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## **Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership: A Study of Group Discourse and Collaboration**

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Sheldon T. Watson  
Vicki L. Myers

**Purpose:** *This article explores distributed leadership as it relates to two teacher teams in one public secondary school. Both situational and social aspects of distributed leadership are foci of investigation.*

**Methods:** *The qualitative study used constant comparative analysis and discourse analysis to explore leadership as a distributed phenomenon. Data from field notes and video recordings of two teacher teams during one semester were used.*

**Findings:** *Three constructs emerged that informed our understanding of collaborative interaction within each professional learning team: purpose, autonomy, and patterns of discourse. Purpose and autonomy, manifest as organizational conditions, largely shape patterns of discourse that characterize the interaction of the team members. We argue that the nature of purpose and autonomy within a teacher team can influence the social distribution of leadership.*

**Conclusions:** *The nature of teams in shared governance structures—the fact that teams can organize to either find or solve problems—has important implications for the creative and leadership capacity of individual teams. Thus, structures and social dynamics of distributed leadership must be attended to and not taken for granted. Implications include (a) conceptualizing leadership in terms of interaction, (b) needing to help teachers become aware of conversational dynamics that lead to or subvert effective collaboration, and (c) needing to help principals become more aware of their role in helping to establish clarity of purpose and appropriate levels of autonomy, so that teams may engage in work that leads to effective and innovative problem-finding and problem-solving activities.*

**Keywords:** *distributed leadership; teacher teams; school improvement; discourse analysis*

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In this article, we examine how two collaborative teacher teams contribute to leadership at a public high school. To understand how, and the extent to which, leadership manifests itself in these teams, we apply a distributed leadership perspective (e.g., Gronn, 2000; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004), which argues that successful educational leadership is not simply a function of what superintendents do in districts or what principals or assistant principals do in schools. Instead, educational leadership involves the practices of multiple individuals and occurs through the complex network of relationships and interactions among the entire staff of the school (e.g., Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). The distributed leadership perspective helps us to understand how the two teacher teams are embedded in an interactive network of interdependent school activities that collectively constitute leadership (Crow et al., 2002; Gronn, 2003).

The distributed leadership perspective is relatively new, and has begun to influence empirical studies of school leadership (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003; Smylie et al., 2002). This study contributes to the literature on distributed leadership by examining the work of teachers in a high school operating within decentralized governance and school-improvement structures and processes. Past research on distributed leadership has often focused on elementary schools (e.g., Heller & Firestone, 1995; Sebring, Hallman, & Smylie, 2003; Spillane, Diamond, Walker, Halverson, & Jita, 2001) and the implementation and devolution of organizational policies and bureaucratic processes (e.g., Copland, 2003; Goldstein, 2003; Halverson & Clifford, 2004). To better understand how distributed leadership works, we believe that researchers must closely attend to the dialogues that take place within the organizational structures that are the artifacts of the situational distribution of leadership, such as teacher teams. The following questions guide our work:

- What factors contribute to or interfere with team decision making?
- What discursive patterns are associated with leadership within teacher work teams?
- What organizational conditions foster or impede leadership within teacher work teams?

By applying discourse analytic methods to the dialogues of these two teacher teams, we identified two distinct patterns of discourse that we call *passive discourse* and *active discourse*. Through the use of constant comparative analysis, we also discovered that these two patterns were related to

the surrounding organizational conditions of the two teams. Our most important finding is that both organizational context and discourse patterns were related to the leadership effectiveness of the teams.

## DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

During the past two decades, scholars of school leadership (e.g., Smylie & Hart, 2000) and leadership in general (e.g., Bass, 1981) have acknowledged that leadership is not solely embedded in formal roles; it often emerges from relationships between people (e.g., Crow et al., 2002; Scott, 1992). In a review of studies of teacher leadership Smylie et al. (2002) noted that the mid-1990s witnessed a renewal of conceptions of *networked leadership* that first emerged in the 1950s and 1960s (i.e., Barnard, 1968; Thompson, as cited in Smylie et al., 2002). Networked leadership emphasizes looking at what school personnel do, more than who is doing it, and it challenges the conventional belief that leadership is associated with particular positions. The message is that those seeking to study leadership should look for the performance of these key activities instead of assuming that watching the principal will explain how the school is managed. For example Firestone (1996) associated leadership with tasks and *functions*. Rather than choosing to focus on specific positions and people, he emphasized the performance of these *activities*. Renewed interest in networked leadership has led researchers to focus on the activities that constitute leadership and the network of organizational relationships that contributes to effective school leadership.

An alternative perspective conceptualized leadership as an organizational resource (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Pounder, Ogawa, & Adams, 1995; Smylie et al., 2002). In this model, leadership is embedded in the relationships between networked roles. Such networks support a multidirectional flow of influence throughout organizations. Understanding leadership thus requires an analysis of the degree of social influence possessed by individuals, groups of individuals, or the entire organization. In the school context, our understanding of leadership is enhanced by examining the multidirectional social influences occurring between teachers, administrators, parents, students, and other stakeholders.

Spillane, Halverson, et al.'s (2001, 2004) model of distributed leadership brings together ideas from these perspectives, as well as from other sources. Like Firestone (1996) and others who take functionalist approaches, Spillane et al. associate leadership with activity and argue that to understand school leadership, we should focus on activities and tasks rather than on the

behavior of individuals formally identified as the leaders. The focus is on leadership practice, which “is distributed over leaders, followers, and the school’s situation or context” (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 11). Borrowing from distributed cognition and activity theory, this model locates leadership practice within a networked web of individuals, artifacts, and situations. According to Spillane et al., this approach allows researchers to distinguish between a school’s officially stated theories of practice and what really happens in practice. Once the actual practices are identified, an important challenge is to connect them to the specific tasks facing school leadership (Spillane et al., 2004).

From a distributed leadership framework, interaction between individuals plays a central role in accomplishing effective leadership (Gronn, 2000). To identify the distributive dimensions of leadership, researchers must pay close attention to the interdependencies between activities—whether those interdependencies are pooled, sequential, or reciprocal (Spillane et al., 2004; Thompson, as cited in Smylie et al., 2002). Decisions are not made by a single individual; rather, decisions emerge from collaborative dialogues between many individuals, engaged in mutually dependent activities. These collaborative dialogues are a key component of what Spillane et al. have defined as the social distribution of leadership. To understand what is truly distributed about socially distributed leadership thus requires an empirical focus on interaction—collaboration, dialogue, and communication.

Spillane, Halverson, et al.’s (2001, 2004) theory of distributed leadership has been a catalyst to several empirical investigations. In their examination of resource allocation in Chicago elementary schools, Spillane, Diamond, et al. (2001) highlighted how the leadership in one school effectively identified and activated resources for improving instruction. Sebring et al. (2003) studied Chicago public schools as well, looking at factors that caused organizational retreat from efforts that had once promoted distributed leadership. Halverson and Clifford (2004) focused on the role that local situation plays in mediating teacher-evaluation policy implementation in a small suburban Midwestern school district. In broad strokes, Camburn, Rowan, and Taylor (2003) studied how schools that have adopted Comprehensive School Reform models both configure and activate school leadership through the definition of formal roles.

