Expanding Leadership Capacity toward Social Justice

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Abstract	Article Info
Educational administrators are consistently challenged to find the right mix of leaders and to identify potentials that can be harnessed to expand the cadre. In both the academic and research communities, there has been much dialogue surrounding the way in which leadership is developed in organisations. These discourses continue to provide avenues for researchers to identify and recommend best practices for leadership development. Varied types of leadership could be explored as a means of expanding leadership capacity and sustaining a cadre of leaders suited to meet the growing needs in educational communities and other spheres. This study investigated perceptions of staff concerning distributed leadership as a possible strategy for enhancing succession planning, expanding leadership capacities, and ensuring that social justice is practiced within their organisation. Two main questions were explored in this study to uncover participants' perceptions of current leadership practices and distributed leadership; and to have them suggest how distributed leadership could be used within their academic unit to expand leadership capacity and to practise social justice. This research provides valuable information regarding how distributed leadership can be used to augment leadership capacities, enhance succession planning, and expand leadership capacity to ensure social justice is practised within the specified context.	**Article History:** *Received* September, 30, 2018 *Accepted* June, 30, 2019 **Keywords:** *Social justice, Distributed leadership, Leadership capacity, Capacity building.*

Introduction

Important to every stakeholder in the educational landscape is the leadership of its educational institutions. Miller (2015) noted that educational leadership experiences can be gratifying and stimulating but these experiences are not without challenges. According to Smith (2013), it requires a collaborative effort of sharing leadership. In Jamaica, particularly since the founding of the Institute for Educational Administration and Leadership- Jamaica (IEAL-J) seven years ago, there has been increased attention and investigations into educational leadership and management. This paper is an output of the third international conference led by the IEAL-J.

Effectiveness of educational processes and their outputs all reflect on leadership. In today's educational spaces, with the ever-growing challenges and dynamic processes in our institutions, educational leaders and administrators need to be shifting gears to meet the changing needs while performing effectively. This requires having the right number of individuals with appropriate talents and leadership competencies to meet those growing needs. But, in educational organisations there are challenges to leadership and the distribution of leadership roles. This requires building an academic leadership community of which two pillars are succession planning and capacity building. In one academic unit, there is an intervening issue in that succession planning is challenged by the hand-picking of leaders and/or the lack of such planning. The situation begs the question – Could distributed leadership be used to expand leadership

capacity within that academic unit and to ensure social justice is practised? This study explores distributed leadership as a tool to expand leadership capacity in that academic community as a means to practising social justice.

Statement of the Problem

There is an ever present need to expand the community of leaders who are equipped to lead Jamaica's educational institutions. However, identifying leadership interests is at times challenging because on the one hand, some people resist leadership to avert accountability; and on the other, there is the widely known practice of subjectively selecting leaders. Notwithstanding the underlying statement, there is need for leadership succession planning and in particular, capacity building to distribute leadership in order to build a community of leaders, to ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to participate in leadership development, to have an appropriate cadre to draw from (through an equitable and competitive process) when appropriate, and to share leadership to ensure social justice is practised, which is the essence of this paper.

Purpose of the Study

This study serves three main purposes: to better understand the leadership practices in an academic unit, to determine how academic and administrative staff in that setting perceive distributed leadership, and to identify means by which distributed leadership can be used for succession planning and expanding leadership capacity to ensure social justice.

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do staff members in the select academic unit perceive current leadership practices and distributed leadership?

2. How could the select academic unit use distributed leadership to expand leadership capacity and to ensure that social justice is practised?

Literature Review

In educational institutions, effective leadership is a "high priority issue" (Miller, 2013, p. 13) for a number of stakeholders. A critical component of this is effective people leadership which according to Miller (2016) requires educational leaders and administrators to "show commitment to organisational learning, understanding and empathy towards diversity and ambiguity, and to be forward thinking and creative in relation to how best to meet the needs" (p. 99) of those they serve. This literature review investigates distributed leadership as a tool that educational leaders and administrators may employ to enhance succession planning, expand leadership capacity, and ultimately exercise social justice – a practice which is at the heart of effective people leadership.

