Benefits of distributed leadership education essay

Leadership is not all down to the Head teacher, the head of department or, in the classroom the teacher. If it is, nobody is learning anything at all about leadership. The first rule about leadership is that it is shared." (Brighouse and Woods, 1999: 45)

Most often administrative leadership is viewed as different from any kinds of leadership in school. The roles might be different since most managerial roles are completed outside the classrooms while teachers' leadership is exercised within the classroom. Nevertheless in school, teachers, administrators, Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), parents and students can all work together towards the improvement of Distributed Leadership (DL). That is why Sergiovanni states that,

" If leadership is a practice shared by many then it must be distributed among those who are in the right place at the right time and among those who have the ability." (2006: 189-190)

In this section, literature will be organised and focused round the following questions:

What are the benefits of distributed leadership in a secondary school?

To what extent is leadership shared among all stakeholders in Sunflower School?

How far can distributed leadership facilitate learning?

How effective to the schools' improvement and success can distributed leadership be?

What are the benefits of distributed leadership in a secondary school?

A successful leader is classified as such, when s/he manages to involve others in the process of leadership. According to Sergiovanni, when principals share leadership, they " get more power in return" (2006: 185). DL also enables those involved to develop their own leadership skills.

With DL, Principals are helping their colleagues by boosting their self-confidence, and to make their own decisions (Nicholls, 2000). Recently, Mifsud found that " Maltese Heads practise shared decision-making to ensure widespread ownership" (2008: 7). Thus all teaching-staff (Teachers and LSAs) will become more autonomous, while abiding with the School Development Plan (SDP) and curriculum. Sharing leadership with all stakeholders involves dedicating time to achieve good results (Brighouse and Woods, 1999). The " pure" type of collegiality (Bush, 1995: 52) works its best, when the institution is formed by a small number of staff. Having a large number of teaching-staff will surely make DL difficult. Although in our school's context we have a large number of staff, DL can still work since the teaching-staff is divided into smaller groups. Likewise, Brighouse and Woods say that, " The smaller the school or teaching unit, the more leadership, as well as work, can be shared" (1999: 45).

According to Leithwood et al DL helps teachers to be satisfied with their work, increases their " sense of professionalism", stimulates " organisational change", increases efficiency and encourages " cross-interactions" between teaching-staff (1999: 115). Although, Blase and Blase argue that entrusting teachers with self-autonomy and empowerment makes them feel " satisfied,

motivated and confident" and they are likely to give their utmost in their job (1994: 29); this sometimes may also lead the teaching-staff to overpower the Principal like it happens in our school. Yet, Blase and Kirby (1992) found that when teachers are empowered through autonomy, their attitudes and performance will get better. Moreover, even when leadership is shared among teaching-staff and students, this creates an attitude of respect between them, especially when they are so directly involved. Having a democratic leader helps gain attentive listening from subordinates, which in turn will also help improve relationships.

When teachers working in democratic schools but had previous experiences in other schools which have authoritarian leaders were interviewed Blase and Blase (1994) concluded that teachers' classroom autonomy enable them to have class control. An autocratic style called by Brighouse and Woods " north pole-north pole leadership" will lead teachers to work to rule and nothing more (1999: 51). In contrast having a democratic style called " north pole-south pole" where leadership is shared among all stakeholders, will " unlock enormous surges of energy and effort among professionals" (Brighouse and Woods: 1999: 51). They also argue, that sharing leadership will relieve Heads form some leadership stress. Thus DL, leads to sharing of responsibility which will not remain a burden on the Head's shoulders. Until recently, according to Cauchi Cuschieri (2007), leadership in Maltese Church Secondary Schools was seen as the Head teacher's job. However, the style used nowadays is much more DL amongst stakeholders. In our school this is not the case, since from its founding, it was believed that DL enables sharing ideas and responsibility which finally leads to the school's improvement.

