

Distributed leadership in South Africa: yet another passing fad or a robust theoretical tool for investigating school leadership practice?

Carolyn (Callie) Grant (2017 Article prepared for publication in the journal, *School Leadership and Management*).

INTRODUCTION

Distributed leadership is a concept which has gained prominence in the international literature on education leadership since the mid-1990s (Timperley 2005). In its simplest form, distributed leadership theory incorporates the notion of multiple leaders who interact with followers in dynamic ways. Harris (2004, 13) describes how distributed leadership is currently ‘in vogue’ in many parts of the world and has emerged as a popular alternative to orthodox ways of thinking about leadership.

Orthodox ways of thinking about leadership dominated educational institutions during apartheid South Africa. Education was centralised, hierarchically structured and schools, as organs of the state, were used to segregate young people along racial lines, thereby perpetuating an unequal and unjust society (Christie, Butler and Potterton 2007). The purpose of school leadership was primarily one of control to ensure strict implementation of a curriculum which discriminated on the basis of race but also of language, class and gender (South Africa. Department of Education 1996). The state sought to enforce control through rigid bureaucracy and rule bound hierarchy (Pillay 2008; Williams 2011) which resulted in top-down forms of management, autocratic control and non-participatory decision-making processes in the majority of the country’s mainstream¹ schools (Naicker and Mestry 2011, 2013).

Two decades later, and having emerged from its colonial and apartheid past, South Africa boasts an inspiring Constitution, an impressive Bill of Rights and a vast array of policies aimed at the democratisation of its schools and, ultimately, its society (Williams 2011; Grant 2014). This democratic policy context offers an ideal backdrop for new school leadership theories which speak to inclusivity and shared decision-making practices. Distributed leadership is one

¹ Mainstream schools (Christie, Butler and Potterton 2007) are those schools which constitute the numeric norm in South Africa. Making up 85% of the country’s schools, these schools are socially and economically disadvantaged and are plagued by poverty, illiteracy, HIV/AIDS, violence and substance abuse

such example which is gaining currency as an alternative to traditional forms of leadership, as the South African literature is beginning to show (Mpangase, 2010; Naicker & Mestry, 2013). Williams recommends that distributed leadership should ‘be seriously considered as a means of addressing the leadership crisis in many South African schools’ (2011, 192) while Naicker and Mestry are of the view that ‘distributed leadership has much to offer schools’ (2011, 105). However, as Williams rightly argues, while the political space has been created for the implementation of a form of distributed leadership in South Africa, in practice, it ‘has not been actualised as envisaged in official policy’ (2011, 191).

While the purpose of this article is to argue for distributed leadership as a useful and potentially powerful theoretical lens in the context of the leadership challenges and complexities inherent in the South African schooling system, it comes with a strong proviso. It warns against a superficial and common sense use of distributed leadership and, instead, argues for a more nuanced and theoretically robust use of the concept, which speaks not only to ‘who’ is involved in the distribution of leadership and ‘what’ is distributed, but also ‘how’ the distribution happens and ‘why’ it happens in the manner it does. In building the argument, the article draws on a South African publications-based doctoral study of distributed teacher leadership (Grant 2010) for its evidence.

THE STUDY

The doctoral thesis by publications (Grant 2010) aimed to ‘trouble’ the terrain of teacher leadership – at the level of theory and praxis, in the South African schooling context. Seven published academic journal articles and one book chapter (referred to as chronicles) constituted the ‘core’ of the study. These eight chronicles were underpinned by six research strands and connected retrospectively by three research questions: (1) How is teacher leadership understood and practised by educators in mainstream South African schools? (2) What are the characteristics of contexts that either support or hinder the take-up of teacher leadership? (3) How can we theorise teacher leadership within a distributed leadership framing? Within the mixed-methods research tradition, a three-phase contingent design was employed in a secondary analysis of the original findings. The culminating ‘meta-inference’ (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003) provided the original knowledge contribution and informs much of the remainder of this article. This article draws on two data-types from this publications-based study; the first type draws from the eight individual chronicles and is referenced as chronicles

1 to 8); while the second type draws on the meta-inference itself and is referenced as Grant (2010).

The article begins with a description of what distributed leadership is in its simplest form and then suggests why it has become popular in post-apartheid South Africa. Precisely because of this popularity, it raises a number of limitations related to the concept and warns that these need to be borne in mind when drawing on the concept in leadership research. In order to circumvent these limitations, the article argues for a theoretically robust form of distributed leadership conceptualised as socio-cultural practice, framed as a product of the joint interactions of school leaders, followers and aspects of their situation (Gronn 2000; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond 2004; Spillane 2006) and recommends a sequential distributed leadership framing for the South African context.

WHAT IS DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP?

Internationally, the field of educational leadership has been challenged on two fronts. First, it has been preoccupied with the work of those in formal management positions and second, it has concentrated on the characteristics, roles and tasks of those in formal management positions at the expense of leadership practices and particularly the leadership practices of teachers and learners (Spillane, Diamond and Jita 2003; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond 2004). The findings of the South African doctoral study were no different with leadership being primarily understood ‘in relation to headship, equating principal with leader’ (Chronicle 1, 518) and, as one educator commented, leadership ‘often remains located in the person of the principal who is sometimes unwilling to relinquish power to teachers’ (Chronicle 2, 55).

In direct contrast, and as early as the mid-1950s, Gibb (1954), in a seminal work, suggested that the leadership functions performed in any group could either be ‘focused’ or ‘distributed’ where ‘leaders will be identifiable both in terms of the frequency and in terms of the multiplicity or pattern of functions performed’ (884). More recently Gronn, working within the frame of distributed leadership as activity (and activity theory in particular), is of the opinion that ‘leadership is more appropriately understood as a fluid and emergent, rather than as a fixed, phenomenon’ (2000, 324). For Bennett, Harvey, Wise and Woods (2003), distributed leadership is a way of thinking about leadership which can be described as ‘not something done by an individual to others’ but rather ‘an emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise’ (3).

