The Place and Role of Distributed Leadership in Functional and Effective South African Schools: Towards School Improvement

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Abstract

A common thread in contemporary research on principal leadership is the ways in which principals take important decisions. These decisions have become increasingly more complex in a system of school-based management. The concept of shared or distributive leadership becomes vital in the process. Distributed leadership implies that leadership is not held by one leader only, but leadership roles are distributed among the rest of the school management team. The idea of leadership as distributed across a group of leaders and situations has proven to be a more useful framework for understanding the realities of schools and how they might be improved. The purpose of this article is to explore how effective distributed leadership contributes to school improvement. The article is based on a qualitative case study in a few South African schools. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with principals from five (n=5) purposefully selected effective or functional schools in a school district in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal to establish the perspectives of participants on the place and role of distributive leadership in school improvement. The five participants described their experiences of the role of distributed leadership in school improvement and how they have focussed their daily routines on the distribution of leadership tasks to ensure improvement. The outcomes of this study show that distributive leadership serves as a significant contributor to school improvement in functional schools and are of importance to all educational managers as they will be able to provide schools with guidelines to increase positive perceptions regarding the role of distributed leadership in school improvement.

Keywords: distributed leadership; school improvement; functional schools; South Africa

1. Introduction and Problem Statement

One of the most important elements related to the professional work of any principal is ensuring that his or her leadership functions are fulfilled effectively within the school (Department of Education, 2008). In a large number of effective or functional South African schools, these leadership functions are indeed being effectively implemented by the principal, but in the vast majority of ineffective or dysfunctional schools in the country, this has not been the case. These schools include a large number that were previously disadvantaged under the apartheid system. Such schools have lower levels of academic achievement with little or no evidence of leadership (Botha, 2013).

Principals can no longer be expected to lead and manage schools on their own. In the more effective or so-called functional schools, it is evident that teachers work more collaboratively and in teams. One of the many strategies that school leaders can use to ensure such collaboration and subsequently improve schools is to distribute leadership among teams and individuals. This also seems to be in line with the culture of the democratic order displayed in post-apartheid South Africa that requires from school principals to exercise leadership that fully promotes the participation of all stakeholders (Swanepoel and Booyse, 2006; Marishane and Botha, 2011; Botha, 2013).

This increased focus on distributed leadership raises two questions. Firstly, what is distributed leadership; and, secondly, what leadership changes should principals make to improve the effectiveness of their schools through the distribution of leadership? Distributed leadership is an emerging theory of leadership with a narrower focus on individual capabilities, skills and talents. This type of leadership focuses on a joint responsibility for leadership activities (York-Barr and Duke, 2002; Mayrowetz, 2008).

Empirical research findings have shown that shared or distributive leadership increases the possibility of the principal and his school management team making the correct decisions during the problem-solving process (cf. Schraw, 2001; Bendixen and Schraw, 2001; Sinatra, Southerland, McConaughy and Demastes, 2003; Angeli and Valanides, 2012).

These research findings have, however, not considered the possible direct and indirect contributions that distributive leadership may make to school improvement in ineffective or so-called dysfunctional schools. In order to

attend to this gap in knowledge, the purpose of this current study, based on a qualitative case study at selected functional South African schools (using ethnographic interviews), was to explore how distributed leadership contributes to school improvement in these sampled schools.

The concept of distributed leadership attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices (Mayrowetz, 2008). The main purpose of distributed leadership is to bring the school management team and other teachers in contact with the goals and values of the school and to release the principal of the many responsibilities of administration, management and other school activities (Loeser, 2008). In such a distributed leadership model, all teachers collectively assume responsibility for the well-being of their schools. The distribution of leadership can also have an important effect on enhancing teacher engagement and involvement in decision-making by involving more teachers in leadership roles in the school system to generate innovations with a strong team approach, and, as a result, to run the school more effectively (Smylie, Conley and Marks 2002; Marishane and Botha, 2011; Botha, 2013).