These studies show the empirical value of the distributed leadership perspective. However, no study has yet closely examined the moment-to-moment interactions between individuals that actually constitute socially distributed leadership. Working within the developing theoretical framework of distributed leadership, our goal is to extend the power of the approach by integrating discourse analysis with ethnographic and observational methods and by placing our primary focus on interaction (Sawyer, Scribner, Watson,

& Myers, 2005). This is accomplished via a localized case study that uses discourse analysis to both supplement and complement constant comparative analysis. The case study focuses on the interactions of two professional learning teams (PLTs) that are part of the school's broader improvement efforts. This focus and these methods have allowed us to learn about both the situational and the social distribution of leadership associated with the use of teacher teams in the case study setting.

## TEACHER TEAMS

Teacher teams have emerged as a popular school improvement strategy. This renewed and broadened interest in teams follows the long-standing popularity of teams as a central component of the middle-school paradigm (Clark & Clark, 1994). Many schools have experimented with distributed leadership by organizing teachers into teams that identify and solve predefined problems and sometimes by forming teams that find and solve indeterminate problems. This practice of collaboration for the purpose of making educational decisions embraces the realignment of roles and relationships of school community members. Scholarship on professional learning communities (e.g., Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Preskill & Torres, 1999) indicates that change is more likely to be effective and enduring when those responsible for its implementation are included in a shared decision-making process.

Flatter hierarchies and flexible teams are proposed by a host of reform efforts that attempt to reshape professional communities within schools (Bryk & Driscoll 1988; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996; Louis, Marks, et al., 1996; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). Studies such as these suggest that in schools where teachers work in self-managing teams to develop goals, curricula, instructional strategies, budgets, and staff-development programs, students often achieve at higher levels. This educational movement was partly inspired by an earlier shift in private industry toward what Drucker (1988) called the *new organization*, an organization with a flat hierarchical structure, filled with skilled and motivated professionals who group as necessary into ephemeral, self-managing, flexible teams. In the years since Drucker's article, many influential organizational theorists have elaborated on this idea, emphasizing that such teams are more creative and improvisational than traditional hierarchical leadership structures are (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997; Kao, 1996; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Weick, 2001). These theorists have often used an improvisation metaphor for these teams.

Teaming is also discussed as a mechanism for performance alignment in the private sector (Labovitz & Rosansky, 1997; Senge, 1990). Senge's claim

that alignment is a necessary precursor to the empowerment of individual organizational members has been influential in the development of the concept of professional learning communities in educational settings. One hazard in the implementation of collaborative structures, such as teaming, is the potential for the cultivation of groupthink (Janis, 1982) and unduly convergent thinking (Weick, 2001). In fact, some scholars fear that these outcomes can become a natural, and intended, consequence of the contemporary organizational landscape (Ball, 1993; Barker, 1999; Bottery, 1996). These authors suggest that many instances of collaboration have become structural mechanisms of control through which the efforts of workers, such as teachers, are more tightly coupled to standardized performance expectations. Such control may facilitate organizational aspirations of performance alignment—but at what collateral cost?

Despite the increasing, and often uncritical, use of teams in schools as a means for involving teachers in broader decision-making processes (Clark & Clark, 1994; Gronn, 1999; Sharman & Wright, 1995), we know very little about how these teams actually work. In particular, we lack clarity in understanding the interactional processes that influence relative team outcomes. Research on teams in schools has often focused on the traits of individual leaders of teams who were deemed to be effective (Fisher & Fisher, 1998; Hackman & Johnson, 2000). Work has also been done on the organizational conditions, design features, and interpersonal processes that frame teacher team interactions. Crow and Pounder (2000) and Pounder (1998, 1999) applied Hackman and Oldham's (1980) model of effective work groups to look at teacher teams. This model suggests that the domains of organizational context, design or structural features, and interpersonal processes are fundamental frames of team interactions. The structural features of this model can be applied to help explain the situational distribution of leadership through the use of collaborative structures. However, the latter category has consistently eluded our conceptual and methodological capacity to capture its collaborative interactions. We suggest that multimethod techniques that incorporate elements of interaction analysis (Sawyer, 2006) can be coupled with our steadily evolving conceptual understanding of distributed leadership (Bennett et al., 2003; Gronn, 2003; Spillane et al., 2004) to gain greater understanding of these essential artifacts of collaborative activity.

## DISTRIBUTION AS INTERACTION

We suggest that the distribution of leadership through the use of collaborative structures such as teams is ultimately constituted through processes of



social interaction. The situational distribution of leadership through team structures creates a context that frames these constitutive processes. Without the interaction between individuals on the team, however, leadership could not be effectively distributed. Because teacher teams meet face to face, the primary medium of interaction for this social distribution of leadership is conversation. Leadership can thus be viewed as an emergent activity (Gronn, 2003), partially constituted via social interactions evidenced by the artifact of conversation. These interactions are simultaneously both structured and improvisational in nature (Sawyer, 2006).

In teacher groups, this conversation, or talk, becomes the primary “medium for interaction; analysis of discourse becomes, then, analysis of what people do” (Potter, 1997, p. 146). However, little is known about the conversational processes whereby teacher teams identify and solve problems. Consequently, our ability to increase the effectiveness of collaboration in teacher teams engaged in school improvement is also limited. In the last 30 years, conversation research has revealed that in many cases, participants themselves are not aware of many of the subtle signals and patterns that are most critical for an effective team to result (Sawyer, 2001). For example, certain interaction patterns are associated with certain unintended outcomes, such as early lock-in on a solution that may not be optimal, versus leaving the discussion open and therefore allowing consideration of more options. Understanding more about these interactional patterns and processes is critical to enhancing our conceptual grasp of the nature of distributed leadership in organizations.

The use of teacher teams within organizations is an example of distributed leadership at one conceptual level. This level is consistent with what Spillane et al. (2004) identify as the situational distribution of leadership. The team is created (typically through the action of formal leadership structures) and charged with solving a specific problem facing the school. An autocratic principal might simply choose to make a decision on his or her own; however, teacher teams are thought to be better able to tap into the distributed and cumulative expertise of the school’s staff (Crow et al., 2002). Teams are often not hierarchically structured; rather, group meetings are free-flowing—akin to a brainstorming session, in which the loose structure enables creative solutions to emerge. A teacher team might be particularly effective at solving a difficult problem that does not have an obvious solution. Before this form of group creativity can emerge, the team itself must be organized in a distributed fashion, allowing all members to contribute, in meetings that do not have rigidly structured agendas.

Interactions within teams are evidence of the constitution of distributed leadership at yet another conceptual level, which Spillane et al. (2004) refer to as the *social distribution of leadership*. This intragroup level of distribution

has not yet been researched in terms of focusing on the specific artifact of talk. Other artifacts of these interactions, such as documents and policies, have been studied (e.g., Goldstein, 2003; Spillane, Diamond, et al., 2001). We identify these as designed artifacts, artifacts that are more structural in nature and that exist at some distance from acts of individual agency. They are more clearly connected to the situational distribution of leadership despite their mediating role in the social distribution of leadership. Designed artifacts are the products of socially distributed leadership manifested in particular situations; yet once created, these artifacts become structuring forces (Watson, 2005). Interactions are the bridge between the collective agency of the collaborative group and the new structural forms they produce. Interactions themselves warrant investigation through the study of the naturalistic artifact of conversations, which we identify as emergent artifacts. The latter are more proximal to the interactional constitution of socially distributed leadership. Exploration of these artifacts serves to complement the understanding of this level of distributed leadership that is already being probed in terms of designed artifacts.