Informed by this literature and framed by the country’s political/social imperative to democratise schooling, the South African doctoral study conceptualised distributed leadership

as neither individual nor positional, but rather as ‘a group process in which a range of people can participate’ (Chronicle 7, 1). Based on the principles of inclusivity and capacity building, this distributed perspective involves ‘working with all stakeholders in a collegial and creative way to seek out the untapped leadership potential of people and develop this potential in a supportive environment for the betterment of the school’ (Chronicle 5, 127). Crucial are the leadership practices of teachers (see chronicles 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7) because distributed leadership is ‘premised upon high levels of teacher involvement and reinforces the notion of leadership potential in every teacher’ (Chronicle 3, 6).

But defined in this way, how different is distributed leadership from other types of leadership such as shared or participatory leadership? What makes it unique? Does it take our understanding of leadership forward or is it merely a case, as Spillane (2006) provocatively asks, of old wine in new bottles? These are critical questions and ones which should be taken seriously in emerging democracies such as South Africa, primarily because a proliferation of leadership concepts (some erroneously called theories) have come to characterise the field of educational leadership, both globally and locally. New concepts have inserted themselves into the leadership discourse, accompanied by much fanfare, only to become redundant after a relatively short space of time (Harris and Spillane 2008). In the South African literature, examples include moulded leadership (Heystek 2007), transformational leadership (Singh & Lokotsch 2005), instructional leadership (Msila 2011), distributed leadership (Williams 2011) and teacher leadership (Grant 2012). These examples speak to the segmental characterisation of the field (Maton 2014), where new approaches are added alongside existing approaches or where the existing approaches are re-labelled and re-presented as something original and radical. The danger with this segmental characterisation is that new ideas fail to draw on and integrate existing concepts and ideas and, in so doing, impede cumulative knowledge building (Maton 2014). This leaves the field grounded in context, description and prescription (Spillane 2006) and restricted in terms of its explanatory power. Currently distributed leadership is the idea of the moment (Harris and Spillane 2008). But why is it popular and for how long?

THE POPULARITY OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA

Internationally, it has been argued that distributed leadership is currently *in vogue* because of its normative, representational and empirical power (Harris and Spillane 2008). In South Africa, distributed leadership has, more recently, emerged as the ‘new kid on the block’. Why is this so?

As already alluded to, post-apartheid educational policy such as the *South African Schools' Act* of 1996 and the *Task Team Report on Education Management Development* of 1996 envisages a society based on the values of inclusivity, equality and social justice; it legislates the structural democratisation of schools and endorses participatory leadership, management and decision-making practices. Within this policy framework, the right to be represented and have a voice within a school constituency aligns well with the concept of distributed leadership, giving it representational power. Thus, within this conceptualisation, teachers, learners and parents are represented and granted a say in school decision-making processes.

But distributed leadership also has great normative power in South Africa. Schools in the 21st century are complex institutions, characterised by a plethora of socio-economic and cultural challenges and so it stands to reason that views that perpetuate the idea of the solo-leader and orthodox models of leadership are outdated and ineffective (Jita and Mokhele 2013). In contrast, a leadership approach carrying the label 'distributed leadership' has immediate appeal as a more appropriate leadership approach for today's complex school leadership challenges (Naicker and Mestry 2011). As a consequence, distributed leadership is seldom presented neutrally in the South African literature (Williams 2011; Naicker and Mestry 2013); instead it is attributed a positive charge (after Maton 2014) and promoted as 'the right way to lead'. Indeed, in light of this normative use of the concept, who would dare claim they were not distributing leadership? A confession such as this would immediately exile one to the 'dark side', the binary position at the opposite end of the leadership continuum where the negatively charged approaches such as autocratic, directive and transactional leadership styles reside.

Thus in the context of South Africa, distributed leadership has both normative power and representational power. But does it have empirical power? Harris and Spillane contend that there is increasing evidence globally that 'distributed leadership makes a positive difference to organisational outcomes and student learning' (2008, 32), although they do acknowledge that the evidence base can be increased. In South Africa, the empirical research base is particularly small, given the newness of the concept in educational research. Further research is essential before claims can be made to show that distributed leadership makes a positive difference to organisational performance and improved learner outcomes in an emerging democracy such as South Africa (Grant 2010; Naicker and Mestry 2013; Bush and Glover 2016).

THE LIMITATIONS AND DANGERS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

It is ironic that the present popularity of distributed leadership is perhaps its most serious limitation. As a concept it can be understood in lay terms; it is trendy and thus appealing to researchers and practitioners alike. However, if understood and adopted in a common sense way, it is, as the idiom suggests, likely to be ‘here today and gone tomorrow’ when another more appealing leadership descriptor is found.

Thus, despite its popularity, and exactly because of its common sense meaning, the term ‘distributed leadership’ is used loosely in the South African literature and lacks conceptual clarity. Botha describes how it attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices (2014). It is often used as a blanket phrase to describe any form of devolved or shared leadership, as the following excerpt illustrates: ‘distributed leadership means the same as dispersed leadership, shared leadership, collaborative leadership and democratic leadership’ (Botha and Triegaardt 2015, 426). The resultant conceptual confusion and overlap prevents ‘a clear operationalisation of the concept in empirical research’ (Hartley 2007, 202), thus limiting the potential for theoretical and analytical rigour.

A second critique of distributed leadership is that it has grown into a theory and frequently prescribed practice which promotes a ‘fantasy apolitical world’ (Lumby 2013, 592). But, as Gunter so aptly puts it, ‘educational leadership meets the issue of power head on’ (2005, 45) and she argues for an explicit theory of power when doing leadership work. So, if a distributed perspective is to be useful as a conceptual lens for school leadership work, then we need to raise questions about the location and exercise of power within an organisation and examine what is distributed and how it is distributed. Is it only technical tasks that are being distributed or is authority and responsibility also being distributed?

