The enactment of distributed leadership in secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

School leaders have a significant impact on student outcomes; however, there has been a shift from viewing school leadership as the actions of an individual, to seeing leadership as a collaborative endeavour, including in Aotearoa New Zealand. The traditional heroic model of leadership is making way for a new leadership paradigm which considers leadership as the actions of many rather than the few and promotes the construct of distributed leadership. This research study, using an interpretive qualitative design, focused on the experiences of secondary school principals in their attempts to distribute leadership. Moreover, the study aimed to connect principal's interpretations of distributed leadership with their practice of the construct. The findings highlight the challenges in defining and enacting distributed leadership. Nine recommendations for principals who are considering distributed leadership as a tool for effectively distributing leadership and improving student outcomes are presented. These are designed to provide principals with a starting point when considering distributed leadership and to stimulate further discussion on the topic.

INTRODUCTION

A shift from viewing school leadership as the actions of an individual principal to the involvement of all teachers in leadership practice has occurred, with the concept of distributed leadership gaining prominence as a contemporary leadership construct (Hairon & Goh, 2015; Harris, 2013; Youngs, 2020a). While *The Leadership Strategy for the teaching profession of Aotearoa New Zealand* and the *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018a, 2018b) both avoid specific mention of the term distributed leadership, the content of both reflects its characteristics. Both documents refer to leaders working collaboratively and providing leadership opportunities for every teacher regardless of role or position, a clear indication of the trend towards a conceptualisation of post-heroic, distributed leadership (Youngs, 2020a). There is currently little guidance for Aotearoa New Zealand school principals on how to

enact distributed leadership practices and provide meaningful leadership opportunities for teachers. This research study was designed to provide insight into the enactment of distributed leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools through interviews with secondary school principals who were known to be using forms of distributed leadership. The research focused on how distributed leadership is interpreted and enacted in four Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools and aimed to provide school leaders with evidence-based recommendations regarding the enactment and practice of this contemporary leadership approach.

UNDERSTANDINGS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Growing in popularity since the early 2000s, distributed leadership is an example of a post-heroic construct and has been actively advocated in policy frameworks internationally (Harris, 2013; Mifsud, 2023). Seen as a strategic approach to creating change, distributed leadership has become a popular government-endorsed strategy (Torrance & Humes, 2015). Based on this assertion, principals and educational leaders need to focus their attention on the purpose and practice of distributed leadership and the conditions they will need to set to ensure it is enacted effectively.

Despite distributed leadership being a focus of a considerable amount of research in the education sector, there is a lack of consensus on a common definition of the term (Hairon & Goh, 2015). A broad understanding is provided by Klaar et al., (2016, p. 115) who describe it as "a purposeful approach to increasing school effectiveness through the involvement of other formal and informal leaders in leadership activities". Key elements of distributed leadership include viewing leadership as a practice rather than a role (Harris, 2013); shared decision making rather than top-down delegation (Hairon & Goh, 2015); and the involvement of many, with influence and agency being shared (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). Distributed leadership is referred to in two of the seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited (Leithwood et al., 2020), as it is suggested that leadership will have a more positive influence on outcomes for both schools and students when it is distributed. The importance of context is emphasised in Leithwood et al.'s study, as the levels of expertise within schools and organisational needs will influence how it is enacted. The varied nature of distributed leadership has been emphasised by Thorpe et al. (2011) who suggest that it should be viewed as "a variety of configurations which emerge from the exercise of influence that produces interdependent and conjoint action" (p. 241).

The value of hybrid configurations which allow for the existence of different forms of distributed leadership along a continuum from 'individual' to 'dispersed' have been highlighted (Youngs, 2020b). Gronn (2008) refers to hybridity in discussing the relationship between power and democratic leadership, pointing to the coalescence of "hierarchical and heterarchical elements of emergent activities" (p. 155). According to Bolden (2011), hybridity helps understand the complex nature of distributed leadership and "may help to shed light on the important balance between individual, collective, and situational aspects of leadership practice and, importantly, when and why particular configurations are more effective and/or desirable than others" (p. 264). Hairon and Goh (2015), in their research on distributed leadership acknowledged the emergence of what they termed bounded empowerment.

