

# Distributed leadership in education, contemporary issues in educational leadership

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, the concept of distributed leadership (DL) in the educational landscape has gone from strength to strength and has made substantial inroads into particular areas of theory and practice. DL has thus become a popular concept in educational leadership and is conceived as a collective social process emerging through the interactions of multiple actors. In particular DL is a notion and strategy that has seen a rapid growth in the management of schools in the context of decentralization of education systems. The aim of this paper is to review conceptual and empirical literature on the concept of DL in order to identify its origins, major arguments, its strengths and weaknesses and areas for further work. Consideration is given to the impact of DL in enhancing the achievement of organizational goals. The findings indicate that effective principals orchestrate the structural, cultural and agential conditions in which DL is more or less likely. Contemporary evidence from the study supports a positive relationship between DL, organizational improvement and student achievement. The paper highlights a number of areas for improving leadership in schools and the need for mobilizing collective engagement and challenging or reinforcing traditional forms of leadership in schools. This article provides an in depth description of how leadership can be distributed in schools to improve learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** Distributed leadership, education leadership, leadership, learner achievement.

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## INTRODUCTION

Technological advancement and the seemingly ever changing environmental pressures suggest an imperative for educational leaders to review their leadership practices. Changes that are taking place in the educational leadership landscape require leadership in schools to discover and articulate forms of leadership appropriate for the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In recent years educational organizations have begun to be led by more sharing, participation by members and democratic principles. This has seen the school based leadership approach accelerated during the decentralization period in education which has resulted in spreading leadership throughout the school context.

School leadership is changing and it is imperative that school leaders need to reflect on these changes and adapt to enhance the achievement of school goals. Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) show that it is clear that

effective school leaders exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of learners. In other words, the impact of school leadership upon school effectiveness and school improvement is significant (Gronn, 2002, 2000; Harris, 2013, 2012; Kruger, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2008; Lumby, 2013; Shava, 2015; Spillane et al., 2004). Harris (2012) echoes the need to embrace effective leadership in the way principals lead schools towards future success. She argues that schools of the future are likely to require multiple rather than individual leaders if they are to achieve organizational goals. DL is one form of leadership that is prominent in the current educational discourse. It means mobilizing expertise at all levels in the school in order to generate more opportunities for change and to build the capacity for improvement. Harris (2012:9) argues that, "as school organizations become

more complex, diffuse and networked, various forms of direction and influence will be required to respond to quickly shifting and changing learning environments” In recent years, there has been increasing demand for democratization and decentralization in the education systems.

Traditional solo leadership, which conceptualized the leader as a hero metaphorically, has been superseded by the concept of DL, which regards leadership as a process spread throughout the organization. From a growing body of literature and empirical research, there is no one style or one person that will build and sustain a highly effective educational institution. There is need for serious (Gronn, 2008) leadership and identification of expertise among teachers, that transformation across the system can be achieved. School leadership today and in future, is beyond the undertakings of one heroic individual. Woods (2004) for example argue that it is simply not possible, and may not even be desirable, for one individual to take every leadership tasks within a school and maximize on learner achievement. In an organization (Gronn, 2008) there is rarely ever just one leader and a number of followers.

DL in schools especially in developed and developing countries has become a popular post-heroic (Badaracco, 2001) representation of leadership which has encouraged a shift in focus from the attitudes and behaviors of individual leaders as promoted within traditional trait, situational style and transformational theories of leadership. Leadership in schools (Northouse, 2007) is conceived of as a collective social process emerging through the interactions of multiple actors. In an article entitled “Distributed properties: a new architecture for leadership”, Gronn (2000) outlined the concept of distributed leadership as a potential solution to the tendency of leadership being considered a one man band in the organization. Harris (2014) shows that DL is primarily concerned with the interactions and the dynamics of leadership practice rather than a pre-occupation with the formal roles and responsibilities traditionally associated with those who led. Rather, it is a practice of leadership in schools that is important if the goal in schools is to secure better instruction and achieve improved learning outcomes for all learners. Recently, Spillane and Coldren (2011) suggested that the adoption of a distributed framework under the right conditions can contribute to organizational development and subsequent achievement of quality learning outcomes in schools.