The outcomes of socially distributed leadership cannot be predicted in advance; rather, problem solutions emerge from the entire school's collaborative dynamic. In teacher team meetings, because there is often no strict agenda and no obvious solution, individuals may be surprised by their collaborators, and group interaction can result in the emergence of creative solutions. Such teams manage themselves through a distributed process of collaborative emergence (Sawyer, 2003a, 2003b). Leadership research has found that self-managing teams are more effective at problem solving in rapidly changing environments and that the superior creativity of the self-managed team results from the interactional process of the group (Sawyer, 2003a; Schein, 1992). Thus, research on distributed leadership is closely related to research on effective teams (e.g., Evans & Sims, 1997; Middleton, 1996; West, 2003; West & Anderson, 1996) and on group creativity (e.g., Paulus & Nijstad, 2003; Sawyer, 2003a).

This research has shown that the most effective teams manage themselves through an improvisational and emergent process (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Weick, 2001). In self-managed teams, "multiple leaders emerge and a dynamic pattern of shared team leadership evolves" (Belasen, 2000, p. 259) and "this collaborative action is informal, emergent, and dynamic" (p. 262). This research has also shown that more improvisational teams are a common source of innovation (Belasen, 2000; Eisenhardt & Tabrizi, 1995; Lanzara, 1983; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Weick, 2001). Self-managing teams are self-organizing systems that are more effective at radical innovation because they are "fluid and loosely coupled, permitting the

emergence of internal networking as the landscape for innovation and creativity" (Belasen, 2000, p. 253). Eisenhardt and Tabrizi (1995) found that improvisational team processes shortened the product development cycle and that advance planning actually retarded product development. Moorman and Miner (1998) found that organizations faced with a rapidly changing market environment were more likely to improvise. Many improvisational groups form quickly and spontaneously in response to a crisis; these ephemeral organizations are emergent and collaborative and better at developing innovative solutions more quickly than are large, formally structured organizations (Lanzara, 1983). Our choice of methods for this study is linked to capturing this improvisational element of teamwork as a fundamental aspect of collaborative interaction.

## Method

To explore the processes of distributed leadership in teacher teams, we collected audiotape and videotape of two teacher teams at a large comprehensive high school in a midsized Missouri community. The high school of approximately 1,650 students is located in a small city district of 16,000 students. The racial composition of the high school's student body is about 83% White, 9% African American, 3% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and less than 1% Native American. (Teacher racial composition is not available.) This high school was selected because of the administration's and faculty's willingness to participate, the school's long history of using teacher teams (since 1986), a recent emphasis and explicit focus on professional learning community, and its relatively close proximity to the researchers.

The high school has developed a schoolwide decision-making infrastructure of PLTs. Two subsets of teams exist: building PLTs that address noninstructional functions and instructional PLTs that are organized by discipline. Prior to selecting teams to study, two of the researchers met with the principal and the school's executive council to discuss the purposes of the project. The researchers indicated that they were interested in focusing on two teams that had demonstrated an ability to work together effectively on matters under their charge. Based on recommendations from the principal and executive council, the researchers chose to focus on one building PLT and one instructional PLT to focus on teams addressing specific curricular issues and issues cutting across the school context. These teams had been established for about 1 academic year, although the issues the groups dealt with certainly changed over time. The study was limited to two teams because of the intensive nature of data collection and analysis we undertook. Each team was observed during the course of a 16-week semester.

The building PLT consisted of seven members: the coordinator of student support programs, the gifted-education coordinator, two social studies teachers (neither of whom was on the instructional PLT), the director of special education, the director of guidance, and an outreach counselor. Each of the teachers had 25 or more years of experience in public education. The social worker, who was also the designated team leader, had 13 years of experience working in school contexts. All teachers in this group were White. One was male. This team's charge was to develop, review, and offer suggestions for change of the school policies and practices for ensuring the academic success of students in danger of failing more than one subject area. Ten meetings during the semester were recorded on digital video. These meetings averaged approximately 35 minutes in length.

The instructional PLT consisted of three social studies and three English teachers teamed together to teach an integrated curriculum using a block schedule format. They were periodically joined by the respective department chairs, two advanced placement teachers, and a school guidance counselor. The curricular focus for the teachers was modern American history and American literature. These teachers' experience ranged from 2 to 10 years. Teachers in this group were also White and female with the exception of one White male. Eight team meetings during the semester were recorded on digital video. Most (but not all) meetings occurred after school, and meetings averaged approximately 43 minutes in length. Two meetings that occurred on early release days lasted more than 1 hour.

Observer field notes and the digital recordings of the meetings constitute the data set. For the 18 team meetings that we observed during the course of the semester, we transcribed randomly selected sessions in full. Once coding saturation of these data was perceived, the remaining meetings for each team were reviewed for spot transcription of both representative and unique segments. All data were examined repeatedly by the research team and analyzed using our coding scheme, even if not transcribed in full.

One of the unique features of this study is that we use the methodology of discourse analysis (Sawyer, 2006). We use the term *discourse analysis* broadly to refer to a wide range of approaches that sometimes go by the names *conversation analysis* or *interaction analysis*. Discourse analysis has been widely used to study classroom interactions between teachers and students (Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, & Smith, 1966; Cazden, 2001; Mehan, 1979; Potter, 1997; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) and to study naturally occurring conversation in other fields (Brown & Yule, 1983; Johnstone, 2002; Psathas, 1995; ten Have, 1999), but it has not yet been applied to the study of distributed leadership.

In the first study of classroom discourse, Bellack et al. (1966) established the procedure that we use here. They began by segmenting classroom

discourse into interactional turns, or what they called *moves* by analogy with a board game. They then identified the speaker of each turn. And in the most important methodological step, they developed a system to categorize the interactional function of each move. After doing this, they looked for teaching cycles: routine sequences of moves that occurred frequently. They discovered that the most common teaching cycle, 48% of all cycles identified, was

1. soliciting move by teacher in the form of a question,
2. responding move by the student addressed,
3. an optional evaluative reaction by teacher.

Discourse analysts usually refer to this kind of repeating sequence as an interactional routine. Interactional routines have a loose structure that is understood by participants who share a culture, and the participants all know how to participate in the routine to bring it off smoothly.

Our first analytical pass through the data focused on identifying types of discourse between team members to deconstruct dialogue into its constituent elements (Blum-Kulka, 1997). It was quickly determined that our own initial coding process was generating categories consistent with Searle's (1976) taxonomy of speech acts. Accordingly, we made the decision to overtly incorporate this existing scheme into our coding structure being used for constant comparative analysis. This was our rationale for the application of this particular normative classification scheme, as opposed to other approaches to discourse analysis that also could have been used. The speech-act approach was thus an emergent quality of our coding process but, once recognized, also provided a more structured means of interpretation of discourse.

