

# 1 Traditional Thinking/New Opportunities

*The history of failure in war can be summed up in two words: too late. Too late in comprehending the deadly purpose of a potential enemy; too late in realizing the mortal danger; too late in preparedness; too late in uniting all possible forces for resistance; too late in standing with one's friends.*

—General Douglas MacArthur

**W**hen Baker, a small rural school and Kansas Distributed Leadership Academy participant, was asked to identify the leadership practices they used associated with reading pedagogical strategies, no one knew the discoveries that would be made. The team discovered nearly 50 different leadership practices. At first, the team was impressed, and then they became somewhat perplexed. “How did all these practices come about?”

A superficial analysis revealed that some of these subconscious practices were the filtrate of past administrators and had been around for years. Many of these practices created a facade of being unique, but in actuality, they were mere replicas of each other. Teachers, to fill in the perceived gaps that existed in fruitless practices, created some of their own. Consequently, the staff just added to the plethora of already existing long-standing practices. The most surprising discovery was that the team could identify only one practice that enhanced and changed teachers' classroom practices that in turn positively impacted student learning.

### Critical Thought

If, as a leader within your school, you knew that a leadership practice you were using was going to have an impact on student learning, would you not want to know?

What if your practices were not going to affect the outcome of your students' learning? Would you not want to know that as well?

**One practice out of 50!** Do you think the Baker team felt that they had properly allocated their time, energy, and capital to enhance student learning? Baker found this discovery to be titanic in nature, and the ship was sinking. Baker, like so many other schools, would have continued to plod along with their daily routines and never have discovered why they were working so hard, never knowing if they were making a difference.

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*We are what we repeatedly do.*

—Aristotle

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By using a few of the tools within this toolbox, Baker was able to discover the lived reality of their practices as well as the formal structure of their school. Prior to this leadership practice diagnosis, Baker was oblivious to the fact that they were expending so much capital on reading pedagogy with a minuscule outcome. This discovery was a step in the right direction for Baker's efforts to improve students' ability to read proficiently.

Baker was able to rethink their leadership practices; thus, they kept their one impact practice, enhanced a few others, deleted 40-plus ineffective practices, and added a few additional ones. Baker created a meaningful system of leadership practices to monitor their ability to enhance and change classroom practices.

Folks often ask me, "What was the one thing?" The short answer to this question is, "It doesn't really matter." The purpose of the story is to point out that they were able to discover what practices were enhancing

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*The total direct and indirect effects of leadership on student learning account for about a quarter of total school effects.*

—Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004, p. 5)

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teachers' classroom practices and which ones were not. As a result of this discovery, the school was able to reduce wasted resources and energy and was able to focus attention on a few well-intentioned and soundly designed leadership practices, monitored for their effectiveness. Thus, leadership practices that were effective at enhancing classroom practices that improved student learning were kept, and all others were reworked or thrown out.

## HAVE YOU HEARD THE NEWS?

Have you heard the news? Researchers have recently documented that school leadership makes a vast contribution to student learning. The review of research done by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) has made it very clear that leadership contributes significantly to school conditions that lead to high student academic performance. “You make a difference” is the newest battle cry of educational reform specialists.

In reality, it is not anything new; after all, these educational reform specialists have been telling their loyal followers this for years. The greats like Linda Lambert, Victoria Bernhardt, Richard Elmore, Larry Lezotte, Peter Senge, Richard DuFour, Mike Schomaker, Doug Reeves, and so many more have urged school leaders to reform their practices. Other reform specialists have erected a picture of education in a time of major crisis that advocates that we do not have a choice but to change. Michael Fullan (2001) refers to this as the “Moral Imperative.”

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*Effective educational leadership makes a difference in improving learning.*

—Leithwood and colleagues (2004, p. 3)

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## HOT LIGHTS!

The interrogation light shines fiercely on those in education today and on none more than those who serve as instructional leaders. As pressure for improving student performance in the current accountability environment swells and test results are scrutinized, school leaders are being urged to focus their efforts on how teachers perform in their classrooms. This focus is essential as educators are now looking at how they teach each student, ensuring that each learns. However, this accountability for performance does not mean that leaders need only to work harder; instead, they must learn to work smarter and more efficiently. School leaders should practice their craft with a precise and purposeful intention to enhance classroom teachers’ practices, which in turn will boost student learning.

## CENTER STAGE

Clearly, so many great educational reformers cannot be wrong. We are in a time of crisis and we know that effective leadership enhances student performance, so we need to buck up and face this challenge head-on. To do so, we need new analytical or diagnostic leadership tools that enable us to think about school leaders in a new way (Leithwood et al., 2004). The tools within the Distributed Leadership Toolbox enable us to approach

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school leadership in new ways that put “how we practice leadership” center stage.