Bounded empowerment is an example of relinquishing control or decision making but is done so with caveats. According to Hairon and Goh, an example of this is when empowered decision making must be "coordinated and aligned to school goals and in harmony with decisions made by others within the organization in alignment to departmental and school goals" (2015, p. 708). This bounded empowerment is a representation of Gronn's (2008) concept of hybridity in that it utilises an existing hierarchy to distribute decision making. While Hairon and Goh (2015) suggest bounded empowerment is a natural fit with the Asian cultural value of hierarchy, it would also appear to fit the traditionally hierarchical nature of school systems internationally. Therefore, perhaps it is worth considering distributed leadership as a construct that can co-exist or even coalesce with other forms of leadership. Furthermore, the notion that distributed leadership requires the flattening of a hierarchy may be erroneous and lack pragmatism.

While there appears to be a lack of understanding of the enactment of distributed leadership, particularly in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, previous research has identified a number of supportive conditions.

1. A culture of trust within the school characterised by the building and valuing of teacher capabilities (Day et al., 2009; Klar et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2016). Research suggests principals need to be mindful of taking time to build trust, develop teacher capabilities and a create a positive school culture (Day et al., 2009), before attempting to distribute leadership. Distributed leadership requires high levels of collaboration which is underpinned by a shared view of leadership practice.

2. Drawing on the strengths and capabilities of a range of staff, described as deliberately harnessing collective will, skill, and leadership of all (Harris, 2011). This process needs to be an authentic and deliberate act that promotes the benefits of utilising the many over the few. Klar et al. (2016) describe principals purposefully identifying leaders by observing them and interacting with them – getting to know leaders and their strengths and interests.

3. The creation of a range of opportunities for those with appropriate expertise, to lead and to take responsibility for critical aspects of change and development (Harris, 2013: Klar et al., 2016). This may include redesigning school routines in order to support and sustain both formal and informal leadership practices (Tian et al., 2016). The importance of facilitating role transition and providing ongoing support once these opportunities have been created has also been emphasised (Klar et al., 2016).

While these conditions provide a guide to the enactment of distributed leadership in schools, context cannot be overlooked. Leithwood et al. (2020) suggest patterns of distribution differ from school to school, and the distribution of leadership is likely to depend on the school's phase of development, the readiness of staff, the levels of trust, and the leader's leadership experience and capability (Day et al., 2009). Furthermore, Leithwood et al. (2020) highlight the importance of leaders being responsive to the context and suggest research highlights how

"effective school leaders understand and respond appropriately to the different contextual demands that they face" (p. 5).

THE STUDY

This research was carried out as part of a Master of Secondary School Leadership (MSSL) qualification. Greg Sharland, the first author, is an assistant principal in a secondary school and was interested in the nature of educational leadership, particularly in regard to the change agenda that currently underpins school improvement. The study was based on a qualitative design and used an interpretive approach to data collection and analysis. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest, "qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their world, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). The intention of the research was to draw upon the experiences of principals in New Zealand secondary schools regarding their attempts to enact distributed leadership.

The data collection took the form of one-on-one interviews with four principals from a range of schools. Purposive sampling was used to select these principals who through their involvement in the MSSL programme had shown an interest in distributed leadership practices. Permission was gained from the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics committee to carry out this study. The principals were spread across the North Island of New Zealand and their schools represented a range of decile bands, student numbers and ethnic demographics. All four principals approached agreed to be interviewed, were all given written information about the study and signed a consent form. Three came from co-educational schools and one a single sex school, and three were male and one female.

The semi-structured online interviews were based on nine questions focusing on the what, why and how of distributed leadership that were sent to the participants prior to the interviews. While principals were asked about their understandings and motivations for engaging in distributed leadership, the focus in this article will be on the enactment including the conditions needed to encourage distributed leadership. A thematic data analysis approach was employed in this research (Braun & Clark, 2006). This involved the steps of gaining familiarity with the data, developing draft themes from the interview responses, and then analysing the themes with reference to existing literature.

ENACTING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

While the motivation and determination to move away from the traditional hierarchical, heroic leader approach was strongly stated by all principals interviewed as part of this study, the enactment of a distributed leadership approach was not straightforward. Three steps in the enactment process common to all four principals were identified: setting the foundations; engaging the many; and seeking opportunities to create organisational change. Each of these will now be discussed with reference to the voices of the principals and to relevant literature.

