Conference Paper:

Case Study on Teacher Perception and Participation in School Governance

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Research Question

For this paper I am asking the following question: how do teachers view and participate in school governance during a time of leadership transition in a Northern New England public high school? In order to explain my thesis and demonstrate my findings I will first define some terms important to my discussion.

First of all, “school governance” refers to anything that impacts school operations (Brown, F. ed., et al 2012); governance, therefore, includes the daily management of schools, as well as policy and program implementation, and school budgeting. When I describe how a school is governed I am referring to the people who make school operation decisions, and this usually takes form in a hierarchy with the ability for some to pull rank over others when making such decisions.

Secondly, I am defining “leadership” separate from formal titles. For example, a principal or superintendent is assumed to be a leader in a school or district and, therefore, have certain leadership duties. Yet, leadership can exist in people who do not hold formalized leadership roles in a school such as teachers. For example, informal teacher leaders can be identified as “individuals who are respected by everyone, or almost everyone, in the group” (Whitaker 1995). These are teachers, then, who have demonstrated strong interpersonal skills amongst their peers. Examples of interpersonal traits are listening and clearly communicating with others (Beachum & Dentith, 2004). Also, teachers can demonstrate leadership through acting as mentors for new teachers. Therefore, in order to encompass all educators in my definition of leadership I will use the word as a descriptor composed of traits such as being an effective communicator,
interpersonal, an advocate on behalf of others, visionary, a mentor, and someone who looks for opportunities to take part in decision-making.

The third term that requires clarification is “organization”. I am drawing from Michel Foucault when defining organization because I am interested in how the organization of the school shapes power relationships between teachers and administrators and, therefore, how it shapes the behavior of teachers. Foucault theorizes that our society is structured in a way that those in power, or authority figures, are the holders of “truth” as accepted by those who do not hold power. Dawson High School, where this research took place, is structured in a way that administrators are seen as leaders, or authority figures; therefore, teachers’ vocabulary and behavior is determined by the organization they exist in, which happens to be a traditional hierarchical school where titles allot formal leadership roles to a select group of people.

**Thesis**

In the following I will describe three major themes that came out of my research. Teachers describe a traditional hierarchical governance system in their high school, but acknowledge recent upheaval as they have had a leadership vacuum where a principal should have been in place for the past two years. Therefore, the first theme discusses how different definitions between governance and leadership arise as demonstrated by figures 1 and 2 respectively (see appendix).

Furthermore, teachers want to be important contributors and vocal proponents or opponents of decisions made in the school. On the other hand, teachers in DHS do not see room for informal teacher leadership roles and this is largely attributed to how
the organization of the school shapes teachers’ perceptions and vocabulary of teacher leadership. The established hierarchy suggests to teachers that if they display leadership characteristics, they must leave behind their teaching and move into administration. Thus, the second theme explores the tension between teachers desire to participate in school governance, while not seeking informal teacher-leadership roles since the organization of DHS does not allow them to explore that option without feeling that they would need to abandon their classrooms.

Lastly, department heads have a formalized teacher-leader role since they have administrative duties such as budgeting, attending weekly departmental meetings, evaluating other teachers, and representing their department’s interests. Nevertheless, department heads’ role is more closely described as a “leader among equals” (Maeve; Department Head) and they are not considered administrators, neither formally in their position title, nor informally by their colleagues. In the third theme, I show that strong teacher leadership in the form of department heads attenuated the leadership vacuum for over two years since they carry out administrative duties at a level visible to teachers, but they are still professionally considered a teacher first, and a department head second.

For the purposes of this draft and the presentation, I cannot give each theme complete treatment, but I want to introduce all three to show the tensions and issues at play in this school.

Literature Review
There is plenty of research on teacher leadership and different models of schools that support teacher leadership in some capacity. In creating the interview protocol for this case study I used the following definition as guidance on what it means to be a teacher leader: “In models of teacher leadership, teachers take more responsibility for decision-making and activities outside of their classroom (Blase and Blase 2000; Fullan and Hargreaves 1996). They assist in reforms that impact the organizational processes within schools (Evans 1996)” (Beachum and Dentith, 2004, p. 277). This definition focuses on teachers’ impact on the larger organization of schools; therefore, it is useful for my purposes of researching teacher roles outside of the classroom.

Teacher leadership that organically exists in a school’s governance structure is frequently referred to as teacher-centered schools. Teacher-centered schools prioritize the professional preparedness and emotional and social well being of teachers (Cohen and Scheer 2003). These schools understand the connection between professional satisfaction with overall school and instruction quality (Cohen and Scheer, 2003, p. 3). Therefore, it is worthwhile to contribute to already existing literature on teacher leadership and participation in school governance.