Searle (1976) identified five broad types of speech acts. Representatives convey information about the world around us via claims, assertions, conclusions, and so forth. Expressive utterances encompass speech that expresses the internal state of being of the speaker. Directives are employed to get the hearer(s) to act, to do something. Commissives and declarations convey agency on the part of the speaker. A commissive speech act commits the speaker to performing some action; promises, vows, and pledges fit within this category. A declaration is a statement that marks a specific change in a state of affairs. It is frequently uttered in an authoritative context and initiates changes in behavior.

Because analyzing talk and text lends itself to working back and forth through the data "as the puzzle arises and is resolved" (Silverman, 2000, p. 831), we applied open and axial coding techniques derivative of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) in our initial design of the case study. This facilitated our use of constant comparative

analysis to identify patterns and themes within the data related to both teachers' perceptions of the contextual factors influencing their collaborative activity and our observations of the conversational processes characteristic of team interaction. Later phases of axial coding sought to make connections between patterns of discourse identified through our use of the speech-act taxonomy and through team effectiveness manifested in decision-making processes and outcomes. Axial coding was also used to track patterns in the occurrence of speech acts across the course of the meetings. Coding of such phenomena allowed us to penetrate the constitution of the discourse of these teams of teachers.

As a result of this methodological approach, our findings synthesize the patterns of discourse that we identified as well as an analysis of the organizational conditions framing teacher work. These two broad factors allowed us to create a profile of both the internal and external factors influencing the relative success and collaborative disposition of each PLT. This facilitates an understanding of each PLT as an element within the distributed leadership network of the school.

## Findings

Three constructs emerged that informed our understanding of collaborative interaction within each professional learning team: purpose, autonomy, and patterns of discourse. Purpose and autonomy were identified as organizational conditions through our coding analysis of the content of the teachers' talk during their meetings. Two dimensions to each construct were observed. Interaction analysis of teachers' conversations revealed the additional feature of discourse patterns. Two different prevalent strands of discourse were present in both teams, yet each strand was much more clearly associated with one team than with the other. These three conceptual constructs were found to have an interdependent influence on the nature of collaboration present in each professional learning team. We explain these constructs and their relationships below.

### *PLT Purpose And Collaboration*

The PLT purpose is the understood reason that the PLT was created. This understanding may differ between teachers and principal. School leaders have a goal in mind when they create a teacher team (this study did not include any teacher-generated PLTs), but that goal may not be communicated to teachers—either because of intent or because of circumstance. We found that the PLT purposes for the two case-study teams fell into two distinct categories

that were long ago identified by creativity researchers: *known-problem solving* (problem solving) and *discovered-problem finding* (problem finding; Sawyer, 2006). Problem solving involves approaching a problem that everyone knows about and applying well-known procedures and techniques to resolve the problem. In contrast, problem finding is required when no one is quite sure exactly how to frame the problem, or what procedures would be involved in its solution. A team that is created with a well-defined purpose is being charged with problem solving; a team that is created to work toward an innovative solution to a vaguely understood set of conditions has to engage in problem finding.

When a team is created with a problem-solving purpose, team members are able to jointly focus on particular information and ideas in order to solve a well-understood problem. One could think of this sort of team as having a closed purpose. The instructional PLT has a problem-solving purpose; its task is to create interdisciplinary instructional and assessment materials for team-taught social studies and English classes. The problem is well known and well understood by all of the team members, and they are all in agreement about the nature of the problem and the appropriate procedures to use to solve the problem. Collaborative interaction within this team is characterized by close attention to well-understood tasks related to classroom instruction, as demonstrated in the following example, taken from a meeting of the instructional PLT on March 31, 2003.

Rick: And here say you need five elements that clearly illustrate the American identity at the time of, or clearly illustrate the lack of a collective identity.

Julie: Right. And I think it needs to say clearly "illustrate the evolution of the American identity, or clearly show a lack of collective identity." Does that make sense?

Jennifer: Um hmm, um hmm [affirmative]

Julie: And make it, and just . . . I think we understand what this is saying, but they won't. Look, we need to really make it clear, what we want, we want . . .

Sandy: What types of things are you going to get with identity? What types of things are they going to say?

Julie: Oh, they could say that we are all about materialism, material gain, or that we're about extending democracy, or about . . .

The team's conversation remains focused on the known problems; other topics almost never come up. Even within the focused domain of instructional issues, there are topics that are not addressed with creative scope, such as

student achievement. The following example, taken from a meeting of the instructional PLT on January 29, 2003, shows how the team collectively decides not to discuss topics that are too far removed from the known problem.

Julie: Well, are there any little things we need to put in about . . . any stuff? I mean do we need to have them; do we need to pull a section from *The Things They Carried*? That's our big piece of literature . . .

Rick: And do we want to put *The Things They Carried* in on the English . . . course?

Julie: Well, if they are going to learn about Vietnam, and write a perspective about Vietnam, I mean to me that's where you . . .

Sandy: Well, but that's, when you think about the perspectives and everything. That's a lot of work for them to do on top of what they're doing for Novanet . . . see what I'm saying?

Julie: Well, all they're doing on Novanet is clicking on multiple choice questions.

Rick: I don't think it's going to be any more for them to do the Novanet thing and then write a perspective than it would be to do the Novanet thing and then read all these things we've given them and answer those questions.

Sandy: Umm . . .

Rick: And we'll see the perspectives as like the same thing as all these chunks that we've given them in third quarter.

Sandy: Yeah.

Rick: Only rather than focus on reading, we're focused on writing.

Sandy: Yeah.

Julie: The question is where do we, what literature do we plug in fourth quarter, and do we need to plug in any . . . you know?

In this dialogue, Sandy presented an opportunity to examine the broader context of the assessment pieces that were being discussed by the group. She expressed reservations about the effect of the planned activities on the students—that it might be too much work. The other members of the team appeared to be preoccupied with finalizing their product. Sandy's question is treated as tangential and is rapidly dismissed. Because of the instructional PLT's closed purpose, the team remains narrowly focused on solving known problems (not finding new ones) and has limited potential to identify creative solutions.

In contrast to the problem-solving focus of the instructional PLT, the building PLT has a problem-finding purpose: to determine why certain students are persistently failing or in danger of failing multiple classes and



to make recommendations for changes to the schoolwide intensive intervention program that should serve these students. The administration has created this PLT to come up with novel, original approaches to the issue—a new way of framing the problem, or a new way of approaching its solution. This problem cuts straight to the core of the school's mission—student learning.

Teachers on the team have the opportunity to brainstorm and recommend novel and creative solutions for this problem. Problem-finding teams are tasked with discovering a new way of framing a problem and identifying new strategies for solving the discovered problem. These teams could be thought of as having an open purpose. Whereas it would not make sense to establish a strict agenda or to constrain the team's discussion too narrowly, a potential downside facing problem-finding teams is that the overall purpose may be so broadly defined that team members could be overwhelmed by the number of variables that influence their task. Given the difficult nature of the problem, the PLT often appears to be overwhelmed by the task, as illustrated in the following example taken from a meeting of the Building PLT on February 20, 2003.

Tracy: It goes back to the age-old question that we've asked every year. What do we do with those kids, because what are we . . . ? Even though they have an F and they can do the Novanet and recover the credit, what's the underlying reason that these kids are failing so many classes?

Christine: So many classes . . .

