Distributed Leadership-A 'Happily Ever After 'for the Post-Primary School?

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Marinella Raftery is a practising teacher, former acting Deputy Principal and current post-holder in a second level school. She embodies many of the changes in leadership practice which have particularly escalated within the last five years. As part of her middle leadership role as Junior Cycle co-ordinator, Marinella has been at the veritable coalface of this evolutionary process, working collaboratively and reflectively with all members of the school community from students to senior management. In developing my research question, Marinella was particularly interested in capturing and integrating the voices and views of those who operate not in the realms of policy or academia but rather at the interface between policy and practice as the literature on DL acknowledges the absence of their valuable and indeed indispensable contribution.

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time in the domain of post-primary education, principals reigned supreme assisted only in matters of management by their deputies. The time for this heroic, hierarchical style of leadership has long passed, however, and we are now in the era of the horizontal and unstratified where leadership has been levelled and distributed leadership (DL) - it would appear– is the latest trend. DL is a relatively recent addition to the leadership lexicon, having only begun to gather momentum in policy and in practice since the dawn of the new millennium (Bolden, 2011), and has varied and often interchangeable interpretations, sometimes being used synonymously with 'shared leadership', 'team leadership' and 'democratic leadership' (Spillane, 2005, p.143).

The consensus would appear to be that leadership does matter (Buck 2016) and has a significant role to play in contributing to school performance and school improvement. Despite this widespread recognition of the relationship between leadership and school improvement, however, there are still many questions that remain unanswered and many gaps in the literature that remain to be filled. Foremost among these is the fact that much of the leadership literature has hitherto tended to focus on formal leadership roles, notably that of the principal,

thereby disregarding the forms of leadership roles and functions that may be distributed throughout the school (Harris, 2004). In the light of the above, my research explored the perceived relationship between DL and school improvement and effectiveness in a single-sex, second level school in Ireland. In pursuing this research, I hoped to establish whether the DL model could indeed lead to an educational happily ever after, or whether its adherents are merely indulging in a fruitless expedition through the rabbit holes of leadership Wonderland. This paper provides a snapshot of the research and endeavours to encapsulate some of its key findings.

CONTEXT

The OECD (2008) report on improving school leadership concluded that the escalation of accountability and responsibility for school leadership was creating the need for increased distribution of leadership roles. This international policy trend, towards a more collaborative, participative and distributed approach to school leadership, is also evidenced in The EU Comenius Report, *The Making of: Leadership in Education* (EU, 2011), which confirms growing EU-wide trends in distribution of leadership tasks and responsibilities to various forms of teacher teams and middle leaders.

The guiding principle of leadership, as a distributed and all-encompassing means of optimising leadership performance and capacity is further endorsed in a contemporary examination of policy developments in European Union Member States conducted by the EU Commission's Working Group on Schools (2017), which acknowledged that effective school leadership must not be limited to either individuals or small-scale teams but should instead extend to more wide-ranging teams comprising members of all school community stakeholders. DL is also pervasive in the Irish educational policy context. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection in April 2014, acknowledged the evolution of the understanding of school leadership and further defined effective school leadership as being,

> inclusive and distributed across a range of partners and personnel who have a shared understanding, ownership and commitment to transform and make changes happen in a context that is itself constantly changing (Ward, 2014, p.1)

These sentiments were echoed by Richard Bruton, Minister for Education and Skills in an address to the NAPD in November 2014, where he reiterated that 'effective leadership is inclusive-not power dictated from one person, but a responsibility shared across a range of people' (Bruton, 2014, p.1). This was further articulated in the *Action Plan for Education 2018* (DES, 2018a) which pledges to enhance in-school middle management structures and empower school leadership through the provision of resources, training and mentoring (DES, 2018a). Other recent seminal policy documents such as: *A 2020 Vision for Education* (Post -Primary Education Forum, 2013), *Looking at Our School 2016:A Quality Framework for Post Primary Schools* (DES, 2016a), and *A Proposal for Management Structures for Post-Primary Schools* (JMB and ACCS, 2014) and initiatives such as the WSE process,

the SSE process, and the Framework for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015) all advocate a whole school, collaborative approach to leadership and explicitly herald the merits of DL. This endorsement is most strongly articulated in the Department's recent circular on *Leadership and Management in Post Primary Schools* (DES, 2018b), a document which is wholly predicated on the notion of a shared vision and purpose in terms of school leadership and peppered with the language of distributed leadership as is evidenced in its delineation of the new roles and responsibilities of the in-school middle management team.

