

Discussion on the Applicability and Limitation of Distributed Leadership Against the Background of Contemporary Chinese Culture

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Abstract—In recent years, distributed leadership has been paid increasing attention in the field of education. In the context of contemporary Chinese culture, the applicability of distributed leadership to school education lies in the following aspects: the urgent need to change teaching methods, teaching objectives reform of value orientation and the new perspective of education management. Meanwhile, distributed leadership also has some limitations, such as the difficulty of changing traditional leadership concepts and leadership styles, the difficulty of forming consistent values, and the difficulty of coordinating conflicts.

Keywords—distributed leadership; China; applicability; limitation

I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the concept of distributed leadership has been gradually attached importance to by China's educational circles. In China, leadership is generally considered as a single role, and it is a matter for leaders. With the development of leadership theory and the emergence of new educational leadership theories including moral leadership theory, people gradually realize that leadership roles can be taken on by more than one person, and leadership behaviors can be reflected among organizational members. As society's demands for school education have increased, people are aware that the traditional principal leadership model has been difficult to adapt to the development of schools. It is in this context that distributed leadership is widely valued in school education in China. On a practical level, some places and schools have been attempting to implement distributed leadership.

II. THE MEANING OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

The term "distributed leadership" was put forward in the 1990s, but it has not been widely concerned by scholars until recent years. Early scholars had a relatively vague understanding of distributed leadership. For example, Melnic (1982) regarded distributed leadership as an opposite of centralized leadership, while Barry (1991) took it as a synonym for "leaderless groups" or "self-managed teams". Distributed leadership sometimes overlaps with decentralized leadership, collective leadership, and other leaderships in terms of structure, and participation power. Therefore, it is suspected

that it has changed in form only. Spillane's (2005) understanding of the concept of distributed leadership makes people recognize distributed leadership clearly. He considered that distributed leadership "is a kind of leadership practice formed in the interaction between the leader, followers and the situation". In essence, distributed leadership is a practice in shared activities, which emphasizes the decentralization of leadership and the role of collective leadership, rather than focusing on individual leadership. Domestic scholars are late in the research of distributed leadership. Apart from international comparative researches on education management, they also pay attention to the domestic school-level education theories. For example, Zhang Xinping (2009) considered distributed leadership as the concrete exploration and practice of transformational leadership theory in school organization. Chu Hongqi studied the issue of teacher leadership in action by comparing the cases of three schools (Chu Hongqi. 2012, pp.270).

The theory of distributed leadership is proposed to make up for the shortcomings of traditional leadership theory, and emphasizes that we "guide and complete tasks of different sizes, complexity and ranges by relying on multiple leadership resources within the organization". But in essence, the two are not necessarily incompatible. Therefore, while seeking for distributed leadership, we should not neglect the advantages of traditional leadership, that is, clear structure and clear performance. "Individual leadership theory and distributed leadership theory can not negate or weaken each other's importance, but provide complementary viewpoints about school leadership." (Zhang Xiaofeng, 2011)

There are three different perspectives on distributed leadership. The first is conceptual perspective. The researches focus on conceptual analysis of distributed leadership, such as exploring the origin of the concept of distributed leadership and differentiating the concept of distributed leadership from concept of other leaderships. Gronn believed that distributed leadership had two characteristics: interdependence and collaboration. He further distinguished two types of distributed leadership behaviors. One is value-added leadership behavior. As the complexity of leadership increases, the organization needs more people to assume leadership responsibilities. The other is collaborative behavior, which can be divided into three types: spontaneous collaboration, intuitive collaboration and

institutionalized collaboration. The second is practical perspective, which holds that practice is the core concept of distributed leadership. In the past, we paid much attention to the macro leadership task and neglected the micro leader practice in the education leadership researches. Distributed leadership is formed in the interaction of specific situations. No leadership model is universal. We should choose appropriate leadership strategies according to the actual situation of the school. For example, Harris's distributed leadership practice considered the internal and external environment of schools. Distributed leadership from the perspective of practice helps educators understand, rethink and improve leadership practice. The third is empirical perspective, which focuses on how distributed leadership can play a leading role and whether it can really have a positive impact on students' learning and educational development. This kind of research usually adopts quantitative research method, takes leadership practice as a series of variables, and student achievements or teacher development as another type of result variable, and studies the relationship between the two variables.

