

## The Perceptions of South African Classroom Teachers with Regard to the Role of Distributed Leadership in School Improvement

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**ABSTRACT** The concept of shared or distributed leadership becomes vital in a system of school-based management. In this process classroom teachers can play an important role in improving teaching and learning through participation in distributed leadership. But what are the perceptions of classroom teachers with regards to the role of leadership distribution in school improvement? This paper reports on a qualitative study on distributed leadership undertaken in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. Ten ethnographic interviews were conducted with teachers from five effective, functional schools to establish the perceptions of classroom teachers with regard to the effectiveness of distributed leadership and its effect on school improvement in their schools. The outcomes of this study show that distributed leadership contributes to improvements in teaching and learning in effective schools. This is of importance to all school leaders as the outcomes provide guidelines on how distributed leadership can be used to improve schools globally.

### INTRODUCTION

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 (DoE 2015; Botha 2016). In a large number of effective or functional South African schools, these leadership functions are indeed being implemented effectively by the principal, but in the vast majority of ineffective or dysfunctional schools in the country, this has not been the case (Botha 2015, 2016). These schools include a large number that were previously disadvantaged under South Africa's former Apartheid system. Such schools have lower levels of academic achievement with little or no evidence of leadership (Botha 2014, 2016; Mulovhedzi and Mudzielwana 2016; Rajbhandari 2016).

Principals can no longer be expected to lead and manage schools on their own. In the more effective and functional schools it is evident that class teachers work more collaboratively and in teams (Triegaardt 2013; Shonkoff 2014). One of the many strategies that school leaders such as principals can use to ensure such collaboration and subsequently improve schools is to distribute leadership functions among school manage-

ment teams and individual classroom teachers. This seems to be in line with the culture of the democratic order displayed in post-Apartheid South Africa that requires school principals to exercise leadership that fully promotes the participation of all stakeholders (Spillane et al. 2011; Marishane and Botha 2011; Colmer 2013; Triegaardt 2013; Elmore 2014; Botha 2014, 2015, 2016; Mokhele 2016).

### Research Question

Danielson (2007) and Botha (2016) explain that school improvement depends on the active involvement of all stakeholders in the school. In every school, class teachers can find numerous opportunities to extend their influence beyond their own classrooms to departments and other teachers across and beyond the school. With this in mind, there is indeed a need in schools to extend leadership roles and decision-making from the principal to classroom teachers through distributed leadership as strategy (Triegaardt 2013; Elmore 2014; Botha 2016).

When studying distributed leadership it is therefore important to investigate whether leadership is held by one leader such as the school principal, or whether leadership roles and deci-

sion-making are also extended to classroom teachers (Botha and Triegaardt 2015). In addition to this, the perceptions that class teachers have of this process need to be determined. The major study problem of this paper, phrased as a research question, is: What are the perceptions of classroom teachers with regard to the strategy of distributed leadership in South African schools?

### Objective of the Study

This paper examines and explores the perceptions of classroom teachers with regard to distributed leadership and its role in improving South African schools. Related to this primary objective of the study, the specific aim of this study is to determine how a distributed leadership model can be accepted by classroom teachers as a leadership strategy to improve schools in South Africa.

### The Concept of Leadership and Distributed Leadership in an Educational Setting

Harris and Lambert (2013) argue that leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. Leadership involves, inter alia, opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information and assumptions through continuing conversations (Marishane and Botha 2011). Leadership means generating ideas together, to seek, reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information and, ultimately to create actions that will emerge from these new understandings (Rajbhandari 2016). In addition, leadership also depends on the position from which it is viewed and the conditions under which the definition or description is made (Pushpanadham 2010; Marishane and Botha 2011; Botha 2016). It is this complex nature of leadership and educational leadership with its various variables that drives continuing and sustained study in this area (Mokhele 2016; Mulovhedzi and Mudzielwana 2016).

