

# Distributive leadership in public schools: Experiences and perceptions of teachers in the Soweto region

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*In current times, the increasing demands of principalship and the complexities facing schools have led to the emergence of distributive forms of leadership in schools. The dissatisfaction with traditional models has resulted in a paradigm shift where leadership focus on the position of individuals in the hierarchy has been rejected in favour of collective leadership practices. In an era of democracy, distributive leadership continues to attract attention as a relevant model for the twenty-first century school. Using a mixed methods approach, we investigated teacher experiences and perceptions of the practice of distributive leadership in South African public primary schools in the Soweto region. Soweto is a township in South Africa steeped in political history associated with the struggle against apartheid (pre-1994) and which, to date, comprises predominantly black residents. Findings from the qualitative phase of the research revealed that distributive leadership had not taken root in schools in Soweto. However, the quantitative findings showed the early stages of a movement towards distributive leadership.*

**Keywords:** distributive leadership, collective leadership, participative leadership styles, teacher leadership, teams, professional development, school climate

## Introduction and background to the problem

In the face of continuous change in the educational environment, such as the nature of work in a knowledge society, educational reforms and the accelerated pace of change, traditional leadership models appear to be inadequate. Traditional command and control approaches to leadership have proved unsuccessful in sustaining school and learner improvements (Harris, 2005a:160). This has resulted in the call by educational theorists, reformers and practitioners for a fundamental re-conceptualisation of leadership practice in the twenty-first century (Harris & Day, 2003:96; Grant & Singh, 2009:289; Spillane, 2009:70). The accepted view of leadership as being located in a person or position is being challenged (Gronn, 2003:18) while more participative, collaborative and distributed forms of leadership are being favoured. The distinction between leadership as a position and leadership as a function can be blurred if principalship is conceptualised as a “practice whose responsibilities, functions and actions are shared by principals and teachers” (Sergiovanni, 2005:42).

Leadership in the post-heroic era is less about instructing or controlling people, but rather about working co-operatively with them to promote teamwork, involvement, empowerment and risk-taking (Oduro, 2004:23). Similarly, post-modernism advocates that leaders move away from the hierarchy, which is irrelevant in a fluid organisation, towards a democratic approach that is inclusive, participative and consultative (Van der Mescht & Tyala, 2008:221-222). Participative approaches are relevant in a democratic South Africa where the voices of all stakeholders are important (Sackney & Mitchell, 2001 cited in Bush, 2007:399-400). Site-based management, which prevailed in post-apartheid South Africa (1994), emphasized collective leadership by shifting the locus of control from the principal to all stakeholders in the school community (Van der Mescht & Tyala, 2008:222).

One of the changes in the educational landscape is the expansion and intensification of the work of principals worldwide (Gronn, 2003:151). In South Africa principals are encountering heavy workloads (Steyn, 2002a:264) and are facing diverse expectations due to an expansion of their role from management

and control to educational leadership (Mestry & Singh, 2007:478). Radical and continuous change has taken place in South African schools as the country shifted drastically from the segregated political system of apartheid to democracy. These changes include technological and demographic shifts, decentralization, issues of accountability, societal violence, economic changes and new legislation, which have contributed to the complexities in schools (Mestry, 2009:4). Therefore, in present times the role of the principal is based on the need to cope with change and cope with complexity (Harris, 2003a:13).

Leadership and management can no longer be confined to those in formal leadership positions (Harris & Muijs, 2005:6). Diverse expertise and flexible forms of leadership are required to address the multifaceted challenges in schools (Harris & Spillane, 2008:31). It is in this context, the expansion and intensification of the principal's work, that the development of the concept of distributive leadership is emerging (Gronn, 2003:151). Distributive leadership is thus a pragmatic response to changing times (Harris, 2007:323).

The education leadership literature is dominated with research that is focused on the principal, entrenching the assumption that leadership is synonymous with the principal (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006:96), and overlooking other sources of school leadership. Research into distributive leadership and teacher leadership are new fields of investigation in South Africa, but some preliminary research has been undertaken by Grant (2006), Grant and Singh (2009) and Grant, Gardner, Kajee, Moodley and Somaroo (2010).