III. THE APPLICABILITY OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF CHINESE CULTURE

The concept of distributed leadership has been concerned by people since it was proposed, especially in the field of education management.

A. *There Is an Urgent Need to Change the Teaching Methods*

Since the strategy of rejuvenating the country through science and education was put forward, researches on education reform in colleges and universities have been increasingly attached importance to. Many of researches discuss the reform of teaching methods in colleges and universities. For one thing, it is difficult to adapt to the needs of modern teaching because of shortcomings of traditional teaching methods; for another, with the progress of modern science and technology and emergence of modern teaching methods represented by multimedia teaching, the traditional teaching methods can not meet the requirements of the new era. The research on distributed leadership theory shows that the interaction between teacher leaders and classroom teachers can promote classroom teachers to take the initiative to change the way of teaching. Classroom teachers' views on teacher leaders determine their acceptance and recognition of teacher leadership behavior, which indirectly promotes their active teaching reform. For example, Camburn & Han investigated 30 schools and mainly discussed the relationship between leadership distribution and teachers' teaching changes. The results showed that distributed leadership had a positive effect on teachers' teaching changes. Researches by S. Bryk et al. indicated that when leaders can truly incorporate teachers in some policy formulation related to teacher development (such as the formulation of school development goals, etc.), both teaching quality and their investment in students can be significantly improved.

B. *The Value-orientated Teaching Objectives Reform*

It can be seen that traditional teaching objectives are task-centered, which determines that teachers are not concerned with the development of knowledge and students, but with a task when determining teaching objectives. This goal orientation makes teachers pay attention to students just as an external utilitarian, rather than focusing on their development. Taking students as the center of teaching is a basic trend in the development of contemporary teaching objectives. Different value choices of objectives affect the effect of classroom teaching. After the three-dimensional teaching objectives are proposed in the new curriculum reform, student-centered value orientation is gradually becoming the trend of classroom teaching. Teaching objectives attach more importance to the development and change of students from multiple perspectives. (Liu Meimei, Chen Yunben, 2006)

Nowadays, the "instillation" teaching in schools needs to be changed urgently, because the knowledge-based economy society puts forward higher requirements for contemporary workers. In the teaching work, more attention should be paid to the students' ability of interaction and cooperation in learning knowledge, so that they can meet the market demand through continuous learning. Distributed leadership is a response of educational leaders to the changes of the times. Theoretical research shows that distributed leadership can effectively improve students' learning motivation and promote effective interaction between teachers and students. In school decision-making, the stronger the sense of teachers' participation is, the more enthusiastic the students will be. Foreign distributed leadership theory research shows that teacher leadership is an important manifestation of leadership distribution. (Liu Youling, 2010) It can be seen that distributed leadership helps to motivate teachers to take the initiative in teaching reform and improve students' achievements.

C. *New Perspective of Education Management*

Distributed leadership is a new perspective to study education management and school management. The study of its theory has important implications for the reform of schools in China, especially for the reform of principals' responsibility system in primary and secondary schools. It not only emphasizes the role of principals in school development, but also pays more attention to the collective role of school leaders, the distribution of leadership power in formal positions, and the distribution of informal leaders. (Liang Dongrong, Zhang Yanmin, 2007) The changes of these concerns have opened a new perspective for the study of educational management in China. Under the guidance of this theory, the United States, Britain, Australia and other countries attach great importance to the study of successful school leadership in order to find out the influencing factors of its success, which has also played an enlightening role for the educational management researchers in China. Nowadays, the society has stepped into the era of knowledge economy. In the management mode, it's necessary to pay attention to the decentralization of leadership responsibilities. It is difficult to accomplish the complex task of organizational change and improvement only by the efforts of a few formal leaders. Distributed leadership is a theory emphasizing leadership practice. Contemporary school leaders

are faced with more complex tasks, which put forward higher requirements for cooperation between different professional groups.

