specific knowledge and skill sets interacted with all others—resulting in transforming many key structures, procedures, and tools in the school in order to not only increase the percentage of students continuing their education after high school graduation, but also to develop a college-going culture within the school.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND PREPARATION

Distributed leadership provides an innovative perspective for understanding school counselor leadership practice. This perspective is not a prescription for how school counselors can lead more effectively, but it does provide a framework for systematically understanding how school counselors participate in leadership practices in schools and can help reinforce the concept of interdependence among multiple school leaders. In this way, distributed leadership can help school counselors “interpret and reflect on practice as a basis for rethinking and revising it” (Spillane, 2006, p. 87).

As we reflected on school counselor leadership practices through the distributed leadership perspective in the examples explored in this article and beyond, some distinct implications and recommendations for school counselor leadership practice and preparation emerged. First and foremost is the importance of viewing leadership as practice, rather than simply personal characteristics, position, or professional role of the school counselor leader. By focusing on school counselor practices—the routines and actions that compose the school days—we can assess whether they are coupled to our professional ideals, philosophies, and visions. For example, the school counseling profession has made impressive efforts to embrace a fundamental philosophy of promoting optimal student achievement by removing barriers that impede academic success (Dedmond, 1998; DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Education Trust, 1997; House & Martin, 1998). The distributed leadership perspective can serve as a tool to analyze whether school counselor practices, the “how” of school counseling work, are aligned with the noble philosophy that should serve to frame that work. In the examples of school counselor leadership practices discussed in this article, there seems to be a high level of fidelity to the philosophical underpinning of increasing student achievement. However, other common school counselor practices may not show this degree of alignment to our professional commitments to social justice and educational equity. For example, too often school counselors have a role in student course selection

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and scheduling processes in schools where academic tracking patterns may have blunting effects on some students' vocational aspirations (Akos, Lambie, Milsom, & Gilbert, 2007).

Because of such potential disparities between philosophy and practice with regard to leadership, we recommend that school counselor education programs place an increased emphasis on school counselor practices and the fidelity of those practices to the mission and vision of the school counseling profession, rather than on the personal attributes and characteristics of individual school leaders. School counselors may be dynamic and influential leaders, but if their leadership is expressed through practices that do not enhance the lives of students and promote achievement, then the end results may be the creation or reinforcement of, rather than the removal of, barriers that impede student success. School counselor educators should encourage student analysis of leadership by providing opportunities for students to reflect on their own emerging leadership practices as well as those they observe during their fieldwork. By viewing leadership as practices that are distributed among multiple leaders, preservice school counselors can see it as a developmental and teaming process, rather than a solely individual undertaking. For example, when engaging with other school leaders to increase student access to college, school counselors can view their contributions and results in a distributed leadership framework. No one individual educator, whether a principal, school counselor, or teacher, can take on complete responsibility, credit or blame, for programs or results. Rather, a distributed leadership approach with valuable contributions from each individual will form the basis for a stronger and more cohesive school community.

The distributive perspective that leadership only occurs when stretched among two or more leaders contains other valuable implications for practice and preparation. Given the specialized training and skill set that school counselors have in coordination of services, consultation, communication, group dynamics, advocacy, systems, and multiculturalism, there is an ethical imperative that they are involved in a significant amount of leadership practice in schools (Stone & Dahir, 2007). Again, recent research has indicated that leadership practices are generally distributed “among three to seven people, including administrators and specialists” (Spillane, 2006, p. 145). Given school counseling training and skills that are both specialized and widely applicable within the school situation, the involvement of school counselors as distributed leaders is extremely important—particularly because of the positive impact such involvement might have on the instructional program in schools (Stone & Dahir, 2006).

The school principal, while not the sole leader of the school within the distributed framework, is still a key leader whose practice generally extends to many school initiatives and goals. This relationship between school counselors and principals is one that has been explored and described by numerous researchers (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Janson et al., 2008; Stone & Clark, 2001). This relationship is important not only as both professionals are situated in positions that offer numerous opportunities to join in leadership practices, but also it has been noted that “the school counselor and principal can enhance one another’s influence” (Stone & Dahir, 2006, p. 94), a notion deeply resonant with distributed leadership. One recent study identified distinct views of the school counselor–principal relationship and used the distributed leadership perspective to analyze the research findings (Militello & Janson, 2007). One of the emergent views of the relationship reflected many elements of distributed leadership—most notably emphases on purposeful interaction around school improvement (Militello & Janson).

The distributed leadership idea that leadership practices usually only occur among two or more leaders seems to be a strong match with the school counseling profession’s emphasis on the importance of collaboration. Collaboration has long been a point of emphasis in both school counseling practice and preparation (Clark & Stone, 2007; Cooper & Sheffield, 1994; Guerra, 1998). Within the school counseling literature, collaboration has been generally viewed as a conduit for leadership (American School Counselor Association, 2005; Clark & Stone), thus making collaboration practices and skills the subject training emphasis. We feel that such emphasis from a school counseling preparation standpoint is well placed. From a distributed leadership perspective, collaboration is more than a conduit for leadership, but the very stuff, or “how,” of leadership itself. It is through such collaborative interactions that leadership is enacted and evolves, so the personal-social skills that facilitate these interactions are crucial and should be emphasized as much as possible within programs (Stone & Dahir, 2006).

Finally, we believe the emphasis on the situational context of leadership practices in the distributed leadership perspective seemed to hold a few distinct implications for school counselors and those who prepare them. School counselors have been described as being at the fulcrum of data flow in schools (Stone & Dahir, 2006). They need to understand the school well—its web of social interactions, various institutional structures, and routines. Knowledge of the school situation is important because it influences the leadership practices

among leaders. School counselor preparation programs should emphasize the importance of understanding the idiosyncratic context in which each school is situated.

Leadership practices that school counselors participate in also influence the situation—that is, the tools, routines, and structures of the school. This potential for transformational action on the situation should be an important part of school counselor leadership practices. The examples we provided earlier demonstrate how school counselors as distributed leaders can contribute to a team approach to transform key structures and procedures such as staff development, large-group guidance, and college advising in order to use them as mechanisms to close achievement and opportunity gaps for students.

Certainly, there are numerous other examples that could be identified. It is important for school counselors to be mindful of opportunities for the transformation of aspects of the school situation—particularly those potential barriers that do not seem to be serving students well. School counselor preparation programs might facilitate such awareness by providing case studies of similar transformations through collective action, as well as by emphasizing the importance of creativity in the work of school counselors.

CONCLUSION

The idea that school leadership occurs most often through *interactions* among leaders is one that should be embraced more fully by school counselors and school counselor educators. In this article we have presented the distributed leadership perspective and discussed how it might be of value in understanding school counseling leadership. Distributed leadership hinges on three key ideas: (a) Examining practice, rather than an individual leader's personal or professional characteristics, is most important; (b) leadership occurs most often between two or more leaders and it is the actual interactions between or among them that constitute leadership; and (c) leaders also interact with their contextual situation—both influencing it and being influenced by it. The distributed leadership perspective seems to be an effective and enlightening model for viewing how school counselors practice as school leaders because it is, in part, designed to highlight the smaller, more mundane acts of leadership that sometimes escape attention. Continued application of distributed leadership to school counselor practice may reveal additional insights that might contribute to our basic understanding of “how” school leadership occurs, as well as how it might be improved. ■

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