Leadership can be defined as the “*process of directing the behaviour of others towards the accomplishment of goals*” (Marishane and Botha 2011: 7). It involves elements such as influencing and motivating people (either as individuals or as groups), managing conflict, com-

municating with subordinates and, most importantly, taking the right decisions at the right time. Muijs and Harris (2013) 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; Mokhele 2016; Rajbhandari 2016).

The concept “distributed leadership” attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices (Baloglu 2011; Triegaardt 2013; Botha and Triegaardt 2015). Mayrowetz (2008: 25) 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 (2015), distributed leadership means exactly the same as dispersed, shared, collaborative and democratic leadership. In turn, Bennett (2010: 36) states that “*distributed leadership is an emergent property of a network of interacting individuals with an openness of boundaries and expertise*”, while House and Aditya (2012: 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 Riehl (2015: 3) conclude by saying that distributed leadership ensures that “*teachers work together towards whole school improvement and school goals.*”

With this in mind, Gronn (2008 : 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, classroom teachers and learners.*” Lewis and Andrews (2004) expand on this, stating that distributed leadership is a form of parallel leadership where class teachers work with principals in a distinctive, yet complementary, way towards goals they all share. Distributed leadership is therefore a form of shared leadership that is distributed to key stakeholders throughout the school.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was used in this study to establish the views and perceptions of classroom teachers on distributed lead-

ership as a strategy to improve South African schools as “*such an approach usually involves multiple realities of a social situation*” (McMillan and Schumacher 2014 : 27). Johnston and Van der Stoep (2009) hold the view that a qualitative approach helps to gather information from class teachers as it allows close contact between the researcher and the participants. The qualitative approach was therefore the most appropriate for this particular research. In-depth individual interviews were used as research instruments, guided by unstructured interview questions.

A literature review was used to refine and redefine the main research question. A phenomenological descriptive design guided the study. Because of the focused nature of the research, it became a description of a particular phenomenon, namely distributed leadership, through the eyes of classroom teachers who experienced it first-hand. Authors such as De Vos et al. (2011: 264) explain that a “*phenomenological study tries to understand specific people’s perceptions and perspectives of a phenomenon, relating the findings to an existing body of knowledge, therefore the combination of a literature review with the empirical study.*”

### Population and Sample of the Study

McMillan and Schumacher (2014: 64) defined the population of a study as a “*group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects or events, that conform to specific criteria and on which the researcher intends to generalise the results of the research.*” The population of the study consisted of 27 schools in a district in the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa where one of the authors of this paper conducted research as part of his doctorate.

Purposeful sampling was used for this paper. According to Rule and John (2011: 63), purposeful sampling is defined as the “*strategy used to choose small groups or individuals likely to be knowledgeable and informative about phenomena of interest and who are most likely to yield data about the evolving research questions.*” For logistical reasons, such as resources and time, five purposefully selected schools in this district formed the sample of the study. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the researchers want to discover, understand and gain insight and, therefore select a sample from which the richest data can be obtained.

Before commencing with purposive sampling, the selection criteria for choosing the sites to be studied should be determined (Le Compte and Preissle 2013). For this study the focus was on effective and functional schools. These particular schools were selected because they are all well performing schools in terms of results, received great feedback regarding leadership and management during inspections from the Department of Education, and support ineffective or dysfunctional schools in the district that need extra support.