Before we can truly gauge the value of these tools, we must understand the purpose and value of the distributed leadership perspective (Spillane, 2006a). We must understand the present conditions of education, and we must understand the theoretical base that gives shape to the distributed leadership perspective. Note: *Distributed leadership perspective* is a term used by Dr. James Spillane and colleagues (Spillane, 2006a; Spillane et al., 2001) to differentiate leadership involving acts of single leaders from that involving interactions of leaders and followers.

Distributed leadership is a relatively new topic on the school leader’s radar, and as such, most practitioners know very little or nothing about its true uniqueness.

### **“HOW” DO YOU KNOW “WHO’S” ON FIRST?**

The great Abbott and Costello baseball skit describing “Who” is on first and “What” is on second makes people laugh every time they hear it. Do you remember who was on third base? No, you are right that “Who” is on first, but “I Don’t Know” is on third base! In reality, not knowing “who” (or in this example, “I don’t know”) is on third base is not a laughing matter. Given some thought, you may notice that a key name is missing from the ballgame: *How*. Studying *how* leaders interact with followers, as well as the “who” and “what,” is essential when thinking about leadership (Halverson, 2005a; Spillane, 2006a; Spillane et al., 2001). The skit is funny and we laugh at Costello, who is not aware of his name blunders and remains clueless throughout the entire episode. Educators often end up as confused as Costello does. Accounts of school leadership often dwell exclusively on the organizational structures and the actions and roles of individual leaders (Spillane, 2006a). Educators think about leadership in the facet of who the leaders are and what they do to others. As a result, “the day-to-day leadership practice falls through the cracks” (Spillane, 2006a, p. 7). When thinking about leadership practice from a distributed perspective, we will need to ensure that “How” is in the ballgame to ensure that the practice of leadership is addressed.

### **GROWING UP A SUPERHERO**

Were you one of those people who grew up watching Saturday morning superhero cartoons and reading the latest comic strip in your tree house? As your teacher was in her second hour of lectures on Monday morning,

did you space out and drift into superhero comic-strip land? Were you one of those students who were going to save the world so everyone would look up to you as the hero? For most of us, it is a culturally ingrained state of mind and therefore becomes an answer of “Yes.” These illusions of being the superhero did not disappear as we entered high school, where we were compelled to be the biggest and strongest athlete or the smartest kid in the class.

As educators, from the first day we entered our classrooms, our school administrators expected us to know our subjects, cover the material, maintain student behavior, be entertaining, and raise student assessment scores. With these expectations upon us, we find ourselves once again put into a situation to be superhuman.

In our principal preparation programs, we learned that we were knighted “The Instructional Leader.” Many principals have stood in front of their staffs and given the declaration of “I am your Instructional Leader.” All

they were missing was a superhero cape with the embroidered letters “IL”! A proclamation of being the sole instructional leader and having that superhero cape with “IL” on it is like returning to our childhood of being a cartoon superhero.

Many educational leaders carry a conviction that they must keep instruction front and center, yet they struggle to fulfill the false expectations of superhero heroics and the external prospect of being the champion of all related to instruction. Leaders caught in this quandary expend countless amounts of energy being unproductive, which leads to high tension. We must be willing to let go of the superhero mentality we place on positional leaders, mainly on building principals. If school staffs are to meet the needs of every child, to have perseverance to put each child first, and to create a combined wisdom (Kolbe, 2004a) of all stakeholders for the betterment of our students, then schools cannot rely on a single heroic person (Elmore, 2000; Reeves, 2006b; Spillane, 2004a, 2005c, 2006a).

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*For many years, principals have been told that they need to be instructional leaders. Defining instructional leadership can be problematic as well. This term, however, has remained a vague concept.*

—Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004)

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## WITHOUT A DOUBT

I just stated above that we need to remove the principal from the superhero mentality, but without a doubt, the principal is crucial to this leadership perspective. The principal cannot or should not be perceived as the sole leader just because of the positional power that goes along with such a title. Louis and Kruse (1995) identified the supportive leadership of principals as

one of the necessary human resources for school-based professional communities, referring to them as, “post-heroic leaders who do not view themselves as the architects of school effectiveness” (p. 234). The role of the principal is essential (Elmore, 2000; Halverson, 2005a; Harris & Chapman, 2002; Spillane, 2004a, 2006a), and sometimes temporarily it includes acting as a superhero (Harris & Chapman, 2002). We will explore this concept further in this chapter and in Chapters 2 and 3.