The aim of our research was to investigate teachers' experiences and perceptions of the practice of distributive leadership in South African public primary schools in the Soweto region. This study did not seek to establish whether distributive leadership had an impact on school effectiveness.

In order to fulfil the aim of this study the specific objectives were to:

- investigate how leadership is enacted at public primary schools from the point of view of teachers
- ascertain the consequences of the leadership that is enacted at schools
- investigate teachers' views towards distributive leadership, and
- examine how leadership is distributed among post level one teachers in schools.

## **Towards distributive leadership**

Leadership from the distributive perspective does not focus on the position of individuals in a hierarchical organisation but on leadership as a collective activity (Harris, 2003b:75). This view has consistent empirical support from studies of effective leadership which have shown that the location of leadership authority does not necessarily emanate from the person of the leader but can be dispersed in between and among the staff within the school (Harris & Muijs, 2005:6). Gold (2004:73) depicts the movement from the single, heroic leader to the ultimate distribution of leadership in teams (Figure 1). Educational leadership in South African schools has progressed along a similar path, with principals being the sole leader in schools at first and then leadership being extended to school management teams (SMTs) and school governing bodies (SGBs).

## **Conceptualising distributive leadership**

Gronn (2000 cited in Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006:46) views distributive leadership as an "emergent property of a group of interacting individuals" where leadership is the product of "conjoint agency". As leaders and followers collaborate in order to accomplish group tasks the roles between leaders and followers begin to blur (Harris & Day, 2003:89). Leadership is fluid and emergent rather than fixed, and is related to collective problem solving and working collaboratively (Harris, 2003b:76). We therefore decided to underpin this study in the framework of Activity Theory (Engestrom, 1999 cited in Gronn, 2003:85), which emphasizes leadership as a collective phenomenon, the centrality of the division of labour, the interdependency of relationships and the notion of emergent activities. In Activity Theory "the potential for leadership is present in the flow of activities in which a set of organisation members find

themselves enmeshed” (Gronn, 2000 cited in Harris, 2005a:163). Activity Theory, therefore, refutes the argument that leadership is the domain of one person such as the principal and provides a framework for the distribution of leadership.

Spillane (2004 cited in Leithwood *et al.*, 2006:47) refers to the “social distribution of leadership”. Here, distributive leadership is viewed as “the enactment of leadership tasks as potentially stretched over the practice of two or more leaders, followers, and their situation” and also “generated in the interactions” between these (Spillane & Sherer, 2004:6). In this instance leadership is concerned with interdependency rather than dependency and embraces a variety of leaders in diverse roles who share leadership responsibility (Harris, 2005b:11).

There are many concepts that are aligned with distributive leadership. Capacity building means “broad-based, skilful involvement in the work of leadership” (Harris & Lambert, 2003:13). Leadership density implies that, when a greater number of people are involved in the work of the organisation, play a key role in decision making, have access to information and participate in knowledge creation and transfer, high leadership density occurs (Sergiovanni, 2001 cited in Harris, 2005a:164). The African philosophy of ubuntu espouses principles that resonate well with distributive leadership such as the collective and co-operative working of people (Mbigi, 1994 cited in Bush, 2007:403), fostering a culture of inclusiveness in the work environment and the interdependency of relationships (Msila, 2008:68-70).

Distributive leadership gives rise to the concept of teacher leadership by expanding the boundaries of leadership.

## Teacher leadership

Distributive leadership in practice means that teachers have the opportunity to lead as well as take responsibility for the most important areas of change needed in the school (Harris & Muijs, 2005:14). Hence, teachers can be viewed as “co-producers of leadership” (Harris, 2005b:11). No longer are teachers confined to the role of follower but are now teacher leaders irrespective of whether they hold formal leadership positions in the school or not (Grant, 2006:513). However, if teachers were to take on greater leadership responsibility, what then is the role of the principal?

## The role of the principal as a facilitator of distributive leadership

Distributive leadership does not seek to remove formal leadership structures but assumes that a relationship exists “between vertical and lateral leadership processes” and that the focus of leadership is on interaction between these processes (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006:46).