Duke et al, (1980) established, that the school is democratic one when the teaching-staff, is involved in the process of decision making. Likewise, Blase and Blase argue that " increasing teacher access to decision making is essential to empowering teachers" (1994: 33). Also, Churchfields secondary school study shows, that teachers feel the need to participate in the school's management as it gives better results in the decision making process (Bush, 1995). Finally, when a decision is taken, it is the teaching-staff's responsibility to put it into action. So, being involved leads the staff to make a decision (Bush, 1995).

Rivalland (1989 cited in Wolfendale 1992: 57) presents a number of benefits that can be achieved from parental involvement in schools:

They work for a better learning environment since it is for their own child's interest;

Whatever is needed to be done in school, and whatever parents are able to do, they do it and they offer themselves as human resources to the school;

They create the learning connection between schools and students' respective homes;

With their presence in school, they will become aware of what the school needs from time to time.

Although, Wolfendale (1992) argues, that having parents involved in the study and formulation of school's behaviour and discipline policy will give a good result; this may not be applicable in our school since it seems that the Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) tackles only social issues and

personal concerns of parents. However, this will be investigated later on in this study.

King states that students' leadership is mostly exercised in the " prefectorial system" (1973: 141). However, this does not seem to be the only solution for our school, since leadership is also exercised through the students' council. It is true that the ultimate responsibility of decision-making in schools is in the hands of the Principal. Nonetheless, as Frost claims " Schools can also be enriched by students' contributions to decision-making and curriculum development" (2008: 356). Moreover, when students are consulted in certain matters such as finance they are taught " some of the hard lessons of democracy" (Colgate, 1976: 123). Prefects and councillors are students particularly chosen to help in school control and decision making. If their appointment is successful they may also serve as role models for other students (King, 1973).

Contrary to all the benefits of involving all stakeholders, one has to say that collegiality is an intense activity since it entails work after school hours. Likewise, Smylie and Denny (1990) argue that the involvement of the teaching-staff in leadership may be time consuming and may have an effect on the students' needs. The time for training and the funding allocated for these functions are not enough, argues White (1992). These problems make DL more difficult to succeed. However since all teaching-staff in our school have free periods during the day, this may not be a problem. Adding to this, having a large number of participants might create problems in communication, even when having a wide range of different views from all participants (Bush, 1995).

To what extent is leadership shared among all stakeholders in Sunflower School?

Leadership is not a one man job, because to be successful this must be shared. Moyo writes that:

" The concept of distributed leadership is the idea of sharing leadership amongst all stakeholders. These stakeholders, as stated earlier include head teachers, middle leaders, teachers, parents and students." (2010: 25)

" It is not leadership if a person orders, requires, seduces, or threatens another's compliance," (Sergiovanni, 2006: 192). So true leadership is when it is shared among all those having the ability to be involved in it. Similarly, Brighouse and Woods emphasise that:

" One person may be ' key' but leadership is shared – among pupils, teachers and other staff and members of the community" (1999: 48).

Likewise, Leithwood et al (1999) refers to DL as a key element of many SDPs.

Until recently the Head teacher in Maltese schools was seen as the school's ultimate authority (Mifsud, 2008). Rather than having an autocratic school, having a democratic one entails having a DL (Bush, 1995). With collaboration, and exchange of ideas, problems can be solved collegially, while individual qualities are developed further (Leithwood et al, 1999). This is what Bush calls collegiality (1995: 52), and claims that there are two different types of collegiality, one is the " restricted", meaning that a number from the staff are chosen to participate in the process of decision making, while the other called " pure" is the process which involves everyone equally

(Bush, 1995: 52). Teachers, LSAs, parents and students who are " enormously committed to children and school life" (Brighouse and Woods, 1999: 49) are perfect for participating in DL, because they are more approachable, more trusted, and their main goal is school improvement.

In one of the interviews carried out in Blase and Blase's (1994) study, a teacher describes best what a shared governance principal's attitude should be like, that is, to guide not to dictate. Teachers interviewed could make comparisons of past and present principals. Although it's ideal to involve everyone in the process of decision making, in the context of our school, there should be a person that leads both the discussion, and assumes responsibility for taking the final decisions, which should be the Principal or a delegate. About this, Blase and Blase state that " principals are compelled to assume full responsibility over all school matters" (1994: 78). Dunford et al also maintain that " whilst the Head will remain the leader, others will need to add a leadership role to their management responsibilities" (2000: 5).