## WHO LEADS AND WHAT THEY LEAD

There are large quantities of books that expose us to the heroics of building leaders. We read books on being a team player and collaborative leader, but these accounts of leadership still center on the context of the positional leader’s actions. There are volumes of evidence-based research to provide clues about what educational leaders should be doing within their schools. In fact, we struggle to count up all the actions we, as instructional leaders, are to manage (Spillane, 2006a;

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*The hard part is letting go of the myth of individualism . . . even when leadership tales venture beyond the single hero or heroine to acknowledge the part played by two or more supporting players.*

—Spillane (2006a, p. 2)

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Spillane et al., 2001, 2004).

Many principals often do not feel their day or week is successful unless they are in every classroom every day or week. Principals who believe this should try to answer the following questions. First, how do you practice this routine of being in the classroom? Second, how do

you know you are enhancing or changing classroom practice as a result of being in the classroom? When asked these questions, most principals cannot answer both, and rarely the second, with any assurance of fact.

So why would we not work harder? Working harder to save our schools often further erodes the possibility of productive improvement. The reality is that these superheroes want teaching and learning to be the central focus, but instead can find themselves managing the daily order of the school with an unconscious awareness of their actions’ impact on student performance. Leader Superheroes maintain traditional structures in order to manage the standard practices of highly prescriptive cultures (Spillane, 2004a). See Chart 1.1.

As I will share in Chapter 3, the Leader Superhero aspect of being highly descriptive (Spillane, 2005b) is what is needed for schools who struggle to meet student needs. This aspect of leadership can be necessary to build a capacity to sustain efficient professional communities for schools that are struggling to meet the needs of all children.

As Spillane and colleagues (Spillane, 2006a; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, 2004) point out, most research puts emphasis on the actions,

**Chart 1.1** Leader Superhero Aspect

- Leadership Focus: Designated formal leader
- Research: Primarily principal—focused on actions, attributes, styles, behaviors of the individual
- Instructional Focus: Teaching and learning—should be the central focus (reality: this is not likely)
- Teacher Leader: Positional or veteran teacher—opportunities should be situational (reality: it may be role-oriented)
- Practice: Highly prescriptive—most likely traditional in approach
- Questions: Who? What?

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Source: Created by McBeth & Wheelles (2005a). Revised by McBeth for this book.

attributes, styles, and behaviors of the individual who is in a leadership position. All these characteristics of leadership are important components to consider, but they can also be problematic if that is where we stop. Low student performance and ineffective classroom practice will continue to exist as long as we ignore or avoid leadership practice; we must know how leadership is practiced in order to meaningfully attend to all educational factors that contribute to student learning (Blase & Blase, 1999; Leithwood et al., 2004; Spillane, 2004a).

Do we as educational leaders want to look like cartoon characters? If not, we must let go of the Leader Superhero mind-set. We must move beyond “doing leadership” on others. We must give due attention to how leadership is practiced through the interactions of leaders, followers, and their situations (Spillane, 2004a, 2005b, 2006a; Spillane et al., 2004). As educators, we need to know not only the actions but also the interactions of leadership practice. We should not interpret an emphasis here on how we practice leadership as devaluing who leaders are and what they do. That would be far from the truth. Instead, we need to think about another aspect of leadership: that of leadership practice. Gronn (2000) and Bryant (2003) encourage us to “de-center” the leader and to not solely view leadership as something that resides within the individual at the top. Leadership resides in every person who, in one way or another, acts as a leader (Goleman, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001, 2004).

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*No institution can survive if it needs geniuses or supermen to manage it. It must be organized to get along under a leadership of average beings.*

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—Peter Drucker

## **25/75: IMPACT OF SCHOOL-RELATED FACTORS**

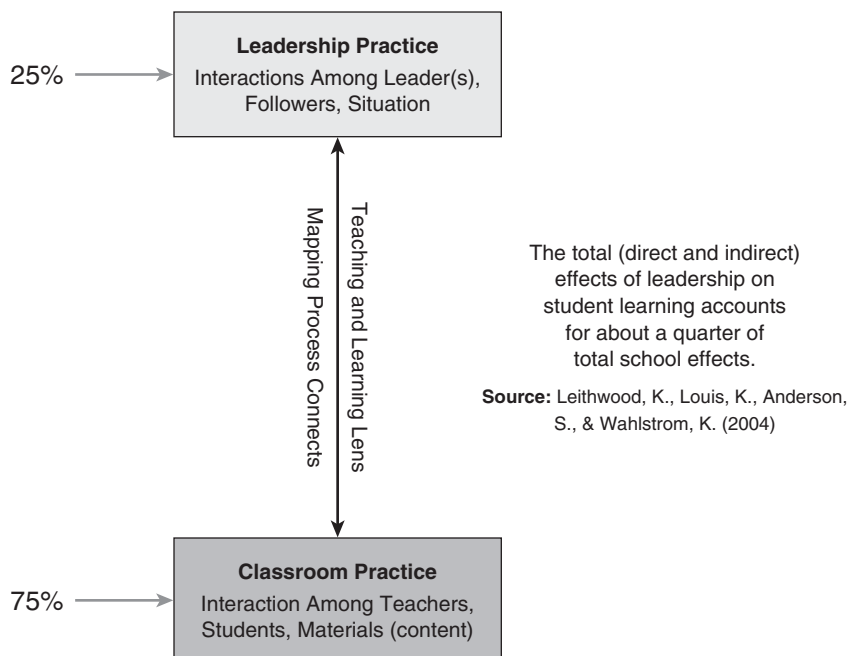
One must always be able to map the factors associated with leadership practice to that of classroom practice (Spillane, 2005c). Due to the