While it has earlier been argued that distributed leadership has normative power (Harris & Spillane 2008), this normative use is potentially dangerous. Hatcher (2005, 258) warns of the ‘seductive ideological character’ of distributed leadership which has been touted by some as ‘the answer’ to the leadership woes in present day schools – the right way to lead (see chronicles 1, 2, 3, 5 and 8). The doctoral study contends that ‘both the lack of clarity of the concept as well as its normative use in perceiving distributed leadership as something desirable ... are potential weaknesses of the theory’ (Grant 2010, 65).

So, is distributed leadership the right way to lead? Not necessarily, I argue if it is only conceptualised as a leader-plus aspect (Spillane *et al* 2004). But, if it is also conceptualised to investigate how leadership as a socio-cultural practice is ‘stretched’ over two or more leaders and how the followers and the situation ‘mutually constitute’ this practice (Spillane *et al* 2004; Grant 2010), then it does have currency and the necessary explanatory power to be operationalised in empirical research.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP CONCEPTUALISED AS SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICE

The leader-plus aspect of a shared activity, while important because it allows for the social distribution of the leadership enactment (Spillane *et al* 2004), is insufficient on its own (Grant 2010). Drawing on Spillane (2006), the doctoral study argues that ‘the leadership practice aspect is crucial because it is the unit of interest, framed as a product of the joint interactions of school leaders, followers and aspects of their situation such as tools and routines’ (Grant, 2010, 59). The fourth chronicle endorsed this point: ‘Education leadership should be viewed as a practice, a shared activity’ in which ‘all can practice’ (52). Spillane *et al* (2004) remind us that ‘what is critical are the *interdependencies* (authors’ emphasis) among the constitutive elements – leaders, followers, and the situation – of leadership activity’ (16). It follows then that the question is not merely whether leadership is distributed, but also *what* is distributed and *how* it is distributed across these inter-relationships. The location and exercise of power (Gunter 2005) becomes fundamental to this conceptualisation where ‘power is visible in the way people are positioned in schools, where people are positioned and who does the positioning’ (Grant 2010, 57). Are just the technical aspects being distributed or does the distribution extend to ‘the authority, responsibility, and hence legitimacy, to do or not do the work’ (Gunter 2005, 51)?

As with followers, the situation (or context) is ‘not external to leadership activity, but is one of the core constituting elements’ (Spillane *et al* 2004, 20). Thus, a distributed leadership practice is *situated* and cannot be extracted from its socio-cultural context (Grant 2010) or its historical and institutional settings (Spillane *et al* 2004). The situatedness of leadership emerged ‘as a constant theme across the chronicles’ in the doctoral study (Grant 2010, 243) and was understood ‘against a backdrop of a fledgling democracy emerging from an apartheid history whilst still carrying the legacy of poverty and inequality’ (Chronicle 1, 522). Gender and

rurality were particularly foregrounded in the second and eighth chronicles whilst HIV/AIDs was the focus in the third and fourth chronicles.

Conceptualised as a socio-cultural practice, distributed leadership is ‘in and of itself neither good nor bad’ (Chronicle 6, 291); neither is it a blueprint for doing school leadership more effectively (Spillane 2006). Instead, it enables a researcher to ‘generate insights into how leadership can be practised more or less effectively’ (Spillane 2006, 9). Thus, as declared earlier, distributed leadership is not ‘the answer’ to the leadership woes in present day schools; it is not necessarily the right way to lead. Indeed, as Timperley (2005) warns, there is risk involved in distributing leadership as it may result in the distribution of incompetence. She goes on to remind us that increasing the distribution of leadership is only desirable if ‘the quality of the leadership activities contributes to assisting teachers to provide more effective instruction to their students’ (2005, 417), and she argues that it is on the quality of the leadership activities that we should focus.

A DISTRIBUTED PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: A SEQUENTIAL FRAMING FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

In order to get purchase on the quality of distributed leadership activities, the doctoral study proposed a graded distributed leadership framework for the South African schooling context, informed primarily by the work of Gunter (2005).

Gunter (2005, 51) suggests that research into the distribution of leadership is being characterised variously in the literature as authorised, dispersed and democratic. This contradicts, to a certain extent, the position of Woods and Gronn (2009) who view distributed leadership and democratic leadership as two distinct entities. They argue that distributed leadership entails a ‘democratic deficit’ (430) and suggest that it be interrogated critically from the perspective of ‘a concern with building organisations that are more democratic and respectful of the human status of their members and other stakeholders’ (Woods and Gronn 2009, 446 – 447). Mindful of this criticism, the graded framing in the doctoral study conceptualised distributed leadership ‘in a manner which brought a democratic element to it’ (2010, 62). The study found value in Gunter’s characterisations of distributed leadership and adopted all three characterisations in its distributed leadership framing but, instead of viewing

the characterisations independently of each other, they were viewed ‘sequentially to allow for levels of possibility within a distributed leadership framing’ (Grant 2010, 61).

One of the strengths of the graded distributed leadership framing was that it was grounded in daily leadership practices and drawn from six individual teacher leadership studies in mainstream South African schools. It thus speaks to the realities of teacher leadership on the ground and is relevant to an emerging democratic context. Furthermore, and drawing on Harris (2003, 322), the study makes the important point that:

To do justice to any research on teacher leadership, we cannot persist in disregarding or devaluing the notion of teacher leadership as a form of distributed leadership because to do so is to knowingly invest in forms of leadership theory and practice that make little, if any difference, to the achievement of young people (Grant 2010, 66 – 67).