But, how can distributed leadership strategy improve schools? Before this research question can be dealt with, the concepts of distributed leadership must firstly be conceptualised.

2. Literature Review

Conceptualising leadership is one of the most challenging tasks educational researchers, educational practitioners and even educational leaders are faced with. It is such a complex concept that its definition, as well as its description, depend on how, when and by whom it is viewed and on one's ability to defend a particular viewpoint. Leadership also depends on the point of view and the conditions under which the definition or description is made (Pushpanadham, 2006; Marishane and Botha, 2011).

Leadership can generally be defined as the "*process of directing the behaviour of others towards the accomplishment of goals*" (Marishane and Botha, 2011, p. 7). It involves elements such as influencing and motivating people (either as individuals or as groups), managing conflict, communicating with subordinates and, most importantly, taking the right decisions at the right time. Muijs and Harris (2003) are of the opinion that leadership has been premised on a singular view of leadership and on individual trust. Educational leadership involves all these issues in an educational or school setting (Marishane and Botha, 2011). The concept `distributed leadership', in turn, attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices. Mayrowetz (2008, p. 425) states that different uses of this term have emerged and refers to distributed leadership as "*an emerging theory of leadership with a narrower focus on individual capabilities, skills, and talents*" that focuses on a joint responsibility for leadership activities.

According to MacBeath, Oduro and Waterhouse (2004), distributed leadership means exactly the same as dispersed, shared, collaborative and democratic leadership. Bennet, Wise, Woods and Harvey (2003, p. 7) state that "*distributed leadership is an emergent property of a network of interacting individuals with an openness of boundaries and expertise*", while House and Aditja (1997, p. 457) say that "*distributed leadership is the process of leadership which involves collaborative relationships that lead to collective action grounded in the shared values of people who work together to effect positive change*". Leithwood and Reid (2003, p. 3) conclude by saying that distributive leadership ensures that "*teachers work together towards whole school improvement and school goals*".

With this in mind, Gronn (2002, p. 445) suggests "*that in the distribution of leadership it is not only the leadership of principals that counts, but also the leadership roles performed by deputy principals, substantives, support staff, members of school councils, governing bodies and learners*". MacBeath (2005, p. 355) concludes by viewing distributed leadership "*as an ability to relinquish one's role as ultimate decision maker, trusting others to make the right decisions and a belief in the potential and authority of others, listening with the intent to understand that allows trust for leadership to be shared*".

According to these views and definitions, the purpose of distributed leadership is to bring teachers into contact with the goals and values of the school and to release the principal of his/her many responsibilities. In this distributed and democratic model, all teachers collectively assume responsibility for the well-being of the school. Hatcher (2005) explains that democracy adds to the emergent character of distributed leadership and the notion that everyone, by virtue of his or her human status, should play a part in the process. The recognition of the capabilities of other members of the school to participate implies that the leader trusts his or her followers and will consequently be comfortable to share power, responsibilities and accountability.

Ritchie and Woods (2007) explain that the democratic and distributed leadership models are very similar in some ways. Both models involve the distribution of responsibility at all administrative levels, working through teams and engendering collective responsibility. In the distributed leadership model, the principal shares authority and power, teachers take leading roles, assume responsibility and act independently as individuals or groups. In the process, "*principals create leadership positions that allow capable and willing teachers to work in a more focused leadership*

capacity" (Loeser 2008, p. 3).

Glew, O'Leary-Kelley, Friggin and Van Fleet (1995) state that, no matter what form the behavioural change may take through participative management, collaborative leadership requires true participation in leadership and decision-making at all levels and in multiple decision processes. The distribution would allow leaders at all levels to work collaboratively in order to achieve the maximum goal in education, namely that all learners will benefit from effective teaching and learning. Lewis and Andrews (2004) add that distributed leadership is a form of parallel leadership whereby teachers work with the principal in distinctive, yet complementary ways towards the goals they all share.