DL in education management represents one of the most influential ideas to emerge in the field of educational leadership. The idea of DL as “leadership shared within and between schools” (Harris, 2008:16) has found favor with researchers, policy makers, practitioners and educational reformers around the world (Harris, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2009; Spillane, 2006). According to Heck and Hallinger (2009), DL in educational organizations is a taking decision process based on

participation or cooperation in which teachers, administrators, students and parents take part. It increases opportunities for the school organization to benefit from the capacities of more of its members and permits members of staff in a school to capitalize on the range of their individual strengths and develops among members a fuller appreciation of interdependence and how one’s behavior affects the organization as a whole. This creates a comparative advantage where individuals and groups in different positions within an organization contribute to leadership functions in areas of organizational activity over which they have the greatest influence. With holistic forms of DL (Gronn, 2002), solutions in school setup are possible which would be likely to emerge from individual sources.

DL first emerged as a pragmatic tool that allowed leaders to share their increasing workloads (Tiana et al., 2016). Over the past decades, the concept of DL in education had gained a lot of unprecedented independence and popularity (Bolden, 2011). Within this paper, the author explored and examined the concept of DL, its origins, strengths and weaknesses with specific reference to educational leadership. The paper draws upon a wide range of research literature to explore the available empirical evidence about DL and organizational outcomes. It also explores the lineage of the concept and its recent rise to prominence in schools. The author reviewed the main theoretical developments in this field and the manner in which these ideas have been embraced and applied in the education context.

## UNDERSTANDING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

The concept of DL overlaps with several other terms such as shared leadership (SL), collaborative leadership (CL) democratic and participative leadership concepts. Any attempt at providing a definitive definition of DL would fail to capture the complexity and inherent paradoxes of the concept and would potentially foreclose a series of on ongoing debates and discussions that are both inevitable and desirable within these concepts. DL is rather a vague concept. It is acknowledged that the terms DL have become increasingly used in the discourse about educational leadership and is currently receiving much attention and growing support (Gronn, 2000; Spillane et al., 2001). However, as Bennett et al. (2003:2) claim, there seems to be little agreement as to the meaning of the terms and interpretations and understandings vary. Bennett et al. (2003) believe that it is best to think of DL as “a way of thinking about leadership” rather than as another technique or practice (p. 2). Harris and Lambert (2003, p4) hold that DL concentrates on “engaging expertise wherever it exists” within the organization rather than seeking this only through formal positions or roles. I also argue that in contrast to traditional notions of school

leadership premised upon the principal as an individual managing hierarchical systems and structures, DL is characterized as a form of collective, shared leadership practices including every person in the school according to his or her expertise. As Elmore (2000:14) admits, in a “knowledge intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform these complex tasks without widely distributing the responsibilities for leadership among roles in the organization. The central element of DL is to create a common culture of expectations around the use of individual skills and abilities. According to Leithwood et al. (2009:1) DL for the majority of authors can be considered to incorporate shared, democratic, dispersed and other forms of leadership.

For these authors, the key concern is how leadership should be distributed in order to have the most beneficial effect which is usually measured in terms of student learning outcomes. Elmore (2000) adds that DL means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise among organizational members which is made coherent through a common culture. DL means mobilizing leadership expertise at all levels in the school in order to generate more opportunities for change and to build the capacity for improvement. High performing schools widely and wisely distribute leadership (Leithwood et al., 2009). It is the “glue of a common task or goal improvement of instruction and a common frame of values for how to approach that task” (Elmore, 2000:15). This is however not to suggest that ultimately there is no one responsible for the overall performance and leadership of the school or to render those in formal leadership roles redundant. Instead the role of those in formal leadership positions is primarily to hold the pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship.

DL equates with maximizing the human capacity within the organization. Woods (2004:441) confirm that DL is about the “additional dynamics which is the product of conjoint activity - where people work together in such a way that they pool their initiative and expertise” the outcome is a product, or energy which is greater than the sum of their individual action. Moreover, as Leithwood et al. (2007) advised the emergency of DL would not necessarily flatten the hierarchical structures of shared in differentiated leadership across different roles. On the contrary, DL would admit the cooperation existence of hierarchical and fluid structures in the organization. These holistic forms assume that the totality of leaders’ work adds up to more than the sum of the parts and that there are high levels of interdependence among those providing leadership. Holistic forms of DL produce leadership activities which emerge from dynamic, multidirectional, social processes which, at their best, lead to learning for individuals involved as well as for their organizations. Interdependence between two or more organizational members may be based on role overlap or

complimentary of skills and knowledge (Gronn, 2002).