Principals play a crucial role in fostering the necessary organisational conditions and climate for distributive leadership to flourish (Mulford, 2003:27). This means that principals must be able to redistribute power and authority, distribute leadership and provide support to others (Hopkins & Jackson, 2003:100). Distributive leadership requires principals who can establish and sustain a collaborative school culture (Glanz, 2006:3) and who promote trust relationships (Hopkins & Jackson, 2003:101). Principals can use the distributive approach to enhance and sustain leadership by institutionalising a leadership-centred school culture. Fullan (2001:10) highlights that good leaders develop leaders at other levels for the future of the system as a whole. In this context the principal is seen to be a “leader of leaders” (Harris & Muijs, 2002 cited in Mulford, 2003:21).

## Research design

The research question was explored using a mixed methods approach which was executed through a sequential exploratory design strategy (Creswell, 2009:211). This choice of design would enable the concepts of leadership and distributive leadership to be explored in the initial qualitative phase and enable the development of an instrument to be administered in the quantitative phase. The mixing of data in this study does not occur by integrating the data from each phase or connecting across phases but rather by

“embedding a secondary form of data within a larger study”, using the qualitative phase as a primary database (Creswell, 2009:208).

The study was underpinned by the pragmatic epistemological position which develops from “actions, situations and consequences rather than antecedent conditions...” (Creswell, 2009:10). Pragmatism is concerned with practical approaches to research problems and provides a philosophical framework for mixed methods studies which focuses on the research problem and employs methods from different traditions to answer the problem (Denscombe, 2007:107-108).

Phase 1 entailed a generic qualitative study and data was collected by means of in-depth focus group interviews in three schools. Using purposive sampling, three schools were selected according to evaluation criteria provided by the Whole School Evaluation Unit of the Gauteng Department of Education. School A was evaluated as being acceptable (Category 3), School C was evaluated as needing support (Category 2) and School B was evaluated as needing urgent attention (Category 1). All participants were teachers who were not formally appointed as leaders and who possessed a minimum of five years’ teaching experience. Informed consent was obtained from the interviewees in order for them to participate in the study. Open-ended questions were used to explore the concept of leadership from the participants’ perspectives and thereafter semi-structured questions allowed for probing and extended responses on aspects pertaining to distributive leadership. Document analysis was undertaken in order to complement the interview findings. A pilot study led to the modification of the interview schedule. Validity was promoted by conducting peer reviews with colleagues regarding the study procedure, the congruency of the findings and the raw data (Merriam, 2002:31). The qualitative data was analysed using Tesch’s Method (1990 cited in Creswell, 2009:186), which involves the identification and coding of topics, the development of conceptual categories and the formulation of themes and sub-themes.

In phase 2, the quantitative phase, a standardised questionnaire was designed that was grounded in the findings from the qualitative phase. Utilizing random sampling, the questionnaire was administered across 27 schools to 300 teachers who did not hold formal leadership positions. The respondents were assured that confidentiality and anonymity of all the information supplied would be maintained. Section A of the questionnaire captured the biographical data of the respondents while Section B comprised 40 closed-ended questions pertaining to the practice of distributive leadership in schools. A six-point Likert response rating scale was used ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). Section C of the instrument comprised two open questions. Content validity and construct validity were employed in this phase of the study. The quantitative data was subjected to statistical analysis and factor analysis procedures using the PASW Statistics 18 computer software programme (Norusis, 2010).

## Findings and Discussion

The qualitative findings revealed that distributive leadership had not taken root in schools in Soweto. However, the quantitative findings showed the early stages of a movement towards distributive leadership. These findings will be presented and interpreted under the following headings:

### Leadership styles

The qualitative data revealed that, in schools in Soweto, traditional leadership practices with a strong hierarchy, and principals who use autocratic leadership styles present powerful barriers to distributive leadership. In the rigid, hierarchical structure of schools, power and decision-making remained in the domain of the principal and SMT. One respondent elaborated:

*Most of the times he’s [the principal] the one who dominate[s]. He use[d] to tell us that we need to do one, two, three, and then hierarchy yes it is still there, it is working because sometimes you find that maybe SMT, they need to meet as SMT and conclude about something and when they come they will just have to tell us that this is what we need to do which I think it mustn’t be like that because they need to even ask for our contribution. Normally we are being told what we must do... (Respondent 5, School A).*

Chrispeels (2004:10) asserts that “the stronger the institutional norms of hierarchy and control, the less likely the leaders will sense agency and authority to act to distribute leadership”. In a firmly entrenched hierarchy, power remains in the confines of the upper echelons such as the principal or the SMT. Distributive leadership requires that formally appointed leaders relinquish power to others so that “the latent, creative powers of teachers can be released” (Barth, 1988 cited in Grant *et al.*, 2010:403).

