SHARED LEADERSHIP: HOW IS THE PHENOMENON UNDERSTOOD IN THEORY AND PRACTISED IN THE SCHOOLS?

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─Abstract─

Leadership affects the success and failure of every type of school, and the complexity of today's school environments makes leadership even more challenging. Therefore, it is becoming more difficult for any single individual to possess all the skills and abilities required to competently lead a school. Shared leadership has been identified as a key governance base for the future that offers ways to make the role of principals more manageable through collaboration and teamwork. A review of the literature indicates that while shared leadership has been practised in some form for centuries, it is still not well understood, not well accepted and not valued by those who practise or study leadership. This study investigates the current understanding and practice of shared leadership in secondary schools. A qualitative case study approach was selected, incorporating a series of semi-structured interviews with school principals. The findings affirmed that there is still little agreement on what shared leadership actually means, ratifying the point that shared leadership is still not well understood. The variation indicates a range of practices that fall under the general umbrella of shared leadership but differ in the manner and extent in which leadership is shared in schools. This study gives a better insight into how shared leadership is understood in theory and practised in schools. This contribution could be used as a training ground for future and existing school principals.

Key Words: *Shared leadership, school principals, implementation, change management*

JEL Classification: I20, I21, I29

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the democratic dispensation in 1994, numerous educational reforms have been implemented in the South African education system. Several policies have been introduced and legislations implemented with an aim to producing a framework for effective education and training. One such policy, which has had a remarkable impact on the way schools are managed and governed, is the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. The most significant educational reform embedded in the South African Schools Act is the move from hierarchical school management to school-based management (Mokoena, 2011; Botha, 2006; Bush & Heystek, 2003). To enable schools to respond effectively to these changes, a shared leadership approach to educational leadership was introduced in school systems (South African Schools Act, 1996). This move is in line with international trends where shared leadership has been identified as a worthwhile response to educational reforms in order to operate schools in an efficient and effective manner (Duignan & Bezzina, 2006; Cranston, 2002). The concept of shared leadership values the contributions that many school stakeholders can make. According to Kocolowski (2010), shared leadership offers a possibility of leadership as a process where actions, planning, experience, knowledge and information are shared with the purpose of achieving organisational goals. Many educational leaders, especially principals, find themselves isolated and alone, believing that they are primarily responsible for leadership in their schools. Such a stance constitutes a myopic view of leadership. School principals need to be bold enough to freely share and distribute leadership responsibilities among teachers and even to other key stakeholders. In this way, they are more likely to create school cultures where key stakeholders such as teachers, learners and parents willingly take responsibility for the leadership of their school community.

Despite policy recommendations that schools must have shared leadership if they are to be successful, the national and international literature indicate that there is still confusion of what shared leadership is and how it is applied in practice (Mokoena, 2011; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Ingvarson, Anderson, Gronn & Jackson, 2006). More specifically, this literature suggests that the notion of shared leadership is still not well understood by some school principals or by those who practise leadership and management in schools. This assertion is supported by a research study on the perceptions of principals and other school leaders of the concept and practice of shared leadership in one school system, which reports that while the rhetoric of shared leadership was prevalent in schools, there was very little evidence of its practice (Fraser & Duignan, 2004). The respondents (16

principals) demonstrate a relatively unsophisticated understanding of what shared leadership might be, and focus their attentions more on idealistic beliefs, values and attitudes to shared leadership, which are not always matched by their behaviours.

Shared leadership appears to be an elusive concept and it is still not well understood how it is practised in schools. However, as it is identified as a critical aspect of school reform, this area warrants more research. This study has adopted the most widely cited definition of shared leadership, which comes from Conger and Pearce (2003:1), "shared leadership is the process where more than one person collaborates for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both". The key emphasis in this broad definition is on learning together, and sharing and creating processes and conditions that encourage everyone in the school community to be effective learning resources for each other. In line with this broad definition of shared leadership, this study explores the current understanding and practice of shared leadership by the school principals in selected secondary schools in Limpopo, a province of South Africa. The following research questions guided the study:

(1) What are the schools principals' understandings of shared leadership? (2) How is shared leadership practised in their schools?

2. CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNING OF THE STUDY

2.1. Research on shared leadership

The study focuses on the meaning and the practice of shared leadership in schools. However, shared leadership is ambiguous, which has added confusion to its meaning and practice. There are several different definitions of shared leadership available in literature, a few of which are presented in this study. According to one definition, shared leadership is defined as a dynamic, interactive process between the actors in a team for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of a team or organisational goals or both (Avolio, Walumba & Weber, 2009; Kocolowski, 2010). Conger and Pearce (2003:1) add, "The influence process often involves peer, or lateral influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence". Pointing to specifics, Wellman (2013) says that of particular interest with shared leadership is the serial interactive social process without hierarchy where the leading position is interchangeable within the group. In shared leadership models, leadership is defined as actions that are performed by people (Badaracco, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Shared leadership is also a study of leadership as a group

phenomenon (Conger & Pearce, 2003). These definitions from the literature therefore suggest that shared leadership practice is not related to the knowledge and skills of only one leader, but a participative process in which individuals and situations interact with each other (Göksoy, 2015). One of the benefits of shared leadership often advocated is that the combined resources in a group can produce and yield more results and is in general capable of more things than any one single individual (Drescher, Korsgaard, Welpe, Picot & Wigand, 2014). It is also important to take note of other terms often associated with shared leadership. In research literature, shared leadership, collective leadership and distributed leadership are often used interchangeably, while the term team leadership is viewed as a slightly different stream of research (Kocolowski, 2010). However, shared leadership definitions often include the term "team" coupled with the concept of process, property or phenomenon (Kocolowski, 2010:24).

In defining shared leadership, the researchers Denis, Langley and Sergi (2012) review literature on forms of leadership that in one way or another imply plurality, that is, the combined influence of multiple leaders in specific organisational situations. The authors identify four streams of scholarship in plural leadership, each focusing on somewhat different phenomena and adopting different theoretical, epistemological and methodological assumptions. These streams of research include the following (Denis et al., 2012:213–214):

- *Sharing leadership for team effectiveness – mutual leadership in groups:* This first research stream focuses on a body of research largely based in the organisational behaviour tradition that considers leadership as "… a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both" (Pearce & Conger, 2003:1). The empirical emphasis here is on teams and mutual leadership in groups and members leading each other, organisational behaviour within the teams and achieving organisational goals, and vertical leaders and self-leadership contributing to shared leadership development. In sharing leadership for team effectiveness, followers are leaders and leaders are followers. The concept of sharing leadership within groups has application in schools. In a school environment, a leadership team approach exists where the school principal participates democratically with teachers, sharing power, authority and decision-making. This arrangement may occur in schools on a micro-level within the school management team and with subject heads of departments in large schools, or on a macro-level with representatives of the school governing body.

- *Pooling leadership capacities at the top to direct others – dyads, triads and constellations*: This second research stream focuses on empirical situations in which two, three or more people jointly work together as co-leaders of others outside the group (Alvarez & Svejenova, 2005). However, in pooling leadership, there are identifiable leaders. There may be a group of people who lead together, a dyad or triad. The leadership group leads the followers. Pooled leadership bridges expertise and provides legitimacy in professionalised settings. This stream is perhaps best associated with the label "collective" leadership and has attracted scholars with a more managerial or sociological orientation. In a school environment, collective leadership may occur in situations where two or more people share the leadership of a school, such as when a principal and deputy principal arrangement exists.

- *Spreading leadership within and across levels over time – leadership relays*: This third stream refers to the work that has examined how leadership may be handed over between people from one hierarchical level to another over time as well as across intra-organisational and inter-organisational boundaries. In other words, leadership is passed from person to person, much like a relay team, as parts of a project are completed. However, in this case not all followers lead, or are expected to lead. This is the stream that is most associated with the term "distributed leadership" and that has been developed extensively by researchers in education and those interested in inter-organisational collaboration (Lambert, 2003; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). In a school setting, leadership in this case can be distributed to middle and lower management through committees, subject departments and collaborative teaching teams.

- *Producing leadership through interaction – decentring individuals*: This fourth stream focuses on leadership as an emergent property of relations. Producing leadership through interaction moves furthest toward decentring the notion of leadership from individuals entirely, adopting "a view of leadership and organization as human social constructions that emanate from the rich connections and interdependencies of organizations and their members" (Uhl-Bien, 2006:655). This perspective is most associated with the term "relational leadership".

The foregoing discussion on research streams together with the definition of shared leadership provide a framework for analysing the principals' perspectives of their understanding and the practise of shared leadership in their schools.

