

Understanding distributed leadership and impact on teaching



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Distributed leadership has been the subject of much research in the sphere of education in recent years. This research report explores how it is understood in the context of the Irish post primary school that I am currently employed in, with some reference to its impact on teaching and learning in the school.

Our school is a Dublin south inner city Presentation all-girls Secondary School (now under the Patronage of the recently formed trust body CEIST) with disadvantaged status. There are 28 members of the teaching staff: principal, deputy principal, 7 Assistant Principals (including a Programme Coordinator post), 8 Special Duties Teachers and 11 teachers with no formal leadership position.

The Board of Management manages the school on behalf of the Patron and must consult with and keep the Patron informed of any decisions, proposals and policy changes. Staff volunteers have always been invited to participate on various task groups and subcommittees in our school. These groups were seen as being very important in the development or revision of policies or curricular issues and their recommendations were generally taken on board by both staff and the principal/deputy principal. These groups have had no <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-distributed-leadership-and-impact-on-teaching/>

shortage of voluntary members from both postholders and non-postholders, which would suggest a 'fundamental core of values that all members of the organization hold' (E849 Study Guide, pg. 21) and also highlighted the fact that distributed leadership exists within the school.

The aim of this assignment is to explore the concept of distributed leadership and the influence leadership practices have on teaching and learning in my school. The overall aim of this research is to support the teaching staff to become more aware of their own leadership perceptions and practices, with reference to the possibilities offered by distributed leadership to positively impact on teaching and learning within the school.

Given the fact that this was a small scale study that had to be conducted in a short time frame

only one research question was addressed in the research:

How do the teachers, principal and deputy principal understand the concept of distributed leadership and how does this link to teaching and learning within the school?

The approach taken throughout this research begins with the assumption that a teacher's leadership role begins in the classroom with the influence they have on their pupils but also extends beyond the walls of the classroom to working collaboratively with colleagues (teaching or ancillary). A teacher's leadership role may extend to their contribution to the school culture.

Teachers may hold a post of responsibility (Assistant Principal or Special

Duties) or an agreed position outside the formal post structure, e. g. subject coordinator.

The Post of Responsibility system is a structure whereby a number of teachers are given

additional remuneration to carry out specified tasks, duties and responsibilities in the

school. It is also called the “ in-school management” system.

There are two grades of post; Assistant Principal and Special Duties. The Assistant

Principal post carries an additional salary allowance of almost €9, 000 per annum and the

Special Duties allowance is approximately €5, 000 per annum. Teachers in receipt of either

of these allowances are required to fulfil duties and take responsibilities in addition to their

full teaching hours. The duties attached to the post are defined by the Board of

Management following a consultation process involving all the staff. The consultation

process includes an analysis of the school needs, agreement on the priorities and the

drawing up of a “ Schedule of posts” to match the agreed priorities.

Each school is allocated a specific number of Special Duties and Assistant Principal posts

on the basis of school size, according to a formula based on the number of whole-time

teachers in the school. Appointment to a post of responsibility is by competitive interview among the teachers already employed in the school, whether full time or part time, permanent or temporary. Selection criteria have been agreed at national level and include credit for the number of years experience in that school and “ the most senior suitable” (DES Circular Letter 05/98 www.education.ie) candidate. Therefore, in most cases, teachers holding posts of responsibility are more likely to be the teachers who have been in the school for the longest number of years.

However, other teachers may also hold no formal position but may be influential with colleagues. Leadership at this level may have a significant and direct influence on

teaching and on the general learning environment. Distributed leadership has been interpreted in many different ways, but incorporates many of the concepts outlined above such as teachers as learners, influence over colleagues and contribution to school climate and culture whether or not in formal positions of leadership.

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Literature Review

Research has shown that leadership is one of the most important factors in making a school successful (OECD 2008, Leithwood and Riehl 2003). Where leadership is effective staff and pupils are better motivated, people know what is going on because communications are clear and frequent, and everyone feels they are pulling together and working towards shared goals (Day, Sammons et al 2007). Distributed leadership is one form of leadership that is prominent in the current educational discourse.

The idea of distributed leadership has been in existence for almost three decades. Murgatroyd and Reynolds (1984) stressed that “ leadership can occur at a variety of levels in response to a variety of situations and is not necessarily tied to possession of a formal organisational role” (cited in Law and Glover 2003 p. 37). This concept incorporates ideas such as teachers working together in teams and teachers taking a variety of responsibilities within the school. On the positive side, it was considered beneficial to teaching and learning within schools if teachers discussed their practice with colleagues, gave and accepted critiques of their work and were open to learning from each other.