Tracy: Yeah, is it that they can't read? Is it that they are on drugs? Is it that they're working 40 hours a week and school . . . paying the bills is more of a priority than coming to school? You know—all those issues . . . And we've looked at it, and looked at it, and we've played with it. And then we say, "Oh boy, that's just too big to figure out." And we don't do anything.

Sue: Well, the discouraging thing is that when I was looking through grades, I saw all these juniors that are failing, failing, failing, failing. And they are all kids that we had in ITP [Intensive Tutoring Program] last year that were failing, failing, failing, failing . . . I mean, these same kids are still . . .

The members of the group are all experienced, and they know that potential problem solutions will involve a large number of people, issues, departments, and details. In the example above, they seem to be operating under the assumption that whatever solution they might propose will be ineffective because any such solution will necessarily involve major segments of the organization. This suggests that the team members do not believe that they have the full support of the organization.

When problem-finding discussion is creatively effective, the group will spend time brainstorming ideas before a worthwhile decision emerges. Different group members will have different ideas about the right way to proceed or even differences of opinion about what topics are appropriate for discussion. These differences contribute to the likelihood that creative problem-finding solutions will emerge (Paulus & Nijstad, 2003). However, our analysis revealed a potential downside to problem-finding discussion; when it doesn't lead to the emergence of a novel, creative solution, it can seem as though members are working at cross-purposes, and arguing about ground rules rather than being productive. The following example, taken from the February 20 meeting of the building PLT, illustrates this point.

Tracy: Are we going to care about this small group—which it isn't huge—when you talk about 40 kids out of how many . . . ?

Barbara: Um hmm . . .

Tracy: You know, and even if you take out the Special Ed. kids 'cause we'll meet their needs, do we care, as a school, about that because we really . . . ? We talk about it and it bothers us a little bit, but it doesn't bother us enough to really do something about it. And that's the issue . . .

Sue: So maybe our discussion really needs to be, "What group of kids are we talking about, number one? Who are we talking about as juniors that we need to do something with?" And we need to talk about . . . and I guess what we're trying to do with that group of kids right now is with this reading grant . . . I suppose, in my mind, it's, you know . . . Those are going to be some of these kids, but . . .

Christine: If we had the reading grant, can they get an English credit for that?

Sue: No. So I've been told.

Christine: And the reason for that?

Sue: I don't know.

Barbara: Maybe it isn't English, it's language arts. Why wouldn't reading count?

As we show below, this team is tentative and somewhat paralyzed in accomplishing its problem-finding task because it lacks the organizational support needed to freely propose truly creative solutions. During their discussion, team members demonstrate that they believe that issues beyond their control will impact decision making, as shown in the following example, taken from the February 20 meeting of the building PLT. In its attempts to determine the best course of action for dealing with issues in the school's failure-intervention programs, the team is unsure of what to do, how to do it, and whether its recommendations will have any impact return.

Sue: So, it can't count, it won't count. They're still going to have to take World Studies. They're still going to have to take U.S. Studies.

Christine: That's the whole . . . that's the problem. We're putting these kids in the wrong spots.

Tracy: But at the same time, and you know, we had . . . And I don't know. That's, that's frustrating too, because we had this whole conversation. I don't know if everybody knows about it, but we came up with these strategies that teachers could use in the classroom to modify, to make, you know, accommodations for kids. And we talked about it. But I don't . . . you know, I don't think it's being done.

Christine: It's not being done.

### *PLT Autonomy And Collaboration*

Autonomy refers to the capacity of the PLT to make decisions that will lead to action and change. As with purpose, understandings of autonomy may vary between teachers and administration. Autonomy varies according to the quantity and quality of the constraints put upon the group by the administration. All teams, groups, or individuals are bounded in some way by the larger organization; all decision making is constrained in some way. Appropriate constraints to autonomy can be helpful, particularly with teams tasked with problem solving; the constraints may help them to focus on their closed purpose. This focus, however, comes with some risk of losing capacity for creative solutions. This risk is magnified for problem-finding teams because constraints are even more likely to interfere with the level of autonomy required for the team to engage in effective, creative decision making.

The instructional PLT is an example of a team with a problem-solving purpose, and its organizational constraints help to keep the team focused. The instructional PLT makes only occasional reference to organizational constraints: department chairs, particular students, technological concerns, or scheduling issues. Instead, their conversation remains focused on their problem-solving task. This narrow mission, however, inevitably limits the total leadership influence this group can exert; this PLT is asked to consider very little aside from curricular and instructional ideas. They don't stray from this purpose to talk about other topics that might conceivably be related to curriculum: teachers other than their interdisciplinary circle, funding, parent relationships, administration, or broad social problems. By remaining focused on solving the well-defined problems facing them, they never transcend a rather limited realm of influence to come up with a new approach, a novel way of framing or solving the problem of curricular development.

Although the instructional PLT's autonomy is restricted, it matches the closed purpose of its mission. When autonomy is matched with purpose, we refer to it as *enabling* autonomy—enabling in terms of the organizational purpose of the team. The organization has granted the autonomy they need to accomplish the well-understood problem-solving task. After all, it is in the nature of known problems that everyone in the organization has a shared understanding of what it will take to solve the problem; consequently, it is well known what level of autonomy will be appropriate and enabling. In the instructional PLT, the conventional division of administrative versus instructional tasks is maintained as the team works on known problems within the traditional realm of teacher responsibility, but is not granted autonomy with regard to traditionally administrative areas of school operation.

The building PLT has been tasked with making recommendations on an issue traditionally under administrative control within this school. The choice of personnel on the team reflects this (see Methods). Consequently, the building PLT has the potential to engage in leadership activity that will have a much broader organizational influence. Creativity research has found that collaboration is particularly effective at problem-finding creativity (Sawyer, 2003a). However, this team is not granted sufficient enabling autonomy. The constraining factors on this team's collaborative interaction inhibit creative decision making and subvert the team's potential. Creative solutions do not emerge, and the participants themselves express sentiments of futility, as in the following example taken from the February 20 meeting of the building PLT.

Christine: Productive brainstorming. But I don't know if we're ever, ever going to reach a conclusion.

Sue: Well, that's OK.

Bill: Seems like every time we get in these groups, we come to the same conclusions.

The team has been given the freedom to make recommendations. These recommendations, however, go through the team's facilitator back to an executive council of teachers and administrators. Ultimately, they must pass muster with the principal, who is himself subject to the authority of district administration. The PLT is the low rung on a ladder that represents the traditional hierarchical structure of public education. They have been given an open purpose—to come up with a creative new way of framing a difficult problem—but how much influence they will have within the organization is uncertain. Their conversation reveals that group members are aware of their lack of enabling autonomy; their conversation contains frequent references

to external authority, as illustrated in the following example taken from a meeting of the building PLT on March 20, 2003.

Christine: And I think, before we do anything with it, once you have it kinda, maybe once we've just talked about it, the deans need to have input too.

Sue: Oh, yes.

Christine: Maybe even before you start on it they should come in this meeting and have their verbal input before you even try to put something together.

Bill: Yeah.

Sue: I'll see if they'll come to our . . .

Bill: That's going to be important because they're the, especially when you say they're in charge.

Christine: And if they disagree . . .

Sue: They'll say fine, do whatever, just tell us what to do [sarcastically].