Distributed Leadership

Described by Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004), distributed leadership is a feature within an organisation where leadership is practised through multiple interactions of individuals and situations. This is a horizontal form of leadership where the practice is shared among individuals within the organisation and, instead of individual judgement, decision-making is administered through the interactions of several individuals. In a distributed leadership environment, a group of individuals with specific qualities

merge those qualities and talents to make leadership available to others (Harris, 2008). Here, according to Greenfield, Braithwaite, Pawsey, Johnson, and Robinson (2009), parties are interacting and sharing expertise which lead to learning while building leadership capacity and fostering synergy. Spillane, et al. noted that distributed leadership has the potential to improve self-determination through work experiences, enrich leadership development experiences, and, through equipped staff, position the organisation to aptly respond to leadership demands from the educational environment.

Bolden (2011) opined that distributed leadership could produce substantial growth and enhance organisational effectiveness. According to Southworth (2009), when educational leadership is widely distributed, it has greater impact on those it serves as well as on the organisation. This happens because distributed leadership helps to share the leadership load, expand leadership capacity at every level, and increase the institution's leadership and its impact. Practising distributed leadership enables the institution to nurture others and produce leaders for tomorrow. Southworth expanded that, among other benefits, distributed leadership builds self-confidence and self-efficacy, causes the organisation to invest in leadership, drives specific actions toward leadership, and helps to create a culture of boldness, co-operation, and trust.

Notwithstanding the foregoing statements, according to Harris (2009), there are arguments that distributed leadership is merely a newly accepted belief that helps to strengthen some ideologies in management. Other limitations and complexities of distributed leadership have also been highlighted. For example, Harris (2009) noted that "distributed leadership can result in conflicting priorities, targets, and timescales" (p. 179). Likewise, Spillane et al. (2004) noted

that distributed leadership is not a cure-all solution and in order to realise success from distributed leadership, it must link with leaders' situations and desires in meaningful ways.

Harris (2011) noted that while the evidence base around distributed leadership is still developing, as part of their educational restructuring, a number of countries (such as USA and the UK) have already embraced distributed leadership. Bolden (2011) further informed that distributed leadership is growing, it continues to make inroads into organisational life, and there is enough evidence to indicate that distributed leadership could produce considerable growth. Distributed leadership can also be effectively used as a leadership development tool for organisational effectiveness (Harris, 2009; Hill-Berry, 2015). In addition, as Huggins (2017) posited, when carefully initiated and sustained, distributed leadership can burgeon into increased organisational and personal capacities.

Succession Planning

Succession planning can generally be defined as the strategic implementation of effective and purposeful initiatives to develop an organisation's human resources and to ensure the availability of talents to meet its needs over time. Defined by Rothwell (2010), succession planning is "a deliberate and systematic effort" (p. 6) that is aimed at equipping others and must be executed to ensure a smooth transition when key people are ready to separate from an organisation. This process involves capacity building and professional development.

Capacity building, according to Potter and Brough (2004) is "the creation, expansion or upgrading of a stock of desired qualities and features called capabilities that could be continually drawn upon

over time" (p. 337). The word *stock* here implies that these capabilities are consistently being used and must be replenished such that the supply does not run out. However, there is a need for commitment to creating, upgrading, expanding these capabilities. Furthermore, there is need for engagement and commitment of multiple individuals since as put forward by Huggins (2017), leadership capacity building is a process that requires commitment of all parties involved.

Professional development is a systematic and sustained process used by institutions to "ensure that [employees] continue to strengthen their practice throughout their career" (Hirsh, 2010, p. 1). Professional development should be purposeful and intentional in nature and, as suggested by Public Impact for the Chicago Public Education Fund (2008), it should be done to increase others' short and long-term levels of effectiveness, which means it is a lot more than just expecting that people will pursue training. According to Mizell (2010), professional development is effective only when "it causes teachers to improve their instruction or causes administrators to become better school leaders" (p. 10). Therefore, the process should involve communicating positive expectations, providing requisite instructions, providing timely feedback, deciding on training and work assignments that will develop the intended capacities, delegating and coaching, and allowing others to reflect on and learn from their failures and successes (Public Impact for the Chicago Public Education Fund, 2008), and as Mizell advanced, to "put their new knowledge and skills to work" (p. 10).