Another perspective broadened the scope of their leadership to decision-making in the overall operation of the school. Hallinger and Heck (1996) found little evidence linking distributed leadership to improved student outcomes. Weiss and Cambone (1994) found that teachers’ involvement in whole-school change could detract from classroom teaching. On the other hand, Greenleaf (1996) found it led to positive effects on teacher efficacy and levels of morale within schools.

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Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2001) view distributed leadership as being central

to the teaching and learning process in the school and agree that leadership involves all

members of the school community, not just the principal and deputy principal. They argue that leadership happens in a variety of ways throughout the school and is centred in the interactions between people. “ Depending on the particular leadership task, school leaders’ knowledge and expertise may be best explored at the group or collective level rather than at the individual leaders level” (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond 2001, p. 25)

“ People in formally designated positions and those without any such designations can and do take responsibility for leading and managing in the schoolhouse” (Spillane and Diamond 2007 p. 7). Therefore, this distributed leadership perspective recognises that leadership roles are played by different people at different times.

Distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000) ‘ sees leadership as a function which is widely dispersed through the organisation rather than as a responsibility vested in an individual’ (Study Guide, pg. 21). The post of responsibility structure in Irish schools allows for some of the leadership functions to be distributed throughout the designated post holders, though this still leaves the question about how to involve all non-post holders. Distributed leadership ‘ assumes that there is an underlying values consensus that enables staff to work harmoniously towards shared purposes and to agree on the bases by which the effectiveness of their organization is judged’ (Study <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-distributed-leadership-and-impact-on-teaching/>)

Guide, pg. 21). This, therefore, would appear to assume a greater involvement by all staff in the decision process of the organisation.

One of the characteristics of distributed leadership is “ an emergent property of a group or

network of interacting individuals” (Woods et al 2004, p. 441). Gronn terms this pooling of

energies ‘ concertive action’ and suggests that it is about the additional dynamic which is the product of conjoint activity – where people work together in such a way that they pool their initiative and expertise, the outcome is a product or energy which is greater than the sum of their individual actions (Gronn 2000).

This is comparable to Spillane’s definition of distributed leadership as “ the collective

properties of the group of leaders working together to enact a particular task, leading to the

evolution of a leadership practice that is potentially more than the sum of each individual’s

practice” (Spillane et al 2001 p. 25).

Theories on teamwork share the view that working together produces results over and

above what would be expected from individuals working alone. The literature on teamwork

often makes the distinction between formal and informal teams but suggests that both types

operate best in a culture that fosters an open climate and where relationships are based on

trust, mutual protection and support (Belbin 2000, Nias et al 1989).

There can tend to be some tensions between 'designated leaders and distributed leadership' (E849 Study Guide, pg. 146). School Principals are accountable for school performance, supported by deputy principal and designated post holders. 'On the other hand, much of the productive work of educational organizations takes place in collaborative teams, characterized by professional norms and distributed leadership, where those with relevant expertise take the lead, irrespective of formal roles' (E849 Study Guide, pg. 146). However, 'the concept of distributed leadership still assumes that individuals will follow that lead when it is provided' (E849 Study Guide, pg. 21).

Teamwork is a key element of distributed leadership in that the nature and purpose of distributed leadership is "the ability of those within a school to work together, constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively" (Lambert 1998 p. 5). However, the existence of structured teams alone does not constitute distributed leadership. In fact, distributed leadership practices may not emphasise the formal structured approach to

teamwork but rather acknowledge that groups of teachers work together as appropriate in order to achieve a particular objective at a given time.

Another distinctive characteristic of distributed leadership (Woods et al 2004), is

that the distribution of leadership varies according to expertise. There is recognition that

various tasks require different expertise and that all the expertise does not reside in one

person at the top. Schools nowadays are complex organisations and therefore it is too much

to expect that they can be led by one person. “ The role of principal is now so complex and

demanding, that it is unrealistic to think that any one person can discharge the role without

the assistance of considerable number of colleagues, both from the teaching and the support

staff” (Martin 2006). This is particularly significant in the context of leadership for

improved learning as it is recognised in the literature that the most significant influence on

student learning is the direct influence the teacher has in the classroom.