METHODOLOGY

As my study sought to explore the role of DL from the perspectives of staff, management and students within a particular school context, and to make visible the lived experiences and perspectives of my participants and fellow practitioners, qualitative research was the optimum approach. My research study, therefore, was a multi - method case study of a single-sex second level school in Southern Ireland which was executed over a 6-month intensive research period in the field. In order to maximise my understanding of the case under study, I collected and integrated many forms of qualitative data including one-on -one semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview, an on-line questionnaire, and my own reflexive journal.
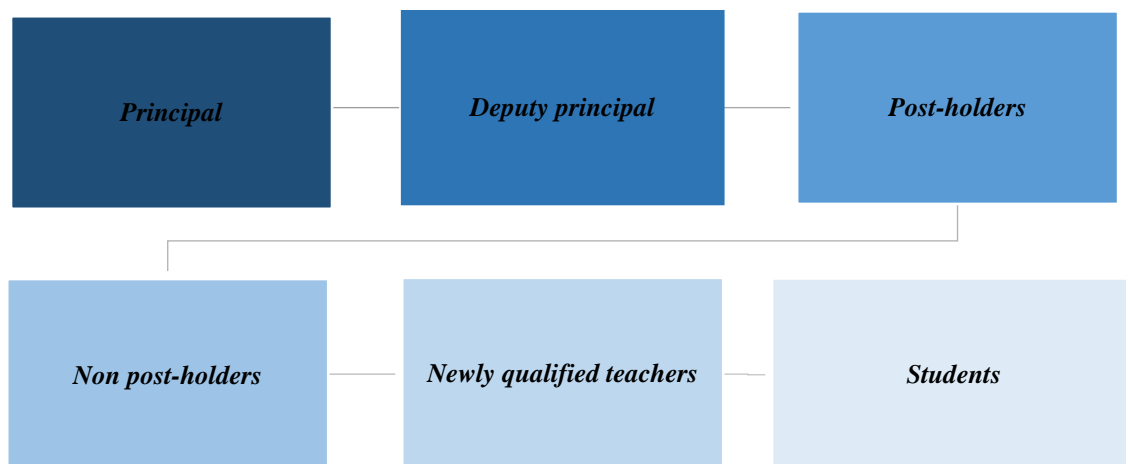

Fig 1.Stratified Purposeful Sampling

I considered stratified purposeful sampling to be the optimum approach in endeavouring to elicit differing perspectives from the various sub groups among the teaching staff comprising: newly qualified teachers, post holders, non- post holders, and management, as illustrated in figure 1 above. My two teacher sample groups were chosen using this sampling strategy and participation in each group was on a voluntary basis. I purposefully selected the Student Council members as they best represent the various strata of students in the school and therefore their multiple voices. As my intent in this study was, to illuminate the particular phenomenon of DL, its operation and effects within the specific context of my own school

(Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007), the imperative for this study was not the size of the sample but rather the depth and quality of the detail to be collected about the site.

As my study attempted to provide an understanding of my participants' lived world and ascribe meaning to their experiences, as current practitioners in a contemporary second level setting, the qualitative interview was the optimum choice (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Consequently, I chose semi-structured interviews, both one-on-one and focus group, as my primary method of data collection.

I endeavoured to incorporate my data analysis as an integral part of the research process itself, involving careful transcription of my recorded open-ended interviews, copious note-taking and reflection post–nterview, and throughout the transcription process where feasible, organising, reading, re-reading and coding interrelated themes, thereby delving deeper and deeper, as advocated by Creswell (2009), into understanding the data. Integral to this search for reliability and consistency of my findings was the checking and cross-checking of all codes used. I used what Creswell (2009, p.191) terms 'intercoder agreement' and cross checked my codes on selected transcript passages with my external auditor and my critical friends.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The beginning of this research journey for me, was the question of whether distributed leadership, the current buzzword in educational leadership literature and policy could in fact lead to overall school improvement and effectiveness. Findings emerged in five key thematic areas, two of which are dealt with below.

IMPLICATIONS OF DL FOR THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

The findings in this thematic area unanimously echoed the consensus of the literature, which highlights the paradox at the heart of DL as being that the principal far from being rendered redundant in the practice of DL remains a changed but nonetheless integral and indeed pivotal part of the leadership equation (Leithwood et al., 2007; Harris, 2013). Participants across all echelons of staff and management acknowledged the implications for the role of the principal as being many and varied, highlighting in particular the crucial role played by the principal in the strategic distribution of leadership roles, the importance of developing leadership capacity in others and the key role played by the principal as a catalyst for transformation and innovation through relationship building.