Christine: If they disagree with the rationale we need to know that before . . .

Sue is the team facilitator and is also the liaison with the school executive council. It is common for Sue to share information gleaned from personal communications and other meetings with administrators with the team. However, sometimes she chooses to share such information at moments in the conversation when ideas are being generated in a brainstorming fashion. In such a context, bringing up an administrator's preferences can interfere with the creative flow of the discussion; the team members defer to their superiors' wishes and stop that line of inquiry, as shown in the following example taken from the February 20 meeting of the building PLT. Through field observations, we also noted that explicit attempts to communicate and gather input from administrators were unsuccessful. The one time a dean did attend a meeting to provide input to the group, that person arrived late and left early because of other demands and never did provide guidance either verbally or in written form.

Bill: That would be the one big step forward, the fact that advisors aren't going to know until the last minute, whether we are going to have, you know, Laurie or another funded position for study halls, another teacher in there. I mean it's been that way every year. We don't know until the last minute . . .

Christine: That is really the main problem . . .

Bill: Other, other than the three or four of us that do it every year, the advisors, Dr. Yates [the principal] can't get all that stuff done until right before school starts.

In this example, the team refers to the principal in the flow of conversation. He does not sit at the table, nor in fact does he ever visit with the team, yet the mere mention of his preferences can terminate a line of reasoning. Of course, it might be a waste of time to pursue a line of thought that the principal is sure to reject; but if the team's discussion does not flow freely, problem-finding creativity cannot take place. Although the idea might initially sound like one the principal would reject, a free-flowing discussion could eventually result in a new variant that hadn't yet been proposed; and after all, that's the sort of outcome that a problem-finding group is supposed to generate.

The team does not believe that they have the appropriate degree of autonomy to accomplish their open purpose. They reveal this in their discussions: They frequently talk about what they don't know, what obstacles their ideas will face, the attitudes of the broader teaching staff, the principal's desires and beliefs, funding concerns, space limitations, student needs, parent relationships, technological barriers, personal preferences, and contractual obligations and privileges, as illustrated in the following example from the February 20 meeting of the building PLT.

Tracy: But at the same time, and you know, we had . . . And I don't know. That's . . . that's frustrating too, because we had this whole conversation. I don't know if everybody knows about it, but we came up with these strategies that teachers could use in the classroom to modify, to make, you know, accommodations for kids. And we talked about it. But I don't . . . you know, I don't think it's being done.

Christine: It's not being done.

Sue: It's definitely not being done. And I would say some of these kids are passing classes that shouldn't be . . .

Barbara: And then we've got kids that are in classes that are . . . When it's brought to teachers' attention saying, "You know, here's a kid that fits that criteria—he's not really Special Ed., but . . . and does not qualify for those services but is failing in the class . . ." And they'll say, "Well, we've already done those accommodations, those in-class strategies . . ." I mean every time . . .

Christine: And I can understand . . .

Barbara: We talk about that. People will say, "Well, those strategies have already been tried."

This team's lack of autonomy is not matched to its mission. It has too little autonomy to effectively engage in problem-finding discussion on a problem that is traditionally an administrative function. We refer to this as

*disabling* autonomy. Thus, the examples above illustrate a particular relationship between teams' purpose and autonomy. The closed purpose and enabling autonomy of the instructional PLT created conditions in which the team worked efficiently and effectively. Paradoxically, however, the instructional PLT was at risk of solving the wrong problem or developing solutions that lacked innovation and creativity because of the team's agreed-on narrow charge and its lack of focus on problem finding. On the other hand, the building PLT's open purpose and disabling autonomy challenged the team's ability to take full advantage of its problem-finding mission.

### *Patterns of Discourse*

We discovered through our analysis that differing purposes and degrees of autonomy were related to the patterns of discourse in each group. By exploring these patterns, we were able to shed light on the nature of collaborative interaction. We found that conversation in the two groups was different in content and form. Comparison of the two groups revealed that the building PLT engaged in patterns of passive discourse, whereas the instructional PLT engaged in active discourse. Each team exhibited some manifestations of each pattern, yet there were definite tendencies toward one or the other pattern of discourse within each team. We hypothesize that the purpose and autonomy of a team partly determined which pattern of discourse was manifest in collaborative interaction. A reciprocal, yet not deterministic, relationship was found to exist between the three conceptual constructs.

*The influence of passive discourse on group communication.* The meetings of the building PLT were predominantly characterized by the speech acts that Searle (1976) would label as *representatives* and *expressives*. These utterances are used to convey factual information and feelings, as illustrated in the following comment made by a member of the building PLT on February 5, 2003.

Nancy: I think it's working fine. There is one teacher who has chosen to do it every other week, on Fridays. That's just the days they do it. They're comin' in and goin' out, and it really works nicely, not that everybody has to do that. But everybody can have kind of their own little thing, so that they are not, you know, every 3 days going through and sending five more. That was real easy for those teachers and it was easy for me, and the kids knew. And so, they had . . . 2 weeks was enough that if they came in on a Friday, they knew they could possibly, if they weren't too low, get that taken care of in 2 weeks and then be on their way.

Within the context of the PLT meetings, these types of speech acts function to communicate information that enhances the general knowledge of fellow team members. They are means of sharing information. The information they convey, however, is generally a static representation of reality from either a group or individual perspective. The only action that is initiated is understanding or an expansion of general knowledge.

Sharing knowledge is a critical function of the collaborative process because it leads to common understanding. The building PLT, however, seems mired in this stage of communication. Information is exchanged, personal feelings and attitudes are expressed, and questions are asked to solicit additional information. Speech acts that would signal substantive action beyond sharing information are notably absent. We refer to this process of continually exchanging and elaborating information as passive discourse.

The open purpose and disabling autonomy of the building PLT resulted in the group members having inadequate information. Team members needed to know more to participate effectively in the problem-finding collaborative process. Because their level of information is inadequate, each new piece of information leads to more questions. Questions are a subset of the category of directives (Searle, 1976). These are active speech acts, yet in this case, they serve to perpetuate an overemphasis on information sharing. They perform the active function of continuing an essentially passive sequence of discourse.

The absence of active speech acts at the end of the meeting signifies the essentially passive nature of the discussion. There is a lot of talk but no action. The cumulative effect of this pattern of discourse is lack of substantive action; a great deal of time and energy is spent on problem identification and reidentification. Team members even comment on their redundant and circular discussions, as shown in the following example taken from the February 20 meeting of the building PLT.

Tracy: This has been a productive meeting though, even though . . .

Sue: It's been a very productive meeting.

Tracy: . . . even though there isn't much written down.

Christine: Productive brainstorming. But I don't know if we're ever, ever going to reach a conclusion.

Sue: Well, that's OK.

Bill: Seems like every time we get in these groups we come to the same conclusions.

Barbara: Oh, yeah.

Bill: W-e need, we need . . .

Sue: We know what we need. We just have to figure out how to get it.