Weick (1976, cited in Blase and Blase 1994: 135) claims that now schools have developed into organisations, in which administrators and teachers work separately and independently. This does not appear to be our school's situation, as the stakeholders all seemed to be involved in teamwork. In contrast, Blase and Blase (1994) research presents principals under study as being open to others' opinions, collegiality and DL. When this issue of DL was introduced, most Senior Management Team (SMT) members were being involved. Arguing this Dunford et al (2000) say that particularly having more SMT members in a secondary school, leads to the shared responsibility and the establishment of different roles.

Leithwood et al (1999: 121) in their study found that teachers were most likely involved in " school planning and school structure and organisation" while the principals' leadership is more focused to management issues. In our school this is not the case as in school planning the Principal is the Chairperson. Normally, people think that teacher leadership is exercised only within the classroom. However, in democratic schools like ours, teachers are involved in all aspects of the school, even when taking decisions. Blase and Blase also state that,

" Successful shared governance principals show trust in teachers' capacity for responsible involvement in both school-level and classroom-level decision making." (1994: 27)

Similarly Leithwood et al argued that there are two forms of teacher leadership; one is the formal style for leadership of class control, or an informal one:

" By sharing their expertise, volunteering for new projects and bringing new ideas to the school… helping their colleagues to carry out their classroom duties, and by assisting in the improvement of classroom practice," (1999: 117).

Brighouse and Woods (1999) concluded that because teachers are leaders in classes they don't like to be followers, and so expect to participate more in school leadership. Moreover, they also say that:

" Successful Heads… are men and women with ideals and the ability to share those ideals with those whom they lead." (1999: 54).

Therefore, through the sharing and openness of ideas, leadership is shared and decisions taken will hold much more. However, in the context of our school, if leadership is to be shared and if teachers are to work in different groups, they are to be monitored either by the Principal or assistant principal. Moreover Leithwood et al, (2000) claim that the number of people involved in DL varies according to different tasks.

" Most effective distribution of leadership functions would vary the numbers of people providing leadership in response to the complexity of the tasks to be performed-more in the case of complex tasks and fewer in response to simple tasks" (2007: 58).

Research shows that in Malta, " Practically all schools have teachers involved in one team or another" (LIE, 2009: 176). The benefits of DL indicate that Maltese schools are trying to work hard on it.

Since 1980, the Education Act in England " ensured parental representation on school governing bodies" (Wolfendale, 1992: 62). Likewise, the Maltese Education Act that was reformed in 2006 states that the Maltese Directorate for Educational Services,

" Should promote, encourage and monitor the democratic governance of schools through School Councils with the active participation of parents, teachers and students." (GOM, 2006: 7)

Thus the PTA and Students' Council were introduced in Maltese Schools so that they may participate actively in school leadership and decision making. As Wolfendale (1992) said, the aim for parents' participation is to represent

other parents, to discuss common interest issues and to inform other parents of decisions taken through written circulars or school meetings. It is also described as " a forum for teachers and parents to meet and engage in social and perhaps fundraising activities" (Wolfendale, 1992: 74). Furthermore, research in Malta confirms that parents are indeed involved in policy decision making and practice (LIE, 2009).

Parents are always keen to participate in school leadership for the benefits of their own children and for the schools' improvement (Wolfendale, 1992). In our school, this may not be the situation, since there are those who are passive and do not participate in any activities or meetings even if it regards their own child's interests. In most of the Maltese schools or colleges, only a small percentage of parents are involved through the PTA committee, while others get involved only through activities organized by the school or the PTA. Some parents " are called upon by the schools to offer their expertise where necessary" (LIE, 2009: 175). However, Wolfendale (1992) notes, that sometimes teachers do not feel the benefit of parental involvement in school.