Jameson (2007, p. 10), in turn, argues that "*shared leadership implies more than one person exercising some degree of joint leadership and the term does not necessarily include real sharing of power, authority and responsibility at different hierarchical levels. When shared leadership is more advanced developed, it may resemble collaborative leadership*". Jameson (2007, p. 11) continues to argue that the distributed leadership model "*goes some way further than shared leadership along the continuum towards fuller group engagement in leadership in specifying distribution of tasks and responsibilities, though not necessarily knowledge, power and authority*". Hafford-Letchfield, Leonard, Begum and Chick (2007, p. 171) are of the opinion that "*coaching and mentoring have strong links with distributive leadership because they are focused on problem solving and the continuous process of learning and reflection*".

According to Carson, Tesluk and Marione (2007), managers should encourage each member of the team to demonstrate leadership through personal meetings. During these meetings they should encourage such a member to utilise his or her strengths, provide clarity and offer support and advice. These practices are effective, because a supportive coaching environment is the main characteristic of distributive leadership. Stone (2007, p. 12) maintains that "*managers master the skill of coaching find that it can boost the performance of workers by making clear to them what they should do and how they should be doing it*".

The presence of a cooperative leadership team and the amount of leadership support plays a significantly positive key role in predicting teachers' school commitment. In addition, participative decision-making and distribution of the supportive leadership function have a significant positive impact on teachers' commitment to the development of the school as a whole (Hulpia, DeVos and Van Keer, 2010). Distributed leadership develops within a school climate of collaboration, where teachers are able to choose meaningful leadership roles connected to teaching and learning. The school principal plays a key role in supporting new leaders by communicating a common purpose, building on a school climate of collaboration, and modelling leadership tools and routines (Chamberland, 2009). School transformation in today's educational system is dependent, in part, by how well teachers work together with their principal and colleagues.

Recent studies (cf. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson, 2010) have suggested that trust by teachers in the school leadership is not essential to transform a school. This study indicated that trust in leadership is not only appreciated, but key to the school-wide implementation of distributive leadership as a school improvement model. The distributed management model fits well with a school structure that is more dynamic; one that utilises temporary teams and task forces with a specific focus that cuts across other hierarchical strata. The strength of this model is that senior leadership teams can respond very quickly to changing circumstances. The distributed leadership model is flexible because the model generates a larger pool of staff that is experienced and confident in managing change. The distributed leadership model *goes some way further than shared leadership along the continuum towards fuller group engagement in leadership in specifying distribution of tasks and responsibilities, though not necessarily knowledge, power and authority and it does not imply people necessarily work together to share the knowledge, power and authority of executive leadership (*Jameson, 2007, p. 11).

3. Research Methodology

The epistemological knowledge view (how knowledge is acquired) and ontological reality view (how reality is perceived) are crucial positions in any research inquiry. In this study, these two knowledge views are premised on the fact that knowledge is not produced through an objective researcher who collects facts about the social world and builds up an explanation in a chain of causality (positivism), but that reality is socially constructed rather than objectively determined (Terre Blanche and Durrheim, 1999).

This view is consistent with the traditions of qualitative and case-study research (Noor, 2008). The research approach used in this study was qualitative in nature. While the population of the study was all effective and functional primary schools in a district in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, the sample of the study comprised five individual case studies conducted in five purposefully selected schools in the district.

The sampling of schools was done in a purposeful manner, based on the assumption that the researcher wanted to discover, understand and gain insight and, therefore, a sample was selected from which the most information could be

gained (Le Compte and Preissle, 1993). The five sample schools were purposefully selected following a selection process where schools were assessed against the National Department of Education's Whole-School Evaluation (WSE) criteria (Department of Education, 2008). The focus areas during the assessment were basic functionality of the school, including aspects such as leadership, management and communication; governance and relationships; quality of teaching and educator development; curriculum provision and resources; learner achievement; school safety, security and discipline; school infrastructure; and lastly, parent and community involvement. This assessment determined whether schools could be classified as functional (effective) or dysfunctional (ineffective).