Heeding this advice, this article takes the graded framing of the doctoral study as its starting point and then expands it by incorporating Muijs and Harris’ (2007) characterisations of teacher leadership and Lumby’s (2013) work on power into it. The resultant ideas are presented in Figure 1 and then discussed.

Distributed Leadership (DL): A Sequential Framing

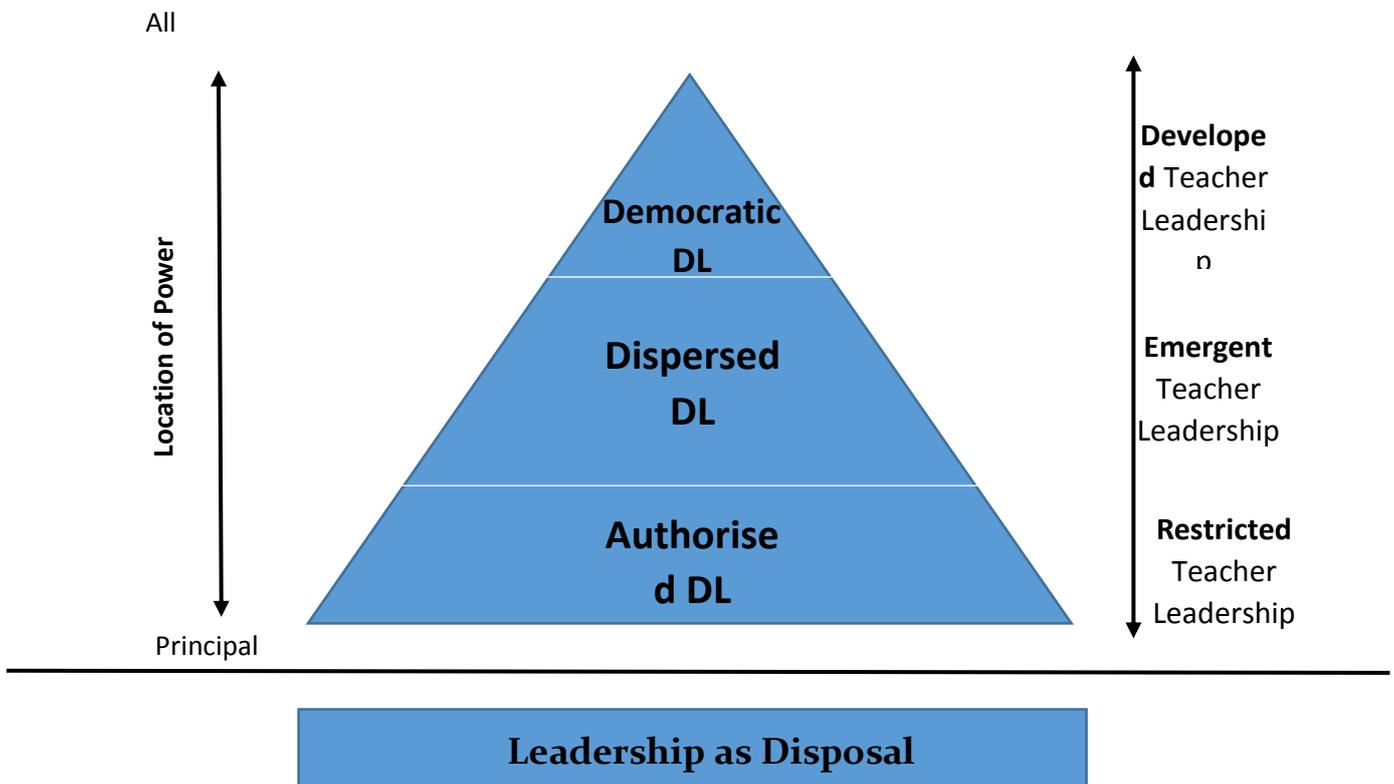


Figure 1: Distributed leadership: a sequential framing

Authorised distributed leadership

Authorised distributed leadership is where work is distributed from the principal to others and is usually accepted because it is regarded as *legitimate* within the hierarchical system of relations and because it enables agency and affords status to the person who takes on the work (Gunter 2005; Grant 2010). In this conceptualisation, power is viewed as an attribute owned by an individual, often the school principal, and evident when the individual is able to encourage another to act in a way that they would not otherwise have done (Lumby 2013). This type of leadership can also be termed ‘delegated leadership’ (Grant 2010, 63) and is evident where there are ‘teams, informal work groups, committees, and so on, operating within a hierarchical organisation’ (Woods 2004, 6). Teachers draw on their agency to determine whether the work being distributed is legitimate or not. If legitimate, ‘they often accept the delegated work, either in the interests of the school or for their own empowerment’ (Grant 2010, 63).

In Figure 1, Gunter’s (2005) characterisations of distributed leadership are represented in a triangle with *authorised* distributed leadership occupying the lowest (but largest) level. This is intentional because, while authorised distributed leadership is the starting point in this sequential framing, it is, perhaps inevitably, the most common characterisation in the South African teacher leadership research. The doctoral study found that, ‘the majority of the leadership situations across the chronicles were characterised as authorised distributed leadership’ (Grant 2010, 303), a finding confirmed in a number of other South African studies (see for example Gumede 2010; Mancoko 2015; Fani 2016).

In the fifth chronicle, for example, power and decision-making in the school were centralised ‘firmly in the hands of the principal and deputy principal at the top of the pyramid’ (101). A teacher in this school explained the nature of the leadership distribution: ‘We have freedom with consultation or with his approval. He is strong at the top and his management is ... I don’t know, we are all a good team ... There is nobody who is going to challenge him, I don’t think’ (Chronicle 5, 100 – 101). In the sixth chronicle, a school management team (SMT) member explained his leadership in the following way: ‘so you would basically use them and their expertise and appoint them as leaders so they will coordinate and take over this activity’ (295). Teachers were aware they were ‘being manipulated into accepting certain decisions but were

compliant in the acceptance of the leadership role' (Grant 2010, 304) when it was in the interests of learners:

... most often the idea has already been formulated; decisions already made by the SMT. We are coerced into accepting it. The strategies they use, tactics are used to get us to take ownership – but it is not so. Ultimately, if it's for the benefit of the children, we agree and accept the idea (Chronicle 6, 297).