A sense of futility sets in, and problems and obstacles seem much more visible than solutions. A self-defeatism is present as well, and potential solutions are quickly shot down by listing a litany of obstacles. Team-member frustration seems to take over at times as the teachers focus on what they perceive as obstacles, more than on potential solutions. In a discussion of bureaucratic obstacles to the completion of a grant proposal for a reading program, the building PLT adopted a fatalistic attitude toward its capacity to finish the proposal. To the casual observer, it may appear that the number and quality of barriers that arise in conversation prohibits any real solutions to the problems that are surfaced. Such an attitude characterized the conversations of the building PLT at many times. The long-term challenge for this group was to develop its capacity for moving beyond problem identification and obstacles to envisioning creative solutions. The organizational conditions and patterns of discourse that we found to be characteristic of this group did not support such capacity building.

*The influence of active discourse on group communication.* The instructional PLT meetings were characterized by a much greater balance of active to passive speech. Each meeting contained multiple episodes of substantive action, either performed at the time or initiated for the immediate future. Representative and expressive speech acts were present, yet these were enmeshed within a patterned sequence of discourse that led to specific actions. Products were created, decisions were made, and behaviors were directed. Team members performed commissive and declarative speech acts that committed them to action and signified a specific change in the state of affairs. Commissive acts communicated the clear intent of the speaker to perform an action, to do something, as shown in the following example taken from the January 29 meeting of the instructional PLT. Such speech acts were not totally absent in the building PLT discourse, but they were much less common.

Rick: Maybe we just take those . . . things we've just come up with and split them up and say, OK. I'll go in and look and make sure that, that there's information in there about reconstruction and about Chinese immigration and about you know, this, and then whatever.

In the absence of such statements, a group is left with a lot of talk and little action, as is seen in the building PLT meetings. Declaratives are typically associated with an institutional authority of some sort and often are related to policy change (Searle, 1976). In the instructional PLT, that role was filled by the team leader or facilitator. She finalized decisions with

declarative statements that represented the cumulative decision-making effort of the group; however, it was her speech acts that formally made it so, as shown in the following examples taken from the March 31 and January 29 meetings of the instructional PLT. These declarations symbolize the granting of institutional legitimacy to team decisions via compliance with established organizational protocol. Note that in the examples provided, declarations take a rather informal manner. In a context where *Robert's Rules of Order* or some other protocol of parliamentary procedure is in place, we would expect more formalized instances of declarations. This is not the case in the meetings we observed and may in fact reflect on a possible need for such protocols of interaction. The following example is taken from the March 31 meeting.

Julie: Now I just have to make this, make sure because we always do this. We always say we are fine and then we get to like, right before and everyone hates . . . the assessment. So I have to make sure again . . .

The following example is taken from the January 29 meeting:

Julie: OK, so the only thing we need to do under Industrialization is *The Jungle* and *The Gospel of Wealth* for Novanet. And then Urbanization would be, umm, Jacob Reis. I have the little excerpt from . . .

Julie: OK, so, that would be that. And then they would use [political] cartoons.

A typical sequence of speech acts for this team was very different than for the building PLT. Similarly to that team, declarative utterances in the form of questions frequently began a topical discourse strand; however, these strands were more often punctuated by active speech acts and were more likely to be terminated by an active speech act. Active speech acts at the end of a meeting may indicate that preceding discussion contributed to the initiation of substantive action (although there may not always be a causal relationship between an active speech act and the preceding dialogue). These terminal active speech acts generally marked substantive action that either the entire team or an individual would take as a direct result of the preceding dialogue. The following example is a typical discourse strand for the instructional PLT, taken from the January 29 meeting.

Julie: OK, here's my question, though. Would you do Emma Lazarus, Ellis Island, and then the tenements and all that kind of stuff, or would you do . . . ? That's how I would do it, 'cause you . . . see who's coming into the city, what . . . and then seeing how they live. Right?

Rick: Yeah.

Julie: So . . . OK. That's what I thought. And then we're ready to move into the reforms. So what we need to come up with then is a template thing that they can do for all these little pieces. So what's the big question they have to answer every time they look at a primary source or whatever . . . ?

Rick: I would say it's who has power . . .

Julie: Who has power . . .

Rick: Denied power . . . and . . . something like to what extent is power shifting in this . . . thing . . . whatever it is?

Julie: Do they need to do some kind of plan, summarize this section, or what? What's the main idea, you know, something so that you make sure that they actually read it, or you . . . that's the only thing I'm worried about.

Rick: Well, I would think . . .

Julie: To lead their reading, because if they're not good readers, you know, they're gonna read Jacob Reis and maybe not get it, you know.

Rick: And not get it.

Julie: But at the same time, I don't want to come up with questions for every little thing we do.

Rick: Yeah.

Julie: But we forgot Booker T., and . . .

Sandy: Don't we have at least generic questions that will kinda go with everything?

Julie: Yeah, I'm just saying do we need more than this for each reading? 'Cause that's the big question for the assessment, but when they read Jacob Reis, about tenements, do they need to summarize or something, like what they've read and then answer those questions each time? Does there have to be another step or do you think that . . .

Rick: Maybe a constructed response style thing like . . .

Julie: Maybe I'm just making stuff up, I don't know . . . I mean maybe they don't need to do something else, but . . .

Rick: I would think . . . if I'm given a piece of reading, those three questions, that would help guide me through it . . .

Julie: OK.

Rick: Because I know that I need to be thinking about those things as I'm reading it. And so in my mind I'm gonna have to . . . of course, you know I'm a good reader.

Julie: Yeah. And just by looking at a political cartoon . . . OK, are they going to be able to say, well I guess, with the information that they've learned from Novanet? But see that's the big wild card that I'm gonna have to look at it and see what we've got going on. OK . . . Well. I think that's . . . We've done a lot. I mean to get all that ready . . .

Rick: Yeah . . .

Julie: Now it's just a matter of actually putting all those pieces in a packet and typing up this thing, and giving it to Sarah, right?

The prevailing organizational conditions of closed purpose and enabling autonomy encouraged active discourse leading to substantive action. Productive discussions that lead to concrete decisions are facilitated by contextual factors that encourage creative solutions to problems. Team members of the instructional PLT have a task that is within their grasp to accomplish. Their individual and collective skills, their content area, and pedagogical expertise are ideally suited to performing the mission of the team. Meetings draw on this expertise to solve problems through collective decision making leading to substantive action. The group's patterns of discourse reflect this process.

Based on these data, we suggest that purpose and autonomy, manifest as organizational conditions, largely shape the patterns of discourse that characterize the interaction of the team members. Thus, we argue that the perceived nature of purpose and autonomy within a teacher team can, in part, create differing contexts for the social distribution of leadership. In one context a team was enabled to engage in decisive collaborative activity, characterized by active discourse. In another team, purpose and autonomy served to partially disable the collaborative group; passive discourse was the result. These findings have significant implications for the use and implementation of shared governance structures in schools.

## Discussion

Building on the work of other scholars (e.g., Gronn, 2003; Sebring et al., 2003; and Spillane et al., 2004), this study has attempted to further elucidate distributed leadership as it occurs in teacher teams—a common approach to shared leadership. In so doing, this study contributes to our understanding of distributed leadership by focusing on how leadership emerges out of the actual work and conversations of teachers. This study sheds light on the interplay between structures and social processes (Spillane et al., 2004) and how this interplay contributes to the exercise of leadership as an interactional process (Sawyer et al., 2005). Whereas many schools use teacher teams to engage leadership capacity and ultimately to enhance organizational effectiveness, our research suggests that successfully sharing leadership in these ways depends on myriad factors that, heretofore, have received scant attention. In our exploration of these two teams, we found that purpose, autonomy, and patterns of discourse play important roles in the exercise of leadership and group functioning. These

concepts played out differently in each group and thus warrant further explanation. Organizational factors, such as purpose and autonomy, have been mentioned in previous research on teams (see Crow & Pounder, 2000).

