



PRINCIPAL'S ACTIONS THROUGH DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP DIMENSIONS: A CASE STUDY OF TWO PUBLIC SPANISH SCHOOLS

GARCIA I., AMADOR L., AND ESTEBAN M.

UNIVERSITY PABLO OLAVIDE, SEVILLE, SPAIN

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ABSTRACT

Experience has shown that the attitude of the person assuming the management functions in the school is a key and decisive element in the quality of the change processes in the school. Of these ideas is born, the concept of distributed leadership (DL). The research design is a case study. The main objective is to understand the four dimensions of DL and the actions of the Principal through representative cases of two schools. The techniques used to collect information were documentary analysis, questionnaires, in-depth semi structured interviews, and observation. An analysis of the data and conclusions are provided.

1. Introduction

2 1st century society has brought profound changes to schools, influenced by technology, globalization processes, program reforms, and curricula to name a few. Experts such as (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Bolden, 2011; Harris, 2012; Spillane, 2012) express that leadership in school effectiveness and improvement forms a key component considered as the second-largest school ingredient. The development of effective school leaders, according to (Pont *et al.*, 2009), is contingent upon needed changes in both policy and practice.

The research study is based on the following two points of view. Firstly, there are new social demands that require reform at the school level. Secondly, these reforms or transformations must be promoted from within each school centre. In this context, competencies to perform all functions within the framework of (DL), is essential. It urges in the Spanish centres a school principal that acts as a agent of change committed to the whole educational community and a shared vision (Bolívar y San Fabián, 2013). The school centre's DL is one of the most thriving factors that schools have to be effective and achieve quality results. School leaders are able to influence and shape the conditions in which they occur. School leadership is one of the most influential factors in student academic achievement and accounts for 25% of all school effects (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006). It means that if the principal's exercise DL practices they will be able to influence the teachers and improve in this way the conditions in the development of the processes of teaching and learning.

2. An approximation to the concept of distributed leadership

Educational research on DL began to appear in the early 2000s. At present, there are many definitions and interpretations of the DL, but few are clear and the definitions that exist seem to differ from one another. In the area of organizational restructuring, much of the research focus on concepts of DL as either horizontal, organic and the extent to which multifunctional structures replace hierarchical structures (Day, 2000).

Evidence from different types of educational institutions confirms the idea that some leadership practices are valuable in almost all contexts (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). For Spillane *et al.*, (2007) there is a perspective of DL, which recognizes the existence of several different types of leaders and as explained by Harris (2012), the activities are widely shared within and between the organization.

The characteristics of the distribution model in the first place focus primarily on interactions, rather than actions, and on formal as well as informal leadership roles. Secondly, it is the direction and influence in leadership, as well as the improvement of the organization's instruction that is important. In this way, the organization recognizes the contributions of all members with regard to their formal and informal leadership (Spillane, 2012). Thirdly, th DL is also fundamental to the reconfiguration of the system to include horizontal decision making (Hargreaves & Fink, 2000). This model leads to a leadership perspective, as a phenomenon involving the organization as a whole.

From Bennett's (2003) perspective, DL first appears at the end of 1990; it is then when the definition of DL actually appears. Harris (2009) points out that the definition and understanding of DL fluctuate between the normative and the theoretical and therefore, remains diverse and broad-based. Despite these solid theoretical foundations, it is only during the last few decades in which DL has been systematically investigated (Gronn, 2002, Spillane, 2012). As a result, new theoretical understandings are emerging which highlight the importance of leaders utilizing the principles of DL as essential to school reform and school improvement (Gronn, 2002, Hulpia *et al.*, 2009). For Elmore (2005) the most important factors are instruction, school improvement, and school performance. Spillane and Diamond (2007), have based their study, to a large extent, on distributed cognition to generate a strong theory of DL.

Research has demonstrated that DL is one of the most vibrant elements to achieve school effectiveness and achieve a wide range of organizational objectives (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006). At the same time, it is important to recognize that all decision making cannot be effectively relegated to a distributed leadership model. In fact, research has demonstrated that the top-down authority model can be more effective for improving student learning outcomes (Garcia, 2019).