In these school contexts, and if we revert to Figure 1, teacher leadership is most likely to be characterised as *restricted* (Muijs and Harris 2007); limited to leadership activities within classrooms and to curricular and extra-curricular activities with other teachers (Grant, 2012). In the first chronicle in the doctoral study, teacher leadership was initially described solely in terms of the classroom: 'In the classroom situation teachers are the designated leaders. They set the goals, implement procedures, instruct, guide, facilitate, mobilise learners, motivate and inspire learners and model behaviour' (519). A finding of the sixth chronicle was that the majority of teachers had 'a narrow understanding of teacher leadership as being restricted to leadership in the classroom' (293). Collaboration with other teachers in curriculum and extra-curricular activities included joint curriculum development evidenced in the establishment of grade committees (Chronicle 1, 520) or phase meetings where 'there were discussions on the different methods' as well as a sharing of 'ideas with other teachers in her grade' (Chronicle 5, 96). Teacher leaders operated as 'curriculum leaders, grade heads, leaders of various committees' as they worked collaboratively with their colleagues 'to develop new curriculum methods and planning jointly' (Chronicle 6, 295). In direct contrast, any decision-making in the area of whole school development was a no-go area for teachers because it was considered the domain of the SMT, and particularly the principal, at the top of the organisational hierarchy (Chronicle 6). The seventh chronicle concurs: '[teachers] were not always involved in school-side decision-making processes and when teachers were involved, this was usually restricted' (13) to maintenance and administrative tasks at the expense of authentic leadership practices (12).

In contrast to the claim that distributed leadership can be characterised as authorised (Gunter 2005; Grant 2010), some researchers (see for example Gronn 2000; Bennett *et al* 2003; Harris 2003) argue that distributed leadership cannot be authorised since it cannot be equated with delegation because of its emergent quality. As Harris explains, 'if it remains the case that the head distributes leadership responsibilities to the teachers, then distributed leadership becomes

nothing more than informed delegation' (2003, 319). While these researchers make a valid point, this article argues that a distributed approach which invites and enables teacher agency through informed delegation, is a necessary first step in a context like South Africa. This is particularly because of the country's authoritarian political heritage, which expresses itself in 'hierarchical social relationships, high-handed leadership styles, intolerance of alternative viewpoints, and disrespectful treatment of the most vulnerable members of our society' (Ramphela 2008, 113).

The last two decades have shown that whilst structural democratisation has occurred in South African schools, culturally the majority of mainstream schools remain non-participatory with one-dimensional power located in the structural position of the principal (Lawrence 2010; Naicker and Mestry 2013). In contexts such as these it is extremely unlikely that leadership as an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals will be realised without some sort of catalyst for change. In such situations a catalysing event, or the episodic agency of someone who is willing to distribute the power to act, will be crucial or the distribution of leadership will remain an ideal.

Thus, while acknowledging that, in its pure form, distributed leadership is emergent and the property of the situation, I agree with Hatcher that 'participatory approaches that operate within a headteacher-dominated hierarchy of power can undoubtedly provide a much more congenial school regime than authoritarian forms of managerialism' (2005, 258). One such participatory approach is authorised distributed leadership which describes a situation where there is an attempt, most likely by the principal (but not necessarily), to shift the school climate from one of authoritarianism to one which is a little more empowering and invitational to teachers who were previously unaware of their leadership potential.

However, whilst authorised distributed leadership is a useful theoretical construct because it allows for multiple leaders within the practice of leadership, it is restricted in its impact because of the hierarchical nature of the relationships (Grant 2010). As Gunter (2005) explains, it is a form of leadership which is not very dynamic and neither is it necessarily productive in regard to sustained activity. Thus, it can only be considered a starting point in the sequential distributed leadership framing and additional characterisations which focus on the emergent quality of distributed leadership are therefore necessary.

Dispersed distributed leadership

The second characterisation in the sequential distributed leadership framing is *dispersed* distributed leadership and, because far fewer cases of dispersed distributed leadership were recorded in the doctoral study, it is represented as the middle level of the triangle, illustrated in Figure 1. In contrast to authorised distributed leadership, dispersed distributed leadership is not bound by the organisational hierarchy of a school and, instead, is evidenced in flatter structures, teacher agency and co-leadership (Chronicle 5, 99). While the formal hierarchy exists, accompanied by job descriptions for the particular management roles, in practice people work together outside of these vertical relations in ways that work to the advantage of all (Gunter 2005, Grant 2010). Woods and Gronn (2009) refer to these more spontaneous, fluid and horizontal working relations as ‘heterarchical’ relations and they convincingly argue that a heterarchical division of labour can co-exist ‘with a hierarchical division of rights and authority’ (440). Drawing on Gunter (2005), the doctoral study describes how dispersed distributed leadership is ‘more autonomous, bottom-up and emergent and is accepted because of the knowledge, skills and personal attributes of organisational members who, either individually or in autonomous work groups, develop the work’ (Grant 2010, 63).

Power in this second characterisation of distributed leadership ‘is less about the control of others and more about enabling participatory decision-making’ (Grant 2010, 313). It places responsibility ‘with the community for creating its own volition’ (Lumby 2003, 292) and is consequently seen as a property of a group, owned in common by the group, and which remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together (Arendt 1970 in Lumby 2013). Teachers, in this characterisation, are not ‘just subject to authoritarian instruction and rule’ (Chronicle 1, 524) but instead play an integral part in the school. Their leadership can be described as *emergent* (Muijs and Harris 2007) where they ‘embrace new initiatives and innovate in a climate of trust and mutual learning’ (Chronicle 5, 89). Within this learning community, collaboration, participatory decision-making and vision sharing are encouraged ‘within a culture of transparency and mutual learning’ (Chronicle 1, 529). ‘Numerous informal group discussions’ (Chronicle 5, 96) and ‘real collaboration where teachers were working effectively, supporting each other and working collegially’ (99) epitomise this type of leadership.