There was evidence that collaborative and participative styles of leadership were not adequately practised. A participant in School A claimed: “*All the efforts we have what we call collaborative where everyone must participate and then participative where everyone must participate but in here no, it is not*” (Respondent 6). Another respondent in School C expressed that all the stakeholders were not adequately involved and stated: “*Everybody must take part but if there is a certain group of people who are doing things on their own then there won't be smooth running of a school*” (Respondent 2).

A participative approach is important in the current school context, since it reduces the workload of the principal through the distribution of leadership functions and roles (Sergiovanni, 1984 cited in Bush, 2007:397). In a true collaborative school culture, strong relationships develop between members, diversity is valued, problem solving becomes the responsibility of everyone and leadership is distributed, contextual and continuous (Glanz, 2006:2).

When the qualitative findings were tested quantitatively, it was found that principals are in the early stages of a movement towards the devolution of decision making to committees, power sharing and participative decision making. This was confirmed by the second factor of the factor analysis procedure named **participative leadership style**. Table 1 indicates that mean scores of the items in this factor varied from 3.55 to 4.20. Although the mean scores are not strong, they support the advancement from rigid hierarchical boundaries of leadership and autocratic leadership styles towards a more participative leadership style conducive to distributive leadership. The mean score for transparency in the school regarding decision making was the lowest (3.55). This concurs with the qualitative findings which indicated the need for principals to employ greater transparency in decision-making processes.

Activity Theory views leadership as a collective phenomenon. In order for activities to become units of analysis, a decentering of the individual leader must occur (Gronn, 2003:87). This will be facilitated by principals who adopt collaborative and participative leadership styles where power is shared with other key players in the school community and where participative decision making is a reality.

## School climate

A theme that emerged in the qualitative phase of the study is school climate. The participants in all three schools offered many examples of a negative school climate. A respondent in School A commented thus: “*At the same time the atmosphere creates hateracy amongst us staff... there will be conflict because of one, two, three*” (Respondent 1).

Prinsloo (2003:144) states that a negative effect of the autocratic leadership style in a school is poor human relations. In an activity system such as a school, poor human relations between the teachers will hinder the distribution of leadership.

The demotivation and despondency of the participants came across clearly. Respondent 2 in School C stated: “*...we are old teachers and we think we have that experience and expertise. So now recently because of this situation we become so disillusioned*”. Another respondent in School B remarked: “*When we think of those leaders and want to do something for those kids and you said, uh I don't do it just because of so and so*” (Respondent 2).

Morale is concerned with people's feelings, states of mind, mental attitudes and emotional attitudes (Kruger & Steinmann, 2003:16). If teachers perceive that their needs are not being met, this will have a negative effect on their morale (Steyn, 2002b:86) as appeared to be the situation in all three schools.

The participants expressed their job dissatisfaction. Respondent 5 in School A had come to “*hate this profession itself*”. Other respondents spoke about “*staying at home*” or “*resigning*” (Respondent 2, School C) and feeling “*stressed*” (Respondent 3, School A).

An autocratic leadership style leads to negative effects including a tense school atmosphere where job dissatisfaction exists and where staff experience stress (Prinsloo, 2003:144). In an unhealthy school climate the goal of teaching and learning cannot be fully realized. Respondent 6 in School A indicated: *“Well you can say partially we do achieve not eh not totally, because we are working under stressful situations”*.

A positive climate has positive effects on teaching and learning as well as learner achievement (Kruger & Steinmann, 2003:15). The principal can play a role as an instructional leader who increases student achievement by influencing the school climate in a positive manner (Ibtesam, 2005:336).