The study was therefore confined to five purposefully selected schools in the district where ten classroom teachers were randomly selected from the five schools. The total sample of participants therefore comprised ten (n=10) classroom teachers from five selected schools in the province. The sample of classroom teachers was deemed sufficient in order to address the purpose of this paper, namely to identify classroom teachers’ perceptions of how distribution of leadership takes place between the principal and classroom teacher in the daily management of teaching and learning within a normal classroom setting. Participants were given codes in order to protect their identities. The codes and biographical details of the participants are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Codes and description of participants**

<i>Participant code</i>	<i>Classroom teacher</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>
CT1A	School A	26	M
CT2A	School A	34	F
CT3B	School B	39	F
CT4B	School B	45	M
CT5C	School C	52	F
CT6C	School C	32	M
CT7D	School D	44	F
CT8D	School D	25	F
CT9E	School E	38	M
CT10E	School E	24	F

### Procedure and Data Analysis

The researchers spent time interviewing the participants in their natural working environment. All the interviews were interactional. Throughout the process the researchers ensured that the trustworthiness of the process was not compromised. The criteria for ensuring trustworthiness as outlined in De Vos et al. (2011) were

observed. Referential adequacy was achieved by taking notes and using a digital recorder to provide a suitable record. Transferability was ensured by thick description of research methodology. Member checking was conducted in order to validate the truth and to confirm the results.

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. The principals of the five selected primary schools were emailed and informed about the aim and nature of the study. Thereafter, they gave written consent to the classroom teachers to participate in the study. The school principals introduced the researcher to the classroom teachers during visits to the schools. The participants were informed that all procedures and data would be confidential, that their identity would not be revealed and that their participation was voluntary. The contents of the structured interviews were first explained orally in the mother tongue of the classroom teachers for easier comprehension and understanding before they were asked to answer the questions. The interviews used in this study lasted no longer than one hour each and were conducted during the school hours.

Cohen et al. (2011: 83) commented that *“qualitative data analysis involves organising, accounting for and explaining the data; in short, making sense of data in terms of the participants’ definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities.”* In this study, the authors have recorded, transcribed and analysed all data in order to identify relevant themes. Rule and John (2011) indicated that themes derived from the research questions guide the study. Themes were identified and coded by means of a line-by-line analysis of each interview transcription and lead to concept and thematic analysis, which implied working with codes to identify patterns such as similarities and differences. In this paper the data collected through interviews were analysed, reduced and interpreted. Furthermore, the coding of the data provided the researchers with a good opportunity to generate the findings, to develop explanations and conclusions and suggest recommendations.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical research findings are a culmination of data triangulation, whereby data from the unstructured interviews were triangulated

with data from the literature. In addition, the authors reviewed the transcripts of the ten individual interviews to determine the similarities and differences between the data in order to determine different patterns in the data. A constant comparative analysis of schools against their learner attainment and progression was therefore made because this is the most important factor that determines the effectiveness of any school. The findings that have emerged from the data were analysed according to the themes identified. The themes were grouped together as sub-perceptions, while the sub-perceptions from the various respondents were grouped together to form four main perceptions. The following four main perceptions emerged from the data: distributed leadership is about the role of classroom teachers to improve teaching and learning; distributed leadership involves both cultural and opportunistic distribution of leadership; distributed leadership is about collaboration between leaders; and distributed leadership can contribute to leadership development in functional schools.

The research findings in Table 2 outline the perceptions and sub-perceptions that emerged during the data analysis. The ages of participants ranged between 24 and 52 and there were more female than male participants.

### **Perception 1: Distributed Leadership is About the Role of Classroom Teachers to Develop Learners and to Improve Teaching and Learning**

It emerged from this study that the participants held the view that distributed leadership is about the delegated leadership role of classroom teachers and their ability to develop learners and, in the process, improve teaching and learning. One classroom teacher (CT10E) commented as follows in this regard:

*“My role as a teacher; I think we are here to educate the children and to develop them as far as possible in their individual personalities and ways, while another participant (CT6C) stated: In my role as teacher, I am there for the benefit of the child. The child’s interests come first and they have to be enriched and developed in all their areas as in personality, emotional behaviour and all that; this enhance education.”*