Our study contributes to the literature base by connecting these organizational conditions to patterns of discourse that we have been able to capture within the conceptual framework of distributed leadership. Findings are consistent with other research suggesting that organizational conditions influence team performance. However, our findings have been grounded in an examination of these factors revealed through interaction. These outcomes suggest that a deeper understanding of collaboration and leadership may be gained by examining the reciprocal relationship between social and situational forms of distributed leadership. Our methodology specifically recommends interaction analysis as a means to study the activities that lie at the heart of the meeting of the social and the situational.

As we noted earlier, Spillane et al. (2004) conceptualized distributed leadership as (a) situationally distributed through, for instance, formal structures and activities such as teacher teams and (b) socially distributed via interactions between organizational members. Our study strengthens this notion while also underscoring the interrelatedness of organizational structure and context and the subtle yet influential ways individuals interact with each other within these structures. The subtleties, borne out through constant comparative method and discourse analysis, depict how factors inherent to the groups and external contextual factors shape each group's potential to exercise leadership.

Thus, groupthink, a principal threat to group creativity, improvisation, and innovation (arguably outcomes of effective groups), arises from factors that reside within and external to the group. The constructs purpose and autonomy that emerged from data analysis make visible the impact of situational factors affecting the groups. Within the school's shared governance structure, the instructional PLT was circumscribed. This team sought to identify and solve problems within its specific curricular area. These boundaries, agreed on both within and outside of the group, established clear definition of group purpose and autonomy. The group's understanding of its purpose (instructional improvement) and autonomy (its independence from other instructional PLTs) facilitated its ability to pose problems and issues and develop solutions. However, one can envision how an instructional PLT could choose to problem find and problem solve in any number of ways. Discourse analysis suggested that the instructional PLT tended not to engage in conversations that questioned its fundamental practice but rather focused instrumentally on procedural aspects of work—in other words, it focused on the what and how of work not the why. This group's

creativity may have been hampered by its isolation from other instructional PLTs, the problems it chose to define, and members' tacit agreement to not rock the boat as evidenced in their patterns of discourse. Such an outcome is consistent with a critical perspective on collaboration (Barker, 1999), which suggests that teamwork can function to limit divergent thinking—divergent thinking of course being a hallmark of creativity and innovation. The situational distribution of leadership, therefore, may serve to constrain the performance of individual organizational members if the collaborative structures in which they operate are unduly coupled to standardized expectations that are themselves latent instruments of hierarchical control. Perhaps the structural position of the instructional PLT actually functioned to suppress divergent thinking, possibly even through administrative intent.

In contrast to the instructional PLT, the building PLT's senses of purpose and autonomy were much less defined. The potential organizational impact of its charge confounded the group as it wrestled with defining its purpose and clarifying its autonomy to make decisions that had broad organizational implications. From a structural perspective, little in the way of ongoing administrative support to empower teachers to problem solve and make recommendations was evident during the study. Time was another contextual factor that influenced group functioning. One semester of fieldwork may have been simply too brief a time frame to expect a group to address an issue that affected so many in the school. This has implications both for schools attempting to facilitate change and for researchers trying to document the process.

Counter to the instructional PLT's active patterns of discourse, the building PLT's interactional discursive patterns were passive as members shared information and explored and rehashed obstacles to potential courses of action. This group demonstrated serious commitment to the pursuit of creative solutions to school problems of paramount importance; however, organizational conditions hampered and subverted the generation of such solutions. In this case, it appears that the principal had a genuine vested interest in creative solutions emerging from this collaborative team. It is likely that these obstacles to the performance of the building PLT were not placed there intentionally, but rather were manifestations of long-standing cultural patterns characteristic of the way this school typically operated.

Both teams provide examples of how distributed leadership is a complex phenomenon, and can just as easily be associated with the negative qualities of organizations as it can be with the positive. Oppressive and controlling structures can take form in a context of collaboration and apparent shared governance. They are not limited to traditional hierarchical models

of organizations. Collaboration does not necessarily equate with workers becoming more creative and innovative. In fact the opposite can occur. The differing nature of group functioning offers important insights into distributed leadership. Our initial black-and-white comparisons of the effectiveness of the two case study teams gave way to a more helpful understanding of the frequently paradoxical situational and social factors that can lead to sustainable distributed leadership.

Primary among these understandings is that both situational and social dimensions of distributed leadership must be attended to continuously. This school has taken significant strides in developing structures of shared governance in an effort to tap into the creativity and leadership potential of its professional staff, parents, and students. However, tapping into this well-spring of leadership potential may be curtailed when organizations leave teams to their own devices without support and meaningful feedback. Similarly, team performance may also be constrained when collaborative activity is too tightly bound through standardized organizational expectations and monitoring. We have found that the line between organizational support and surveillance is quite thin. Clarifying this distinction with a critical eye should be one area of future research.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our research suggests some cautious conclusions drawn from the experiences described here and some suggestions for future consideration. First, teachers and administrators working in team-based governance structures should consider how the scope and nature of a team's challenge and charge can influence team functioning within the group and in relation to the greater organization. Second, the nature of teams in shared governance structures—the fact that teams can organize to find problems or solve problems—has important implications for the creative and leadership capacity of individual teams. Being aware of these problem orientations is an important first step to fostering actual leadership qualities throughout organizations. However, problem-finding teams cannot be treated the same as problem-solving teams. This case study suggests that the performance of a problem-finding team might be enhanced if granted more autonomy or, at a minimum, provided clear parameters of what autonomy the team does have. Finally, the structures and social dynamics of distributed leadership must be attended to continuously and not taken for granted.

This study leads to several recommendations for increasing the effectiveness of teacher teams. Our perspective on effectiveness is grounded in

the assumption that creativity, innovation, and divergent thinking represent positive attributes that need to be cultivated—not shunned—within organizations. These intellectual forces need to be encouraged, harnessed, and articulated throughout schools in order to work toward solutions to the complex and challenging problems that schools face. The lens of distributed leadership offers a dynamic perspective on the forms through which influence behavior flows and spans across, organizations. Such a view suggests that improving an organization must take place within, and across, each level of the organization. The interaction and articulation of the efforts of pluralities of individuals and structural forms are therefore of critical significance to organizational improvement. In the case of teacher teams, this means that formal leaders and teachers must develop capacities in the areas of facilitation, interaction, and communication.

The findings presented here, and the broader body of scholarship on distributed leadership, prompt us to look at leadership in new ways. No longer can we look at leadership as a phenomenon exclusively associated with specific roles, positions, or behavioral traits. Leadership is a complex social phenomenon manifested in many ways, and in many contexts. Leadership can be distributed in both situational and social forms. As these forms of distributed leadership interact, they influence and shape one another. Processes of interaction are a key means of understanding the relationship between these forms of leadership. The study of interaction represents a new frontier in our understanding of what leadership is, how it develops, and how we can foster it.

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