Harding and Pike (1988 cited in Wolfendale, 1992: 59) suggest ways in which parents can be directly involved in the school. This can be done through:

Personal contact with the school and staff;

Written communication;

PTA or other parental groups within the school;

Their involvement in school matters and learning.

In contrast, in primary schools the rate of parental involvement in the PTA is higher than in the secondary. This most probably happens because secondary schools are much larger in number and more teachers are involved, so the rapport between parents and teachers may not be that strong. These issues have been called by Wolfendale as difficulties " to set up and maintain teacher-parent initiatives in secondary schools" (1992: 58).

The development of the School Development Plan was one of the main activities where DL was exercised in Maltese schools with the intention of including all stakeholders in planning and discussion. As the aim was for the school's improvement and improved learning for all students, it was noticed that students were not included in any of the discussion. This issue was later tackled firstly by a students' school council (LIE, 2009) and then by an Ekoskola committee, which takes care of the environment (Bezzina, 2007).

Since, students are the final achievers of the educational institution, they should have space and opportunities to share their views and talk about their needs. Bell and Harrison (1998) state that it is of mutual importance for the school to work in collaboration with students and encourage them in teamwork. Likewise, Brighouse and Woods (1999) stress the importance of involving children in leadership roles within the school, to make them more responsible and prepare them for the world of work.

However, there are two types of student leaders and these must be clearly distinguished. There are those called bullies, who use their power to intimidate others and as a result push away all other students. The other group is called " unofficial leaders" (Brighouse and Woods, 1999: 48), who

somehow always attract others. Moreover, they may be trusted and given a number of leadership duties to carry out as they are seen by teachers as capable and responsible pupils. To distinguish between these kinds of leaders, the school can organise a socio-gram test at the beginning or at the end of the scholastic year.

How far can distributed leadership facilitate learning?

Leithwood et al (1999) argue that there is a challenge between leadership practice, and the research that points out ways in which leadership affects students and their learning. In contrast, Spillane claims that: " What matters for instructional improvement and student achievement is not that leadership is distributed, but how it is distributed" (2005: 149). However, Leithwood et al (2006b) maintain that after classroom teaching, leadership is next to influence students' learning. Lately, Leithwood and Massey emphasised that " Leadership is a major cause for the improvements in student achievement." (2010: 79)

Principals and other SMT members are encouraged to work hard towards creating a better environment for better learning. This means that they are to ensure that the school atmosphere is good both for teachers to work in and for students to learn. This does not refer only to the physical environment, but also to the distribution of leadership and teachers' autonomy.

Principals' acceptance of trust and DL within their school means that they let the teaching-staff choose their ways and means of teaching that is best applicable for the students under their responsibility (Blase and Blase, 1994).

This also can be done through encouraging teamwork between teachers and LSAs. Similarly, Bezzina claims that " Only by involving all stakeholders and respecting differences can we give birth to new ideas" (2006: 86) and thus create a better atmosphere for better learning. Moreover, Brighouse and Woods highlight that DL and collaboration among all staff will result in: " raising the achievement of pupils" (1999: 83).

Christopher Bezzina conducted a case study in one of the Maltese Church schools, where the academic achievement was not so high. The school's Head, having had experiences in different schools introduced the issue of DL for better learning. Teaching-staff, parents and students were encouraged to participate in the schools' matters and decision making programmes. The result was successful concluding that " quality improvement initiatives placed a great emphasis on the leadership of the organisation" (Bezzina 2008: 23). Thus, one can conclude that having DL in a school has a great impact on learning.

According to Moyo, DL has an effect on students' learning through teachers, who are the closest leaders in contact with students and their learning; " But in order to achieve this, teachers need to be involved and motivated by the leadership," (2010: 23). Teachers having a personal view of DL, help children to learn more. This is done by involving them in leadership practice inside and outside the classroom. Brighouse and Woods (1999) note that even the type of teacher-student relationship has an influence on students' learning. Moreover, having autocratic leadership style in class does not help in creating a learning atmosphere for students. The teacher with good student

relationship encourages pupils to never give up, and aim high in life for the future.