According to Heck and Hallinger (2009), DL in educational organizations is a taking decision process based on participation or cooperation in which administrators, teachers, students and parents take part. On the other hand Spillane et al. (2001), see DL as a process firstly involving the distribution of the works among leader and followers, then integration of the works done by members of the group. Spillane et al. (2001:25) define DL as “the collective properties of the group of leaders working together to enact a particular task, leading to the evolution of a leadership practice that is potentially more than the sum of each individual’s practice”. Theories on teamwork share the view that working together produces results over and above what would be expected from individuals working alone. Harris (2014) admits that, while DL theory has pointed to multiple sources of influence within an organization, DL is not just a case of generating more formal roles within an organization. It is not about creating quantity but rather quality in leadership practices.

The term DL attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices. The key features according to Harris (2014) of DL are:

- All actions have their central focus on enhancing students’ educational experiences.
- There is interdependence between learners, followers and their situation.
- Each member is valued and supported in their professional practice.
- Leadership occurs through interaction, influence practices and organizational routines.
- There is recognition that leadership does not reside solely with the principal and deputy.
- A sense of community prevails.
- Ongoing learning is considered to be the norm for teachers as well as learners.
- There is recognition that each person contributes to the overall good of the organization.
- Relevant expertise is recognized and rewarded.
- Appropriate structures are formed and re-formed to provide opportunities for collaborative and participative decision making.
- A climate of trust exists among teachers.
- Leadership may be exercised through formal positions, as well as informal roles and actions.
- There is cooperation and participative leadership throughout the school organization in a manner which enables people to work together to improve teaching and learning.
- There is totality of leaders’ work which adds up to more than the sum of the parts and that there are high levels of interdependence among those providing leadership.

The true test of DL is in the quality of the nature and interactions between individuals. It is primarily concerned

with how leadership influences organizational and instructional improvement (Heck and Hallinger, 2010; Spillane, 2006). The author also agrees that DL refers to both what people do. Who are the agency and the organizational conditions in which they do it, which is the structural aspect?

In this paper, the author argues that, the DL movement is a call for leadership to be shared throughout the organization in a more democratic fashion., The fundamental premise of the concept of DL is that leadership activities should not be accreted into the hands of a sole individual but, on the contrary, they should be shared between a number of people in a school or team depending on their expertise. The distributions should be intended to enhance teaching and learning. DL connects to the quality of teaching and through the structures, systems, procedures and practices that combine to make the school a learning organization. It should however be noted that principals occupy the critical space in DL equation and centre stage in the redesign required to bring about DL to life in schools.

## ORIGINS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

DL is the dominant leadership idea of the moment, even though its genesis can be traced back to the field of organizational theory in the mid 1960s and possibly even beyond. According to Bolden (2011), the conceptual origins of DL can be traced back to 1250 BC, on the other hand Gronn (2000) advises that DL was conceptualized initially by Gibb in 1954. Gibb (1954) asserts that leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group. Harris (2012) also admits that DL is the dominant idea of the moment, even though its origins can be traced back to the field of organizational theory in the mid 1960s and probably even further. Just like leadership which is an ancient concept, DL can be traced back to the early 1250BC. DL has been around for centuries, but it has been widely embraced by education leaders since the millennium.

Gibb (1954) was an Australian psychologist who drew attention to the dynamics of influence processes as they impact on the work of different groups. Gibb suggests that leadership should not be viewed as the monopoly of the individual but rather as a shared function among individuals. In a study conducted by Bolden (2011), it was concluded that while there are some common theoretical bases, similarities and differences between DL and related concepts such as group leadership, shared leadership, collaborative and democratic leadership can be seen. In this article I argue that DL is not a new concept in educational leadership, but rather it is experiencing an overwhelming increase in popularity which probably has eminent academic making direct

statements for embracing this style of leadership. Gibb (1954) argue that leadership and followers frequently exchange roles and observations have shown that the most active followers often initiate acts of active leading (Gronn, 2000). Accounts of DL date back as far as 1250 BC, making it one of the most ancient leadership notions recommended for fulfilling organizational goals through people. Gronn (2000) cites Gibb (1954) as probably the first author to refer explicitly to DL when proposing that leadership in organizations is probably best conceived as a group quality and these are sets of functions which should be carried out by individual group members according to their expertise and knowledge.