The potential for issues of power and control to arise was also acknowledged echoing the work of Lumby 2013 and 2016 and also that of Youngs (2009), with emphasis being placed on the importance of the principal creating an environment of openness, trust and fairness. Interestingly, while much of the recent policy initiatives have been pre-empted by the perceived need to reduce the administrative

burden on the principal, thereby freeing them to concentrate on broader leadership tasks (JMB and ACCS, 2014), the findings point conversely to an escalation in the principal's workload. Throughout the interviews all participants alluded to the key role played by the principal in the DL process with the principal herself echoing the words of Harris (2012) in her assertion:

> I don't think that the Principal's redundant because like I said, somebody does have to drive the bus and sometimes there are difficult calls to make and it's not really for somebody who is a team member be it a team member for a year or thirty years to make that call.

This notion of the principal occupying a centre stage position within the distributed leadership framework (Harris, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2007; Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al.; 2010) was echoed by other interviewees, notably the Deputy Principal who emphasised the importance of having someone 'steering the ship' and further postulated that irrespective of the many leadership opportunities offered by the distributed model,' ultimately the buck stops with the principal.' This recognition of the interdependence of distributed and hierarchical leadership and indeed that the distribution of leadership is ultimately as the literature has suggested, predominantly perceived as being the purview of the principal (Leithwood et al., 2007) was reiterated by the focus group participants, who concurred that the role of the principal is that of a strategic overseer, ensuring that the various teams and initiatives are, 'going in the right direction.' (Teacher E)

Thus the inference may be drawn that in the context of the research setting at least, the paradox at the heart of distributed leadership (Harris, 2007) is that although distributed leadership exists and is perceived to be flourishing within the school its existence and continuation is ultimately dependent on the strong and focussed leadership of the principal (Harris, 2013; Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 2010). The changing role of the principal, from sole leader at the apex of the school hierarchy to someone who nurtures, fosters and indeed actively facilitates the leadership capacity of others (Harris, 2013), was also articulated by Teacher B in their assertion that:

> A leader doesn't always have to be out in front doing everything obviously they have to co-ordinate things, but the ideas don't always have to come from them ... a good leader will be able to take the followers' views on board without feeling intimidated or threatened in any way. That's the mark of a good leader really that they will recognise other people's ideas.

This imperative was further emphasised by Teacher A, who postulated that, 'the principal has to embed an attitude of leadership in the school' and furthermore,' ensure that there are provisions in place for people to access leadership' (Teacher A). The above suggests a cognisance amongst the school community of the need for the principal in the distributed model, as evinced in much of the literature

(Leithwood et al., 2007; Harris, 2012; Harris 2013; Harris and Jones, 2014), to be at the helm in cultivating a culture of leadership and in actively encouraging and fostering leadership in others.

IMPLICATIONS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In this key thematic area also, the findings echoed the literature in the consensus that DL has the potential to contribute indirectly to school improvement and effectiveness through fostering a sense of collaboration and ownership (Penlington et al., 2008; Hallinger and Heck 2011: Harris 2013). Staff and management were unanimous in their agreement with the literature, however, that distributed leadership can only have an impact on school improvement if planfully or strategically implemented (Leithwood et al., 2007; Harris and Spillane, 2008; Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 2010; Harris and De Flaminis, 2016). The extant literature on DL places repeated and consistent emphasis on the fact that the success or failure of DL in contributing to overall school improvement is hugely dependent on the nature of the distribution, and indeed the overall school context., (OECD, 2008; Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016) DL, as the literature has cautioned, is not a magic wand which will transform a school and lead to improved outcomes for all. Indeed, this perception permeated the findings of this study with the principal asserting, from the outset, that DL can't just happen randomly but rather must have, 'a certain focus, it can't be implemented any old way' (Principal). Another crucial component of planning, that of the importance of implementing change such as the DL model slowly and progressively in order to maximise its impact , as evinced in the literature by Harris (2013), was developed by the Deputy Principal in her assertion that for DL to 'go in the right direction' in terms of contributing to school improvement, the paramount consideration should be to move cautiously and patiently to: *'feel the temperature and know who all of the players are and that some of the players aren't ready yet'*