3. METHODS

A qualitative research design was used in the study since it allows the shared leadership phenomenon to be explored in detail and for the conceptions and experiences of individuals to be understood (Creswell, 2013). More specifically, a multiple case-study approach was strategically selected to gather information in a number of small cases located in different environments (Denscombe, 2007). The author decided to employ the multiple case-study approach to draw upon the different perspectives principals have of the understanding and experiences of shared leadership (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Yin, 2003). As evidenced in literature, shared leadership involves many different people in an organisation or school. However, the focus of this study has been restricted to the perceptions and experiences of school principals because of their critical role in the leadership dynamics of schools and their positions as the appointed leaders. The importance of the principals' understandings, attitudes and feelings towards shared leadership is apparent from the works of Andrews and Crowther (2002), Andrews and Lewis (2002) and Lambert (2006). These authors recognise that a critical factor in the adoption and success of shared leadership lies with the level of the principals' support. Furthermore, principals are also authorities on the leadership activities within their schools.

The sample of this study comprised three secondary schools located in the Waterberg district in Limpopo, a province of South Africa. The schools were selected from different environments, such as township, rural and urban environments. Only a principal from each school was selected to participate in the study. It was believed that the principals leading these schools, which are located in various contexts (urban, township and rural), would provide varied experiences about the research investigation. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study or decline to answer questions if they deemed it necessary. By focusing on a few cases within their natural settings, the researcher was able to spend more time with the participants and to conduct an in-depth study. Using purposeful sampling, the three schools located in the Waterberg district were selected on the basis of the following criteria: (1) proximity of the sites to the researcher; (2) the number of sites manageable in terms of time, distance and costs; (3) the quintile within which each school falls, and the academic performance over the last three years. Table 1 provides summary of the research sample.

Table 1: Research sample

Name of school	Type of Quintile	Location	Name of principal (pseudonym)
A	5* fee-paying	Urban Area	Gloria
B	3** Non-fee paying	Township Area	Norman
C	3** Non-fee paying	Village Area	Jacob

*This means that school A receives fewer norms and standards from the government, because the community it serves is composed of parents who can afford to pay a tuition fee for their children.

**This means that both school B and C receive more funding from the government, considering that they serve learners from a poor community.

Gloria (pseudonym), the principal of school A, is in her mid-to-late fifties. She has been the principal of school A for almost 18 years. Prior to her tenure at this school, she served as head of department and deputy principal in two different schools in the same district. Gloria has formal qualifications in educational leadership and management. She has substantial experience and a deep understanding of educational leadership and management. Gloria has studied various models of leadership and she believes in a participative leadership approach.

Norman (pseudonym) who is in his sixties is the principal of school B. He joined the school as the deputy principal and was promoted to principal when the previous principal retired. He has completed studies up to master's level in education management. He demonstrated a thorough understanding of management, which is evident in the quality and precision of his interview responses.

Jacob (pseudonym), the principal of school C, has been with the school for almost ten years. Prior to his tenure as principal, he served as a head of department and was later promoted to deputy principal at a primary school in the neighbouring village. He has an honours degree in education management and he is currently studying towards a master's degree.

For each case, data were collected through a semi-structured interview with the principal of the school and through the review of official school documents. The

semi-structured interviews were utilised to explore each principal's understanding of shared leadership and to gather information about how it is practised in their schools. All the interviews were audiotaped after prior arrangement with the participants and later transcribed by the researcher. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. In addition, the researcher took field notes during the interview process to record the information not reflected on the audio tapes. Official documents such as newsletters, school reports and policy statements were reviewed. The principals were asked to provide copies of these documents, if they were not readily available. These documents contain information about the activities and features of schools. These documents were often written or authorised by the principal, which provided a method to verify claims made during the interviews. The combined use of interviews and official school documents allowed the data to be verified through triangulation and provided credibility to the study

The researcher used Amedeo Giorgi's general steps for conducting research and analysing data. These steps entail: (1) reading all the interview material to get a sense of the whole; (2) identifying commonalities within the descriptive data; (3) determining and describing the relevance of each meaning unit; and (4) articulating the experiences of the participants in a statement that is consistent with the interview material (Giorgi, 1995). In addition, as part of data analysis, the interview and documentary data were compared to the literature with the results reported as a series of findings to determine if they support the theory of shared leadership or not. As way to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the study, the researcher provided an audit trail of the decisions taken during data collection, analysis and interpretation. The process of member-checking was also done at different stages of this study – interview transcripts were given to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the data capturing process and the interpretation of the findings was also shared with the participants and with peers to confirm and reduce possible bias (Dishena & Mokoena, 2016; Creswell, 2013).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored school principals' understanding of the concept "shared leadership" and the way it is practised in their schools. The findings gathered through various techniques (interviews and document analysis) are presented in the next section.