As stated by Blase and Blase (1994), teachers' autonomy is when they are free to decide their own ways and means, to carry out their work. In Malta, teachers' autonomy is mostly linked with the classroom; where they are free to design their lesson plans, with their own resources, while also having autonomy to students' control, which Blase and Blase (1994: 73) call it " disciplinary matters". This kind of DL will also influence students' learning.

Besides this type of autonomy in the classroom, new methods and techniques should be tried and encouraged. This so called " innovation" facilitates learning for all students, as education becomes not just one size fits all, but adapted especially to the pupils' needs (Blase and Blase 1994: 75) through the organisation of differentiated learning. In school, this entails teamwork, reinforces collegiality and sharing of the resources within. For teachers to improve students' learning, they must first share their ideals with others and then work together towards that ideal. " It is the job of the management to bring those ideals together into common set of objectives," (Brighouse and Woods, 1999: 54).

Parents are considered as the first educators, great contributors of all aspects of learning, and always interested in helping their children to learn better. Wolfendale (1992: 60) argues that, " parents as educators, can make a significant contribution to children's acquisition of reading and literacy skills". Moreover, Leithwood et al argue that:

" No matter what the student population, involving parents primarily in the teaching of their own children is most likely to contribute to children's learning" (2006a: 102).

The study by HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectors) showed that Parents' involvement in schools, lead to students' success (1991, cited in Wolfendale, 1992: 56). It's interesting to study ways in which parents can help both teachers and students in relation to learning. However, one must also take note of the relationship that exists between parents and teachers and not cause any job meddling.

Usually, we only think of academic results when it comes to students' learning. However, research shows that through their participation in leadership, students gain more knowledge and acquire new skills. These skills are needed for their future in society. Frost claims that students' participation in leadership also helps them acquire other non-academic achievements; " greater self-esteem, heightened self-confidence, interpersonal and political skills, and self-efficacy when students have opportunities to exercise responsibility" (2008: 356).

When given certain leadership roles, students set their own targets for learning through that experience (Brighouse and Woods, 1999), which might also be of help to other students. Brighouse and Woods (1999) argue that a teacher can give responsibility to students to help those in need in a certain matter. Through each other's support, those that have less academic abilities will achieve and learn more. Research shows that pupils have so much to say about their learning, and as such they should be consulted for

the benefit of their learning, and the methodology used by teachers in class (Morgan, 2011).

How effective to the schools' improvement and success can distributed leadership be?

Fink sees schools as " living systems" where:

" Leadership is distributed across the various cells that affect a school such as students, teachers, parents, unions, social services, County Hall, and local communities". (2010: 44)

Bezzina's study carried out in a Maltese Church School revealed, that when teachers were involved in DL " the majority of staff felt responsible for determining the way forward" (2008: 24). He then concluded that school improvement and success can be achieved, " with hard work, sacrifice and commitment expressed by the Head teacher, the senior leadership team, pupils, parents and teachers," (Bezzina, 2008: 26). LIE maintains that when a policy's decision making process involves all stakeholders in a school including, SMT, teachers, students and parents;

" Then the values which are held dear by the school will be on the road to success because they would have been owned by all" (2009: 176)

Brighouse and Woods (1999: 45) confirm that research done in the past and again lately by OFSTED shows that, " leadership in schools is the key factor in improvement and success". They also argue that,

" A key ingredient to school success is the extent to which the values of school life are shared among all the members of the community," (Brighouse and Woods, 1999: 55)

According to Telford (1995) collaboration between all stakeholders within a school brings about school improvement. She argues that the following points which lead to school improvement affect both the individuals within the school and the institution itself;

" Development of the educational potential of students, professional development of teachers, good organizational health, institutionalization of vision" (Telford, 1995, cited in Bell and Harrison 1998: 14).