There are several models of governance where teacher leadership can exist. First, distributed leadership, also known as collective, shared or collaborative leadership focuses on distributing control and influence in the school (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008, p. 532). It is leadership that is disseminated across staff and faculty members; therefore, multiple faculty members are adopting tasks and are constantly interacting with one another about a variety of issues (Penlignton, Kington & Day, 2008, p. 69). Distributed
leadership in schools usually involves designated leadership roles, which tend to be formally titled to three to seven people; but there are also more staff members that adopt leadership roles without a formal title (Spillane, Healey & Parise, 2009, p. 409).

Second, team-based schooling establishes models of smaller learning communities amongst teachers (Supovitz, 2002). Team-based schooling is also referred to as “communities of practice” that are made up of teacher teams who form the foundation of the larger “professional learning community” (Gajda & Koliba, 2008). The primary task of teacher teams is to meet about and share instructional practices with the goal of improving student learning. Their meetings focus on dialogue, decision-making and evaluation of teacher and student performance, budgeting and resource allocations, and disciplinary actions (Gajda & Koliba, 2008, p. 139).

Another model is teacher-leader schools, which appoint one or more teachers to be their school leader. This is an interesting design meant to instill power in the teacher. Many advocates of this system are critical of a central authority model that maintains most of the decision-making power in the hands of a few leaders, which takes away agency from teachers and functions more like a business than a school. Dawson High School follows a traditional model that has hierarchical authority; nevertheless, shared governance takes form in committees and/or department heads who simultaneously teach and make administrative decisions on behalf of their departments.

The literature so far is lacking in discussion on how teachers view governance in a traditional public high school such as DHS, and whether it is even possible for such leadership roles to exist in an organization like DHS. Therefore, I hope this case study
will provide insight into how teachers conceptualize teacher-leadership and school governance in a traditional public high school.

**Context/Methodology**

Dawson High School is a Northern New England public high school with about 80 faculty members and over 900 students. The governance model that most appropriately describes DHS is traditional hierarchical. A school board is elected to the district, a superintendent oversees the district, an assistant superintendent is second in command to the superintendent, and a director of student services occupies a tertiary role in the district. There is a principal who is the managing director of the high school, assistant principals, then department heads—which includes the head of guidance—and lastly teachers and guidance counselors. The former principal retired two years ago leaving his position vacant. In response, the superintendent hand selected a hiring committee for a new principal, but the search failed the first year. The assistant principal stepped in as interim principal during the two-year search, which consequently left an assistant principal position vacant. It is unclear why the first year failed. Some teachers expressed that a few candidates they were interested in ended up pulling out of the process due to economic reasons. Nevertheless, the committee reconvened for the second year and decided on a new principal for the next academic year. Unfortunately, the new principal was involved in an accident and couldn’t attend the first month or so of the academic year, which caused faculty to feel further disconcertion. Therefore, the current principal began his leadership role a month already into the school year and at a time in DHS where there had already been a lack of permanent leadership for over two years. As a
result, there are uniformly negative sentiments among teachers I interviewed for this case study. These sentiments provide the opportunity to see what they are thinking in terms of governance and leadership at their high school and gives insight into how teachers perceive their role in school governance.

My methodology for this case study was based on seven semi-structured interviews with educators at Dawson High School. We used purposive sampling to select our interviewees (Bryman, 2012) since we wanted a range of teacher experiences based on subject taught, gender, whether they were veteran or novice teachers, and if they were department heads or not. The selection was completed through a key informant in the high school who connected us with six teachers that fit this diverse criterion. He was the last teacher interviewed for this study. We used this study design in order to collect data on a variety of teacher experiences while taking into account the short research period we had to interview. Additionally, semi-structured interviewing allows teachers to give detailed answers to a pre-designed interview protocol that were then coded afterwards. A limitation of this research design is that our key informant was able to choose whom we had access to interview, therefore, there is a risk that he introduced bias in selecting teachers.

Findings

The first theme I will discuss is the difference between teachers conception of governance versus leadership. Teachers described governance as being structurally top-down, as Tyler, a novice teacher, describes in the following:

“So there is a principal who is gone, assistant principal fills that void and becomes the managing sort of director of the school. And below that it does sort
of breakdown communication goes through department heads to the member of departments and then we as the teachers sort of facilitate the students. I guess there is some sort of governance tree that you could make. The guidance department too you would find plays a large role, whether or not they are supposed to, they play a very large role…”

The principal holds the authority in the school as “managing director” with the other positions falling underneath. The guidance department, which is responsible for scheduling and providing additional services to students, has its own department head. Therefore, guidance counselors are categorized alongside teachers. This is visually shown in Figure 1. Another teacher, Maeve, who is a veteran teacher and department head also describes governance in a similar fashion:

“Well...obviously the principal and vice principal are you know sort of we see them as being in charge and that kind of thing and then uh they’re involved with the superintendent...[omitted]...so we see that and we see that kind of governance.”