Enquiry 1: How do the school principals' understanding of shared leadership compare with the definition adopted in the study?

This study adopted the operational definition of shared leadership as "a process where more than one person collaborates for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both" (Conger & Pearce, 2003:1). The principals' understanding and definition of shared leadership was compared with this definition to check any elements of similarity.

During the interview, Gloria, the principal of school A, described shared leadership as the "sharing of responsibility with other school stakeholders". She believes that sharing responsibility gives other people the opportunity to exercise some leadership. This view resonates with Lambert's (2006) claim that leadership capacity needs to be developed among all school stakeholders. Gloria described this as one of her responsibilities and, by way of example, indicated that the school is able to run smoothly even in her absence. As an appointed leader and a school principal, Gloria understands that she needs to openly share power and decision-making with other school stakeholders. She further indicated that "sharing leadership in a school setting should be based on mutual trust and delegation of responsibilities, rather than delegation of tasks". Throughout the interview, Gloria mentioned and provided examples of her role which agreed with the five functions of shared leadership, namely, diverse participation in leadership (exemplified by established teams operating within the school), collaborative relations, joint responsibility, shared vision and open conversation (Duignan, 2007; Duignan & Bezzina, 2006; Dinham, Aubusson & Brady, 2006). From a general perspective, Gloria' conception of shared leadership closely resembles the operational definition of shared leadership adopted in this study.

During the interview, Norman, the principal of school B, contextualised shared leadership and described it "as letting your deputies know what you are doing and what you have done". Norman believes that both his deputies should have positions of power and authority equal to his own to be effective in their daily duties. Throughout the interview, Norman emphasised the importance of shared responsibility for running the school, valuing and respecting one another, and the need for open and honest communication. In describing shared leadership, the focus was on collaboration with his deputies rather than leading the entire team, which he reiterated in different forms throughout the interview. This suggested that Norman and his deputies have worked collaboratively at providing direction for the school and have achieved common goals. Collaboration (understanding of how each person operates) and open communication are characteristics of shared leadership described in the literature (Lambert, 2006; Locke, 2003; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Therefore, Norman's conception of shared leadership is to some

extent consistent with the operational definition of shared leadership adopted in this study.

During the interview, Jacob, the principal of school C, described shared leadership by putting more emphasis on the role of the principal in providing the strategic direction and monitoring the operations of the school. In his view, shared leadership is "making sure that his vision about the school was shared and cascaded to all other school stakeholders". Throughout the interview, Jacob appeared to have a clear understanding of shared leadership, but his focus was more on delegation of leadership than on collaboration. From a general perspective, delegation of responsibilities is one of the characteristics of shared leadership described in the literature (Edvantia, 2005; Lambert, 2003) where power, authority and decision-making are shared by the principal through hierarchical structures with other school stakeholders. In addition, the requirements for shared leadership, namely, shared vision, open communication and a balance of power appeared evident from the interview with Jacob.

Enquiry 2: How is shared leadership practised in the selected secondary schools?

Analysis of the interviews highlighted three forms of shared leadership exhibited by principals: those based largely on collaboration; those based largely on delegation; and those based on a balance of the two. Figure 1 presents data more clearly on how shared leadership is being practised in the selected secondary schools in the Waterberg district in Limpopo, a province of South Africa.
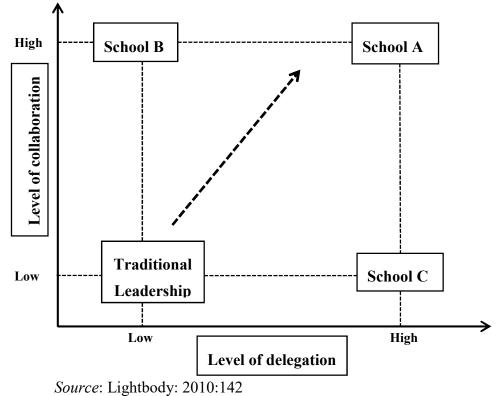
Figure-1: Three forms of shared leadership