The researcher conducted unstructured interviews with the five principals from the five selected functional schools, focusing on their experiences on distributed leadership and how the distribution of leadership supported change and improved their schools. The demographic data of the participants in the study are described in table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic details of participants

Participant's ID	Age	Male/Female
P1	36	M
P2	47	F
P3	54	F
P4	41	M
P5	39	M

Data from the interviews were transcribed, analysed and discussed. The researcher attempted to make sense of all the data collected qualitatively, that is, from unstructured interviews and documentary analysis. The developmental data analysis was carried out in line with eight steps as provided by Tesch (in Creswell, 2003). With these steps in mind, the researcher

- tried to get a sense of the whole by reading through all the transcriptions carefully, jotting down some ideas as they came to mind;
- selected one document to analyse, trying not to think about the substance of the information, but rather to establish its underlying meaning;
- made a list of all topics while clustering together similar topics into columns that might be arranged as major topics, unique topics and leftovers;
- revisited the data, abbreviating the topics as codes while writing the codes next to the appropriate segments of the texts (new categories and codes emerged);
- made an attempt to find the most descriptive wording for the topics, turning them into categories and grouping topics together that relate to each other by drawing lines between topics to show interrelationships;
- abbreviated each category while alphabetising the identified codes;
- assembled the data material belonging to each category in one place and performed a preliminary analysis; and
- re-coded the existing data, if found necessary.

Triangulation was done by analysing how each set of data answered the research question. The subsequent analysis considered each set of data in relation to the research question. In ascertaining the trustworthiness and dependability of the study, it was ensured that all the data were collected systematically and that all the contributions and experiences of the participants were represented by recording and transcribing them for analysis. Furthermore, to minimise ambiguity, it was ascertained in this study that the questions were clear and meant the same to all respondents. Moreover, to maintain credibility, the researcher ensured that appropriate methods and techniques had been employed in such a way that other researchers have a step-by-step guide to how conclusions were arrived at. Similarly, the researcher determined credibility by presenting accurate descriptions or interpretations of human experiences that people who share that experience or perception would immediately recognise the descriptions.

Objectivity in this study was maintained by ensuring that all the data were collected systematically and that all the contributions and experiences of the participants were represented by recording and transcribing them for analysis. Reliability of the instruments in this study was ascertained by ensuring that the questions were clear and meant the same to all respondents and by representing the experiences of the participants as accurately as possible. This was achieved through intense observation and member checking (Krefting, 1991).

4. Findings and Discussion

The empirical research findings are a culmination of a data-triangulation process, whereby data from semi-structured interviews were triangulated with data from documentary analysis. The use of literature supports the outcomes of the empirical study. In addition, the researcher reviewed the transcripts of the interviews from the participants to determine the similarities and differences between the data in order to determine patterns in the data. A constant comparative analysis of schools against their learner attainment was therefore made, because this is one of the main indicators of the effectiveness of a school. The findings were analysed according to each of the following four themes presented in table 2 below that have emerged from the data.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes derived from the data

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Distributed leadership is about teacher leadership	Initiate things; lead other teachers as class leaders; and teamwork and motivation of teams
Theme 2: Distributed leadership is about teamwork	Decision-making; taxonomy of distributed leadership; time management; roles of subject and grade leaders; and sharing of knowledge and expertise
Theme 3: Distributed leadership is about democracy and sharing of leadership at all levels	Meetings; set of an example; teamwork; and involvement of teachers to make decisions
Theme 4: Distributed leadership is about interaction between all leaders	People skills; sharing teamwork; communication; meetings to discuss academic progress; one-on-one meetings; honesty and openness; monitoring of progress; collaborative work; and sharing

4.1 Theme 1: Distributed leadership is about teacher leadership

In improving schools, school principals need to implement effective leadership and leadership strategies to ensure continuous development and improvement of their schools. One of these leadership strategies to be used is distributive leadership. Principals need to distribute leadership tasks to ensure that all teachers have a role to play in the development and improvement of the school. One principal respondent (P5) stated during his interview that educational leadership via its distribution gives clear guidance to teachers within as well as outside of class.