The traditional model of headmaster's single leadership has been difficult to meet the needs of school development. Other leaders in schools, such as deputy principals, teaching and research directors and grade group leaders, should be paid more attention to. Of course, this does not deny the principal's leadership; on the contrary, the principal is still the most important role in school leadership. The leadership task of the school is accomplished by the cooperation of leaders at various levels. The personal leadership of the principal is difficult to face the complex problems of the school in the current era. A series of non-traditional subjects, such as parents and off-campus groups, have been brought into the school management system by the American School Improvement Act and the British Parent Charter. In order to solve the problem of principals' lack of professional knowledge and limited leadership energy in curriculum teaching, both informal teacher leaders, subject leaders and formal leaders of school administrators have been included in the ranks of leaders, which further promote the development of distributed leadership model.

IV. LIMITATIONS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE CULTURE

In the context of contemporary Chinese culture, distributed leadership has many obstacles in the application process due to various factors.

A. *Traditional Leadership Concepts and Methods Are Difficult to Change*

Over two thousand years of feudal system and emperor-centered leadership have led traditional leadership to believe that leadership can only be one person and that at most a few people are solely responsible for all matters. Accordingly, schools are centered on principals. Students and ordinary teachers should obey absolutely, which is inseparable from our traditional concept of leadership. It is difficult for both the principal and the teacher to change their traditional ideas. On the one hand, the principal holds absolute power and will not easily put it down; on the other hand, teachers are accustomed to just regarding themselves as "employees" of schools, in a dominant and subordinate position. It is difficult to change this concept fundamentally in a short time, which makes the application of distributed leadership in China face great limitations. (Li Chaohui, Wang Anping, 2011) The research of Swood and some other relative researchers also believe that when distributed leadership presents a spontaneous dislocation or disorder dislocation, distributed leadership will show a negative impact on short-term or long-term organizational development.

B. *Consistent Values Are Hard to Form*

The most important thing for the successful application of distributed leadership is to have a common culture and consistent values. However, because of the great differences in country, region and identity, it is difficult to form a consistent

value concept in this cultural background. Although the organizational structure of the school is relatively simple, there are still differences in values, which is also the obstruction of the application of distributed leadership in practice.

C. *It Is Difficult to Coordinate the Conflict of Objectives*

Everyone has their own goals to pursue. The main body of the school, namely the principal and the teacher's goals often conflict. The principal pursues the short-term goals of the school, such as emphasizing the basic skills of the teachers, the safe and orderly environment of the school, and the teachers tend to seek for the goals of their own professional development and improving their participation. Principals feel more pressure from outside the school, so they pay more attention to the competition and ranking between the same-level schools; teachers devote to their own career development and their students. Because of the different goals pursued, there will be some contradictions between principals and teachers inevitably. This conflict of goals is difficult to coordinate, hindering the performance of distributed leadership. Goran, one of the important founders of distributed leadership theory, expressed concern about the future of distributed leadership. He mentioned that, driven by policy, 76% (52/68) of the members of a British school were labeled "leaders" by school leaders or colleagues, that is to say, only 16 teachers in a school had no so-called leadership role, which was obviously unreasonable.

V. CONCLUSION

In short, distributed leadership has both adaptability and limitations in the context of Chinese culture. For the two different school management systems in China and the West, the mode and method of distributed leadership are also different, which requires creating a locally applicable model. On this basis, a series of theoretical exploration and practical research are carried out to gradually build a theoretical system of distributed education leadership with Chinese characteristics. There is still a lot of work to be done in the future research of distributed leadership in the field of education in China, such as understanding the impact of distributed leadership on school development or student learning through large-scale quantitative research, the relationship between different leaders' behavior and teacher development variables, etc. There have been many studies in these fields in the western education field, while the field of educational leadership in China is still in its infancy. In addition, it can reveal the complexity of distributed leadership more deeply through qualitative research in specific situations and contribute to the construction of school leadership theory.

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