The concept of trust emerges from the literature as being significant (Duignan 2006). Teachers need to feel trusted and supported by their principals and their colleagues. Trust is necessary if teachers are to feel motivated in their work and if they are to be allowed to initiate an activity and take responsibility for decisionmaking. Along with being trusted in their work, people also need support. People want to talk about what they are doing – supporting these conversations is an essential task of the leader (Wheatley 1999). Trust, allied with support, is an underpinning value within the concept of distributed leadership.

Harris (2004) recognises that structural and cultural barriers operate within schools which could make it very difficult for some teachers to show leadership. Jockeying for power positions in a school can create a climate which is not conducive to, for example, young teachers expressing their opinion, especially if it differs from the traditional or prevailing opinion. Such action could be perceived as a threat to the status quo.

Another concept that links distributed leadership with learning is that of professional

learning communities. Professional learning communities may be viewed as an extension of

teacher leadership. For example, Harris et al (2003 p. 79) identifies four dimensions of the

teacher leadership role that extends to the overall operation of the school.

Teacher leaders:-

1. translate the principles of school improvement into the practices of individual

classrooms (a brokering role);

2. assist other teachers to cohere around a particular development and foster a more

collaborative way of working;

3. play a mediating role in school improvement. They are an important source of

expertise and information;

4. forge close relationships with individual teachers where mutual learning takes place.

Schools with professional learning communitiess report significant benefits for students, including lower rates of absenteeism and decreased dropout rates. students have also

exhibited academic gains in maths, science, history and reading than in traditional

schools. (Hirsh and Hord 2008 p. 27).

The direct link between leadership and student outcomes “ is a rare event indeed in the

research literature on educational leadership and school improvement”

(Mulford, Silins

and Leithwood 2003 p. 3) However, Mulford et al’s research found that what was important

was that staff are actively and collectively participating in the school and feel that their

contributions are valued. This contributes to creating a learning organisation where

teachers’ learning, as well as student learning, is valued (p. 6).

Methodology

Davies and Ellison (1999) argue that a variety of data-gathering techniques should be used to develop a balanced view of the organisation’s strategic position. For this reason, my main research methodologies involved the use of a detailed questionnaire distributed to all teaching staff as well as a follow up focus group meeting. These methods of investigation have designed with the purpose of better serving the objectives of the research. Mellon (1990, pg. 49) states that the two main questions to be addressed were: “ who might have the information you need and who is accessible”? As highlighted by Patton (1990, pg. 45), “ where the focus is on individuals, an inductive approach begins with the individual experiences of those individuals”. This

multi-method approach allowed for triangulation, using different methods of data collection within the study to ensure that it is as full and balanced as is possible within the relatively short time scale.

A mixed-method approach was decided on, through which a questionnaire would identify relevant issues on distributed leadership in order that these issues could be examined in more detail in focus groups.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) highlight the role of literature review as a valuable source of experience that leaves the researcher with: better understanding of the information needs on the field, aware of the gaps left by previous studies, and sensitive to the issues he/she might identify in the data.

Literature could be a secondary source of data, and help the researcher to formulate questions to be used in interviews and questionnaires, during the initial steps of the research. It can also confirm findings, comparing the research results to past evidence. This will be very important in this study.

My trust with all teachers involved is very important to develop. ' As Bassey (1999) points out, researchers, in taking data from people, should do so in a way that recognizes those people's initial ownership of the data and that respects them as fellow human beings who are entitled to dignity and privacy' (Study Guide, pg. 55).

As humans were obviously be the most important component of this research, the issue of informed consent had to be addressed. Therefore, it was necessary to inform all interview participants about the study, their role within the investigation, and how the information they provided would be used. While, as argued by Miles and Huberman (1994, pg 291) it may be that <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-distributed-leadership-and-impact-on-teaching/>

truly informed consent is impossible in qualitative research the issue could not be dismissed, and, accordingly all participants selected for the study were informed of both the nature and purpose of the research. They were also given the opportunity to decide whether to participate in the survey or to withdraw at anytime.

The main principles of research ethics are:

The identity of participants' must be protected in order that the published results of the study do not humiliate or harm them in any way. Anonymity must therefore be extended to all records, written or electronically recorded, that are collected during the study.

All participants must be treated with respect and informed of the researcher's interests. The participant must agree to participate in the study. The researcher must not lie to the participants or record conversations on hidden mechanical devices.

The researcher must make clear the terms of the research and abide by the terms of the agreement.

The findings must be based on the data and truthfully reported.

