



Effects of distributed leadership on academic performance in selected schools in Chris Hani West District, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the effects of distributed leadership on academic performance in a selected school within the Chris Hani West District. The study is based on Gunter's theory of leadership and adopts a qualitative research approach with a case study design. Convenient sampling was used to select the school, while purposive sampling guided the selection of participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic content analysis, presenting findings as emerging themes. The study revealed that distributed leadership promotes effective leadership practices, enhances teacher engagement, and contributes positively to academic performance. The key benefits identified include aligning teachers with school goals and values and reducing the administrative burden on principals. Based on these findings, it is recommended that principals foster leaders who clearly understand the school's vision and purpose, encourage teamwork and collaboration among staff, and actively involve teachers in decision-making processes to improve motivation and commitment. This study contributes to scholarship by providing empirical evidence on the practical application of distributed leadership in a South African school context. It highlights its potential to improve school performance and offers insights into policy and leadership development in educational settings.

Keywords: Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Teacher Leadership, Advanced Leadership Strategies, High-Performing Schools.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of distributed leadership is to ensure that students achieve success, which depends on mentors improving their knowledge, skills, creativity, and capacity to innovate. Consequently, there is an evident and urgent demand for distributed leadership in education, as the transformation in school leadership is critical to improving the quality of education and creating conditions for optimal teaching and learning.¹ Distributed leadership is viewed as an approach that recognises schools as complex organizations with multiple stakeholders, where no single leader possesses all the necessary skills and knowledge to address all problems or make decisions independently. Instead, responsibilities are shared among various individuals within the organization, allowing principals, teachers, and other personnel to

¹ Daniel Jambo and Lei Hongde, "The Effect of Principal's Distributed Leadership Practice on Students' Academic Achievement: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *International Journal of Higher Education* 9, no. 1 (2020): 189–98.

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collaborate and tackle challenges together. Each person contributes unique skills, expertise, and perspectives, enhancing decision-making and problem-solving while fostering shared responsibility and ownership.²

By embracing distributed leadership, schools can effectively use available resources and promote a culture of continuous learning and improvement. This approach distributes leadership tasks across multiple individuals, alleviating the burden on a single leader and empowering others to engage in leadership activities.³ The shift to distributed leadership recognises the complexity of educational organisations and underscores the importance of collaboration and teamwork in addressing challenges, ultimately promoting positive outcomes for students and the wider school community.

The main objective of this study is to examine the potential impact of distributed leadership on student achievement. By exploring the factors that contribute to successful distributed leadership, researchers aim to provide insights on how educators can implement this approach effectively in schools. Principals play a key role in fostering a culture of distributed leadership, and understanding educators' perceptions of principals' actions can offer valuable guidance to improve leadership practices.⁴ Distributed leadership contributes to capacity building, enabling sustained improvement and effective management of changes through collaboration among both formal and informal leaders.⁵

Distributed leadership has gained widespread recognition in global literature since the mid-1990s.⁶ The approach encourages multiple leaders to engage in meaningful communication, providing an alternative to traditional autocratic leadership. Each team member assumes specific leadership responsibilities, nurturing leadership potential and establishing a framework for future growth.⁷ When decision-making authority is delegated to team members, leaders practicing distributed leadership empower staff to participate in leadership activities, thereby enhancing overall work efficiency.⁸ Individuals with opportunities to exercise leadership tend to be more proactive and demonstrate higher performance levels.⁹

Overall, the positive impact of distributing leadership responsibilities in schools is evident, as it optimizes operational efficiency, aligns staff with school goals, and supports improved student outcomes.¹⁰ This study specifically examined the effects of distributed leadership on academic performance and its broader influence on school management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Lerutla and Steyn, the body of research on leadership in South Africa remains notably scarce.¹¹ Existing domestical and international studies, highlight a concerning lack of sufficient professional training for many principals, particularly in critical areas such as finance and instructional leadership. This deficit impedes their ability to effectively impart essential skills to their subordinates.