On the other hand in tracking the theoretical origins of DL in organizations, a number of key concepts are commonly cited. Spillane et al. (2004) for example identify distributed cognition and activity theory as the conceptual foundation of DL. The concept of DL was conceived as a theoretical analytical framework for studying school leadership, one that would explicitly focus attention on how leadership was enacted in schools, as an activity stretched across the social and situational contexts. DL is one of the most ancient leadership notions recommended for fulfilling goals through people, it has its foundations in activity theory and distributed cognition (Bolden, 2011). Lynch (2012) notes that more recent genesis of DL, by indicating that after its disappearance after a short stint in the mid 1990s, it reappeared as a movement of sorts after. Gronn (2000) wrote his taxonomy of DL and from there its popularity in school organizations continue to rise. Clearly, there is a suggestion that DL theory is not a new concept in the educational landscape but rather it is experiencing an overwhelming increase in popularity. In tracking the theoretical origins of DL, a number of key concepts are commonly used. Spillane et al. (2004), for example, identify distributed cognition and activity theory as the conceptual foundations of their account of DL. These concepts represent human cognition and experience as integrally bound up with the physical, social and cultural context in which it occurs (Hutchins, 1995). The second approach highlights the manner in which human activity is both enabled and constrained by individual, material, cultural and social factors (Giddens, 1979). Gronn (2000) similarly recognizes distributed cognition and activity theory as key concepts within DL. With regards to activity theory, Gronn draws on the work of authors such as Vygotsky (1978) who offers a framework for analyzing situated activity as the product of reciprocal and mediated interactions between instruments, subjects, objects rules, community and division of labor. This is also linked to Gibb's (1954) work on leadership and distribution of power, dual leadership and influence substitute for leadership and sharing of leadership. All these authors map out a rich and diverse array of theory and research upon which subsequent work on DL was built.

## STRENGTHS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

The concept of DL overlaps substantially with shared leadership, collaborative, democratic and participative leadership concepts. DL assumes a set of practices that are enacted by people at all levels rather than a set of personal characteristics and attributes located at the top and this gives the approach a great strength. A number of individual and organizational benefits have been associated with DL. As compared with exclusively hierarchical forms of leadership, DL more accurately reflects the division of labor which is experienced in the organization on a daily basis and reduces the chances of error arising from decisions based on the limited information available to a single leader. DL increases opportunities for the organization to benefit from the capacities of more of its members, permits members to capitalize on the range of their individual strengths and develops among organizational members, a fuller appreciation of interdependence and how one's behavior or effects the organization as a whole. When DL works well, individuals are accountable and responsible for their leadership actions, new leadership, roles created, collaborative teamwork is the modus operandi and interdependent working is a cultural norm. Elmore (2000) characterizes this as comparative advantage, where individuals and groups in different positions within an organization contribute to leadership functions in areas of organizational activity over which they have the greatest influence. In the context of teamwork, DL provides greater opportunities for members to learn from one another.

Through increased participation in decision making, greater commitment to organizational goals and strategies may develop. DL has the potential to increase on the job leadership development experiences, and the increased self-determination arising from DL may improve members' experience of work. Such leadership allows members to better anticipate and respond to the demands of the organization's environment. With the adoption of DL (Gronn, 2000), solutions are possible which would be unlikely to emerge from individual sources and overlapping actions that occur in DL contexts provide further reinforcement of leadership influence.

Tian et al. (2016) posit that DL might bring positive impacts on students' learning, teachers' morale and students' transition and some critics argue that such improvement may be rhetoric. On the other hand Lumby (2013:582) warned that DL "reconciles staff to growing workloads and accountability" but in terms of the use of power, teachers' autonomy is offered with a leading rein. DL might significantly enhance teachers' organizational commitment and job satisfaction when there is cohesion in the leadership team. However in some cases teachers' commitment seemed to drop if multiple leaders supervise

them.