The organization of DHS, according to Maeve, is “seen” as a top-down governance model. In her explanation, the superintendent is largely removed from interactions with faculty at the school other than the principal and assistant principals who act as liaisons with district administration. Similarly, department heads are the liaisons between teachers and the principal. Interestingly, assistant principals are accessible to teachers since they deal more directly with disciplinary problems, as Tyler explains:

“And we have in support of the principal we have assistant principals and they serve a function of, often times they communicate more to us than the principal does. They are meant to be more accessible to us they deal a lot with discipline, especially at our public school where discipline is a problem.”

Therefore, a difference between governance and teachers’ perception of leadership begins to emerge as teachers describe whom they turn to for guidance and/or support.
Assistant principals are the primary disciplinarians, the guidance department schedules and provides additional services such as counseling or connecting students with outside resources, and department heads are the most accessible formalized leaders for teachers. Beth aptly describes her department head’s role as, “Um, basically if she had a job description first and foremost it would be supporting those faculty members within the department.” Department heads are ultimately responsible for representing the concerns and needs of their department. They meet weekly with their teachers, thus acting as the formalized leader teachers interact with the most.

Due to the complexities of relationships between teachers and other faculty, I generated a second flow chart of how teachers perceive leadership at DHS shown in Figure 2. Instead of a hierarchy, teachers approach the assistant principal, department heads, and guidance for a variety of needs. Those three “branches” of leadership then communicate more directly with the principal, but since there has been an absence of permanent leadership, communication has been fragmented with a principal. Also, teachers feel largely removed from any interactions with a principal since they can turn to three different resources first. I refer back to the definition of a leader as someone with traits such as being an effective communicator, interpersonal, an advocate on behalf of others, visionary, a mentor, and someone who looks for opportunities to take part in decision-making. Teachers find these characteristics present in department heads, guidance and assistant principals, whereas they have yet to figure out the leadership style of a new principal, and do not necessarily need him as a resource.
This is the first layer of how teachers view school governance versus leadership, which leads into the second theme of how teachers see themselves as participants. Most teachers, when asked what role they think teachers should play in school governance, responded with wanting to have a more active role in decision-making. For example, Ruth, a veteran teacher and department head, responded:

“Um...well especially things when there are rules that are going to affect what they do in their classroom. And it could be anything from you have to have a pass to go to the bathroom, to you have to provide copies of your final exam before you leave. You know things like that that are going to directly affect their classroom as well as what they do. Uh they should definitely have a voice. Both on whether what’s your goal here, is that actually going to reach it.”

Ruth expresses that teachers should be a part of conversations in regards to creating and implementing policy that affects their students and classrooms. Larry, another veteran teacher, expressed similar beliefs:

“I think teacher’s should be at least asked the question, at least asked whatever the question, be made to feel like they’re a part of the team. I think that’s very very important. I think there’s nothing worse than making...creating an environment that’s like you know perceived as being top down and that your voice doesn’t matter, ok.”

Larry expresses the possibility of team-based schooling to the extent that teachers feel they can make an impact on what goes on in the school. Even though teachers are able to vocalize how they want to be a part of governance this doesn’t translate into changing the organizational structure of governance in place at DHS. Six of the seven teachers who were interviewed accept a hierarchical leadership model—this is shown through Figure 3. Kevin is an example of this behavior:

“I like being asked my opinion as a teacher but I also believe that if an administrator has a really good philosophy and a really good belief then they should often tell teachers what to do.”
So while they want a louder voice in decision-making, they see themselves as “just” teachers and not teacher leaders.

Furthermore, because of the formal difference between administration and teachers, teachers don’t see room for becoming leaders unless they abandon their classrooms and move into administration. Teachers lack the vocabulary for informal teacher leadership since their actions and vocabulary are shaped by the hierarchical organization of DHS that allots formal titles. Due to a disjunction where teachers voice what role they want in governance and the action that this requires, a stalemate occurs where teachers retreat into their classrooms, as Beth and Maeve describe:

“...I mean basically this is the year that people go into their classrooms and teach because we feel like there is no leadership in the school right now.” Beth

“And I felt, before I became a department head, a little bit distant from the governance of the school. For example, I could go a year without speaking to my principal.” Maeve

Since they feel distanced from the people in charge of making decisions and don’t see where they can develop leadership they withdraw into the classroom space where they have autonomy and control over their profession. For example, Ruth explicitly says, “I think we have a lot of autonomy within our classrooms we have a lot of rules on the books and a lot of people who follow them and a lot of people who don’t.” Teachers value having their classroom space, such as George, a veteran teacher who is especially disconcerted with leadership in the school. He outright states,

“Nobody is involved in my teaching...”

