

## **TOWARD A NEW CONCEPTUALIZATION OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN MOROCCAN SCHOOLS**

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*Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other*

**John F. Kennedy**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper makes the case for the necessity to take teacher leadership seriously in the process of the reforms that our educational system is currently undergoing. The paper contends that a new conceptualization of teacher leadership is needed if we ever aspire to transform Moroccan schools into “learning organizations” (Senge et al., 2000). It calls for the need to replace the traditional approach to leadership with a leadership of transformation and empowerment, one that redefines teachers as leaders and agents of change.

### **1. PREAMBLE**

Toward the end of the last millennium, the Moroccan Ministry of Education launched an ambitious program that sought to reform Moroccan schools. This program culminated in the publication of the National Education Charter, the goal of which is to ensure a healthy learning and teaching environment. Laudable though these efforts are, nine years after the Charter had been launched; the situation in Moroccan schools still leaves much to be desired.

Moroccan teachers unfortunately continue to face many obstacles that militate against their transformation into teacher leaders. Indeed, it is unreasonable to expect teachers to be agents of change when their teaching conditions are untoward, to say the least. Success stories pertinent to public schools in Morocco are hard to come by. Instead what we read in newspapers day in day out are stories that make one, sometimes, cringe with shame for being a teacher. Seven years after the introduction of the reforms, teachers still have the same old-fashioned complaints: overcrowded classrooms, lack of incentives, measly salaries, lack of opportunities for professional and intellectual growth, an egregious promotion system, lack of management competencies and what have you. This has resulted in teacher strikes being a monthly occurrence, so much so that several political parties are vying to take the lead in calling for strikes in their names, which has had the undesirable effect of balkanizing teachers’ efforts, and debilitating their strife, in the process.

While it is not my intention to paint a gloomy picture of the educational system in Morocco, nor to cast aspersions on the efforts that are being made to improve the current situation, I cannot emphasize enough the need to take these issues seriously before it becomes too much too late. The recent reforms, which were heralded by the government as a milestone in the history of the educational system in Morocco, do not appear to have achieved their desiderata for having neglected to take in earnest the role of the teacher as a leader. Reforms that do not put teachers in the vanguard of educational change are bound to fail. As has been reported by The Carnegie Forum on Education and Economy (1986), for school reforms to succeed, it is necessary to empower teachers by allowing them to participate fully in the fulfillment of these changes. Teachers should no longer be viewed as “semiskilled functionaries” (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001); instead, they should be treated as equal partners in leadership.

In Morocco, the management of school business is still regarded as the task of the few. The business of decision-making is heavily centralized, and teachers, especially at the primary and secondary levels, have virtually no voice in running school business. They have little say in selecting course material, hiring their future colleagues, and shaping school policies. Anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers view themselves as disempowered employees whose job is to execute the orders of the powers that be. They receive orders from the headmaster, who in turn executes the orders of the high authorities, herein a chain of command that is predominantly hierarchical in its structure.

Such hierarchical approach to leadership presupposes that there is a hero sitting atop the educational pyramid who can single-handedly be in charge of all major administrative tasks and duties. It also assumes that there is only a selected few who can be entrusted with the business of decision-making. The people located the bottom of the pyramid are, so to speak, “out of the loop”, and henceforth their voice is not worthy of consideration. This approach to leadership, which is, unfortunately, still widely prevalent in the Moroccan system of education, has been foregone in several countries, such as the USA, Canada, and Australia. One of the reasons why the idea of a heroic leader has been dispensed with is that when it is time for this type of leader to leave, progress comes to a halt and practices that were supposed to be gone reappear (Copland, 2003). Indeed, it is time to reverse the pyramid by allowing people located at the bottom--that is teachers--to play a key role in running school business.

## **2. PARADIGM SHIFT: DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AS A MEANS OF EMPOWERMENT**

The kind of leadership that is needed in our educational institutions, and without which educational reforms are likely to proceed clumsily and ineffectually, is distributed leadership. It can be conceptualized as follows:

A shared process of enhancing the individual and collective capacity of people to accomplish their work effectively... Instead of a heroic leader who can perform all essential leadership functions, the functions are distributed among different members of the team or organization. (Yukl, 2002, p. 432)

As this definition explicates, inherent in the concept of distributed leadership is the idea of sharing or spreading leadership amongst all stakeholders. These include headmasters, principals, teachers, parents, and students. In this way, distributed leadership becomes synonymous with teamwork. It is a collective endeavor in which all those concerned bring their efforts together to see to it that meaningful contexts and opportunities for learning are being created. In this way, a teacher's duties, for instance, do not stay within the confines of the school; rather they transcend it by contributing to the creation of a community of learners beyond the classroom (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001).