(Bogdan and Biklen, 1992)

These form the main thrust of my ethical considerations when conducting the study.

For this research, a questionnaire was designed to gauge teachers' perceptions of

distributed leadership and the practices in the school that contribute to it.

The findings

were used to form the basis for further investigation through a focus group discussion.

The questionnaire was primarily an attitudinal one and therefore used the

Likert scale which places people's answers on an attitude continuum (May 2001 p. 104). In

addition, three open questions were included. This allowed participants greater freedom in

their answers. Responses to the questionnaires were used to clarify the research questions

and identify more specific issues which would be discussed within the focus group.

Focus groups have been defined as a group of individuals selected and assembled by

researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the

subject of the research. (Powell et al 1996 p. 499) They can be used to ascertain attitudes, feelings, knowledge, perceptions, ideas and beliefs of participants, from the participants' personal experience. As the literature suggests (Gibbs 1997 and McNamara 2006), the researcher plays an important role which includes providing a clear purpose, helping people to feel at ease and facilitating interaction between group members. This was made somewhat more difficult, given that the research was conducted in my own school. In hindsight, it may have been more appropriate to conduct the investigation in a neighbouring school.

Questionnaires were distributed to all teachers in the school. The questionnaire was designed

on the basis of findings from the literature on distributed leadership.

Part 1 of the questionnaire contained fifteen statements pertaining to leadership and

participants were asked to rate their agreement or otherwise with these statements using the

Likert scale. Respondents' scores of 4 or 5 denote agreement or strong agreement. Scores of 2 or 1 denote disagreement or strong disagreement respectively and a rating of 3 is considered 'neutral'.

Part 2 consisted of fifteen statements pertaining to leadership practices in schools. In this

section, participants were asked to score each item on the basis of how far along a spectrum

their school was in implementing this practice. A score of 4 or 5 denotes a well-established

practice and a practice which is being refined, respectively. Scores of 2 or 1 denote that the

practice is starting or does not happen in the school respectively. A rating of 3 denotes that

progress is being made in this practice.

By asking respondents to indicate their degrees of agreement with these statements, the

researcher can ascertain the respondents' perceptions of distributed leadership and identify

the key issues which they highlight as being central to the practice of distributed leadership

and its connections to teaching and learning. These can be analysed from a normative

perspective, based on the literature findings.

The questionnaire included three open questions; the first elicits further insights into

respondents' understanding of distributed leadership, the second asks them to identify

factors that support their work and the third seeks to identify factors that inhibit their work.

Following discussion at a staff meeting, where I explained the purpose of the research, staff agreed to participate and questionnaires were distributed to the 28 teachers on staff. A total of 16 questionnaires were returned (57% response rate).

In order to answer the research questions it was necessary to gather further data from a focus group comprised of teachers that have experience of different levels of leadership. Therefore, the group comprised of the principal and deputy principal, 3 teachers who hold posts of responsibility and 3 teachers who do not hold posts of responsibility. The focus group was approximately one hour duration.

Findings

Responses to the first set of statements on the questionnaire identified a number of issues

perceived by the respondents to be associated with distributed leadership. It was clear from the questionnaire responses that all teachers perceived themselves to be leaders.

However, the context of that leadership was in the classroom – they see themselves

as leaders of their students within the classroom, having a direct influence on their learning.

Their view of themselves as leaders with influence beyond the classroom was rather limited.

The questionnaire also revealed that teachers believe that teaching and learning is

influenced positively when teachers work together and when they engage in professional

development to improve their knowledge and skills.

Also, teachers saw distributed leadership as including their involvement in decision-making and in leading new initiatives in the school. However, they also

acknowledge the key role the principal plays, for example in ensuring that there is a shared

vision among staff and that pastoral care systems operate effectively for students.

In response to the second set of statements on the questionnaire, respondents highlighted a

number of leadership practices that are operational in the schools to a greater or lesser

extent. These practices were identified as:

Monitoring and supporting student learning

Working together as a staff

Structures and systems such as subject departments and posts of responsibility

Monitoring and supporting student learning included

having systems to support student learning

analysing results of examinations and using the data to

review practices

all teachers playing a role in monitoring student performance and iv)

all school policies being designed with a focus on enhancing, improving and developing a high quality learning environment.

These points were all part of a recently completed DEIS plan in the school.

Working together as a staff involved:

discussing school development priorities at staff meetings,

professional development on whole-school issues,

collectively prioritising specific actions to improve learning.