In the select academic unit, succession planning and capacity building are not done on a wide and transparent scale. In some instances, the *modus operandi* could at best be described as a

replacement planning where the manager or department head identifies a specific individual, or two, to groom for possible replacement (Rothwell, 2010). However, this has implications for capacity building which is critical to expanding the community of leaders for equitable and effective succession planning and for practicing social justice.

Social Justice

Social justice has been termed by Vogel (2011) as the "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs, including an equitable distribution of resources where all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure, self-determining, [and] interdependent" (p. 71). In education, social justice has been described by Miller, Hill-Berry, Hylton-Fraser, and Powell (2019) as activism that seeks to build individuals through combined efforts of all parties and at all levels of the education system. They expanded that the process involves the equitable distribution of benefits, privileges, resources and opportunities among stakeholders in those organisations and communities; and is intended to stimulate positive motives and changes. Social justice emphasises inclusion and has activism at its core since it challenges the status quo and breaks barriers. Additionally, according to Szeto and Cheng (2018), it addresses differences and promotes equity in organisations, communities and cultures.

Social justice embraces "familiarity with the culture and commitment to improve the lives of people" (Silva et al., 2017, p. 329). As expanded by Szeto and Cheng, leadership for social justice involves a battery of strategies adopted by educational leaders and administrators to ensure inclusion is practised in their academic communities and related cultures. Further, as Furman (2012) puts

forward, social justice has a community focus and it cannot be realised in the absence of democratic participation. Therefore, in the select academic unit, facilitating that democratic participation could help to share leadership and build an academic leadership community where social justice is practised.

To summarize the literature reviewed, distributed leadership has the potential to build personal and organisational capacities; effective succession planning could help to expand leadership capacities to enhance the practice of social justice; and the practice of social justice could ensure that leadership is shared and developed.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted in a large faculty in a tertiary institution in Jamaica. This faculty is one of six in the institution and the second largest; offering over 20 courses of study. Hereafter, this faculty is referred to as the select academic unit. The researcher contemplated conducting the study in the wider academic community but being closely aligned to this unit, there was some ease at which the participants could be accessed. Hence this is where the study began. As a means of ensuring impartiality and broadening representativeness for the population in this study, a quantitative approach was used. Through a cross-sectional survey, responses were solicited across a select academic unit. The population size was 86 (N = 86) staff members, 18 in the administrative and 68 in the academic category. As a means of ensuring representativeness, the researcher targeted 50% of the population. However, making allowance for non-response, instead of 43, the researcher increased that figure to 50 participants (n= 50); 15 administrative, 35 academic staff members.

To collect the data, the researcher met participants, explained the study and its purpose to them, clarified that there were no foreseeable ethical issues, and explained the concepts of distributed leadership and social justice. Following, the researcher handed the questionnaires to participants who agreed to participate in the study, and made arrangements to collect them after completion.

Ideas for the questionnaire items were gleaned from various discussions surrounding leadership capacity building, succession planning, and social justice; and a similar study that the researcher had conducted (Hill-Berry, 2015). To test the instrument, a few colleagues were asked to respond to the items and provide feedback further to which a decision was made to use the questionnaire in this study. An 11-item questionnaire was developed and presented as 10 closed-ended and one open-ended item. Questions 1 – 10 were Likert-type items with response options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For question 11, participants were at liberty to write their responses in the space provided. A restriction to the responses for this question was that participants were to summarise their responses in one or two sentences. The chosen research methodology enabled each of the research questions to be appropriately addressed. The strength of using both types of questions was that where responses were limited because of the nature of the Likert-type questions, the open-ended question provided detailed responses to expand and clarify some of the responses provided in the Likert-type questions.

