

## The Role of Distributed Leadership in Functional South African Schools

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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 this process. The purpose of this article, based on a comparative qualitative case study, was to explore how effective distributed leadership contributes to school improvement. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with principals from five purposefully selected functional schools in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal to establish the perspectives of participants on the role of distributive leadership in school 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 all types of schools with guidelines to increase positive perceptions regarding the role of distributed leadership in school improvement.

### 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 (Marishane and Botha 2011; Department of Education 2014; Harris 2015). In a large number of effective or functional South African schools, these leadership functions are indeed being effectively implemented by the principal (Botha 2015), 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 2014).

Principals can no longer be expected to lead and manage schools on their own. In the more 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 (Hatcher 2005; Triegaardt 2013; Botha 2015; Harris 2015). This also seems to be in line with the culture of the democratic order displayed in post-apartheid South Africa that requires from school princi-

pals to exercise leadership that fully promotes the participation of all stakeholders (Swanepoel and Booyse 2006; Marishane and Botha 2011; Botha 2013; 2014; 2015; Jones et al. 2015).

### Research Objective and Research Question

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 (Schraw 2001; Bendixen and Schraw 2001; Sinatra et al. 2003; MacBeath 2005; Ritchie and Woods 2007; Angeli and Valanides 2012; Triegaardt 2013; Harris 2015). These research findings have, however, not considered the possible direct and indirect contribution that distributive leadership may make to school improvement. In order to attend to this gap in knowledge, the purpose of this current study, based on a qualitative and comparative case study at selected functional South African schools (using ethnographic interviews), was to explore how distributed leadership contributes to school improvement in the sampled schools.

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? In order to address the first research question, the concept of distributed leadership must be conceptualised.

### Conceptualising Distributed Leadership

Defining 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; Harris 2015; Jones et al. 2015).

Leadership can generally 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, communicating 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 (Botha 2013; Jones et al. 2015).

The concept 'distributed leadership', in turn, attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices. Mayrowetz (2008: 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. Distributed leadership is therefore an emerging theory of leadership with a narrower focus on individual capabilities, skills and talents. This type of leadership approach focuses on a joint responsibility for leadership activities (Mayrowetz 2008; York-Barr and Duke 2012; Triegaardt 2013). With this in mind, Jones et al. (2015) concluded by defining distributive leadership as an

*approach in which collaborative work is undertaken between individuals who trust and respect each other's contribution. It occurs as*

*a result of an open culture within and across an institution. It is an approach in which reflective practice is an integral part enabling actions to be critiqued, challenged and developed through cycles of planning, action, reflection and assessment and re-planning.*

From this definition it becomes clear that the concept of distributed leadership attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices. According to this definition, 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. In such a distributed leadership model, all teachers collectively assume responsibility for the well-being of their schools (Loeser 2008). 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 (Ritchie and Woods 2007; Smylie et al. 2010; Marishane and Botha 2011; Botha 2015; Harris 2015).

According to MacBeath et al. (2014), distributed leadership means exactly the same as dispersed, shared, collaborative and democratic leadership. In turn, Bennet et al. (2013: 27) state that "distributed leadership is an emergent property of a network of interacting individuals with an openness of boundaries and expertise", while Leithwood and Reid (2013: 3) state that distributive leadership ensures that "teachers work together towards whole school improvement and school goals". 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.

Harris (2015) 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.

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 et al. 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 (Jones et al. 2015) 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.

## 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 paper, 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 (Makoelle 2011).

This view is consistent with the traditions of qualitative research (Noor 2008). The research approach used in this study was therefore 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 (n=5) 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. 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 2014). 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.

**Table 1: Demographic details of participants**

<i>Participant's ID</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Male/Female</i>
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. Triangulation was done by analysing how each set of data answered the research questions. The subsequent analysis considered each set of data in relation to the second 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.

## 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 that have emerged from the data.

### Theme 1: Distributed Leadership is about Teacher Leadership

The researcher wanted to compare the viewpoints of different school principals to define effective school leadership at functional schools. Overall, all respondents define leadership as the role of all stakeholders as leaders to make schools more effective. In improving schools, school

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

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
<i>Theme 1:</i> Distributed leadership is about teacher leadership	Initiate things; lead other teachers as class leaders; and teamwork and motivation of teams
<i>Theme 2:</i> 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
<i>Theme 3:</i> 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
<i>Theme 4:</i> 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

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 as well as other stakeholders have a role to play in the development and improvement of the school.