**Table 2: Perceptions of classroom teachers with regard to distributed leadership as strategy**

<i>Perceptions</i>	<i>Sub-perceptions</i>
<i>Perception #1:</i> Distributed leadership is about the role of classroom teachers to develop learners and to improve teaching and learning.	Development of teaching and learning; everyone is a leader; leading and supporting each other; and working together as one team.
<i>Perception #2:</i> Distributed leadership involves both cultural and opportunistic distribution of leadership.	Taxonomy of distributed leadership; development of school culture; leadership development; leaders for the future; and all teachers are role players.
<i>Perception #3:</i> Distributed leadership is about collaboration between leaders	Set examples within teams; teamwork; and involvement of all teachers in the decision-making process.
<i>Perception #4:</i> Distributed leadership can be accepted as an effective leadership strategy to improve schools	Extra opportunities for staff to develop; some schools still need leadership training to be effective; involvement of classroom teachers and assistants to lead within the school; clear job descriptions; taxonomy of leadership; leadership skills development; responsibility and accountability; sharing of work load; and passion from all team players to succeed.

Another teacher (CT1A) who was in his third year of teaching pointed out: *“In my role as a class teacher I feel that we are there for the benefit of the child. The child’s interests come first and they have to be enriched in all areas such as in personality, emotional behaviour and academic progression. If this happens, education will improve to the benefit of the learners and the school.”*

Robinson (2011) holds the view that leaders via their instructional leadership task, create the conditions for class teachers to develop learners so that teaching and learning can be effective. He also mentions that school leaders have a critical role in ensuring professional development of teachers in schools. Principals as instructional leaders can make a profound difference to learner outcomes by distributing leadership to class teachers to empower them and to ensure that they are developed in multiple ways. As such they can enrich learners and improve teaching and learning.

It was also clear during the interviews that all the participants have a clear perception that teachers are mainly responsible for the development of teaching and learning within the classroom. These views correspond with those of

various authors such as Triegaardt (2013), Botha (2016) and Mokhele (2016). Van Hoof et al. (2013) maintain that distributed leadership is making staff with specialist knowledge responsible for leading others in tasks that require knowledge. One participant (CT4B) stated: *“For me it is being an example, having that impact on the children and the children learning from me. At the end of the day, the children should have an understanding, have learnt something from you, and take it and apply what they have learnt.”* Another participant (CT7D) responded in this regard:

*“Well, I think it is a form of leadership that is associated with education itself, which is teaching and learning. Then leadership comes in with you as an educator getting more skills to improve your teaching in the class so that you get better results in relation with the management of the school, your classroom and the total school environment.”*

### **Perception 2: Distributed Leadership Involves Both Cultural and Opportunistic Distribution**

The authors refer to the clarification of types of distributed leadership as identified by Trie-

gaardt (2013) and MacBeath (2015). These types of distribution may be typified as formal (with a job description); pragmatic (indicated by necessity); strategic (when an individual's expertise is needed), opportunistic (based on people's preferences); incremental (based on previous performance) and cultural (when it promotes school culture).

It has emerged from this study that most of the participants were in favour of leadership distribution that may be typified as either opportunistic or cultural distribution of leadership. Opportunistic distribution of leadership is when leadership tasks are given to classroom teachers as a strategy to develop them as leaders for the future (Botha and Triegaardt 2015). Cultural organisations such as schools are different from other organisations and as such face their own distinctive challenges. They are geared towards producing new ideas and it is this production of new ideas which makes them cultural. Balancing this priority with the need to run a financially sustainable organisation, and hopefully one that makes a positive difference to the world, is what gives cultural leaders a unique set of challenges (Mulovhedzi and Mudzielwana 2016). Rodd (2013: 233) points out that *"sometimes effective leadership is enacted by standing back, saying or doing nothing."* The following comments made by two of the respondents (CT4B and CT7C) are all good examples of cultural distribution in schools:

*"After a few years of teaching but later on you also use your younger teachers to give them certain responsibilities like in sport or even with some of the subjects or parts of the subject. You give some of the tasks to them with your supervision but give them also a chance to develop themselves."*