This has implications for the school as an organisation. He also emphasised the role of teacher leadership during distribution when he stated: "*It is a mammoth task, but I basically go on the three legs of being a leader, a manager and an administrator. Your leadership is basically your inspiration, your guidance, your empowering of those that work with you*". This corresponded with what Gronn (2002, p. 423) said in the literature when he stated that distributed leadership is *"an emergent property of a group or network of individuals where group members pool their expertise to develop the school".*

The importance of ethics in leadership distribution was emphasised by participants on a few occasions during the interviews. Dysfunctional, ineffective schools need to change their work ethics for distribution of leadership to be effective. One respondent from an effective school (P2) said in this regard:

> *My teachers have got work ethics, they won't strike, they won't stay away for no reason at all, they don't have other interests like taxi businesses, shebeens, funeral parlours and things like that. Their priority one, two and three is education and they want to do the best for their learners and they coach sporting activities after school free of charge and they do cultural activities after school free of charge.*

Another respondent (P4) replied further with real anger when referring to why his school is functional and another one in the same area is dysfunctional, when saying:

> *The distribution of powers will not work there. The biggest problem in that school is punctuality and school attendance; they don't attend school. If they do attend school, they don't attend school for the duration of the day; half way through the day they just excuse themselves. The principal there comes late for school and leaves early. The teachers are the last ones to arrive and the first ones to leave, while it should be the other way around. The principal there [and I know him personally] has got a taxi business; his priority is not at the school, he will never buy ownership of the school.*

4.2   Theme 2: Distributed leadership is about teamwork

Leadership appears rather to be a working relationship among members of a group in which the leader acquires status through active participation and demonstration of his/her capacity for carrying cooperative tasks through to completion (Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson, 2001). The participants in the study all agree with the importance of teamwork during leadership distribution. According to MacBeath, Oduro and Waterhouse (2004), distributed leadership can be classified into six different types of leadership, namely:

- formal leadership (with a job description);
- pragmatic leadership (indicated by necessity);
- strategic leadership (when an individual's expertise is needed);
- opportunistic leadership (based on people's preferences);
- incremental leadership (based on previous performance); and
- cultural leadership (when it promotes school culture).

Participants were asked during the interviews which of these types they adhered too. One respondent (P4) followed a strategy of opportunistic distribution of leadership at his functional and effective school. He stated in this regard:

> *I believe that distributive leadership should identify people that will be able to perform certain management tasks. For example, the sports year calendar at our school was always managed by a head of department. This year I have made that a post level 1 educator's responsibility because sports are his passion. So, I am looking for where people show their talents, where their passion lies and then try to develop them as well by giving them management functions in their respective areas.*

This is clearly an example of opportunistic distribution of leadership as the principal identified people on his staff who will fits into his informal framework via this teamwork approach. The principal identified staff members on the basis of their willingness and passion for certain tasks and consequently distribute these tasks to them.

It was also clear in this study that functional schools also followed formal distribution of leadership as a strategy to ensure effectiveness within the schools. In this process a top-down approach was followed via a formal process. One of the respondents (P2) added in this regard:

> *Distributive leadership is accomplished by giving responsibilities through from your deputy principal to your HODs, to your senior teachers, and ultimately down to your level 1 teachers. We want to see that there is an even load being given right through and we would like to give responsibilities to junior teachers as well, so that they can develop in the process as well.*

The results of this study also prove that functional schools follow a strategy of cultural distribution of leadership. One of the participants (P1) explained in this regard: "*everybody is sharing it and everybody putting all of that together eventually to have one strong goal achieved*". This reiterates that all schools are part of one big team, a team where education takes place for all learners in the area. Some teams are more developed than others and others are stuck because of the lack of resources and support from their provincial departments. Dysfunctional schools need to get more involved in the development of their schools and accept the help offered by more effective schools. During cultural distribution schools are willing to share their expertise.