² Ledi Lyu et al., "How Distributed Leadership Fosters Individual Leadership Emergence: The Mediating Role of Empowerment Role Identity and Enacted Leader Identity," *Systems* 11, no. 2 (2023): 77.

³ Lyu et al., "How Distributed Leadership Fosters Individual Leadership Emergence: The Mediating Role of Empowerment Role Identity and Enacted Leader Identity."

⁴ Koemhong Sol, "Distributed Leadership in Schools: A Brief Review of the Literature," *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research* 1, no. 1 (2021): 73–80.

⁵ Sol, "Distributed Leadership in Schools: A Brief Review of the Literature."

⁶ C. Agyare-Opoku, "School Principals' Use of Distributive Leadership in Teacher Motivation" (University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2021).

⁷ Niamh Hickey, Aishling Flaherty, and Patricia Mannix McNamara, "Distributed Leadership: A Scoping Review Mapping Current Empirical Research," *Societies* 12, no. 1 (2022): 15; Xi Ling et al., "The Application of Distributed Leadership in Middle School Classroom," in *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 8 (Frontiers Media SA, 2023), 1200792.

⁸ Lyu et al., "How Distributed Leadership Fosters Individual Leadership Emergence: The Mediating Role of Empowerment Role Identity and Enacted Leader Identity."

⁹ Chung-Jen Wang and I-Hsiu Yang, "Why and How Does Empowering Leadership Promote Proactive Work Behavior? An Examination with a Serial Mediation Model among Hotel Employees," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 5 (2021): 2386.

¹⁰ Agyare-Opoku, "School Principals' Use of Distributive Leadership in Teacher Motivation"; Jambo and Hongde, "The Effect of Principal's Distributed Leadership Practice on Students' Academic Achievement: A Systematic Review of the Literature."

¹¹ Matete Lerutla and Renier Steyn, "Distinct Leadership Styles and Differential Effectiveness across Culture: An Analysis of South African Business Leaders," *SA Journal of Human Resource Management* 20 (2022): 1957.

Additionally, Don and Raman contend that there is a paucity of prescribed leadership or management training programs available.¹² Principals are often appointed based solely on their educational background, with little consideration of their managerial or leadership proficiency. The onboarding of new educators and the provision of support are frequently limited in scope, leading principals to adopt a pragmatic approach to navigate the complexities of school leadership. The consequences of inadequate leadership and uneven distribution of leadership in South African education are apparent in the struggles faced by students, with some schools even facing closure due to these challenges.¹³

The researchers align with Oyugi's assertion that the effectiveness of a school's academic performance hinges on the leadership styles exhibited by its principals, instructors, and supervisors.¹⁴ In addition to meeting higher performance standards, principals are now encouraged to collaborate to cultivate leadership within their teams. This recommendation is based on research indicating that collaborative learning communities have a positive impact on school improvement.¹⁵ Hence, the model will encompass critical managerial skills that enable leadership teams to effectively share leadership responsibilities and reinforce the driving forces behind educational progress and transformation. The researchers view successful principals as responding to heightened expectations by cultivating robust leadership cultures, a social phenomenon woven into the fabric of the school. When investigating distributed leadership, it is crucial to assess whether leadership is not confined to one individual but is spread throughout the functions and decision-making processes of the leadership team. Given the intricacies of the high school curriculum, the leadership team must be well-versed in a variety of leadership strategies to effectively manage high schools.

This paper is rooted in Gunter's theory, which was also referenced by Pillay and Tucaliuc, Curşeu, and Muntean for its alignment with the key attributes of distributed leadership.¹⁶ This theory emphasizes entrusting individuals who aspire to foster the development of others with leadership responsibilities within the organization, thereby facilitating the enhancement of functions. Another key aspect is dispersed leadership, characterized by collaborative efforts to redefine responsibilities through a shared approach to leadership, signifying a departure from a single authoritative leader. Distributed leadership encompasses the extensive delegation of leadership tasks and the reconfiguration of responsibilities, resulting in a shift in power dynamics within school relationships and the pursuit of the school's values and objectives. It is viewed as a democratic form of leadership and shares similarities with transformational leadership in its potential for collective action. However, as noted by Hickey, Flaherty, Mannix McNamara, and McNamara, while both exhibit an emergent disposition that recognises creativity, democratic distributed leadership distinguishes itself by engaging analytically with school values and goals.¹⁷