*"I think when you study at the university you only get that practical work, I think it is five weeks, I don't think it is each semester. That is not enough because you study for four years and then you are in this situation and you are not used to all the possible things that can happen and we as assistants see it every day and I think you get more normal experiences."*

Another class teacher (CT7) gave the following example of opportunistic distribution within schools:

*"When you hand things over to other people like we have done in my phase because I cannot get on to the pre-primary school as much*

*as I should. I have a mentor there, one of the older teachers that run it for me and she phones down to me when there is a problem. So, she is actually overseeing it for me because I cannot get up to preschool in the morning. That is what I would imagine; you are distributing the work load."*

Harris and Lambert (2013) believe that both opportunistic as well as cultural distributed leadership provide the infrastructure that holds professional learning communities such as schools together and makes them effective. It is the collective work of teachers at multiple levels that creates and sustains successful professional learning communities. The characteristics of such effective learning communities as a form of distributed leadership highlight how principals and teachers work together to inquire and to engage in leadership and share their knowledge and expertise to enhance their community's ability to meet the needs of all learners (Spillane 2012). Distributed leadership provides a rich conceptual framework to study learning communities because a distributed framework can help clarify the varied roles assumed by principals and class teachers and how their actions, orientations, and leadership contribute to learning.

### **Perception 3: Distributed Leadership is about Collaboration Between Leaders**

Triegaardt (2013) as well as Harris (2015) explain that the distribution of leadership is a process where distributed leadership is the by-product of shared leadership activities and collaboration, rather than the routine handing out of tasks. Ritchie and Woods (2007) explain that the democratic leadership models are similar in some ways to the distributed leadership model as both models involve distributing responsibility and collaboration between school leaders at all levels, working through teams and engendering collective responsibility. This is confirmed by Botha (2016) who stated that democratic and distributed leadership are two sides of the same coin and that both approaches have to do with collaboration between school leaders on all levels. This includes the classroom teacher.

In this paper it emerged that all of the classroom teachers agreed that distributed leadership is about sharing of leadership processes and not the delegation of leadership tasks from senior management to classroom teachers. Spill-

ane et al. (2011) warn in this regard that distributed leadership cannot be delegated as delegation is a manifestation of power relationships. The quotes below illustrate clearly the perception among classroom teachers that distributed leadership is about sharing and collaboration. Mokhele (2016) also confirms that distributed leadership cannot be delegated and that it entails collaboration as well as empowerment, support, capacity and growth. Some of the participants did not agree with this as one (CT6C) responded that *“distributed leadership is about sharing of leadership and delegation of tasks, both ways.”*

One teacher (CT3B) commented as follows: *“Each teacher has some responsibility to make sure collaboration takes place in the classroom and the principal and/or deputy should coordinate the process in ways that make the sharing of leadership more important.”* Hulpia et al. (2010) confirm that the presence of a cooperative leadership team and the amount of leadership support play a significant and positive 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 via collaboration. Furthermore, Mourshed et al. (2010) insisted that purposeful collaboration between peers is also a feature of how the world’s greatest school systems improved from already being great to becoming excellent.

Nicolaidis et al. (2014) substantiate that it is also expected that key staff should engage in collective decision-making. This helps ensure that all school leaders collaborate and have the opportunity to influence relevant decisions. Sebba et al. (2012) conclude: *“Collaborative teaching and learning is most likely to be effective where attention is paid to developing trust, building on existing relationships and networks, while recognizing respective roles and contributions, ensuring that knowledge meets local needs and addressing competing priorities.”*

Heck and Hallinger (2011) confirm that distributed leadership can be viewed as collaboration practised by the class teacher and other members of the school’s improvement team for the purpose of improving the school in terms of effective teaching and learning. The participants acknowledged the importance of sharing leadership tasks within schools. They also had a

clear perception that effectiveness in schools is based on effective collaboration, sharing and decision-making, which have an impact on the daily functioning of the school.

