Distributed Leadership in Action: The PAC-Math NIC

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Distributed leadership (DL) abandons the heroism of an individual leader, and instead, capitalizes on participants' expertise by creating structures that encourage collaboration among an overlapping web of leaders and followers. Our prior work presented a new way of framing DL as 'flipping the spider' of traditional organizational hierarchy (Clark et al., 2022). Our previous research explored how DL-informed workshops can motivate faculty development (Clark et al., 2022) and teacher education (Miller & Braley, 2021). In our current project, we build on this and expand the work to explore how DL works within a Networked Improvement Community (NIC) (Bryk et al., 2015). NICs are described by four key characteristics: (1) the community aims to accomplish a clearly defined outcome, (2) members have a deep understanding of the common challenges of the community and are poised to adapt and create to make progress towards addressing needs, (3) the community action is informed by improvement science and strives for continuous inquiry and learning, and (4) members are coordinated to maximize effort towards addressing complex problems (LaMahieu, 2015). The DL structure provides opportunities for members to step into leadership roles according to their self-identified strengths and curiosities, while a core group of organizers and facilitators provide infrastructure and support.

In October 2023, the Program Assessment Conference for Mathematics (PAC-Math) (NSF award #2306211) brought together mathematics professional development practitioners, evaluation professionals, and higher education administrators to develop a flexible protocol for mathematics departments to use for self-evaluations of their Professional Development for Teaching (PDT) programs for graduate student teaching assistants (GTAs). By replicating the DL model in this NIC context, we aim to provide more nuanced descriptions of the DL anatomy. PAC-Math will advance the frontiers of knowledge about how DL supports NICs.

In this poster, we will review research about DL and describe how DL principles were applied in the planning of the PAC-Math conference by involving all participants. We will highlight how the DL model capitalized on the diversity of voices and shared expertise of participants. We will present some of the outcomes of the conference, conclusions of the external conference evaluation, and how the results of the conference will inform how DL might interplay differently in a NIC than in faculty development. We look forward to hearing from the RUME community about their insights into and experiences with DL and working in NICs.

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