This finding was consistent with the views of Harris (2015) as described above.

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 also corresponded with what Gronn (2012: 423) said in the literature when he stated that distributed leadership is *“an emergent property of a group or net-*

*work 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.*

Most of the respondents were also in agreement in the empirical study that educational leadership is about teachers as leaders. There were a clear comparison between the literature review and the empirical study that educational leadership is about teachers as leaders who are in control of different situations within the school. This finding corresponds with views cited above (for example Triegaardt 2013; Botha 2015) where it was clearly stated that distributive leadership refers to a type of leadership that focuses on a joint responsibility for leadership activities.

## **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 et al. 2001). In this paper the researcher investigated the role of distributed leadership to ensure effective schools in South Africa. The respondents revealed that leadership strategies are about teamwork. Teamwork is an important strategy to ensure the effective distribution of leadership within schools. During the empirical study, the respondents made it clear all their schools are in need of strategic distribution in order to ensure effective teamwork and all agree with the importance of teamwork during leadership distribution. This is in line with the views of Triegaardt (2013).

According to MacBeath et al. (2014), 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 to. 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 (MacBeath et al. 2014) as the principal identified people on his staff who will fit 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 (MacBeath et al. 2014) 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 (MacBeath et al. 2014). 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 (Botha 2015; Jones et al. 2015).

### **Theme 3: Distributed Leadership is about Democracy and Sharing at All Levels**

The literature consulted indicated a clear link between distributed leadership and democratic leadership (Bennet et al. 2013). The empirical study undertaken revealed that sharing of lead-

ership tasks are an important element of distributed leadership. 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. This correspond with what Harris (2015) stated earlier in this paper. One respondent (P5) said in this regard: “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. This corresponds with the view of Triegaardt (2103) as set out earlier in this paper. 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.*

#### **Theme 4: Distributed Leadership is about Interaction between all Leaders**

This paper revealed that distributed leadership supports and improves effective schools through the interaction of all leaders. Interaction occurs at effective schools through the three tiers of distributed leadership. The empirical study also proved that interaction between leaders is necessary for a school to be successful. Distributed leadership means the same as dispersed leadership, shared leadership, collaborative leadership and democratic leadership (MacBeath et al. 2014). 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”*.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This study was a comparative study between leaders at effective schools. The researcher investigated in this study the role of distributed leadership to ensure effective schools in South Africa. The empirical study revealed that teachers as leaders should also have an opportunity to take a leading role at the school. Participants in the study explained that effective schools were ensured by shared leadership and acceptance of accountability across the school and by all stakeholders involved.

Effective distributed leadership practices, inter alia, can make the difference between functional schools and less effective ones. 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 main outcome of this study is that distributed leadership enhances the effectiveness and functionality of schools. For instance, teachers are working more collaboratively in teams and as individuals to improve the functionality of schools. Leaders in functional schools should work together in collective networks to improve change in such a way that the school can improve as a whole. The outcomes of this study also show that distributive leadership serves as a significant contributor to school improvement. Linked to this outcome, it is clear that principals can create leadership positions that allow capable and willing teachers to work in a more focused and functional capacity. 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.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The distribution of leadership is a strategy of shared responsibility between all school leaders. School management team members need to participate in decision-making. As distribution of leadership 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 more accountability and responsibility. School management teams need to focus and dedicate all their energies to the core functionality of their schools. The core function of any school is to create an environment where effective teaching and learning occur. This paper revealed that it is to a principal's advantage to involve other role-

players in decision-making. Various studies have shown that when teachers who are affected by decisions or plans are not actively in their construction, it is unlikely that they will support them. A distributive leadership approach will ensure that all stakeholders buy into a particular project and accept ownership thereof. Principals should, therefore, apply the principles of distributive leadership effectively by involving all teacher leaders in the management of the school to ensure school improvement. It is also recommended that leadership teams in a school should, from time to time, reflect on progress that has been made and that necessary revisions as may be deemed appropriate should be made. This should contribute to overall functionality of the school.

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. It is recommended that there should be an active engagement between all leaders to monitor and evaluate the functionality of schools in South Africa.

This study has highlighted that sharing of leadership with a democratic approach is an effective strategy to ensure school improvement and school effectiveness. 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.

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