However, as Lumby (2013) rightly points out, teachers are not always included equally in these collaborative practices and so it is important to be alert to structural and cultural conditions which serve to marginalise teacher participation in school leadership. Although not necessarily

intentional, discrimination continues to occur in South African schools, despite legislation and policies to the contrary. People, in certain school contexts, are effectively excluded from distributed leadership practices because of their gender, race, class, language or age. The second chronicle offers one example: ‘It was clear from all the African participants in this study that in rural communities, women have very little credibility as leaders’ (47). Challenging social inequities such as these requires a transformative leadership agenda which works for social change and social justice (Brown 2004; Grant 2010). Consequently, a third characterisation of the sequential distributed leadership framing became necessary.

Democratic distributed leadership

Democratic distributed leadership, the third and final characterisation of the sequential distributed leadership framing, is represented as the highest (but smallest) level of the triangle in Figure 1 because, while it is the ultimate goal in this sequential framing, it was, perhaps inevitably, the least common characterisation in the South African doctoral study.

Democratic distributed leadership is similar to dispersed distributed leadership in that both have an emergent character where creativity and resourcefulness circulate widely and both have the potential for concertive action (Gunter 2005, 56). However, it is different in that it does not assume political neutrality, but instead engages critically with organisational and societal values and goals (Woods 2004) and raises questions of inclusion and exclusion such as ‘how meaning is developed, how experiences are understood and how we work for change’ (Gunter 2005, 57).

Democratic distributed leadership was considered a crucial (yet largely absent) mechanism for change in the South African schooling system, according to the doctoral study. The study argued for the importance of this characterisation which ‘talks to issues of inclusion and exclusion, challenges issues of power and privilege and works for social change and social justice in the practice of leadership in schools’ (Grant 2010, 319). A central tenet of this characterisation is that it ‘raises questions of who is included and who is excluded in relation to leadership and in relation to the multitude of social practices within the school’ (Chronicle 4, 53). As a form of leadership, it encourages the individual and/or the group to ‘challenge issues of power and privilege, inclusion and exclusion, in relation to education leadership’ (Chronicle 8, 181). More specifically, it calls for school leaders (regardless of organisational position) who ‘begin to engage critically with the values, goals and mission of the school and ask questions which begin to challenge the status quo and raise issues of social inclusion and

exclusion' (Chronicle 6, 299). It is evident from these excerpts that the value of the democratic distributed leadership characterisation is that it 'brings a critical lens to the practice of leadership and, in so doing, offers a tool to challenge the power status quo in schools' (Grant 2010, 319).

Within this characterisation, teacher leadership can be described as *developed* (Muijs and Harris 2007) when it is taken up convincingly and sustained as an organisational phenomenon, supported by an enabling school culture and associated structures. Developing an enabling school culture requires that schools put 'people first', foreground healthy relationships and nurture a culture of authentic dialogue (Chronicle 8). This can only succeed in a climate which encourages 'courage, risk-taking, perseverance, trust and enthusiasm within a culture of transparency and mutual learning' (Chronicle 1, 529). Power in this characterisation is conceptualised as 'the capacity to act' (Ramphela 2008, 121) and it calls on the activism of the collective. In the eighth chronicle, the Sesotho term 'Batho Pele', a collective concept which means 'people first', was used to describe how 'the group, the people come before the individual' (187). Similarly, the isiZulu phrase 'Umuntu, gumuntu, gabantu' which means 'I am who I am because of other people' was also used (Chronicle 8, 234 – 235).

Central to these Sesotho and isiZulu phrases is the notion of empathy. Empathic leaders, the eighth chronicle argued, are leaders who have the maturity and capacity to 'put themselves in the other persons' shoes' (Chronicle 8, 187) and value the diversity of voices in the school. These different voices need to be 'heard and valued, especially when they present an alternative view which challenges the existing status quo' (Chronicle 8, 188). Thus leaders need to learn to value diversity and be unafraid of contestation and complexity because it is 'through social participation, mutual engagement and dialogue using a shared repertoire about the social issue at hand that will give rise to changed practices and lead to socially just schools' (Chronicle 4, 54). The eighth chronicle further suggests that all school leaders, SMT members and teachers alike, be challenged to become 'critical reflective practitioners who guide their colleagues on a journey of critical self-reflection in an environment which is transparent and supportive and open to new ideas and new learning' (189).

While *developed* teacher leadership refers to teacher leadership taken up as an organisational phenomenon, it can also transcend school boundaries and become visible in the transformation of the larger school community within civic society. Teacher initiative and collective teacher activism is strongly supported and evidenced through active teams (within and beyond the

school borders) which meet on a regular basis, to not only discuss, plan and implement their work, but also to critique their practice. This is in order to ‘confront unjust, stereotypical and discriminatory ways of being, and therefore leading, in the pursuit of a more fair and equitable society’ (Chronicle 8, 187).

The distributed perspective on school leadership with its sequential levels (Figure 1) is an appropriate theoretical tool to investigate the leadership complexities in post-apartheid South Africa because it raises questions about the location and exercise of power within a school and examines not only what is distributed, but also how this distribution happens and who is included and excluded. Conceptualised as such, a distributed leadership framing uncovers whether only technical tasks are being distributed or whether authority and responsibility are also being distributed (Gunter 2005). But what if, under the guise of distributed leadership, illegitimate practices are promoted?