3. Methodology / Research design

3.1. Research design

The study employed a multi-case qualitative research design (Stake, 2013). Qualitative research methods allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how DL effected the two selected principals within the context of their respective schools. Whereas the primary source of data were the in-depth structured interviews of the principals, institutional data and data from the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science were analysed (Educa Madrid, 2018).

The type of case study that was employed is called an instrumental case study. Instrumental case studies are distinctive because of the interest to know and understand a broader problem through the knowledge of a particular case or cases (Stake, 2013).

3.2. Dimensions of distributed leadership

DL consists of four dimensions, which are listed below (Garcia, 2019):

1. **Shared vision, mission and goals:** It is the aspect of DL that implies that everyone is committed to the shared goals of the institution with a sense of purpose or long-term vision. It is considered that the school has a set of shared values that guide the efforts, promote confidence and commitment among teachers, managers, administrative staff and the educational community. The school is sensitive to the needs of the students, parents and community, and it generates support in helping, establishing and clearly communicating the course of the institution.

2. **Distributed Leadership Practices:** There is a delegation of work, and the director assumes that the sum of the whole is greater than the individual parts because the shared decision making and collaboration translate into a learning for the organization. The management considers that participatory forms of leadership work best and that this allows collective access to the knowledge of the

organization. Democratic processes are and regular informal and formal communication is employed whenever possible to productively resolve conflicts.

3. **Professional development of teachers, complexity of the tasks:** This dimension includes reflection and dialogue in order to delegate, orient, leverage and improve the skills and knowledge of all teachers, and create a positive and effective common culture, as well as provide a consistent and coherent school curriculum between subjects and levels, as well as a system of goals and incentives. Leadership actions contribute to the development of people in order to advance productively in the institution. Management and leadership are practiced as a reflection of the school's culture, ethics and traditions. In addition, it includes the planning of the professional development of the team, through assistance to seminars, courses, workshops, etc., and supports the allocation of the necessary resources to promote the efforts of school improvement.

4. **Shared decisions of the Organization:** Work is conducted on the basis of cooperation rather than competition, to promote productivity within the school, with a "holistic" vision of the organization and with flexible professional practices. The members of the organization discuss and help each other in a spontaneous way to solve problems, through agreements to modify certain organizational structures, and through parental involvement, in order to make decisions about teaching and learning their children in school.

3.3. Population and study units

The population under study is the group of primary education principals of centres of the Autonomous Community of Madrid, corresponding to 244 public primary schools and 277 private, according to the database of (Educa. Madrid, 2018).

3.4. Study sample

An intentional sampling was carried out with two principals. The selection of the schools was based on the following criteria. Firstly, the two primary schools represent different types of schools. Secondly, the schools provided evidence of innovation in programs, services, and technology. Thirdly, the principals have served their current role for a period of between 2004-2017.

Based on these criteria, the study cases selected in this research were the following schools in the city of Madrid: Case Study No. 1: OG and Case Study No. 2: JV.

In relation to the principal's gender of the case studies, one was female (OG school) and another one was a male (JV school). At the time of the study, the principal of OG was 40 years old and the principal of JV was 55 years old. Years of experience as principals in the respective schools were varied. The principal of the OG School served for eight years and JV have served for 14 years. The schools vary in size of the student population. The JV school enrolls between 550 and the OG school has 689 students.

3.5. Community and school context

The study cases selected were public primary schools, located in the Tetuan municipality of the capital Madrid. One of the schools is bilingual. In relation to population, Tetuan has 153,789 inhabitants and an extension of 537.31 Km², distributed in the official district. It has beautiful views, four roads, Castillejos, Almenara, Valdeacederas, and Berruguete. Relative to foreign residents, Tetuan has 69,036 inhabitants, divided mainly between Ecuadorians, Dominicans, Romanians, and Moroccans.