Setting the foundations

Setting the foundations was acknowledged by all principals as an essential first step in the successful enactment of distributed leadership. This included setting the foundations for the enactment of distributed leadership, consideration of a common understanding, the strengthening of relationships, and an understanding the need for a long-term approach. Participants in this study were asked about their understanding of the concept of distributed leadership as this is considered a prerequisite to ensuring its successful enactment (Denee & Thornton, 2021). Unless the focus is on distributed leadership as an evolving practice that involves everyone and is beneficial for students is clarified, there may be resistance from staff who view it as another term for delegation. Rather than providing a research-based definition, each principal used a series of concepts to explain their understanding of the construct. These understandings were clearly underpinned by personal experiences and participant's subsequent mental models of leadership. Two of the principals focused on the concept of team and the associated collaboration that is required for a team to function. The other two principals viewed distributed leadership as a process of empowerment and accountability. Arguably, both approaches are underpinned by the key concept of distributed leadership.

The importance of first establishing a high trust environment characterised by strong personal and professional relationships was commented on: *"your environment's got to be one of (high trust) before even beginning to think about it"*. Autonomy and accountability were also identified as key aspects of building professional relationships on the distributed leadership journey. Additionally developing a strong vision and a common set of values was seen as a priority. A high level of trust has also been found to be a prerequisite of distributed leadership in previous studies (Day et al., 2009; Klar et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2016).

Principals also commented on bringing people on board who share the vision for distributed leadership practice. One noted: *"You start to appoint people into your team...so you start to grow...surrounding yourself with really good people and then giving them the freedom to get on with the job and getting out of the way"*. All principals in this study commented that distributing leadership took time and required a commitment to relationship building and developing a culture of trust. One principal discussed how he learned this the hard way:

> I just assumed that I could walk in and bring the distributed approach... You've got to actually have established leadership before you can distribute anything...People don't know you, and they don't know your style. You haven't built personal relationships with the people in your school let alone professional ones...I moved too quickly in those early days without a doubt.

Another commented: *"you are talking years you're not talking terms, days, or weeks"*. These findings reinforce research from Day et al. (2009) and Harris (2013) whereby distributed leadership is viewed as a long-term strategy.

Engaging the many

The concept of engaging the many was central to the beliefs of all four principals, although their methods differed. Some preferred a bounded empowerment

approach involving the delegation of authority (Hairon & Goh, 2015), whereas others deliberately created conditions that would encourage participation from a wide range of staff members. The boundaries to leadership were more blurred in this second approach which is similar to Leithwood et al.'s (2007) concept of spontaneous alignment, where collaboration arises in response to particular problems, bringing together people with different skills, knowledge, and backgrounds.

Once the foundations were set, all principals in this study focused on ensuring there were opportunities for other to contribute their strengths and skills, and creating functional teams. The consensus amongst the principals interviewed was that the distribution process needed to start with the senior leadership team. *"Talk the talk, walk the walk"* was a phrase used by a principal to highlight the need for his senior leadership team to role model the behaviours of distributed leadership. He explained his rationale:

> In trying to set up distributed leadership at the start for the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), that was a focus, and it takes time to then filter out to a point where you've got enough people involved in those teams around the school to then start to get the shift.

Following on from the focus on the senior leadership team, it appears the enactment of distributed leadership across the whole staff was predominantly based on opportunity as opposed to a deliberate, structured roll-out. This opportunity-based approach involved seeking out opportunities to encourage the distribution of leadership slowly but surely across a wide range of staff, including support staff. One principal suggested:

> It depends where opportunities come along to make change. What we've tried to do is anytime a new role comes up, or anytime someone leaves and there's an opportunity if you like to repurpose a role, then we will look at it.

Examples of both successful and unsuccessful strategies were shared in the interviews. One successful approach involved identification of the need to move ICT into the pedagogical space. This led to the creation of a team involving newly created roles, an eLearning coordinator and digital pedagogy innovators. The team, consisting of both teaching staff and support staff, was created based on expertise rather than position. Another principal described an unsuccessful attempt to distribute leadership that involved creating cross-department, collaborative cross-curricular workrooms. Staff resisted this initiative as they appeared to prioritise the senior curriculum areas and wanted to stay in their departments. The two examples outlined above illustrate the importance of not forcing change on staff. The eLearning group was interest-based and largely optional whereas the cross-curricular group was based on those who were teaching year 9 as opposed to those who wanted to join the group.