‘Leadership as disposal’ masquerading as distributed leadership

Earlier this article cautioned about possible risk in distributing leadership and challenged us to scrutinise the quality of the leadership activities being distributed. This point is particularly pertinent in the context of a society struggling to emerge from decades of discrimination and persistent authoritarianism, whilst dealing with the consequences of apartheid’s unjust and exclusionary laws and practices. Consequently, the argument was made for authorised distributed leadership as a useful initial characterisation of distributed leadership in a country like South Africa. Authorised distributed leadership, as previously explained, is where work is distributed from the principal to others and is usually accepted because it is regarded as *legitimate* within a hierarchical system of relations.

But, what if the work distributed within a hierarchical system of relations is regarded as *illegitimate* because ‘what’ is distributed is thought to be ‘inauthentic’ leadership work? For example, in the sixth chronicle in the doctoral study, the SMT members alleged they were distributing leadership to teachers but instead ‘controlled the leadership practice of the school allowing teachers limited control and superficial involvement in decision-making’ (298). Under the guise of participatory decision-making, important leadership decisions were made unilaterally by SMTs who ‘paid lip-service to teacher participation and dialogue in decision-making, indicating a “lack of valuing” of teacher voice and authentic dialogic space in the school’ (Chronicle 6, 298). Teachers experienced the extra work forced on them as unjust

management practice, supporting the view that ‘teacher leadership roles cannot successfully be imposed by management’ (Muijs and Harris 2003, 442), especially if the work is considered unfair. These teachers resisted the extra work delegated to them by their SMT because the practice was not negotiated but instead involved unwanted tasks being passed down the hierarchy to teachers. The words of one educator bring this message powerfully home: ‘Sometimes you feel its management’s job just passed onto you. I won’t consider that as leadership. It is just passing the buck’ (Chronicle 6, 296).

he leadership practice reported on in this sixth chronicle cannot be characterised as distributed leadership because it was *not* recognised as legitimate by followers who, in defiance of the non-negotiated process, chose to withdraw from the practice (Grant 2010). Instead, the doctoral study refers to this illegitimate practice as ‘leadership as disposal’ which refers to situations where teachers are ‘at the disposal’ of the SMT who unload, dump or dispose of unwanted technical tasks onto them (Grant 2010). Important to remember is that ‘leadership as disposal’ is **not** a characterisation of distributed leadership. However, it remains a valuable tool for discussion and analysis because it helps to expose illegitimate school leadership practices masquerading as distributed leadership. As such, it has been included in Figure 1, but purposely positioned below the distributed leadership triangle.

CONCLUSION

Distributed leadership is the current trendsetter in the field of educational leadership in South Africa; presently popular because of its representational and normative appeal. This being the case, this article has warned that we should not be seduced by its ideological character because, if we are, there is a real danger that distributed leadership, as with its predecessors, will be relegated to the large pile of redundant leadership theories. But, as Woods, Bennett, Harvey and Wise (2004) advocate, there is a conceptualisation of distributed leadership which advances our understanding of leadership beyond merely a renaming of previous ideas. One such conception of distributed leadership advanced in this article focuses on the dynamic interactions between multiple leaders and followers in particular situations, as well as on the material and symbolic artifacts and how they are used (Timperley 2005).

Underpinned by strong conceptual foundations of activity theory and distributed cognition, this distributed perspective on leadership speaks not only to ‘who’ is involved in the distribution of leadership and ‘what’ is distributed, but also ‘how’ the distribution happens and ‘why’ it happens in the manner it does. To this end, the sequential distributed leadership framing

proposed in this article provides an additional language of description for the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of this leadership practice as well as integrating a democratic dimension into the distributed leadership discourse.

Conceptualised as such, this distributed perspective on leadership is an appropriate context-sensitive “sensing-device” (Spillane *et al* 2004) for registering the complex practice of school leadership in emerging democracies such as South Africa. Its value lies in its capacity for ‘getting under the skin’ of leadership practice, of seeing leadership practice differently and revealing the opportunities for school transformation (Harris and Spillane 2008). It therefore has explanatory power which can lead to cumulative knowledge building in the field of educational leadership, whilst also enabling change in leadership activity in schools.

Distributed leadership then, is not simply a ‘nuanced rebranding’ (Lumby 2013) of previous leadership concepts, but a robust and appropriate theoretical tool for investigating school leadership practice in post-apartheid South Africa. Further empirical studies which focus on the leadership practices of the different school stakeholders across a range of activity systems are necessary, for without these nuanced studies of the leadership practices of teachers, learners, parents and the SMT, distributed leadership may well become a passing fad.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, N., J.A. Harvey, C. Wise, and P.A. Woods. 2003. *Distributed leadership: a desk study*. Available at www.ncsl.org.uk / literature reviews.
- Botha, R.J. 2014. "Alternative leadership approaches for South African schools". *Journal for Educational Studies* 13 (1): 26 – 49.
- Botha, R.J. and P.K. Triegaardt. 2015. "The principal as a distributed leader: supporting change and improving South African schools". *International journal of educational sciences* 10 (3): 419 – 427.
- Brown, K.M. 2004. "Leadership for social justice and equity: weaving a transformative framework and pedagogy". *Education administration quarterly* 40 (1): 77 – 108.
- Bush, T. and D. Glover. 2016. "School leadership and management in South Africa". *International journal of educational management* 30 (2): 211 – 231.
- Christie, P., D. Butler, and M. Potterton. 2007. *Report of the Ministerial Committee: Schools that work*. 13 October 2007.
- Fani, P.P. 2016. *Restricted teacher leadership: a case study in a township high school in Port Elizabeth*. Unpublished Master of Education dissertation, Grahamstown: Rhodes University.
- Gibb, C.A. 1954. "Leadership" in G. Lindzey (Ed.) *Handbook of social psychology Volume 11: special fields and applications*. Cambridge MA: Addison-Wesley, 877 – 920.
- Grant, C. 2010. *Distributed teacher leadership: Troubling the terrain* Unpublished PhD thesis. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Grant, C. 2012. "Daring to lead: the possibility of teacher leadership in KwaZulu-Natal schools" in V. Chikoko and K.M. Jorgesen (Eds.) *Education leadership, management and governance in South Africa*. New York: Nova Science, 52 – 68.
- Grant, C. 2014. "Leading for social justice in South African schools: where have all the activists gone?" in I. Bogotch and C. Shields (Eds.) *International handbook on educational leadership and social (in)justice*, 521 – 539. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Gronn, P. 2000. "Distributed properties: a new architecture for leadership". *Educational Management and Administration* 28 (3): 317-338.
- Gumede, K. 2010. *Teacher leadership within an authorised distributed leadership context: a case study of three teacher leaders in a rural primary school*. Unpublished Master of Education dissertation, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Gunter, H.M. 2005. *Leading teachers*. London: Continuum.
- Harris, A. 2003. "Teacher leadership as distributed leadership: heresy, fantasy or possibility?" *School leadership and management* 23 (3): 313 – 324.
- Harris, A. 2004. "Distributed Leadership and School Improvement". *Educational management administration and leadership* 32 (1): 11-24.
- Harris A. and J. Spillane. 2008. "Distributed leadership through the looking glass". *Management in education: the journal of professional practice* 22 (1): 31 – 34.