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

This paper is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand how individuals interpret phenomena and construct meaning in their social contexts. Interpretivism allows the researcher

¹² Yahya Don and Raman Arumugam, "School Management and Leadership: Teamwork in School," *Multidisciplinary Journal of Instruction (MDJI)* 1, no. 2 (2019): 14–36.

¹³ Lerutla and Steyn, "Distinct Leadership Styles and Differential Effectiveness across Culture: An Analysis of South African Business Leaders."

¹⁴ Millicent Oyugi and Julius O Gogo, "Influence of Principals' Leadership Styles on Students' Academic Performance in Secondary Schools in Awendo Sub-County, Kenya.," 2019.

¹⁵ Loes De Jong, Jacobiene Meirink, and Wilfried Admiraal, "Teacher Learning in the Context of Teacher Collaboration: Connecting Teacher Dialogue to Teacher Learning," *Research Papers in Education* 37, no. 6 (2022): 1165–88.

¹⁶ Helen Gunter, Dave Hall, and Joanna Bragg, "Distributed Leadership: A Study in Knowledge Production," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 41, no. 5 (2013): 555–80; Poomani Pillay, "Patterns of Distributed Leadership: A Case Study of Three Primary Schools in KwaZulu-Natal" (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2013); Mihai Tucaliuc, Petru Lucian Curşeu, and Arcadius Florin Muntean, "Does Distributed Leadership Deliver on Its Promises in Schools? Implications for Teachers' Work Satisfaction and Self-Efficacy," *Education Sciences* 13, no. 10 (2023): 1058.

¹⁷ Hickey, Flaherty, and Mannix McNamara, "Distributed Leadership: A Scoping Review Mapping Current Empirical Research."

to engage collaboratively with participants, capturing their subjective experiences and providing rich insights into the ways distributed leadership operates within schools.

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore the nuanced effects of distributed leadership on academic performance. Qualitative research is well-suited for studying complex social phenomena where rich, descriptive data is required, rather than numerical measurement.¹⁸ The researcher believes that focusing on two selected schools, the study prioritises depth over breadth, enabling a detailed understanding of leadership practices, challenges, and outcomes within their specific contexts.¹⁹

Research Design

The paper used a case study design, which allows for an in-depth investigation of contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts.²⁰ The researcher believes that this approach facilitated a comprehensive exploration of how distributed leadership is enacted and perceived in the selected schools, providing insights into its influence on academic performance. Data were collected in the natural school settings of the participants to ensure contextual authenticity.

Population and Sampling

The paper population comprised principals, deputy principals or heads of departments, and senior educators from two purposively selected secondary schools. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were more likely to provide rich, relevant insights into distributed leadership practices.²¹ Participants were recruited after institutional approval and informed consent, with an emphasis on voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. This approach enabled the researcher to guide discussions using a pre-determined set of themes while allowing participants to elaborate freely on their experiences.²² Interviews were conducted in person at the participants' schools, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and capture authentic responses.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to systematically code and categorise the data into meaningful themes.²³ Analysis followed an iterative process: familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, identification and review of themes, and synthesis of findings. This method ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the lived experiences of participants while providing interpretive insights into the effects of distributed leadership on academic performance.

¹⁸ Anup Chowdhury and Nikhil Chandra Shil, "Thinking 'Qualitative' through a Case Study: Homework for a Researcher," *American Journal of Qualitative Research* 5, no. 2 (2021): 190–210; Arya Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research: Key Attributes and Navigating the Conundrums in Its Application," *Sociological Bulletin* 70, no. 1 (January 19, 2021): 94–110, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920970318>.