The importance of the physical environment was mentioned by some principals. One saw an opportunity to role model distributed leadership by changing the physical environment. As he pointed out, *"there are certain environments that make it a lot easier to facilitate distributed leadership"*. After

initially taking some criticism over their siloed set-up, he decided to remove some of the physical barriers: *"If you literally knock the walls through, suddenly there are no barriers, the physical environment actually is quite significant. You can be creative with that"*. Two of the principals in this study shared their office space with their SLT, leaving other spaces as meeting rooms.

Other conditions that supported the successful implementation of distributed leadership included promoting individual growth and development through mentoring systems along with providing leadership opportunities for all. One principal shared her strategy of having: *"an all-comers approach…if you're interested in helping develop, for example, restorative practice in school, you can join this committee, and you can be part of that work"*. However, she cautioned: *"One of the issues that has arisen with that particular model is that there isn't necessarily a lot of commitment to engage with the work that comes along with it."* The philosophy of engaging the many in the enactment of distributed leadership has been discussed in other studies, for example Harris and DeFlaminis describe broadening the notion of leadership so "that agency and influence are widely shared" (2016, p. 141). As discussed above it may involve bounded empowerment whereby the clear direction is provided by the principal or spontaneous alignment, a less structured approach.

Seeking opportunities to create organisational change

The opportunity to create new roles and leadership opportunities as an outcome of the practice of distributed leadership was referred to frequently by principals in this study. Roles such as the learning evaluation leads and digital pedagogy innovators mentioned above, resulted from the creation of new teams to solve a particular problem. This appears to be distributed leadership in action and expertise is engaged wherever it exists, rather than solely relying on the expertise of the positional leaders. Leithwood et al. (2020) report a greater commitment among teachers in schools where leadership responsibilities are distributed according to patterns of expertise, highlighting the value of this approach. The importance of the principal in this process is emphasised by Harris (2013, p. 548) who suggests principals must "provide the opportunities for others to fulfil and realise their leadership potential". Similarly, Klar et al., (2016) describe the role of principals in enacting distributed leadership as creating leadership opportunities, facilitating role transition and providing support.

Organisational change can also be enacted through changing expectations of teachers' behaviours as part of a high trust, distributed leadership model. One principal described this as where *"people are expected to kill their own snakes and solve those issues themselves and make decisions and get it right"*. This represents a significant shift from the traditional top-down structure that many had operated in previously. This principal aimed to empower others to be creative, problem-solve, and make decisions rather than telling them what to do:

> I mean I can, from top-down, tell you what you should be doing and that, but I'd rather you tell me because I want you to tell me how you get the best outcomes with your kids, you're the expert, I'm certainly not.

Adding further depth to the conditions of trust and autonomy, he described the need to create an environment where *"they've got the confidence to sometimes get it wrong"*.

Another example of challenging the barriers that a traditional hierarchical system dictates through a willingness to take on a variety of roles was commented on with the shift from traditional head of department roles to curriculum leaders:

> The idea of that is you might be a curriculum leader, working at this moment in time, you're working on this piece of mahi. But next year, we might need you to work on something else. So, the idea is that the roles are more agile and less fixed...too many of the roles were too fixed.

Day et al.'s (2009) work on the impact of school leaders on distributed leadership suggests successful school leaders provide the conditions that determine the effectiveness, in part or whole, of the distribution of leadership. These include "providing time to exercise leadership, acknowledging the importance of such leadership, creating opportunities to develop leadership skills, and targeting or encouraging people to take on leadership tasks" (p. 14).

The schools in the study appeared to have created a balance between a traditional hierarchy and a contemporary, distributed form of leadership. This apparent harmony embodies Gronn's (2008) conceptualisation of distributed leadership as a hybrid form of leadership. While the lack of evidence in this research from teachers and support staff does not allow for any judgement of effectiveness, anecdotally we can view this situation as an example of the successful implementation of distributed leadership. These findings provide further evidence that, as Thorpe et al. (2011) point out, distributed leadership should be viewed as a variety of configurations. Further, a hybrid view of the construct may provide a more pragmatic and realistic view of distributed leadership in practice.