Studies conducted in Australia by Slims and Mulford (2002) reported that student outcomes were likely to improve when leadership sources were distributed throughout the members of the school community and when teachers felt empowered in relation to issues they considered important in the school. Sillins and Mulford (2002) put forward the concept of deep democracy which includes among others; respect for the worth of the individual and his/her cultural traditions and the importance attached to collective choices and actions in the organization. Spillane et al. (2004) also pointed to a link between DL practices in schools and an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in schools. In similar studies Harris and Muijs (2004) reported positive relationship between the extent of teachers' involvement in decision making and student motivation and self-efficacy. Their research suggested that more distributed forms of leadership had a positive impact on student engagement. In another study, Hulpia et al. (2009) explored the link between DL and teachers' organizational commitment. They found that teachers were more committed to the school when school leaders were highly accessible and encouraging their participation in decision making. These study findings provide an indication that a positive link between DL and educational outcomes exist which makes DL a strong approach to educational leadership. A number of other studies (Harris, 2013; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000; Lumby, 2013) do indicate a positive relationship between DL and significant aspects of school performance. Day et al. (2007:17) also concluded that "substantial leadership distribution was very important to a school's success in improving pupils outcomes" DL was positively correlated to the conditions within the organization, including staff morale, which in turn impacted positively upon student behavior and student learning outcomes.

On the other hand Harris (2009) concluded that:

*The empirical evidence about DL and organizational development was encouraging but far from conclusive, we need to learn more about the barriers, unintended consequences and limitations of DL before offering any advice or prescription. We also need to know the limitations and pitfalls as well as the opportunities and potentials of this model of leadership practice (p.18)*

A similar conclusion was reached by Leithwood et al. (2009) and leads them to suggest that without the more nuanced appreciation of the anatomy of DL which has developed only recently, it would be unrealistic to expect to find a significant relationship between DL and performance outcomes. However empirical research studies give some indication of the potential benefit of a carefully implemented approach to DL as well as the

danger of a poorly conceived approach.

## WEAKNESS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

While the idea of DL is popular in the educational landscape, there are some limitations that are worth highlighting. Despite its widespread use in studies of educational leadership, the concept of DL remains unclear, with different definitions and interpretations. Different terms and definitions are used interchangeably to refer to DL resulting in both conceptual confusion and theoretical overlaps. Mayrowetz (2008) identifies four common usages of the term DL and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of each. The first usage is linked to the theoretical approach advocated by Gronn (2008) who uses the term to examine the activity of leadership, drawing on other areas of social science. In the second usage, DL is linked to the promotion of democratic ideals while in the third, it is presented as a way to improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness since the distribution of leadership practice allows for the utilization of multiple sources of knowledge and expertise. The fourth usage presents DL as the means to advance human capacity building in the organization, through its emphasis on the development of individual skills and abilities associated with participation in leadership activity. Mayrowetz (2008) advocates for a shared, theoretical informed definition of DL that is well connected to the problems of practice that this field engages, specifically school improvement and leadership development. On the other hand, Bennett et al. (2003) talk of DL or devolved leadership while Hoy et al. (1990) define DL in terms of effective team working linked to social activity theory. Recently, Leithwood et al. (2009) have argued that the concept of DL overlaps substantially with shared collaboration and participative leadership concepts. Links have also been made between DL and democratic leadership (Woods, 2004) and most recently connections have been made to teacher leadership (Harris and Muijs, 2004; Kruger, 2009; Harris, 2013; Lumby, 2013). This accumulation of allied concepts not only serves to obscure meaning but also presents a real danger that DL will simply be used as a 'catch all' term to describe any form of devolved, shared, democratic or dispersed leadership practice (Harris and Spillane, 2008:32).

The lack of a clear approach to the definition of DL has been highlighted by other authors. According to Harris et al. (2007), the term is conveniently used to provide a description of many types of shared or collaborative leadership practice. They also note that DL has been used in the literature to refer to the opposite of hierarchical leadership and has been linked to "bossless" or "self-managed" groups (p.338). Robinson (2008) identifies two main alternative conceptions of DL; thus DL as task distribution and DL as distributed influence

processes. In this case there appears to be little agreement in the literature regarding the meaning of the term. The concept is debatable as Timperley (2005:56) claims, "one point on which different authors appear to agree is that DL is not the same as dividing task responsibilities among individuals who perform defined and separate organizational roles". The different approaches to the definition of DL have implications on the concept interpretation. Differences in the definition of the term can be linked to differences in its operationalisation and measurement. As a result findings of different studies may not be comparable if authors use different variables to measure DL. Findings from available studies of the effects of DL on educational outcomes may not provide us with a reliable indication of its role in promoting certain outcomes in schools. A comparable research tool is lacking in the case of DL even though attempts have been made to develop an appropriate instrument (Hulpia et al., 2009).