Several terms are often used interchangeably with distributed leadership, such as "lateral leadership" where organizational participants interact more or less on an equal footing, "self-managing", "democratic leadership", and "participatory leadership." The common denominator amongst all these appellations is their call for the necessity to treat employees--teachers in our case--as equal partners in leadership, rather than subordinates who must execute the orders of an elite group. In other words, the need to move away from the vertical, hierarchical, bureaucratic style of leadership is a stepping stone toward empowering teachers and democratizing education.

One way of empowering teachers through distributed leadership is by encouraging them to voice their views more openly and vigorously, without fear of retribution, regarding school policies, curriculum design and educational practices. In this regard, Allen (2004) makes a distinction between four types of voices:

*Voting voice*, where teachers cast their votes on issues pertinent to school policies;  
*Advisory voice*, where teachers provide their input regarding school decisions, policies, and governance;  
*Delegated voice*, where teachers are involved in leadership teams that make decisions about their colleagues' promotions, creation of new programs, and so on;  
*Dialogical voice*, where teachers are encouraged to express their views more openly and use their potential as leaders to create change in their schools.

As Allen explains, it is the dialogical voice that is more likely to bring meaningful change and transform educational practices since unlike its predecessors it involves a substantial amount of commitment and risk-taking. By being empowered through a sense of ownership of their job, teachers are likely to take a vested interest in enhancing the performance of their organization.

Today, it is taken almost as axiomatic that effective leadership correlates with school improvement. Such a claim is substantiated by a sizeable body of research. Mulford (2006) reports on a project called Leadership for Organizational Learning and Student Outcomes (LOLSO) conducted through the Australian Research Council. The

Project found that distributive leadership has a direct relationship with students' scholastic achievement. The exemplary headteacher displays a "caring ethos" towards other teachers; teachers were treated with great respect and encouraged to exchange their ideas about curriculum development and school policies. Mulford concludes that, in order to ensure scholastic achievement, teachers should be held in high esteem and be encouraged to make decisions about school business.

In their overview of the literature on distributed leadership, Harris and Muijs (2002) identify three major benefits of distributed leadership:

*Improving school effectiveness:* The authors explain that several studies suggest that collaboration between teachers is key in school effectiveness. For instance, Taylor and Bogotch (1994), based on data gleaned from 637 teachers, found that there is a positive correlation between school participation and school effectiveness. Another study by Wong (1996) claims that a strong sense of collaboration between teachers and principals has a positive impact on students' learning.

*Improving teacher effectiveness:* Harris and Muijs cite Smylie (1995) who argues that there are several ways in which teacher leadership can impact teacher effectiveness. Smylie explains that by engaging teachers through distributed leadership, teachers' expertise will reach new heights and their confidence and self-esteem will be boosted. As a result, they will be more apt to take risks and experiment with novel, cutting-edge teaching methods, which in turn will have a beneficial impact on their effectiveness as teachers and leaders both inside and outside the classroom.

*Contributing to school improvement:* The two scholars contend that current research shows that collegiality, an essential component of distributed leadership, is crucial in improving schools and ensuring their success. Collegiality entails continuous collaboration of teachers' efforts as well as their co-operation and networking. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) have found that school improvement is more likely to take place when teachers have confidence in themselves, in the ability of their colleagues to create change, and in the ability of their schools to enhance their professional development (cited in Harris and Muijs, 2002).

In order to achieve these benefits, it is thus necessary to view teachers as partners in the educational process. Partnership can be established by "stretching" leadership, to use Spillane and Sherer's (2004) term, across teachers. Some of the areas in which leadership can be stretched, henceforth enabling teachers to take up their potential as leaders, are as follows:

- Evaluation of colleagues' teaching performance
- Selection of textbooks and instructional materials
- Recruitment of new staff, teachers, and administrators
- Curriculum development and action research
- School policies
- Coordination of programs
- Professional development

- Coaching and mentoring students

### 3. TEAM POWER—DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AT WORK

In this section, I provide a concrete case of how distributed leadership is put to work in an education center in Morocco. This is done with a view to helping readers who are willing to take action see how distributed leadership can create a democratic atmosphere that promotes students' learning and teachers' self-esteem. I will use pseudonyms when referring to teachers in order not to disclose their identity. On average, teachers in this center teach two courses, with two sections each, for a total of twelve hours per week. Three aspects of distributed leadership are discussed below: collaboration, collegiality, and involvement in committees.

