

Chapter 50

Exploring Distributive Leadership in South African Public Primary Schools in the Soweto Region

Raj Mestry

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Suraiya R Naicker

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The increasing expectations of the principalship and the intensification of the challenges facing schools today have resulted in the emergence of distributive forms of leadership in schools worldwide. These developments prompted research in schools in South Africa, more specifically in the Soweto region, to inquire if distributed leadership had manifested. Soweto is a township in the Gauteng province of South Africa that is associated with the historic struggle against the apartheid government (pre-1994). A qualitative approach executed by means of focus group interviews was employed at three schools to explore the views of teachers who did not hold formal leadership positions. It was found that distributive leadership had not transpired in the schools that are largely rooted in classical leadership practices. This chapter provides an account of the study while elucidating the concept of distributive leadership and examines the role of formal leaders within a distributive leadership framework.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that effective leadership is paramount to successful schooling (Bush, Kiggundu & Moorosi, 2011; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Huber & Pashiardis, 2008). However, the relevance of traditional leadership models for schools in the twenty-first century are being challenged by theorists, reformers and practitioners, who advocate a fundamental re-conceptualisation of leadership in the twenty-first century (Grant & Singh, 2009; Grenda, 2006; Spillane, 2009). The accepted view of leadership as located in

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a position or person has been rejected (Gronn, 2003; Senge, 2006; Spillane, 2009; Spillane, 2005) in favour of more collective forms of leadership. Leadership is increasingly being viewed as a practice rather than a role (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2005). This raises questions as to where the sources of leadership are located in the contemporary school.

Economic, social, technological and political changes have contributed to the changing role of educational leaders. Globalisation drives the need for high educational standards and for meeting competitive economic demands (Harris & Muijs, 2005:1). Traditional command and control leadership approaches fall short of addressing changes in the current educational environment such as the nature of work in a knowledge society, educational reforms and the accelerated pace of change. Traditional models hindered the practice of more flexible leadership styles and restricted teachers from taking on informal leadership roles (Moloi, 2005; Neuman & Simmons, 2000). In the post-heroic approach, command and control approaches to leadership give way to collaborative approaches that favour human relations, thus encouraging teamwork, participation, capacity building and risk-taking (Oduro, 2004). A shift from the hierarchy to flatter lateral structures is supported by post-modernism, which encourages more fluid organisations and a democratic approach to leadership, featuring inclusivity, participation and consultation (Bush, 2007). Such an approach resonates with the South African context, which strives to uphold democratic principles since the abolishment of apartheid in 1994. Bush (2007) notes the relevance of the participative leadership model for a democratic South Africa where the voices of all stakeholders, such as parents, learners, teachers and the broader community are important. In South Africa, a participative approach to leadership was facilitated by the implementation of site-based management which shifted the locus of control from the principal to all stakeholders in the school community (Van der Mescht & Tyala, 2008). Site-based management was operationalised in South African schools through the introduction of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and School Management Teams (SMTs).

The contemporary school has become complex in structure and purpose and therefore organisational change and development will require more fluid and distributed forms of leadership (Crawford, 2005). Dimmock (2003, p.4) argues that in turbulent educational environments “coherent” and “synergistic” approaches to leadership have come about in response to radical change. One of these emerging leadership approaches in schools today that is receiving prominence is distributive leadership. Theorists maintain that distributive leadership captures and reflects the evolving model of leadership in schools today (Harris, 2005a; Hartley, 2007). Schools can no longer be described in terms of traditional leader-follower dualisms (Gronn, 2003; Woods & Gronn, 2009). Spillane (2005, p.143) refers to distributive leadership as an “antidote” to the heroic leadership model. This perspective is shared by Hartley (2007) who strongly asserts that distributive leadership will replace the flawed heroic leadership phase.

We take the stance that the distributive approach, where all members are enabled to act as agents for change, is essential to the success of a school in the twenty-first century. MacBeath and Cheng (2008, p.270) concur with this perspective in the ensuing quote:

Developing leadership is not just about honing the skills of those in the most senior positions, important though that undoubtedly is. It is also about releasing the energies of every member of staff and every learner and about giving each of them a sense that their contributions are valued.

The distributive approach holds promise as theorists call for an alternate paradigm in school leadership. In this chapter we focus on the experiences and perceptions of teachers regarding the phenomenon of distributive leadership in their schools.

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