¹⁹ Brighton Kumatongo and Kenneth Kapalu Muzata, "Research Paradigms and Designs with Their Application in Education," *Journal of Lexicography and Terminology (Online ISSN 2664-0899. Print ISSN 2517-9306)*, 5, no. 1 (2021): 16–32.

²⁰ Patrik Aspers and Ugo Corte, "What Is Qualitative in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Sociology* 42 (2019): 139–60.

²¹ James H McMillan and Sally Schumacher, "Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry," (*No Title*), 2010; Fr Baiju Thomas, "The Role of Purposive Sampling Technique as a Tool for Informal Choices in a Social Sciences in Research Methods," *Just Agriculture* 2, no. 5 (2022): 1–8.

²² Enas Abuhanda, Islam Asim Ismail, and T Bsharat, "Understanding Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods: A Theoretical Perspective for Young Researchers," *International Journal of Research* 8, no. 2 (2021): 71–87; Chowdhury and Shil, "Thinking 'Qualitative' through a Case Study: Homework for a Researcher."

²³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101. Aniek Draaisma, Frans Meijers, and Marinka Kuijpers, "The Development of Strong Career Learning Environments: The Project 'Career Orientation and Guidance' in Dutch Vocational Education," *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 70, no. 1 (2018): 27–46.

Trustworthiness

The paper adhered to qualitative standards of trustworthiness, focusing on credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability.²⁴ Credibility was enhanced through member checking and verbatim transcription; confirmability through detailed audit trails; dependability by documenting all research steps; and transferability by providing rich contextual descriptions to allow assessment of applicability to other settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university, and permission was sought from the Eastern Cape Department of Education and school authorities. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage.²⁵ The interviews were scheduled to minimise disruption and were conducted respectfully, protecting the privacy throughout the research process.

Delimitations and Limitations

The paper is delimited to two selected secondary schools in the Chris Hani West District, focusing on their leadership practices. The findings are not generalisable to all schools in South Africa. Limitations include potential participant bias and time constraints due to full-time employment of the researcher. Mitigation strategies included careful scheduling and triangulation with document review to corroborate the findings.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this paper are presented thematically, guided by the objectives of the paper. The themes were developed to provide a clear understanding of the key aspects of school leadership and their impact on educational practices. The analysis revealed several prominent themes, including clarity of purpose, focus on goals, distributed leadership, teamwork, and others, reflecting the experiences, perceptions and insights of the participants.

Clarity of Purpose

This revolves around having a clear and well-defined sense of direction, intention, or goal. It implies a state of understanding and focus regarding one's objectives, which can be applied to various aspects of life, including personal development, professional endeavours, and broader life philosophies.

P1 said that "Developing plans and clarify the vision".

P2 reinforced this by noting that "a shared vision gives everyone a roadmap and it prevents confusion and helps us prioritize what really matters in improving learner performance."

H1 shared that "Clarity in purpose helps us understand not only what we are doing but why we are doing it."

H2 added that "When leadership is distributed, every department must align with the school's vision".

E1 highlighted that "Having a clear purpose motivates us because we know what the school stands for and what is expected from us."

E2 echoed this sentiment, saying, "A shared purpose makes collaboration easier; it gives meaning to what we do daily in the classroom."

Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that having a clear understanding of one's purpose equips leaders to navigate the numerous challenges they face in their roles. Chaudhary, Rashid, and Jhamat assert

²⁴ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020). Norman A Stahl and James R King, "Expanding Approaches for Research: Understanding and Using Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Developmental Education* 44, no. 1 (2020): 26–28.

²⁵ Jack Fraenkel, Norman Wallen, and Helen Hyun, *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*, 10th ed. (McGraw-Hill Education, 2019); Amrita Sil and Nilay Kanti Das, "Informed Consent Process: Foundation of the Researcher-Participant Bond," *Indian Journal of Dermatology* 62, no. 4 (2017): 380–86.

that a strong sense of purpose enables individuals to focus on what they seek to achieve in the world and how they wish to make a positive difference.²⁶ Consequently, the researcher believes that this clarity guides leaders toward environments and communities where their contributions are both meaningful to them and valued by others.