**Ok, so your classroom is your space.**

This is *my* world, I own it.
On the other hand, the new principal seems to be taking a newer approach and pays more visits to teachers’ classrooms. Maeve gives an account that, “…he comes in a lot more and just drops in. So he’s probably dropped in maybe for 10-15 minutes at a time. I think he’s been in my room four or five times this year.” But for Beth, his presence in the classrooms and hallways have made him “a noisy leader”. Therefore, this second theme reveals a tension in teachers’ ability to express how they want to see themselves participate in governance, while maintaining autonomy over their classroom.

The primary reason for the current state of governance at DHS—and the largely negative sentiments associated with it—stem from the leadership vacuum for over two years. Yet, the school continued to function and teachers carried on with their jobs. There have been drawbacks to lacking a permanent leader at DHS, which I hope has been revealed by teachers’ negative sentiments and contradictory statements on how the school is governed versus how they would like to see themselves participate in governance. So, what accounts for teachers’ ability to successfully teach and be present in the school on a day-to-day basis? In this third theme I propose that department heads, who are formal teacher leaders, have attenuated the leadership vacuum since they carry out administrative duties on the level most visible to teachers. Maeve outlines several of her duties in the following:

“So the model is that we’re part of the leadership team from the teaching ranks itself and so that we can give input and guide in those kinds of things. So I’m involved at that level and I do under the…with that, I’m involved in teacher evaluations, I’m also involved in hiring for the department, uh, I deal with any parental concern for an issue with the teacher in the department that they
haven’t resolved just with the teacher themselves or maybe they’re just uncomfortable approaching a teacher so they may come through me.”

Other teachers also describe their department heads as representatives for their departments in dealing with administration, as well as being responsible for evaluation and budgeting. Thus, each department head has basic duties but also has their own unique style. Kevin, for example, feels his department head is much more hands off, “My personal department head is kind of involved on the sidelines.” Whereas, Beth describes her department head as, “she sees herself in many ways as like our mother, which is really really nice but I don’t think it’s in the job description.” Since department heads are one of the primary resources for teachers to turn to, as I demonstrated through discussing the first theme and outlining leadership in figure 2, teachers have been somewhat insulated from the lack of permanent leadership.

Yet, department heads are still perceived as teachers and not administrators. Administrative titles imply that you are not in the classroom, whereas department heads still teach a full course load while carrying out their additional duties. Maeve says of her role that “you’re sort of a leader among equals, you know, I’m still a teacher with my colleagues...”. Tyler commented on a teacher-leader school model saying, “Like my concerns are the people who would seek those positions [formal teacher leader of a school] are people who don’t want to be in the classroom as much.” This also supports my earlier observation that there is clear division between administration and teachers, and while department heads straddle these two worlds, they ultimately identify as teachers even though their duties entail administrative responsibilities.

Implications
The negative tone set by the absence of a permanent principal the past two years fueled by a contentious failed search the first year has led to several faculty members writing off their new principal and acting skeptical towards administration in general. This case study contributes to knowledge on how we can better understand teacher sentiments as shaped by a leadership vacuum.

Additionally, this case study offers insight into how teachers perceive leadership and their role in governance. They want to be listened to and desire more avenues of communication, but seem overall content with having a hierarchical leadership model, as long as it is performing in their favor. This case study implies that if an organization doesn’t encourage or talk about informal teacher leadership, teachers have a difficult time voicing how they can participate in governance, especially when there is a clear separation between teacher and administrator. Administrators are perceived as leading in a traditional hierarchical governance model, while teachers at the “bottom” of the hierarchy have less clout in decision-making.

I have attempted to be descriptive in discussing how seven teachers view and participate in school governance during a time of leadership transition. The uncertainty they express during this time causes them to voice frustration at feeling left out of important conversations. Nonetheless, they view a traditional model at their school and so are navigating a system that doesn’t encourage informal teacher leadership. In order to further understanding about teacher participation in school governance we must continue having conversations with teachers. As Maeve told me at the end of our interview, “it’s nice to be asked.”
References


Appendix

Figure 1. Official School Governance at Dawson High School

Table 1. Teachers Interviewed from Dawson High School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Teacher/DH</th>
<th>Veteran/Novice</th>
<th>Search Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T_01 (Tyler)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T_02 (George)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Veteran</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T_03 (Beth)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Veteran</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T_04 (Maeve)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>DH</td>
<td>Veteran</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T_05 (Kevin)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T_06 (Ruth)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>DH</td>
<td>Veteran</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T_07 (Larry)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>DH</td>
<td>Veteran</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Approximately 80 faculty members total; 8 Department Heads total
Figure 2.

Leadership Chart from the Perspective of Teachers at DHS

Figure 3.

Scale of Governance Models Favored by Teachers

Teacher-Led Schools: Overthrow Administration

Hierarchy, but teachers are included in decision-making

Top-down Leadership: Tell me what to do

George Maeve Larry Beth Tyler Kevin Ruth