As a delimitation, this study was not extended to all the staff in the select academic unit. It was concentrated only on the full-time academic and administrative staff. There were two limitations to this study. First, the data collection clashed with staff members' busy

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schedules so the activity lasted longer than was anticipated. Second, because the study was delimited to academic and administrative staff, others in the technical group within that academic unit who would have wanted to, did not have an opportunity to participate in the study.

Results

To assist with clarity and presentation, participants in the study were numbered according to their categories - administrative or academic; for example, Administrative staff 1. A total of 45 questionnaires were completed and returned; a response rate of 90%. Participants were 18% male and 82% female. Responses provided by the males were similar to those returned by the females. See Table 1 for a summary of the 10 questionnaire items.

Research question 1 asked: How do staff members in the select academic unit view current leadership practices and distributed leadership? A total of almost 76% of participants agreed to some level that within this academic unit, staff members often fuse abilities to achieve established goals, 62% cumulatively agreed that transforming into a learning organisation was one of the goals for their academic unit, and 89% agreed that through distributed leadership their academic unit can become a learning organisation where people continue to expand their capacities. While 53% reported that staff members were customarily offered opportunities to generate new ideas, 49% reported that staff members frequently got opportunities to participate in leadership.

In terms of whether their academic unit can use distributed leadership to expand leadership capacities, almost all participants (98%) agreed. However, a mere 47% reported that senior leaders

valued staff ideas and facilitated their contribution to leadership; and 51% were in some level of agreement that staff members were encouraged to build leadership capacities by participating in leadership.

Table 1.

Participants' level of agreement with statements regarding leadership in their academic unit

Item	A	SA
		%
In this academic unit, staff members merge abilities to achieve established goals.	64	11
Transforming into a learning organization is a goal of this academic unit.	53	9
Through distributed leadership, this unit can become a learning organization.	58	31
Staff members are offered opportunities to generate new ideas.	51	2
Staff members frequently have opportunities to participate in leadership.	42	7
This academic unit can use distributed leadership to build leadership capacities.	42	56
Senior leaders value staff ideas and contribution to the leadership.	38	9
Staff members are encouraged to build capacities by participating in leadership.	47	4
Distributed leadership could help to enhance the succession planning process.	29	69
Enhanced succession planning can augment social justice in this academic unit.	29	69

A: Agree   SA: Strongly agree

These responses indicated that, although there was the view that distributed leadership could enhance leadership capacity building, over 50% felt their ideas were not valued and senior leaders were not facilitating their contribution to leadership initiatives. Only half of the number of participants was reportedly encouraged to participate in leadership. Ninety-eight per cent of participants agreed that distributed leadership could help to enhance the succession planning process, and that enhanced succession planning can augment social justice in the select academic unit.

Research question 2 asked: How could the select academic unit use distributed leadership to expand leadership capacity and to ensure that social justice is practiced? Similar responses to this question were offered by both sexes and both categories of staff – administrative and academic. Participants did not all provide a response to this open-ended question and some of the responses did not provide clarity. Some reportedly did not think of specific ways in which distributed leadership could be used but said that, based on the definition, distributed leadership could be used for all three purposes - to expand leadership capacities, to enhance succession planning, and to practise social justice. However, the main responses to this question are captured below.

Participants reported that in the select academic unit, staff members were not well-rounded and aware of the different areas and activities that were taking place, at times even within their department. Therefore, particularly in their discipline and in administration, it would be beneficial to do "staff rotation to expose the staff to different leadership roles" (Administrative staff 9) and expand leadership capacities.

Staff members felt that they were at times being micro-managed and were thus hindered from using their initiatives or judgement, and that one way this could be addressed is to allow the staff to "make certain types of decisions without consulting their heads" (Academic staff 13). However, since this has implications for accountability, there was mutual understanding (by the researcher and participant) that this suggestion was only in relation to those decisions for which the staff members in particular could be held accountable. While stated differently, another participant expressed that academic leaders should embrace new initiatives and new ideas.