Focus on goals

Leadership refers to the leader's commitment to maintaining a clear and unwavering attention on the objectives and outcomes that need to be achieved. Leaders who emphasise the focus on goals exhibit several key characteristics and practices.

P1 said that “developing plans and the vision for the organisation”.

P2 emphasised that leadership entails “Prioritising key objectives and aligning daily activities with long-term school goals.”

H1 concurs, “indicating that goal orientation is crucial for operational coherence.”

H2 stated that “Having clear targets helps educators know exactly what to focus on each term.”

E1 added that “When leadership sets SMART goals, it guides our teaching priorities and helps us manage our workload efficiently.”

E2 concurs that “Goal-focused leadership creates a sense of direction and motivates staff to contribute meaningfully towards achieving school objective.”

The findings reveal that setting goals allows leaders to remain focused on what is truly important. According to Musaigwa, goal setting involves having a broader vision and a strategic plan to reach the desired destination while providing the team with clearly defined targets.²⁷ The researcher agreed with this view, noting that such a focus allows staff to prioritize their efforts effectively, thereby ensuring that the school functions efficiently and purposefully.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership ensures effective leadership within a school for enhanced performance, emphasizing the benefits of sharing leadership responsibilities among various individuals within the educational institution. It contributes to effective leadership by harnessing the collective capabilities of the entire school community. Through shared responsibilities, accountability, and collaboration, distributed leadership improves overall school performance, creating a positive and dynamic educational environment.

P1 stated that “Distributed leadership is about giving other leaders ownership.”

P2 added that “Effective leadership involves trusting your team and delegating responsibilities appropriately.”

H1 concurred, emphasizing that “Distributed leadership enables departments to function more effectively because everyone feels accountable for outcomes,”

H2 observed that “It encourages collaboration among staff and helps identify potential leaders within the school.”

E1 mentioned that “When teachers are given opportunities to lead projects or committees.,”

E2 supported this by adding that “Shared leadership promotes teamwork and a sense of belonging, as every member’s contribution is valued.”

The participants revealed that the principals should relinquish some authority, appoint competent deputies, and rely on their advice while respecting their autonomy. Agyare-Opoku notes that maintaining open communication and recognizing that a leader cannot do everything alone are essential aspects of

²⁶ Naveed Iqbal Chaudhary, Hafiz Abdur Rashid, and Naveed Jhamat, “Role of Distributed Leadership and Readiness to Change Dimensions in Public and Private Schools Regarding Commitment to Change.,” *Bulletin of Education and Research* 42, no. 3 (2020): 159–81.

²⁷ Misheck Musaigwa, “The Role of Leadership in Managing Change,” *International Review of Management and Marketing* 13, no. 6 (2023): 1.

distributed leadership, while Hickey, Flaherty, and Mannix McNamara emphasized the need for clearly understood and genuinely shared organizational objectives and values.²⁸ The researcher concurs that the promotion of trust, creativity, and a culture of professional entrepreneurship inspires initiative, enthusiasm, and innovation among staff.

Teamwork

Teamwork emphasizes collaboration, coordination, and mutual support among individuals working together to achieve a common goal. It is a fundamental aspect of organizational success and is applicable in various contexts, including the workplace, sports, education, and community settings.

P1 said that “Leaders must encourage teamwork”.

P2 added that “Effective collaboration strengthens relationships among staff and creates a positive school culture where everyone works toward shared goals.”

H1 mentioned that “Collaborative planning among teachers helps to align teaching strategies and improve learner performance,”

H2 emphasised that “Teamwork encourages the exchange of ideas and problem-solving, leading to better decision-making and innovation.”

E1 stated that “Working together as a team makes the workload more manageable and promotes mutual learning,”

E2 added that “Collaboration fosters trust and unity, making it easier to overcome challenges and support one another.”