- Hartley, D. 2007. "The emergence of distributed leadership in education: why now?" *British journal of educational studies* 55 (2): 202 – 214.
- Hatcher, R. 2005. "The distribution of leadership and power in schools". *British journal of sociology of education* 26 (2): 253 – 267.
- Heystek, J. 2007. "Reflecting on principals as managers or moulded leaders in a managerialistic school system". *South African journal of education* 27 (3): 491 - 505.
- Jita, L.C. and M.L. Mokhele. 2013. "The role of lead teachers in instructional leadership: a case study of environmental learning in South Africa". *Education as change* 17 (sup1): 123 – 135.
- Lawrence, G. 2010. *The enactment of teacher leadership in an urban primary school: a negative case*. Unpublished Master of Education dissertation, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Lumby, J. 2003. "Distributed leadership in colleges: leading or misleading?" *Educational management and administration* 31 (3): 283 – 293.
- Lumby, J. 2013. "Distributed leadership: the uses and abuses of power". *Education management, administration and leadership* 41 (5): 581 - 597.
- Mancoko, M. 2015. *The enactment of teacher leadership in a township High School: A restricted form*. Unpublished Master of Education dissertation, Grahamstown: Rhodes University.
- Maton, K. 2014. *Knowledge and knowers: towards a realist sociology of education*. London: Routledge.
- Mpangase, B. M. 2010. *Lecturers as Leaders? A Case Study of a Further Education and Training College*. Unpublished Master of Education dissertation, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Msila, V. 2011. "School management and the struggle for effective schools". *African education review* 8 (3): 434 – 449.
- Muijs, D. and A. Harris. 2003. "Teacher leadership-improvement through empowerment". *Educational management, administration and leadership* 31 (4): 437-448.
- Muijs, D and A. Harris. 2007. "Teacher leadership in (in) action: Three case studies of contrasting schools". *Educational management, administration and leadership* 35 (1): 111-134.
- Naicker, S.R, and R. Mestry. 2011. "Distributive leadership in public schools: experiences and perceptions of teachers in the Soweto region". *Perspectives in education* 29 (4): 99 – 108.
- Naicker, S.R, and R. Mestry. 2013. "Teachers' reflections on distributive leadership in public primary schools in Soweto". *South African journal of education* 33 (2): 1–15.
- Pillay, S. 2008. *Teacher leadership: A self-study*. Unpublished Master of Education dissertation, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Ramphela, M. 2008. *Laying ghosts to rest: dilemmas of the transformation in South Africa*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Republic of South Africa. 1996. *South African Schools' Act*. (Act No. 84 of 1996, Government Gazette No. 17579, 15 November 1996).

- Singh, P. and K. Lokotsch. 2005. "Effects of transformational leadership on human resources management in primary schools". *South African journal of education* 31 (1): 55 – 73.
- South Africa. Department of Education. 1996. *Changing Management to Manage Change in Education*. Report of the Task Team on Education Management Development. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Spillane, J.P., J.B. Diamond and L. Jita. 2003. "Leading instruction: the distribution of leadership for instruction". *Journal of curriculum studies* 35 (5): 533 - 543.
- Spillane, J.P., R. Halverson and J.B. Diamond. 2004. "Towards a theory of leadership practice: a distributed perspective". *Journal of curriculum studies* 36 (1): 3 – 34.
- Spillane, J.P. 2006. *Distributed leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tashakkori, A. and C. Teddlie. 2003. "The past and the future of mixed methods research: from data triangulation to mixed model designs" in A. Tashakkori and C. Teddlie (Eds.) *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioural research*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 671 - 701.
- Timperley, H.S. 2005. "Distributed leadership: Developing theory from practice". *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 37 (4): 395-420.
- Williams, C.G. 2011. "Distributed leadership in South African schools: possibilities and constraints". *South African journal of education* 31: 190 – 200.
- Woods, P.A. 2004. "Democratic leadership: drawing distinctions with distributed leadership". *International journal of leadership in education* 7 (1): 3 – 26.
- Woods, P.A., N. Bennett, J.A. Harvey and C. Wise. 2004. "Variabilities and dualities in distributed leadership". *Educational management, administration and leadership* 32 (4): 439 – 457.
- Woods, P.A. and P. Gronn. 2009. "Nurturing democracy: the contribution of distributed leadership to a democratic organisational landscape". *Educational management, administration and leadership* 37 (4): 430 – 451.