Summary

The enactment of distributed leadership across the four schools highlights the contextual nature of distributed leadership. Moreover, each principal's interpretation and understanding of distributed leadership clearly contributed to the variation in approaches to the enactment of the construct. The one consistency across the responses was the ever-evolving and opportunity-based nature of distributed leadership. Each of the principals openly discussed their successes and failures in their attempts to enact distributed leadership. Several themes emerged, including setting the conditions which included developing relationships and taking time, engaging the many, and seeking opportunities to distribute leadership. However, what also emerged was a notable difference in the way each of the principals went about enacting distributed leadership in relation to these themes. This is unsurprising given the fluid and emergent nature of distributed leadership. Moreover, it highlights the inconsistent and highly contextual practice of the construct identified in early studies (Hairon & Goh, 2015; Harris, 2013).

RECOMMENDATIONS

A shift towards post-heroic forms of leadership requires a deliberate and sustained approach. Moreover, there is a need to develop the readiness of those within the organisation, both in formal and informal leadership roles, whereby mental models of leadership are challenged and capabilities to function effectively within a 'leadership of the many' construct are developed. Based on the findings from the research, along with a review of the literature on distributed leadership, a set of recommendations have been developed. These recommendations are designed to provide evidence-based guidance to school leaders who may be considering enacting more distributed leadership practices in their schools.

Recommendation	Description
Develop an understanding of distributed leadership	Distributed leadership is a complex concept that needs unpacking before enactment is attempted. As a starting point, distributed leadership needs to be viewed as *a practice that involves everyone* and *a contextual and evolving practice of leadership.*
Distributed leadership is a long-term strategy	Planning for a long-term roll out of distributed leadership is needed. While some short-term effects will be observed, a long-term and well-resourced commitment is required.
Articulate the 'why'	Teachers and support staff need to understand the potential benefits of distributed leadership. What is in it for the students? What is in it for them? This needs to be articulated clearly from the beginning.
Focus on relationship building	Developing professional and personal relationships is the first step in enacting distributed leadership. Through relationship building, a high trust culture can be developed which will provide the necessary foundations for distributing leadership.
Begin with those that have influence within the school	Those with positional, social, or cultural influence such as SLT members should initially be targeted. Role modelling of the behaviours of distributed leadership by those who have influence within the school will begin to change the perceptions of others and pave the way for the wider distribution of leadership.
Look for opportunities to implement distributed leadership	As opportunities arise, principals should encourage those with the expertise, and/or willingness to participate (regardless of position). Furthermore, there should be flexibility and capacity to establish formalised roles out of these groups where

	appropriate. Forced groups/situations should be avoided.
Change the physical environment	Where possible, the physical environment should be changed to stimulate a dynamic, collaborative environment. This could include communal workspaces and suitable collaborative spaces.
Review, reflect and adapt	Distributed leadership requires constant review, reflection, and adaptation. It is an evolving practice that is contextual, and this context will change over time.

Table 1: Recommendations for enacting distributed leadership

LIMITATIONS

This research has provided a unique insight into the application of distributed leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools. However, the scope of the research is limited, meaning the findings provide a starting point only for understanding distributed leadership in practice. Four interviews with principals in varying stages of their principalship, and in very different contexts regarding the enactment of distributed leadership, has created an intriguing insight into the challenges and successes of distributed leadership. This, however, by no means provides the academic rigour that is required for an authoritative view on this field of study. Furthermore, the interviews enlightened us on the views of the principal without delving into the perspective of those throughout the organisation that are actually practising distributed leadership on a daily basis. Further research here is required to correlate intent with action and compare the views of leaders with those of their staff. In doing so, a clearer picture will emerge of effective distributed leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations from this project provide a useful set of guiding principles for school leaders interesting in increasing school effectiveness through the distribution of leadership, however, these are only the beginning of an ongoing discussion. If we continue to ask our school leaders to create change, we must provide them with more robust and clear guidance. To achieve this, leadership policy and frameworks must be more explicit in their guidance and recommendations must be underpinned by a combination of Aotearoa New Zealand and international research. Distributed leadership has the potential to transform educational leadership but current policy provisions do not provide supportive conditions or guidance.

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