Both schools have a very high acceptance rate with few students not admitted. There is great diversity in the socio-cultural and economic backgrounds of the children and their families in these two schools. The immigrant student population in these two schools mirrors the census data. There are significant numbers of immigrant students from The Dominican Republic, Colombia, Venezuela, Paraguay, Ecuador, Romania, Morocco. Recently there has been an influx of Asian students.

Both schools have a dining service, whose main objective is to help the parents of the students so that they can make their family and work life compatible. They also exist in the Spanish schools, the associations of mothers and parents of students (AMPA), whose fundamental objective

is the representation of the interests of the parents, mothers or legal guardians in the educational centres of their children.

A semi-structured in-depth interview guide was developed. The in-depth semi-structured interview protocol was selected as a way to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of the school's principals over other data collection methods.

Demographic variables relevant to the two school sites were also investigated including school dropout and completion rates and rates of unemployment. More general economic policies in Spain relative to school operations were also considered.

3.6. Interview protocol

As a structured interview, the questions were formulated in advance based on the four dimension of DL. The interviews were audio-recorded and digitally transcribed using Atlas.ti. Researcher notes were also compiled. The analysis process consisted of four phases, namely, (i) Primary contact with the document (Organization, classification and initial information readings); (ii) Preparation of the document; (iii) Analysis (construction, designation, and definition of categories of first and second order [selection of analysis units, code assignments, code relationship] and network creation); and, (iv) Analytical interpretation (description of Findings or theorizing) (Garcia, 2019).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Two public schools and two different ways looking at school management

About the past history of the school, the Principal of OG stated:

OG was inaugurated on August 13, 1976, by President Adolfo Suárez, the first Democratic president (1976-1981), after the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. OG was born with democracy when even the municipality of Tetuán was in the process of urbanization.

Currently, immigrant students represent 44% (268) of a total of 689 students. In relation

to the teaching staff, the school principal explains that:

I have focused myself to try to include something with DL at least two or three times a week. I worked out a schedule, the teachers and I did, where every other week each grade level team has an opportunity to plan together. I'm always part of those meetings with them, and I consider that a distributed leadership function. I set a block of time each day where I'm in a grade level for an hour or an hour and a half each morning. I'm always visible that. (Principal OG)

There are 10 early childhood faculty at the school. There are 12 elementary education faculty and six English language faculty covering the first through sixth grades at the school. There are 24 classrooms at the school. There is a team of educational and psycho-pedagogical orientation (EPPO), formed by a psychologist and a technical teacher of services to the community (PTSC). OG is considered an ordinary centre with support for students with special educational needs, an educational compensation program, TGD Classroom project and a Bilingualism project. Due to these characteristics, the attention of the EPPO of the sector is a priority by the two professional profiles of educational orientation and services to the community (PTSC). There is great diversity in the socio-cultural and economic backgrounds of the children and their families in these two schools.

4.1.1. The OG principal and an approach to school improvement

My professional experience as a teacher in public education began more than seventeen years ago, exercising my teaching work in five schools in the community of Madrid, located in different social environments, with heterogeneous students and organizational different cultures. In two of them participating actively as a member of the School Board, coordinator of Cycle six courses, collaborating closely with all the resources of the environment, Town Hall, health centre, social workers, school of parents etc. With a high degree of satisfaction in achieving the proposed objectives. (Principal OG)

The mission, vision and sharing goals (MVSG) dimension is based on a consistent school curriculum:

We are one of the best bilingual centre, we have the project of the community of implantation of bilingualism, we go for the fourth course, we are now concretizing the dates for the examinations of second and third of the external tests of the language, because that is a project in development and That goes well and that benefits the whole school. (Principal OG)

Of the MVSG dimension, the principal considers it attractive and challenging:

I think distributed leadership was described as collaborative; involved with vision, goals, mission, tone, and direction; involving risk taking and change; and emphasizing interaction with people. I see myself as a leader of leaders, we've been getting a lot of training in that from the Supervisor. He wants the teachers to have lots of autonomy, and I have no problem with that, as long as they are following things that are appropriate and following our mission. (Principal OG)

The second dimension analysed was shared decision-making (SD). The interviewee said that the decisions were summarized as follows:

I agree that DL means working together, planning and sharing decisions and ideas, this happens in our schools. I think a very important word in the context of sharing leadership is working as part of a team most of the time. Also, I am providing user-friendly mediating processes and structures to empower people with regard to sharing decisions which profoundly affect their live. All teachers are involved in decisions which affect the whole school. In the OG school a culture exists that encourages all staff members to put forward suggestions and initiate new projects/ideas – where everyone has a sense of ownership for the school and its mission. In the participatory structure, promotion of collaborative work, promotion of productivity and holistic vision. (Principal OG)

With regard to the participatory structure, it can be emphasized that the OG has an organizational design that allows incorporating the different actors of the educational process in the decision-making (management, teachers, students, parents). Related to these factors the principal stated:

We also have a collaborating team and that organizes many activities also with parents, some party and the educational community also forms part in

the centre, although the most Important is channelled through the school board and parent involvement of the school board. (Principal OG)

As to the third dimension practice of distributed leadership (PDL), the principal stated:

These practices were identified along a spectrum ranging from not existing in the school, at one end, to the condition being well established or refined, at the other end. Also in spite of variation within and across the school in their responses a number of themes emerged worthy of further exploration: monitoring and supporting student learning responsibilities of individual teachers, working together as a staff and structures and systems such as subject departments and posts of responsibility. (Principal OG)

About the fourth and last dimension, Professional Development (DP), Principal OG stated:

that it is based on training, resources, technology, curriculum, motivation, and complexity of the task. (Principal OG)

There is professional development which provides a school curriculum consisting of improving education, innovation in music teaching. The Computer science project applied to musical education has shown, in the time that students show great interest in computer resources and has served to address music education with the help of other tools. The general objective is to use ICT as a didactic resource to reinforce the curricular content of music education in the third primary cycle. As well as putting into practice new pedagogical and didactic approaches, to facilitate the educational innovation and to adapt the work of students and teacher to the new educational necessities and to their sociocultural environment.

4.1.2. The Principal JV made the assessment of diversity and integration

The school was established in 1922, when the City Council of Madrid approved a plan to build six school groups: Méndez Álvaro (later called Menéndez Pelayo), Chopa (then Joaquín Costa), Antonio López (Concepción Arenal), Moncloa (Pérez Galdós), Ventorrillo (Pardo Bazán) and Bravo Murillo (Jaime Vera). The style of architecture is called Mudejar based on the use of brick seen in its arches.

The primary education is organized in two sections (teaching teams): The first one corresponds to the courses of 1^o, 2^o, and 3^o, while the second group corresponds to the courses of 4th, 5th and 6th.

The Principal of the JV was asked about his preparation and his seniority at the school and he commented as follows;

I started in 1978, I started as a teacher and started to occupy management positions in the year 92, at the school IZ, I took the Principal of the centre, I was in that school during eight years I change to JV school and here I am since the year 2000, which are fourteen years. (Principal JV)

4.1.3. Valuing diversity

About the mission, vision and shared goals (MVSG) dimension, the principal characterizes it by valuing diversity and sensitivity to the needs of the families and redesign of the organization. The Principal JV further explained as follows:

I am sure that above opening comment set the tone for distributed leadership as an inclusive concept, not specifically related to formal roles or posts of responsibility. Now almost every member of school will either have authority delegated to them for a particular area or will take it on their own back to organise something. I really think you try to develop a leadership capacity within people and they precise that through the particular roles they are doing. It is looking at the whole management thing, it is the whole team aspect, unlocking potential, and that can be channelled into different roles at different times. (Principal JV).

In relation to the PDL dimension, it associates with the contribution to the institution by the teachers who assume new roles of leadership and with those PDL as a strategy to access the collective knowledge of the organization.

With regard to the third dimension, the SD in the JV school are characterized by lack of a holistic vision, but if there is a curricular vision, cooperative work, redesign of the organization and existence of enriching professional practices.