Interviewees across all strata echoed the literature (Penlington et al. 2008;Harris and De Flaminis 2016) in their identification of a perceived link between working collectively and collaboratively and the potential for school improvement and effectiveness and indeed positive organisational change. This idea of the potential benefits of working together, of embodying the principle of the old Irish proverb, 'Ní neart go cur le chéile' (In togetherness comes strength) was articulated by the Principal in her assertion that the school could not be 'effective' without the involvement of 'all the people in the school' and without the 'balance of different angles and different voices' (Principal).This perceived benefit of incorporating all the voices in the pursuit of overall school improvement was further highlighted by the students as encapsulated in the following ,'more opinions and more voices give more ideas and possibilities'(Student 1)

This perceived positive impact on the affective domain and its consequent perceived benefits for school effectiveness and improvement was also evinced by Teacher B in their assertion that distributed

leadership could lead to a better functioning school through creating a 'happier environment' because as they further expanded, 'if you feel that you are part of a system you are going to work better than if you just feel like you are a mere cog in a machine' (Teacher B). This perception of DL as being a positive and empowering experience was echoed by the student participants as articulated by Student 7 in their assertion that, *'I feel like I have a great opportunity to discuss important things relating to my school and implement changes and improvements'*

The importance of a shared sense of purpose, responsibility and ownership with regard to in-school visions, developments and initiatives, which permeates the literature (Penlington et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007) was also a persistent subtheme with regard to the perceived implications of distributed leadership for school improvement and school effectiveness. Here, as elsewhere, there was consensus across all echelons of staff, management and students that sharing a sense of responsibility, of having a sense of ownership, could have positive implications for school improvement and effectiveness in the long term as evidenced by Teacher G's assertion that such a sense of ownership and responsibility could potentially, 'benefit the Principal and the Vice principal in the long run and the students too ultimately'

CONCLUSION

This research illuminates many possibilities for enhancing the operation of DL and for maximising its potential impact on school improvement and school effectiveness, not only in the school under study but in similar second level settings. The findings indicated that DL was perceived to be inherently beneficial and likely to impact indirectly on school improvement and school effectiveness but *only* if implemented under the right conditions. In order to optimise its effectiveness, DL requires a transformation in both the leadership style of the formal school leader and indeed the culture, attitude and ethos evinced throughout the school.

While initiatives to enhance and support the quality of both senior and middle leadership in schools, such as the Professional Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL) course for aspiring school leaders which has been allocated 50 extra places this year to accommodate the burgeoning interest in leadership throughout the system are laudable and encouraging, much more is needed. Ongoing school-based CPD courses in leadership are vital for time-pressed teachers unable to avail of time-consuming courses such as the above, such CPD could be offered on an e-learning basis. As the literature also emphasises the importance of increasing students' awareness of leadership and of maximising the student voice (McGregor, 2007; Fleming, 2015) the NCCA and the DES need to enhance the provision of specific leadership training modules for students at both Junior and Senior Cycle level.

One of the major challenges to the effective implementation of DL identified in the findings was the issue of time deficit; a challenge which must also be addressed as– despite teachers' acknowledgement of the inherent benefits of DL–the findings excavated a deep rooted fear that time spent on the practice of DL could encroach on precious class contact time, thereby paradoxically impacting negatively on teaching and learning. Given the increased emphasis on the DL model, and the fact that a staggering one in three (34.5%) of teachers are currently working in promoted positions of leadership in our schools (Bruton, 2018), redressing this time imbalance is imperative. Although the allocation of 22 professional hours for teachers to support efforts to implement and embed the New Junior Cycle framework as allocated in a recent Departmental circular (DES, 2017) are a welcome introductory gesture, policy must look in a more concerted way towards a reduction in class contact hours for teachers in leadership positions, as outlined above, commensurate with the levels of their roles and responsibility.

At the beginning of my narrative on DL, I began at the beginning with a retrospective look at the changing face of leadership from the 'Once upon a time', heroic model of the lonely leader leading from the heights of academia to the more fluid and dynamic latter-day distributive model where the principal is truly a 'primus inter pares'–a first among equals–and where leadership is no longer perceived as being the preserve of the 'few' but is rather, widely accessible to the 'many'. In listening to the voices of the many, I am happy to conclude that the distributed model of leadership as postulated in the literature (Leithwood et al., 2007; Harris, 2008) may not be a veritable leadership magic wand but that a 'happily ever after' for DL as a potential contributor to school improvement and effectiveness is indeed possible, if not probable, if that wand is strategically and planfully applied.

ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

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