Highlighting the significance of teamwork and its link to achieving group goals inspires effective collaboration. Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara posit that collaborative efforts streamline tasks, improving efficiency and productivity.²⁹ The researcher agrees that establishing a clear connection between individual performance and collective objectives motivates teams while fostering collaboration that reduces isolation and strengthens workplace unity.

Perception of the principal on distributed leadership

Distributed Leadership involves exploring how a school principal views or interprets the concept of distributed leadership within the educational context. Distributed leadership is a model where leadership responsibilities and decision-making are shared among various individuals within an organization rather than being concentrated solely in the hands of one leader.

P1 said, that “The effectiveness of the distributed leadership is visible because teachers are taking good care of their classes as leaders there”.

P2 emphasized that “Distributed leadership promotes teamwork and mutual trust, as every member is given a role to play in achieving school objectives.”

H1 observed that “When leadership is shared, decision-making becomes more participatory, and teachers feel more valued and motivated to contribute,”

H2 added that “Distributed leadership allows departments to function more efficiently since each staff member understands their specific leadership role within the team.”

E1 commented that “Teachers who are trusted with leadership tasks become more confident and develop professionally,”

E2 noted that “Distributed leadership encourages collaboration and reduces dependence on the principal for every decision.”

Distributed leadership differs from mere delegation. Delegation involves assigning tasks to others for completion, fostering an unhealthy culture when consistently practiced by school leaders. Continuous delegation creates a top-down dynamic, where those with less time and lower compensation are burdened

²⁸ Agyare-Opoku, “School Principals’ Use of Distributive Leadership in Teacher Motivation ”; Hickey, Flaherty, and Mannix McNamara, “Distributed Leadership: A Scoping Review Mapping Current Empirical Research.”

²⁹ Hickey, Flaherty, and Mannix McNamara, “Distributed Leadership: A Scoping Review Mapping Current Empirical Research.”

with the workload. Consequently, the workforce may develop resentment towards organizational leaders, perceiving them as lazy and less dedicated. In our school, educators manage classes, effectively reducing the principal's additional workload. This exemplifies the successful implementation of distributed leadership.

Outcomes of a distributed leadership

This centers around examining the effects and results that emerge when leadership responsibilities and decision-making are shared among various individuals or teams within an organization.

P1 noted that "People skills are key; good relationships are essential to get work done."

P2 added that "Distributed leadership fosters staff ownership and accountability, improving teaching and learning."

H1 emphasized that "Shared leadership empowers teachers to use innovative strategies, enhancing learner performance."

H2 stated that "It promotes inclusive decision-making, increasing staff engagement and commitment to school goals."

E1 mentioned that "Being involved in leadership tasks motivates teachers and improves student outcomes." and

E2 added that "Shared leadership reduces the principal's burden while ensuring everyone contributes to school objectives."

The advantages of distributed leadership are evident as it aligns teachers with the school's goals and values while relieving the principal of numerous administrative responsibilities. Through the effective implementation of distributed leadership, the school has successfully increased the pass rate of students.

Learner involvement perception

Active participation and participation of students in their own education. This theme underscores the importance of students playing an active role in the learning process, contributing to a more dynamic and effective educational experience.

P1 said, "I would say constant communication, and it must be open".

P2 added that "Encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning promotes confidence and ownership, which enhances overall school performance."

H1 emphasized that "When students are actively engaged, they develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills."

H2 noted that "Active participation allows learners to contribute to decision-making processes."

E1 observed that "Involving students in leadership roles and classroom activities motivates them to perform better and builds self-confidence."

E2 added that "Distributed leadership not only improves teacher-student collaboration but also develops students' leadership abilities, preparing them for future responsibilities."

Improved performance is possible through distributed leadership. It enables the utilization of administrators' collective knowledge to improve student achievement, educators, and administrative personnel. It also leads to the growth of student leadership skills as they participate in leadership earlier, which improves their confidence and makes them feel like part and parcel of decision-making within the school.