The respondents acknowledged the importance of collaboration to improve the quality of teaching and learning within schools. They had a clear perception that effectiveness in schools is based on the effective delivery of the content and implementation of the curriculum. One of the participants (CT7D) summarised this as follows: *“By working with the principal and sharing his or her leadership we collaborate with each other; the same way that we collaborate with learners to improve teaching and learning in our classrooms.”* This corresponds with the views of Botha and Triegaardt (2015) who have stated that sharing of collaborated leadership tasks is needed to ensure success when changes are made to improve schools.

#### **Perception 4: Distributed Leadership Can Contribute to Leadership Development in Functional Schools**

The study shows that all participants have the perception that distributed leadership can be an effective tool to improve schools. The quotes below give an indication of the agreement between the participants. One classroom teacher (CT8D) responded as follows: *“Yes, definitely, because I think you take ownership and when you take ownership of your school, the school will improve.”* Another (CT3B) added:

*“I think it will work because when leadership is distributed they don’t take the duties of the principal as solely his or her own responsibility at that school, because people will just be careless at school and know that there is somebody who is responsible for this so, ‘Why should I do this?’ But, if they had distributed leadership, then everything is shared amongst the personnel at school, so it becomes easy for everyone and everyone knows that he or she is accountable for the work that is done at school, resulting in an improved school.”*

Spillane and Diamond (2015: 38) assert that *“school leadership and management are thought critical for successful schools and school-level factors matter when it comes to improving student learning and maintaining these improvements over time.”* Bolden (2011) confirms that leaders need to communicate with

each other frequently to take ownership in order to improve schools. The best strategy to communicate is to have effective meetings where leaders at all levels can take ownership of the school. The Oscar coaching model to enhance meetings can be accepted as an effective distributed leadership strategy (Botha and Triegaardt 2015).

However, one classroom teacher (CT9E) had doubts about the effectiveness of distributed leadership in all schools, qualifying this by stating: “No. Tell me why. Unfortunately some of the rural schools, I don’t think they have so much passion. You hardly have a teacher that pitches for her class.” The majority of the respondents had a strong perception that distributed leadership is an effective leadership strategy that can lead to more effective and functional South African schools. This perception was earlier confirmed by Botha and Triegaardt (2015) and Botha (2016).

### CONCLUSION

The nature of this paper was exploratory and provided insights into the role of distributed leadership to ensure effective schools in South Africa. The paper has highlighted that sharing leadership processes and giving more responsibilities to classroom teachers can improve their effectiveness in the classroom and this, in turn, can improve South African schools. The paper established that most of the participating classroom teachers consider distributed leadership as an opportunity to share leadership within their schools. The majority of participants were of the view that distributed leadership can contribute to an improvement in teaching and learning. Participants had a strong perception that delegation is not a part of distributed leadership. Participating classroom teachers confirmed that, in certain cases, they sought advice from more experienced members of staff and also confirmed that the school principal had the capacity to lead from the front.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The distribution of leadership is a strategy of shared responsibility between all school leaders and classroom teachers and indicates that all stakeholders in the school need to participate in decision-making. As distribution of lead-

ership is not a common practice at most schools, principals should develop a plan together with their school management teams to take their schools to a higher level of competence by giving other stakeholders such as classroom teachers more accountability and responsibility. This paper revealed that it is to a principal’s advantage to involve other role-players in decision-making. A distributive leadership approach will ensure that teachers buy into a particular project and accept ownership thereof. Principals should therefore apply the principles of distributive leadership effectively by involving all teachers in the management of teaching and learning. Teachers who need additional help to improve their personal standards of teaching and learning should be assisted. Other classroom teachers can act as mentors to support colleagues. Principals need to support such initiatives so that teachers can develop their teaching and learning skills, which would ultimately result in improved schools.

While some schools have not yet achieved an acceptable level of effectiveness, others are indeed effective and functional and could actually serve as models of 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.

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