According to this participant, senior leaders and managers were fixed in their old ways and were reluctant to embrace new ideas. Therefore, for the academic unit to use distributed leadership to expand leadership capacities, it would require a new orientation by senior management such that they would "be accepting of and responsive to new ideas" (Academic staff 27).

Staff members reportedly were at times limited or even timid because they did not have enough leadership exposure. To address this challenge, the academic unit could have the staff participating in activities within that academic unit or even outside of that academic unit as a means of "exposing staff to varied leadership cultures and practices" (Academic staff 24). Then upon completion, or on their return, use distributed leadership to have them participating in different leadership roles. One suggested means of providing this exposure is "planning a staff conference with particular focus on leadership" (Academic staff 33). This would allow exposure to different practices in educational leadership and for building a network of stakeholders with educational interests who could share information and ideas with them in the future.

According to one participant, staff members were often times lacking recognition for the work they were doing and this can be a deterrent. Therefore, as a means of recognising their efforts, department heads could "assign leadership roles to their supervisees and reward those who are high performers" (Administrative staff 5). Another participant proposed that the academic unit should have a "Leadership Day" (Administrative staff 12) where the junior employees would be allowed to sit in the offices of their academic leaders (president, deans, college administrators) for a few days to

gain a first-hand experience of executing the functions of these academic leaders.

One participant suggested that the educational leaders within that unit should "use distributed leadership as means of succession planning" (Administrative staff 14). Another shared that, although not described as distributed leadership, "the practice is already in use" (Administrative staff 15). She added that benefits were already being realised from distributed leadership as it had created a number of opportunities for idea generating and sharing, and it had resulted in job enrichment and increased levels motivation within that academic unit. While not providing much detail, the other participant suggested that this academic unit could use distributed leadership to "coach, mentor, and train prospective leaders" (Academic staff 8) to expand leadership capacities.

To summarise the responses, participants would embrace distributed leadership and related initiatives to expand leadership capacity and to ensure that social justice is practised in that academic unit. An anticipatable benefit could be a community where there would be adequate numbers of personnel who are equipped to assume leadership roles. In addition, since leadership would not be left to a select one or two individuals, there would be fewer biases in the leadership assignment processes – ultimately, a community in which social justice would be practised.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyse how distributed leadership could be used in a select academic unit to expand leadership capacity in order to achieve social justice. The research attempted to address questions related to how staff members in the

select academic unit perceive current leadership practices and distributed leadership; and how staff perceive that the select academic unit could use distributed leadership to expand leadership capacity and to ensure that social justice is practised.

Participants' responses indicated no particular effort to practice distributed leadership or social justice; and for one participant, distributed leadership just happened throughout their operations, even without having such thoughts (Administrative staff 15). According to this participant, that was an effortless activity that was executed unintentionally. However, that is somewhat different from what was found in the literature positioning distributed leadership as an effort that involves interacting, sharing expertise and merging qualities to build leadership capacities (Harris, 2008; Spillane et al., 2004). Over 75% of the participants reported that there was some merging of capabilities with the intent to achieve set goals of their academic unit. One could also suppose that within that academic environment there were some efforts toward professional development as over 60% shared the goal of transforming into a learning organisation (Senge, 1990) where capacity building is continuous.

Some of the findings were akin to what was found in the literature in that almost 90% felt that distributed leadership can be the fuel in the engine required to move that academic unit into a learning organisation. This was similar to the suggestion advanced by Spillane et al. (2004) that distributed leadership has the potential to expand capacities through work experiences. However, this requires idea generating and sharing and it was only about half of the participants who reportedly were provided with opportunities to generate and share new ideas.