*Collaboration:* Although the center under scrutiny is run by a director, Sabrina, she is not the one who selects the materials for the course. At the beginning of each semester, one coordinator is appointed per course. The coordinator usually volunteers to coordinate a course and if nobody shows initiative, the director appoints one. In the worst case scenario, when nobody is willing to coordinate a course, the director then steps in and does the coordination herself. Sabrina trusts coordinators by giving them full freedom to select the material that they believe will benefit students. Coordinators generally select the material by working in synch with other teachers of the same course. For instance, at the beginning of the spring 2007, Leila, the coordinator of one of the courses, sends an email to other teachers in which she states the following:

Dear Faculty,

I would like to hold the opening meeting of the year on Monday, January 22 at 11 a.m. Please let me know if this is a good time for you. At the meeting we will discuss course changes, the exemption exam, and our meeting schedule for the semester. Please look over the revised course on the website and come to the meeting with questions, comments, and any ideas or materials you're willing to share to get us started. Looking forward to seeing everyone then. [01/19/2007 03:03 PM]

As this email shows, the coordinator takes the lead in selecting the material during the break, then holds a meeting right before classes start to discuss the selection. What she has selected and posted on the website is thus not written in stone. Rather, it can be revisited, added to, or even replaced through the collaboration of other teachers, which is solicited through this email. This pattern is followed throughout the semester in the sense that all issues are put on the table and negotiated before they finally become ratified. Even exams are written collaboratively; the coordinator would usually write them up, then call for a meeting to obtain her colleagues' input. The following email helps illustrate this point:

Hello everyone,

As next Friday, Feb. 23, is our first test date, we will need to meet this week to discuss the test questions. Is everyone available Thursday at 10 am? Please let me know. In the meanwhile, please send me suggestions for test questions. We need multiple choice, short answer, and long answer questions to make up a morning exam, an afternoon exam, and a make-up exam. Please see the sample on the website or ask me if you have questions about style or format. I will make up the tests and bring them to Thursday's meeting for your review. We will meet on Friday at 4:30 to discuss Test 1 grading. Thanks. [02/12/2007 01:00 PM]

Just like the previous email, this email also invites teachers' input to the writing of the exam before it is finally administered. Interestingly, the director of the center is one of the teachers to whom the email is being sent, since she also teaches one of the sections of the same course. Apparently, the director is comfortable taking the back seat, while one of her employees is leading the way. This is an example *par excellence* of teacher empowerment through distributed leadership. As Prawat (1991) explains, empowerment is not necessarily synonymous with relinquishing power and giving teachers absolute power. It simply means giving them the opportunity to experience a sense of ownership and lead aspects of the change.

*Collegiality:* The relationship between the teachers in this center can be characterized as collegial. Granted, it is hard to imagine that there will never be moments of tension or friction between these teachers for one reason or another. Disagreements are not hard to come by in professional life, but what matters most is how these disagreements are resolved. In places where there is an absence of leadership, disagreements are likely to remain unresolved or escalate into perpetual bickering or physical confrontation, which will likely have negative repercussions on teachers' as well students' performance. In what follows, I show how a serious issue was resolved among the teachers collegially and without alienating anyone.

After the first test was given, and in order to ensure a sense of fairness, Sabrina, the director, recommended that each one of the teachers grade another teacher's section; that is no one will be grading his or her students' exams. Few days after all exams had been graded, one teacher, Julia, appeared to be appalled by the scores that her students received. She complained to some of her colleagues and expressed her vehement disagreement with the grader. She also told Leila, the coordinator, that she is entertaining re-grading the exams. Of course, this would not be fair since the policy is that teachers do not grade their students' papers. Thanks to the coordinator's leadership, this issue was resolved amicably. The course coordinator, Leila, called for a meeting to discuss this problem. She sent the following email:

Hello everyone--We will meet on Friday at 4:30 to discuss Test 1 grading.