Challenges of distributed leadership

It involves an exploration of the difficulties and obstacles that organizations may encounter when implementing a distributed leadership model. Although distributed leadership has its benefits, it also comes with its set of challenges.

P1 said, that "If you distribute the work, you will get a different input because time is changing, the curriculum and children are changing".

P2 added that “Ensuring consistency and maintaining quality across various leadership roles can be difficult when responsibilities are distributed, requiring constant monitoring and support.”

H1 emphasized that “The capacity, expertise, and willingness of teachers to take on leadership roles vary.”

H2 observed that “Conflicts may arise when roles and expectations are not clearly defined.”

E1 mentioned that “Some teachers may feel unprepared or reluctant to assume leadership responsibilities, which can slow implementation.”

E2 added that “Without adequate training and support, distributed leadership can create confusion and inconsistency in how tasks are performed.”

The capacity, expertise, experience, and willingness of teachers to take on leadership roles and responsibilities pose significant challenges that school principals must address when delegating their leadership duties. Schools can evolve into more impactful learning organizations for both students and staff if these potential leaders are given the authority to contribute actively. Empowering staff members in this manner encourages them to reflect on their professional experiences and take action to enhance the quality of their teaching.

SGB perception of distributed leadership.

Involves exploring how a school governing body perceives or views the concept of distributed leadership within the educational setting. A School Governing Body typically consists of parents, educators, and community representatives who collaborate to make important decisions for the school.

P1 said, that “No evidence of coaching as a leadership strategy within the school.”

P2 added that “The SGB plays a critical role in supporting distributed leadership, but their understanding of shared responsibilities often determines how effectively leadership is implemented.”

H1 emphasized that “When the SGB understands and values distributed leadership, they can provide guidance and oversight that strengthens collaboration among staff,”

H2 observed that “Limited awareness or training among SGB members can hinder their ability to support leadership initiatives effectively.”

E1 mentioned that “The SGB’s perception of leadership influences teacher morale and participation in decision-making.”

E2 added that “When the governing body actively engages with distributed leadership principles, it fosters a culture of shared responsibility and accountability throughout the school.”

Understanding the SGB's perception of distributed leadership is crucial for successful implementation. It provides insights into the potential support, challenges, and considerations that need to be addressed to effectively integrate distributed leadership principles into the school's governance and decision-making processes.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Clarity of Purpose

Leadership is essential to providing clarity of purpose within an organisational or team context. Effective leadership entails guiding and influencing individuals or groups towards shared goals, ensuring that everyone understands the vision and objectives. McKitterick asserts that a clear, well-defined, and easily understood set of goals is essential for both individuals and organisations.³⁰ It provides a distinct sense of direction, allowing focused effort, informed decision-making, and alignment with the vision of the organization. Similarly, Bishop and Reed emphasise that clarity of purpose is crucial for personal and organisational success.³¹ The findings of this study indicate that distributed leadership contributes to this clarity by serving as a roadmap for decision-making, inspiring action, and fostering a shared

³⁰ Bill McKitterick, “Clarity of Purpose in Social Work Practice,” in *Self-Leadership in Social Work* (Policy Press, 2015), 73–92.

³¹ Jennifer Anne Bishop and Paul Reed, “Defining Success: Establishing Clarity of Purpose and a Measurement Framework to Advance Health Equity,” *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* 28, no. 5 (2022): 559–61.

understanding of objectives. Leaders who operate with purpose inspire others through effective communication, cultivating a positive and supportive work environment, motivating, and empowering team members.³² Wang and Yang further note that purposeful leadership goes beyond material success; it promotes integrity, social responsibility, and a meaningful impact on the community.³³ The researcher agrees that clarity of purpose enables leaders to guide their teams effectively, creating motivation, engagement, and increased productivity.