It is interesting to note that it is much easier for principals to control goals rather than humans. To gain control for the accomplishment of a goal, leadership must be shared (Sergiovanni, 2006). Little (1981, cited in Sergiovanni, 2006: 186) found that when principals work through collegiality with teachers, the school will improve. It is of importance to equalize the principal and teachers' opinions in a discussion, since no one should be preferred to the others as everyone is sharing from his/her own knowledge, for the school's best interest (Blase and Blase, 1994). Similarly, Nicholls (2000) argue that leadership is best carried out when a number of people having the same values and aims challenge each other for getting better results. In other words, one can say that school leadership is best fulfilled when all those involved in the institution, share their thoughts without being considered as superior to one another. Thus, " including group activity

liberates leadership and provides the framework we need for widespread involvement in improving schools" (Sergiovanni, 2006: 186).

In successful schools, when a debate crops up on school improvement, the staff should work on: " Involving pupils, parents and governors" (Brighouse and Woods, 1999: 83). Likewise, Davies and Davies (2010) also claim that it is crucial to involve others in school leadership as it leads to school improvement and success. Moreover, they say that:

" Engaging all the staff in discussions about where the school is, where it needs to go and hence the skills and knowledge we need to learn to achieve progress is a uniting factor." (Davies and Davies, 2010: 15)

Shared leadership might bring about changes which are required for school improvement to take place. The best change is usually one generated from something or someone within the school because it

" Recharges energy in participants and embraces the greatest likelihood of improvement in teaching and learning styles, simply because it is so localised," (Brighouse and Woods, 1999: 60).

Changes for school improvement are gained faster, when teachers are involved in the process of decision making (Bush, 1995). Furthermore, Brighouse and Woods, (1999) argue that when change for school improvement is required, time has to be allocated in the school's diary, since the staff needs time to work on the implementation process. In their study Leithwood et al concluded that teachers consider their participation in leadership, as a step for the school to be more " effective" and " innovative"

(1999: 121). Moreover, when teachers are involved in the decision making they are less likely to have adverse reactions to principals' expectations.

According to Dunford et al (2000) when the decision making process involves those who are closest to its impact it gives a positive attitude towards school improvement. In addition, they say that if secondary schools want to be effective, leadership must be shared at least among senior staff. Furthermore, Sergiovanni (2006) emphasises that in schools where power is shared among principals, teachers, parents and others, work is done autonomously towards schools aims for school improvement. Likewise, Nicholls (2000) claims, that a shared vision is indispensable for school improvement.

Trusting teachers through empowerment may lead principals to achieve their desired goals without imposing them. " Building trust is critical to empowering teachers," (Blase and Blase, 1994: 29). They also claim that this shows that the principal demonstrated great faith in them and valued them as experts and professionals," (Blase and Blase, 1994: 77). Teachers involved in different leadership roles are expected to work for the improvement of the decision-making process (Leithwood et al, 1999). This collegial process of involving others in the decision making process is exercised through discussion and shared power in the institution.

" In a collegial, collaborative environment, principals consistently concentrate on enabling others to examine and redesign schools for improved learning, and teachers learn to share power and work as a team." (Blase and Blase, 1994: 33)

Leithwood et al (2007) concluded that when DL is implemented and when opportunities are offered, staff will be much more motivated to work towards school improvement.

From their research Leithwood et al established that:

" Informal leaders had more involvement with creating high-performance expectations and motivating others than formal school leaders, while formal leaders had more to do with identifying and articulating a vision." (2007: 57)

With informal leaders we can include both parents and pupils. When students are at home most of them speak about their school experience with their siblings and through this parents get to know their thoughts and feelings. Hence, parents might be another link between schools and children. Parental involvement in schools may bring about changes which will finally lead to school improvement. Similarly, Wolfendale argues that, " parental opinion can be mobilized to bring about significant changes" (1992: 63).

Conclusion

" School's success lies in the skills and attitudes of the professional staff, not merely within the leadership capabilities of the principal." (Blase and Blase, 1994: 28)

Thus DL is needed for growth and development because the Principal sometimes is in need of other staff members to solve certain problems. According to Bezzina, DL " calls for an extension of that power vertically downwards to involve all members of staff," (2000: 305). Moreover, the final result of school success is a job that belon