Beforehand, please:

- Do not return the tests to the students
- Enter the current grades on the 'n' drive [a shared drive where teachers

can see each others' grades and share material] by Friday morning, so that we can tally averages

- Do not re-grade
- See a third person if you are unhappy with specific grades

At the meeting we need to come to a consensus about the grading policy, one that we can use for all future exams and, consequently, one that affects how we describe the exam process to the students. Thanks, in advance!  
[02/28/2007 04:54 PM]

The meeting was held and teachers discussed the rationale behind not grading one's tests and the importance of trusting another teacher's assessment. The teacher with the complaint, Julia, was listened to and allowed to voice her perspective on the issues. Other teachers all provided their input and the team finally reached a consensus: tests will not be re-graded. Indeed, Julia refrained from re-grading her students' tests and explained to her students the reasons for not doing so. She also told them that in case they were not happy with their scores, she would have to discuss this with the grader first. As this example shows, by not rejecting the teacher's complaint "off the bat," the team managed to maintain and nurture its collegial relationship and abate a charged emotion, which could have easily turned into a hostile feeling.

*Involvement in Committees:* Although all the teachers in this center are extremely busy, most of them still seem to have the energy to volunteer their time by serving on different committees. At the beginning of Fall 2006, Sabrina sent an email to the faculty in which she inquired about faculty's interest in volunteering for the vacancies available in some committees. After she heard from those interested, she then sent the following email, asking everyone to cast their votes for their candidate of choice:

Dear colleagues,

Could you all please vote for the Committee position by replying to this email with an X on the ballot?

1. Faculty Evaluation Committee Ballot

<i>Eligible and Standing for Election</i>	<i>Place an X beside your choice</i>
Karim	
Amanda	

2. Recruitment has no open positions this semester

3. Disciplinary Action will be formed as needed, from among those who expressed interest. Thank you. [09/25/2006 03:57 PM]

The votes were cast within three days, and Sabrina announced the results on day 4:

Karim has been elected to the Faculty Evaluation Committee. So for those of you who would like to or need to have a class observation, Karim and Mark [*Mark's eligibility has not expired yet*] are the two committee members to ask. Thanks for Amanda and Karim's willingness to stand, and to all of you for voting. [09/29/2006 08:51 AM]

Karim's new leadership role consists now not only of coordinating one of the courses, doing action research, but also of evaluating his peers. As a new member of the faculty evaluation committee, he will be invited to conduct class observations, write up observational reports, meet with the rest of the committee to discuss teachers' progress and overall performance, and make recommendations for promotion and retention. Amanda who did not receive the opportunity to serve on the committee started focusing her energies on other leadership tasks. In fact, she appears to have found her niche in coordinating the tutoring program, which offers free tutoring to students enrolled in the school. Such leadership role and willingness to serve the school have earned her the admiration of her colleagues. When the faculty evaluation committee, of which Karim is currently a member, met to evaluate her performance, they recommended that her contract be renewed with the highest promotion.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I believe that distributed leadership holds the key to improving our educational system. The paradigm shift that is suggested here stipulates that the "great man" theory of leadership needs to be replaced with a leadership of transformation and empowerment. Real leaders are those who create new leaders by sharing power with them, and not by alienating them or expecting them to pay lip-service to whatever they decide. Real leaders make other teachers actively engaged in identifying the needs of the students, in being continuous learners, in collaborating in the search for new challenges, new opportunities for professional development, and new theories and practices that could enhance students' scholastic achievement. Real leaders seek to transform their schools from hierarchical organizations into democratic organizations, organizations that "are continually renewing themselves, reinventing themselves, reinvigorating themselves" (Handy, 1994, p. 45).

To end on a positive note, I cannot but salute two initiatives taken by the Ministry of Education, which if nurtured, could eventually lead to the kind of distributed leadership advocated in this paper. First, recently the Ministry has initiated a bid for textbooks, in which teachers were solicited to write their own textbooks in order to compete for the chance to have them taught in schools all over the Morocco. Prior to this, the Ministry of Education used to appoint the textbook writers. The Ministry has delivered on its promise, and now teachers who manage to submit the most viable textbook will see it published. That is what is meant by non-hierarchical leadership; the business of decision-making should be decentralized by trusting the people at the bottom since they are the ones who do the business of teaching on the ground. Giving teachers a voice in selecting the material that they see fit is one major step toward achieving decentralization.

Second, the Ministry of Education covered the conference fees for one of its representatives to attend the current MATE conference from the first day until its end in order that he reports back to the Ministry the major issues debated. Such initiative is praiseworthy since it is predicated on the fact that it is only by listening to teachers

that sound reforms regarding the future of Moroccan education can be reached. It is only through overtures such as these that we can truly convince teachers that teaching is a fully-fledged and genuine profession. Nothing can ignite teachers' passion and foster their feeling of self-worth better than encouraging them to make their voices heard. Teaching is their bread and butter and they should be empowered through a sense of ownership of it.

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