Source: Lightbody: 2010:142

Before the democratic elections of 1994, leadership in South African schools had been a skill associated with the principal alone. Leadership was based on command of and control by the school principals. Leadership was practised from a hierarchical perspective, focusing on the individual leader and a top-to-bottom organisational structure. The majority of school principals pursued a command-and-control type of leadership, labelled "traditional leadership" as indicated in figure 1. Figure 1 illustrates that traditional leadership is characterised by both low collaboration and low delegation or non-existence in a school setting. As a result of global educational reform and the introduction of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, leadership and the way South African schools are managed and governed have changed. The majority of schools migrated to a more inclusive and democratic leadership style. In figure 1, this migration is indicated by means of dotted arrowed line. A description of the analysis of how leadership is practised in each case or school follows in the next section.

At school A, the practice of shared leadership was classified as high in both collaboration and delegation (figure 1). Gloria, the principal of the school, described the sharing of responsibility with other school stakeholders as her main priority. She indicated that she uses leadership teams to delegate leadership, but quite often meets with teams to make decisions collaboratively. A review of the official school documents, including the school webpage, school prospectus and quarterly newsletters, highlighted numerous references to the shared leadership and collaborative team approach operating in the school. The team approach exhibited at school A resonates with what Denis et al. (2012) call "sharing leadership for team effectiveness" in their definition of leadership, using four plural streams. The empirical emphasis of this approach is on teams and mutual leadership in groups and members leading each other, organisational behaviour within the teams and achieving organisational goals, vertical leaders and self-leadership contributing to shared leadership development (Denis et al., 2012).

At school B, Norman, the principal, follows a collaborative approach where open and honest communication is considered important to ensure that his deputies have a comprehensive understanding of the activities related to the school. He jointly shares power, authority and decision-making with his deputies. However, delegation of duties to his deputies is based on their capabilities that suit their circumstances. For these stated reasons, shared leadership at school B has been classified as high on collaboration and low on delegation (figure 1). This approach was also evidenced in official school documents, with the principal and his deputies attending most of the meetings and jointly conducting interviews with parents, and quarterly newsletters referencing collaborative activities that took place at the school. Therefore, this kind of approach resonates with what Denis et al. (2012) call "pooling leadership capacities at the top to direct others" in their definition of shared leadership using four plural streams. This stream is perhaps best associated with the label "collective" leadership. In this case study, collective leadership occurs in situations where the principal quite often shares the leadership of the school with his deputies.

At school C, Jacob, the principal, sees his leadership as ensuring that his vision about the school is understood by all school stakeholders. Shared leadership exists in a delegated approach, mainly through the school's hierarchical structure. Jacob sees his role as that of running the school and using the available talent and skills of his staff members through delegation. Staff members at this school participate in a whole range of activities, such as projects teams, event committees and wider community projects. The school newsletters showed that the student

representative council, the school governing body and various staff committees contributed to the running of the school. On the basis of this, shared leadership at school C has been classified as high on delegation and low on collaboration (figure 1). According to the four streams (plural leadership) developed by Denis et al. (2012), the approach exhibited in this case study is associated with the stream called "spreading leadership within and across levels over time". This stream is mostly associated with the term "distributed leadership". In a school setting, leadership can be distributed to middle and lower management through committees, subject departments and collaborative teaching teams, as has become apparent at this school.

5. CONCLUSION

The three cases present narratives of the conceptions and practice of shared leadership from the perspectives of the principals. Although the schools differ greatly, common themes such as collaboration, delegation, communication, shared vision have emerged from the perspective of principals that in general support the literature on shared leadership. However, the different conceptions of shared leadership affirm that there is still little agreement on what shared leadership actually means, ratifying the point made in literature that shared leadership is still not well understood. The variation in terms of the practice of shared leadership indicates a range of practices that fall under the general umbrella of shared leadership, but differ in the manner and extent to which leadership is shared. It is clear that further research is still needed in the field. However, this small-scale study offers readership an authentic picture of how shared leadership is understood and practised at selected secondary schools in the Waterberg district in Limpopo, a province of South Africa. Despite the elusive way in which leadership is defined and practised, this study supports the idea that shared leadership is a viable new way of looking at leadership in schools.

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