Even though it has been assumed that DL is good leadership, a lot depends on the quality of distributing leadership as well as on the method and purpose of its distribution (Harris et al., 2007). As alleged by Timperley (2005), DL over more people is risky business and may result in the greater distribution of incompetence. It has been linked to inefficiencies stemming from a larger number of leaders and associated disagreements over aims and priorities (Harris et al., 2007). Timperley (2005) speculates that teacher leadership may not command the respect of formal leaders which may in turn result in them being questioned and disrespected. It is also possible that contrary to popular assumptions, teachers may not always desire their involvement in leadership practices. Some teachers may not desire leadership positions even if they have expertise. The literature on teacher participation in decision making suggests that this may very well be the case since teachers appear not to expect or desire their involvement in all decisions (Hoy and Miskel, 2005). Most importantly, DL poses the major challenge of how to distribute development responsibilities and authority and more importantly who distributes responsibility and authority, it should not be misguided delegation. Finally, DL requires those in formal leadership positions to relinquish power to others. Apart from the challenge to authority and ego, this potentially places the principal or school head in a vulnerable position because of the lack of direct control over certain activities in the school. DL implies shifts in power and authority and control. Research by Chapman et al. (2010) provides some warning signal about DL from principals who felt an acute sense of personal accountability and responsibility for the school's performance. Ultimately, those at the apex of the organization will be judged based on the performance of their organization. This is a real tension and dilemma for those leaders who feel the weight of responsibility squarely on their shoulders alone. While the limitations of DL are mainly conceptual and

definitional issues, research and measurement issues, and the validity of underlying assumptions, these limitations are further exacerbated by the lack of sufficient empirical evidence on the effects of DL on educational outcomes. The lack of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of DL in promoting instructional improvement and increasing student achievement is considered a weakness.

## THE WAY FORWARD, IMPLICATIONS

The review of literature on DL has noteworthy implications for future research. To a great extent it is important that the conceptual and methodological challenges associated with DL be addressed and minimized. Even though it may be rather impossible to arrive at a universal usage and definition of DL (Mayrowetz, 2008) research on the outcomes and effects of such leadership in schools should be guided by a common understanding of what is meant by the distribution of leadership. This is crucial in order to ensure that research findings are comparable and can be used to build a reliable evidence base which can in turn inform policy and practice.

The viability of DL in schools is dependent on several variables. These are the level of control and autonomy allowed by top management in schools, the organizational structure and agency of the schools, the social and cultural context of the school system and the source of the impetus for developing DL (Bennett et al., 2003). All these variables need to be considered in order to determine whether DL is a viable proposition in schools. In some cases, other forms of leadership or a combination thereof might be more desirable and advantageous for sustaining development in schools. One direction for future research may be the exploration of the links between DL and other forms of leadership. To impose DL regardless of the prevailing conditions would be imprudent or suicidal for school systems. Literature on DL points to a tendency to focus exclusively on the theoretical foundation of DL, detaching it from practice. For example, the relationship between DL and democratic leadership has intrigued scholars (Gronn, 2008). Even though the refinement of the conceptual base of DL requires the exploration of its links with other conceptual domains, the key question for any leadership model remains whether it can contribute significantly to student learning outcomes. As Robins (2008:253) attests:

Arguments about more democratic forms of school organization and the importance of teacher empowerment are in themselves, inappropriate grounds for advocating greater distribution of leadership in schools. They are inappropriate because the ethical imperative of school leadership is to do what is in the interest

of the children, not what is in the interest of staff.