Focus on Goals

The study revealed that goal orientation is a central pillar of effective leadership. Clear goals provide direction, motivate individuals and teams, and foster a culture of continuous improvement. Ha-Vikstrom highlights that well-defined goals create accountability, allowing performance to be evaluated, areas for improvement identified, and corrective actions implemented.³⁴ Principals who prioritise goal setting can improve concentration, improve resource allocation, and reduce distractions, resulting in a results-oriented environment. The findings suggest that when leaders establish SMART goals, the staff can prioritise efforts effectively, which positively impacts school performance. The researcher concurs that a strong focus on goals provides both structure and motivation, encouraging commitment to achieving school objectives.

Team Development

The findings underscore the importance of developing teams within the school context. Effective team development nurtures collaborative relationships among educators, administrators, and staff, thereby improving organisational effectiveness. Don and Raman note that cultivating teams enhances collaboration, leverages diverse talents, improves problem-solving, and contributes to a positive, student-focused environment.³⁵ The study revealed that principals who promote teamwork create a sense of belonging, professional satisfaction, and staff retention. Distributed leadership inherently supports team formation by emphasising shared responsibility, collaborative decision-making, and empowerment of staff. The researcher observes that effective team development facilitates efficient allocation of resources and promotes innovation, ultimately contributing to overall school success.

Fostering Learner Involvement

The paper highlights that distributed leadership extends beyond staff to actively involve learners in educational decision-making. By recognising students as stakeholders, schools can cultivate a culture of engagement, collaboration, and responsibility. Ling, Bai, Li, and Yang argue that distributed leadership fosters students' collaborative skills, improving their ability to solve problems collectively.³⁶ Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, and Osher observed that students involved in school planning demonstrate greater motivation and willingness to engage in learning.³⁷ The findings suggest that distributed leadership promotes learner participation through partnerships, peer teaching, inquiry-based activities, and reflective group work. The researcher agrees that this approach encourages mutual support, strengthens student engagement, and develops leadership skills, which collectively improve educational outcomes.

³² Barbara Steinmann, Hannah J P Klug, and Günter W Maier, "The Path Is the Goal: How Transformational Leaders Enhance Followers' Job Attitudes and Proactive Behavior," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 2338.

³³ Wang and Yang, "Why and How Does Empowering Leadership Promote Proactive Work Behavior? An Examination with a Serial Mediation Model among Hotel Employees."

³⁴ Thanh Ha-Vikström, "People-, Process-and Goal-Focused Leadership Behaviour: An Empirical Study in a Global Company," 2017.

³⁵ Don and Arumugam, "School Management and Leadership: Teamwork in School."

³⁶ Ling et al., "The Application of Distributed Leadership in Middle School Classroom."

³⁷ Linda Darling-Hammond et al., "Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development," *Applied Developmental Science* 24, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 97–140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Principals should prioritise promoting leaders who have a clear understanding of the school's purpose, as this enables them to navigate challenges effectively and make informed decisions that advance the school's objectives.
- Distributing leadership among various individuals and organisational structures can help schools address contemporary challenges while improving overall efficiency and effectiveness.
- Principals should actively encourage teamwork within the school, fostering collaboration and a sense of belonging. When staff are involved in decision-making and collective activities, they are likely to feel more engaged, motivated, and committed to achieving school goals.
- Principals should cultivate a culture of shared responsibility rather than mere delegation. Sharing leadership responsibilities ensures that staff feel empowered, valued, and recognised as integral contributors rather than subordinates.
- Principals should provide opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles and support their professional growth, thereby developing future leaders within the school.

By implementing these recommendations, the selected school in the Chris Hani West District can establish a distributed leadership that improves academic performance, strengthens staff participation, and contributes to the overall success of the educational institution.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the effects of distributed leadership on academic performance in selected schools in the Chris Hani West District. Based on the findings and discussion, it concludes that by entrusting leadership responsibilities to individuals, the organization is developing, and tomorrow, leaders are developing. This is characterized by collaborative efforts to redefine responsibilities through a shared approach to leadership, signifying a departure from a single authoritative leader. The extension of leadership tasks and the reconfiguration of responsibilities result in a shift in power dynamics within school relationships and the pursuit of the school's values and objectives.

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