It became clear from the participants that functional schools are indeed prepared to help ineffective schools. One respondent (P4) replied in this regard: "*We have a system of adopting a school. Some schools in our area are not on the same level as ours. And by us setting the example and by us showing the way things are done and in the inputs we make, we can assist these schools to improve*". With this response, the role of teamwork is once again emphasised in the distribution of leadership.

4.3   Theme 3: Distributed leadership is about democracy and sharing at all levels

It became clear from the interviews that participants stated unambiguously that shared leadership and teamwork via democracy should be utilised as a strategy to ensure school improvement. One respondent (P5) added: "*A situation of two heads is better than one and if you can have good team work, it will always be a very good outcome. But you must always remember that your team is as strong as the weakest player in the team*", while another one (P3) responded:

I think for professional support and professional motivation and encouragement it is necessary for educators to close ranks and motivate one another. I know that specifically our school motivates and is a source of inspiration for the teachers, due to the fact that we are still able to start collectively with scripture reading and prayer as a unit in the mornings. Another thing which I believe for motivational encouragement is positive feedback. We keep our staffroom as a positive environment where the policy is in the staffroom and in the public environment everything is positive, but when there is a complaint or a negative thing it is brought to this office and we take it here, so that outside we look strong and good but inside we take the problems on a one-to-one basis.

A third respondent (P4) elaborated on this view as follows:

We need to speak from the same mouth and work from the same guidance that the Department gives us in the form of syllabus work and that is why we have subject meetings and that is why we have grade meetings so that we can go forward by doing the same thing; by looking at academic aspects from the same background and from the same viewpoint.

It can be concluded that dysfunctional schools can implement democracy and sharing via meetings to improve teamwork at their schools. One respondent (P2) said in this regard:

For teachers to work and share together is a very good thing, that is why we have regular grade meetings, regular subject meetings, so that they are all aware of what is expected from them and that they are all at the same level by the end of the week and the same amount of work has been done by the end of the week.

4.4 Theme 4: Distributed leadership is about interaction between all leaders

Distributed leadership means the same as dispersed leadership, shared leadership, collaborative leadership and democratic leadership (MacBeath, Oduro and Waterhouse, 2004). All these aspects emphasised the importance of interaction during the distribution of leadership. One respondent in the study (P4) said that he managed his school through a *"leadership style of cooperative management where every stakeholder is given the opportunity to set their point of view and then manage the final decision".*

The role of distributed leadership is to ensure effective schools through interaction between all leaders. To ensure that leadership is effective, interaction between leaders need to be linked to the distribution process to ensure effective schools. One of the participants (P2) stated clearly in this regard: *"I am not an autocratic leader and I believe in sharing ideas and getting ideas from others and also getting input from the teachers. We are not afraid to go to other teachers and get their inputs in a matter as well",* while another respondent (P5) added: *"Distributive leadership, as the term says, means the distribution or passing of leadership to others. I am distributing, passing my leadership on to other persons, in my case to my HOD, running the academic programme of the school".*

5. Concluding Remarks

While some schools have not yet achieved an acceptable level of effectiveness, others are indeed effective and functional and could actually serve as models for school improvement for others to emulate. It requires the involvement of all the stakeholders at a school to make a difference. Hence, the sharing of leadership tasks among teachers and the interaction between all leaders via the distribution of leadership may serve as a starting point for enhancing school improvement in all South African schools.

The research findings in this study could form the basis of considerably expanded investigations into the field of distributed leadership enhancing the effectiveness of schools. The outcomes of this study show that distributive leadership serves as a significant contributor to school improvement. These outcomes are of importance to all educational managers as they will be able to provide schools with guidelines to increase positive perceptions regarding the role of distributed leadership in school improvement.

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