In the quantitative investigation the factor **creating a distributive school climate** resulted from the factor analysis and consisted of items that reflect upon a school climate conducive to distributive leadership. The mean scores of the items in this factor ranged from 4.06 to 4.65 (Table 2). Teachers showed partial agreement with all the items. Lower mean scores for items relating to teacher morale (4.06), recognising teacher efforts (4.07) and the creation of a healthy work environment (4.12) indicate that greater improvement is needed in these areas.

## Professional development

The findings posit the professional development of teachers and principals to be important to the distribution of leadership. This is supported by insights from Activity Theory which regard professional development to be a critical tool to improve leadership practice. Respondent 5 in School A suggested that teachers receive leadership training to avoid staff conflicts, while respondents in School C were of the view that professional development would enhance the leadership skills of principals.

The professional development of teachers in leadership is widely supported in the literature (Harris, 2003b:78; Hopkins & Jackson, 2003:97; Grant, 2008:85). According to Chrispeels (2004:14), principals often lack training in problem solving, group dynamics, participative decision making and approaches to distributing leadership.

In the quantitative phase, data from the open questions of the questionnaire revealed that, according to teachers' perceptions, hands-on leadership opportunities for teachers enabled their professional development. Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (2003:197) maintain that, when teachers reflect about their hands-on leadership experiences, a powerful strategy is created for dealing with the lack of training opportunities for teacher leaders. By providing teachers with leadership opportunities and by supporting, coaching and mentoring them, a view of the principal as a “leader of leaders” emerges.

## Team structures

The qualitative data showed that team structures were institutionalised in only one of the three schools, namely School A. When this was tested quantitatively it was found that 66.6% of the participants had the opportunity to execute leadership in teams or committees, either as members (36.3%) or leaders (30.3%). It, therefore, appears that in Soweto primary schools there is a movement from traditional, hierarchical structures to flatter, team-based structures, which is a trend worldwide as indicated by Harris (2007:327). Activity Theory supports the division of labour in a school and this can be facilitated through team structures which ease the expansion and intensification of work pressures in schools.

The African philosophy of ubuntu supports forms of leadership that are participative and inclusive of people in the work environment, which is another explanation as to why the teachers in Soweto support working in teams. Prinsloo (1998 cited in Msila, 2008:70-71) concurs that the ubuntu leadership style is a movement away from hierarchical structures towards a “cooperative and supportive form of leadership in which collective solidarity of the group is employed and respected”.

## The effects of distributive leadership

The participants perceived that distributive leadership has positive effects for themselves and their schools. In the qualitative investigation the participants in all three schools were unanimous that such an approach

would enable participative decision making. An activity system is characterised by “multi-voicedness” where the views, traditions and interests of teachers as well as all members of the school community are regarded as important (Beatty & Feldman, 2009:4-5). Hargreaves and Fink (2008:239) argue that the ultimate goal of distributive leadership is to create a truly democratic citizenship.

The quantitative findings indicated that the respondents “agreed” to “strongly agreed” that involving teachers in leadership improves teacher relationships (77.9%), develops teacher confidence (69.1%), increases teacher morale (75.0%) and increases job satisfaction (69.1%). In addition, 79.8% of the respondents were of the view that their involvement in leadership roles would lead to an improvement in learner achievement. A study by Silins and Mulford (2002 cited in Hargreaves & Fink, 2006:101) supports the perception of the participants in the current study that there is a link between distributive leadership and learner achievement, and found a positive effect on learner outcomes when leadership was distributed throughout the school community and teachers were empowered in their areas of interest.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In order to facilitate a shift away from traditional models of leadership it is recommended that greater emphasis be placed on the practice of leadership styles that support the distribution of leadership by the Department of Education (DoE) through training programmes, which should include follow-up measures at schools. Leadership styles that foster collegiality, capacity building, collaboration, teamwork and human relationships are in line with the contextual challenges facing schools in the twenty-first century. More prominence can also be given to the philosophy of ubuntu leadership, especially in the context of township schools. While the South African DoE supports participative leadership styles based on democratic principles, there seems to be a gap between policy and the practice of participative leadership styles in schools in Soweto. Jansen (2004:126) contends that “policy is not practice” and that, while the framework for democratic education is in place, South Africa has a long journey ahead “to make ideals concrete and achievable within educational institutions”. In this regard, principals need to learn how to share power and devolve decision making to others.