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accountability of high-stakes testing dictated by federal policy, we have spent an exhausting amount of time and effort talking about classroom practice. Do not take this wrong, but if that is all we do, then we continue to miss the passing boat.

Ken Leithwood and associates (2004) have recognized that the total direct and indirect effects of leadership on student learning account for about a quarter of the total school effects, whereas the other 75% can be tied to classroom practice (see Figure 1.1). The effects of successful leadership are considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances (see Figure 1.2). I interpret this to mean that the percentage of leadership effort may need to increase when schools are in “high need.” Leadership is the catalyst in the turnaround stories of troubled schools. We must give serious consideration to the fact that existing theories, concepts, and constructs of leadership have largely failed to deliver instructional improvement. The dominant model of leadership, which has been chiefly concerned with the skills, abilities, and capabilities of one person, has been proven severely limited in generating and sustaining school- and classroom-level change (Fullan, 2001). Thus, leadership

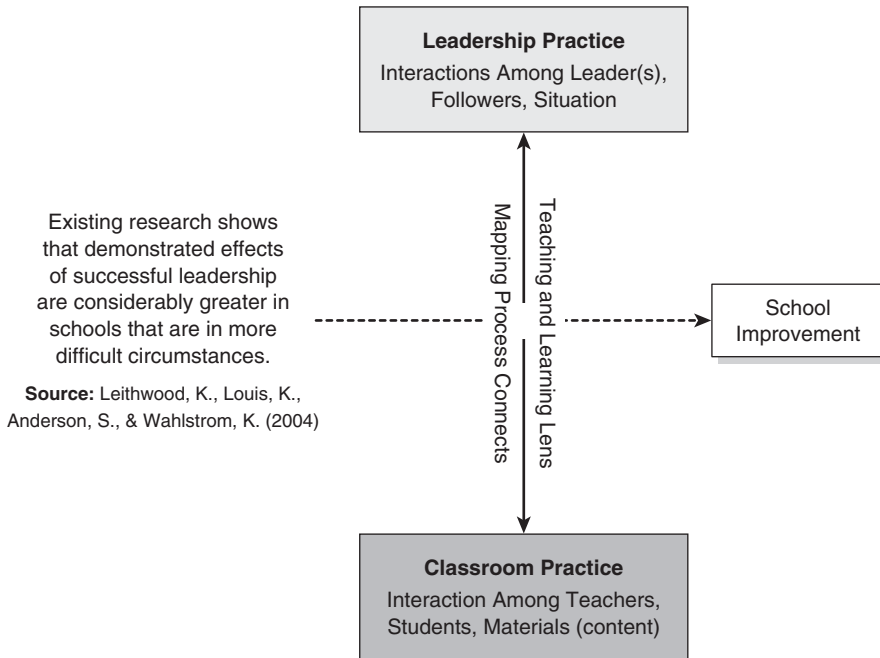
**Figure 1.1**



Source: Created by McBeth & Wheelles (2005b).



Figure 1.2



Source: Created by McBeth & Wheelles (2005b).

as it is today needs to be questioned in view of what we know about leadership (Fullan, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2004; Spillane et al., 2001, 2004). The distributed leadership perspective could be part of the answer to the leadership question.

The fact is that leadership practice analysis needs to be an important piece of the school improvement puzzle. However, it is rarely done and really has not received much attention until Gronn brought it to light in 2000. Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond published their research findings in 2001, which described leadership practice within the context of distributed leadership as an essential way of thinking about leadership.

The Distributed Leadership Toolbox provides a set of routines and tools for diagnosing and designing essential practices for successful schools. The intent is to give school teams a new way of thinking about the relationship between leadership practice, classroom practice, and student performance. My task with this book is to help leaders perfect their performance of these routines and use of these tools. The steps listed in this book are not meant to be the fix-all, cure-all medical prescription for

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school academic illness. However, the steps do create the means for schools to self-diagnose their present health and to prescribe solutions that can be monitored for intended results.

### **Chapter Reflection**

As a result of reading this chapter, what has become apparent to me?

What connections have I made to my present situation?

What questions do I still have unanswered?

As a result of reading this chapter, what actions am I going to take?