Subject departments were seen as forming a central part of distributed leadership. However, in the school they are considered to be a forum for sharing resources and are only now being used for subject planning.

The responses from the open question on distributed leadership emphasised community and collaboration rather than hierarchy.

The second open question on the questionnaires asked teachers to name the factors that

support them in their work. The key issue emerging was the need for support and help from

both colleagues and management, particularly in dealing with student behavioural or

disciplinary issues. They also referred to the approachability, accessibility and openness of

the principal as being an important factor in enabling them to do their job well. Other

factors stated were encouragement from management, being trusted and treated as a

professional, good organisation and planning and being allowed to try out new ideas

without interference.

The views of distributed leadership expressed by respondents in the questionnaires were

reinforced in the focus group discussion, particularly by the post-holders.

However,

different views on the nature of decision-making were expressed by the post-holders' in the focus group; firstly, if leadership is distributed then that should mean making decisions together but on the other hand, " sometimes it is important for a principal to make a decision. There might be a decision that the team can't agree on and it is a horrible decision and the principal has to make the decision."

The participants in the focus group agreed that it was important that everybody has a voice. The idea of having a voice was extended further by a non post-holder, who stated that " if, at a staff meeting, people are listened to, then you are going to get the message that this is a good place to share initiative and share ideas."

Participants also agreed that teachers are role models for the students and that their behaviour and interactions with colleagues, as well as with students, have a major influence on students.

' We're role models for students in what we do, in how we interact and speak with each other'.

The focus group discussion allowed for a degree of interaction, disagreement and debate

about issues and concepts that was not possible in responding to a questionnaire.

Leadership and management were debated. While there was a general consensus that

leadership involved everybody in the school, there was some debate about the role of postholders. The consensus among the group was that all teachers, not just post-holders, can be empowered to lead.

The principal saw distributed leadership as extending beyond classroom leadership to whole-school issues.

‘ Now almost every member of staff will either have authority delegated to them for a

particular area or will take it on their own back to organise something.

Whether you

are a tutor or whatever it is, there is much more involvement in school life now than

there was in the past’.

‘ I would see leadership as leadership wherever it expresses itself throughout the

school, whether it is in management or whether it is running the school musical or

whatever it might be that it is the capacity of the person to bring people with you to

achieve a particular task’.

Concepts mentioned by both the principal and deputy principal included empowerment, giving independence, involvement in decision-making, recognising expertise, leading by example, delegation and creating an environment where people are not afraid to take risks and are encouraged to take initiative. There is strong overlap between the views expressed by the principal and deputy principal and those expressed by both post-holders and non post-holders.

There was very strong agreement among all participants in the focus group that leadership is a concept that can apply to all teachers, whether they hold a position or post of responsibility or not. The participants all agreed that distributed leadership is about empowering people, allowing them to take initiative and be involved in decision-making. They also agreed that it is about the atmosphere in the school that encourages teachers to take leadership roles in specific aspects of the school, e. g. extra-curricular activities and special functions that occur in the school from time to time.

There was agreement that distributed leadership incorporates the idea of teachers working together in teams and collaborating in planning and providing learning opportunities for students. This applies at both subject department level and at whole school level, for example having a team approach to policy development.

There was agreement that if all teachers took leadership responsibility beyond their

classroom, e. g. for students' behaviour in the corridor, it would be a very good school. But

a note of caution was sounded about some teachers taking on too much power and the need

for the principal to “ direct” came through strongly

“ he directs us to make sure we're all speaking with one voice to students and parents”.

All were in agreement that the principal and deputy play a particular leadership role, whether in managing staff or directing practices, so that there will be a shared vision in the school.

The post-holders themselves discussed the preparation and training they received when

appointed to their posts of responsibility. There was strong agreement that they had no

formal training for their post. They watched other post-holders doing similar jobs,

especially year heads. They all agreed that not only did you watch them but you consulted

with them and asked their advice and opinion. Some posts, however, are new and their

incumbents therefore have no 'predecessor' or colleagues to consult with.

These posts

require "an awful lot of initiative".

Some time was given to discussing the system in place for communication between post-holders and the principal or deputy principal. The participants in the group consider meetings, whether formal or informal, with the principal or deputy as being a form of support to them in their role. The arrangements for formal meetings varied significantly between schools and also between the two levels of postholders, i. e. assistant principals are more likely to have formal meetings with the principal and deputy than special duties teachers. The participants agreed that the specia