Principals play a crucial role in facilitating the conditions and climate conducive to distributive leadership in schools. Training programmes for principals can focus on the concept of distributive leadership, its role in school transformation and the skills needed to institutionalise a distributive culture in schools. Principals need to be convinced that distributive leadership does not disregard their positional authority as the main leaders of the school. Instead principals need to view themselves as “leaders of leaders” whose role is to groom future leaders and promote sustainable leadership.

The hierarchical structure of schools need not be viewed as a barrier to the institutionalisation of distributive leadership. Distributive leadership, viewed as concerted action through relationships, enables collaboration among members of staff who hold different positions in the hierarchy (Bennett, Harvey, Wise & Woods, 2003:9). It is, therefore, recommended that distributive forms of leadership be integrated into a complementary vertical leadership structure in schools. Alternate structures such as networks or webs can be introduced to diminish the focus of leadership as a command and control function from the apex of the hierarchy to a view of collective leadership where principals are a part of a collaborative framework or community of practice. The principal’s role can then be more easily understood as facilitator, mediator and supporter; a more collegial school atmosphere can thus be created.

In supporting the need for a re-conceptualisation of leadership practice in the twenty-first century and a search for alternate and relevant models of leadership, this research highlights that distributive leadership has much to offer schools. The findings of the qualitative investigation indicated that leadership in Soweto is rooted in traditional leadership practices and that a shift is needed from autocratic styles of leadership, hierarchical structures and non-participative decision-making if distributive leadership is to thrive. The quantitative investigation, however, showed the early stages of a movement towards distributive leadership, which needs to be nurtured and developed. The optimistic attitudes of teachers towards the concept of distributive leadership were conveyed in the study. Further research can be undertaken to explore the views of principals and other stakeholders regarding distributive leadership. Practitioners

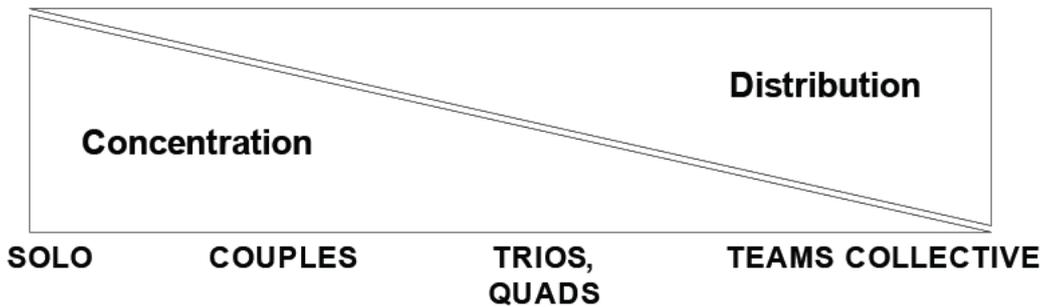
and policy makers are urged to take cognisance of the importance of distributive leadership in successful school transformation.

**Table 1: Items associated with participative leadership style**  
(position in text - page 8, paragraph 1)

Item no.	Description of item	Mean score	Rank order
B13	The decisions of committees are respected by the principal.	4.20	1
B10	The principal shares power with teachers.	3.88	2
B11	Teachers participate in important decision making.	3.86	3
B3	There is transparency in the school regarding decision making.	3.55	4

**Table 2: Items associated with creating a distributive school climate**  
(position in text - page 9, paragraph 5)

Item no.	Description of item	Mean score	Rank order
B30	Teacher relations are good.	4.65	1
B5	I feel free to express my views openly in meetings where the principal is present.	4.35	2
B7	The principal provides support to teachers who take on leadership roles.	4.30	3
B29	Committees operate on the basis of trust.	4.20	4
B26	I experience job satisfaction.	4.16	5
B28	The principal creates a work environment in which motivated teachers can flourish.	4.12	6
B4	My efforts are always recognized by the principal.	4.07	7
B27	The morale of teachers is high.	4.06	8



**Figure 1: Leadership along a dimension of responsibility and influence (Gold, 2004:73)**  
(position in text - page 3, paragraph 1)

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