The literature suggests that, like other school leadership strategies, DL suffers from several shortcomings. The review of literature clearly points to the need for more studies of the effects of DL on student learning outcomes. For without more evidence on the effects of DL on learning outcomes, the model runs the risk of remaining intuitive conceptions of leadership, with limited or no impact on educational policy or practice. At a theoretical level, DL is an analytical frame for understanding leadership practice. The distributed perspective can serve as a tool for school leaders by offering a set of constructs that can be harnessed to frame diagnoses and inform the design processes (Spillane et al., 2004). DL can serve as both a diagnostic and design tool that offers a lens on leadership practices within schools and between schools. It offers schools the opportunity to stand back and think about exactly how leadership is distributed and the difference made, or not made by that distribution. The strategy of leadership offers an alternative and potentially illuminating way of tracking, analyzing and describing complex patterns of interaction, influence and agency. DL also poses some critical questions for its use in schools:

- How is DL done and practiced in schools?
- To what extent is the distributed pattern in schools optimum?
- How is DL practice in schools developed and enhanced?
- How best can we extend leadership distribution to the wider community, learners, parents and other stakeholders?
- What difference is DL making in schools?

The crucial point to make is DL is not necessarily a good or bad practice in schools; it depends on the context within which leadership is distributed and the prime aim of the distribution. DL offers the real possibility of looking at leadership through a new and alternative lens that challenges the tacit understanding of the relationship between leaders and followers. Followers may actually be a key element in defining leadership through their interactions with leaders. It raises the possibility that leadership has a great influence on organizational change when leadership practice is purposefully distributed or orchestrated. DL is not a panacea or a blue print or a recipe, rather it is a way of getting under the skin of leadership practice, or seeking leadership practice differently and illuminating the possibility of organizational transformation. The major issue presented in this paper suggests that successful leaders are those who distribute leadership, understand relationship and recognize the importance of reciprocal learning processes that lead to shared purposes; they distribute leadership in order to generate organizational development and change.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper an attempt has been made to give an overview of the field of DL, how it has developed, its strengths and limitations. It has been demonstrated that the concept of DL involves the expansion of leadership roles in schools, beyond those in formal leadership or administrative posts, and it represents the most influential ideas to emerge in the field of educational leadership in the past decade. The idea of DL as leadership shared within and between schools has found favour with researchers, policy makers, practitioners and educational reformers around the world. While the idea of shared, collaborative or participative leadership is far from new, DL theory has provided a new lens on a familiar leadership style. The paper highlights that without the support of the principal, DL is unlikely to flourish or be sustained. Effective school principals orchestrate the structural, cultural and agential conditions in which DL is more or less likely. They play a key role in leadership distribution and are a critical component in building leadership capacity throughout the school. To a great extent, principals occupy the critical space in the teacher leadership equation and centre stage in the work redesign required to bring distributed leadership to life in schools. A distributed perspective on leadership suggests a changed role for the principal. This shift is quite dramatic and can be summarized as a move from being someone at the apex of the organization, making decisions, to seeing their core roles as developing the leadership and capability of others and from a distributed perspective, interactions and a crucial part of leadership practice. The implication for principals is that they are a crucial part of the leadership practice in a school but that there are other sources of influence and direction. Contemporary evidence from the paper tends to support a positive relationship between DL, organizational improvement and student achievement. Studies carried out have also outlined and reinforced the importance of DL as a potential contributor to positive organizational change and improvement. It is seen as an essential component of raising standards and improving school performance. Despite words of caution from many in the research community, DL is clearly being advocated and endorsed in educational policy around the world. On the other side there is evidence to suggest that certain forms of collective leadership or forms of distributed influence have a modest but significant indirect effect on student learning achievement. Meeting the educational needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require greater leadership capacity and capability than ever before, within, between and across schools. The DL research shows that multiple or collective influences can, under the right conditions, positively influence organizational outcomes. Many would argue that the prime aim of leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is innovation. Using DL frame, innovation is generated through sharing and collaboration. The evidential base about the impact of DL and its effects has been

summarized in this paper. The evidence increasingly point towards a positive relationship between DL, organizational improvement and student achievement. Consequently, going forward, there is real possibility that the on-going discussion and debate about distributed leadership will reside at the interface between practice, research and theory. Entrusting the idea of distributed leadership to those who enact and practice it in schools would seem not only timely but also an important step forward in the next phase of its development. While the idea of DL is not its critics, the contemporary literature continues to show a positive relationship between shared forms of leadership and improved organizational performance which makes the strategy a powerful one for use in the educational landscape. It is my suggestion that African countries should adopt DL in learning institutions to improve learning and teaching conditions.

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