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There seemed to be a divide among study participants' perception of whether their academic unit could use distributed leadership to build capacities and whether staff members were given such opportunities. While almost all participants agreed that their academic unit can use distributed leadership to build leadership capacities, just below 50% of participants reported that staff members frequently got opportunities to participate in leadership and that senior academic leaders valued staff ideas and facilitated them contributing to leadership. In the same vein, just over 50% reportedly were encouraged to build capacities by participating in leadership. This could be interpreted as participants identifying certain gaps but did not think of distributed leadership as a tool that could have helped to bridge those gaps. Therefore, since participants admitted that this academic unit could use distributed leadership to coach, mentor, and train prospective leaders, like Southworth (2009) advanced, it could also be embraced to help to propel specific actions toward leadership; and allow the staff to incorporate their new knowledge and competencies into their practice (Mizell, 2010) as a means of continuously strengthening their practice (Hirsh, 2010), and increasing their levels of effectiveness (Public Impact for the Chicago Public Education Fund, 2008).

These responses indicated that although there was the view that distributed leadership could expand leadership capacity, over 50% felt their ideas were not valued and facilitated by senior academic leaders as the staff would have desired. Further, they were not being encouraged to participate in leadership initiatives. Greenfield et al. (2009) noted that, in a distributed leadership environment, parties are interacting and sharing expertise which both help to foster learning while building capacity and nurturing synergy. The findings suggested a similar view as almost 100% of

participants were in some level of agreement that distributed leadership could help to expand leadership capacity. Furthermore, distributed leadership could be the machinery to enhance succession planning and no doubt this could further help to expand social justice in the select academic unit.

Based on participants' responses, one could reasonably assume that, within the select academic unit, distributed leadership was not thought of or explored as a leadership development tool. But, this was contrary to what one participant reported. She reported that distributed leadership was already being utilised in the academic unit with several benefits realised from it such as increased motivation for the staff and job enrichment. These were similar to the benefits mentioned by Spillane et al. (2004); and this may be an indication that the senior academic leaders within that academic unit may need more information about distributed leadership, as with such information they could easily buy into distributed leadership and use it as a tool to expand leadership capacity.

Silva et al. (2017) advanced social justice through "familiarity with the culture" (p. 329), and Szeto and Cheng (2018) underscored inclusion, addressing differences, and promoting equity in organisations, communities and cultures. Similarly, from the results of the study, as means of using distributed leadership for capacity building and social justice, participants suggested exposing staff to diverse leadership cultures and practices. This would ensure that social justice is practised resulting in two main advantages. On the one hand, one or two individuals are not burdened with leadership (Smith, 2013), and on the other hand, leadership capacity is expanded and a wider net is created from which the organisation could draw. Further, in the select academic unit, as a means of ensuring that social

justice is practised, this exposure to various cultures could help to break down barriers, build up individuals, and spread the resources, benefits, privileges and opportunities (Miller et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The research has reasonably addressed each of the research questions in that it provided insight into how staff members in the select academic unit perceived the existing leadership practices and distributed leadership; and it suggested how the select academic unit could use distributed leadership to expand leadership capacity and to ensure that social justice is practised.

Based on the responses from the participants, it is safe to conclude that the staff would welcome the introduction of distributed leadership, that distributed leadership would help to expand leadership capacity, and the select academic unit could use distributed leadership as a tool to practise social justice. Rather than focusing on just senior academic managers, this academic unit would benefit from distributing leadership and appropriating its resources to develop internal talents and build leadership capacities to enhance succession planning. Such initiatives would create a leadership community where employees have equal opportunities to vie for vacant positions so that social justice is practised. This would also create a learning organisation (Senge, 1990), where leadership capacity building is perennial and individuals are learning leadership through multiple interactions (Harris, 2008). In such a situation, the outcome is likely to be leadership sustainability in an environment where social justice resides (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004).

Notwithstanding the stated limitations and reserves about distributed leadership (Harris, 2009), participants perceive that the

select academic unit should incorporate distributed leadership as a tool to enhance succession planning, build a leadership community, mitigate leadership distribution biases, and expand leadership capacity toward social justice. The researcher believes it may be beneficial to replicate this study in other academic units or in the wider academic community within that tertiary institution.

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