Two of the core objectives of the school include the acquisition of competence in one or more foreign languages and the basic competence in information and communication technologies. They are also deeply concerned about student drop-outs. In relation to the student drop-out rate and other negative influences on the school as a result of the recent the economic crisis, he added:

At first, it was a little difficult, well more than difficult, it was a sudden change; Because when I came to school in the year 2000, talking about 600 students who were in school, as there were 400, 450 Spaniards, 150 foreigners. The following year in 2001 practically equalled. And in the year 2002, it was backward, practically 75%-80% of the population is not Spanish and the rest, yes, Spanish. (Principal JV).

The principal described the negative impact of the high student mobility rate as follows:

The problem is that the course begins with twenty-five students and throughout the course have gone eight or nine and have come another ten or twelve, that's the problem: When a student is incorporated in the primary room coming from an educational system other than ours and in many cases s with knowledge and skills quite looser. (Principal JV).

With regard to the impact of various decisional processes, the principal referred to the advantages and disadvantages as follows:

My understanding of distributed shared leadership is that most of the people, if not everybody in the building would have a sense of leading some aspect of school life. I certainly wouldn't believe that you have to hold a post of responsibility to share in the leadership of the school. (Principal JV)

Principal JV articulated the idea that reading is an essential factor in intellectual enrichment and constitutes a key activity in education and is one of the main learning tools whose domain opens doors to new knowledge.

5. Discussion

It should be emphasized that the main strength of this case study is that it provides relevant data on the reality of DL in two schools in Madrid. The critical examination of the findings in this study will contribute to the larger body of research in this area. In this case study, the results of the investigation are not intended to be definitive and have various limitations (Stake, 2013).

Prior research has established that the active support by school leaders is essential to the improvement and innovation of the teaching and learning processes by school leaders. (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). In this research study, both

schools have demonstrated that the behaviour and attitude of the person, who assumes the functions of management in the institution, are a key element that determines the existence and quality of processes of change in the institution. Entering the addresses through the project of direction in Madrid, it is important, for the principals to be elected. The project is an instrument presented to a committee of parents, professors, and representatives of the administration. It contains in writing a proposal for an educational plan that includes the vision of the Centre; In addition to values, principles, and modes of action. Although the project is designed for the first four years, both managers have been re-elected and the work continued. In these two cases, the principals were chosen for their innovative projects.

One of the main findings in this case study is that both principals have deepened their understanding of DL as a result of the profound social changes in their centres and communities due to current economic crisis in Spain and the related social consequences for students and families. The inclusion of students, is the product of immigration in both schools, implies social work of integration and high communication values.

The priority here is logically the curricular matter, then the child has to learn languages, mathematics, geography, history, but the main point is to learn to become a citizen, to be with others, to behave with others, to respect others and in that we are lucky because, as we said before, having so much variety of cultures, so many varieties of nationalities, you have to learn to respect the partner because there are five, eight, ten different nationalities in each class. (Principal JV)

The two schools are characterized by having a DL, with high levels of participation by the students and an inclusive approach to diversity. It also demonstrates the commitment of principals, in the face of the many social and economic challenges of the students including students who live poverty, foreign and Spanish students from different cultural backgrounds, especially Latin America and Central Europe; students with special, transient, permanent educational needs; and, students psychologically affected by family situations of abandonment or violence.

The management of the curriculum focuses on objectives and learning criteria, the possibility for students to acquire the desired competencies and integration. In both schools, the high immigrant population is a priority for the management

of the Centre, facilitating resources and enabling the objectives to be achieved. The OG Principal notes, in relation to the improvement of the education to the reinforcement of language and mathematics:

We have flexible groupings up to sixth of primary, in mathematics and languages, only in first, because we consider that first, we have distributed the resources where more is needed and second because we consider that in the language it is better that all the students are in a group. Because it enriches, because and when you limit the groups in curricular competition the lower groups impoverish the language a little and we saw that it was not the most optimal. We only keep it in first because it is when they are learning the scripture and if there is a substantial difference. (Principal OG)

Both Principals coordinate various Centre improvement projects at their individual schools. In the case of OG, there are special initiatives related to information and communication technologies, but also in programs related to experimental sciences, and bilingualism.

In the JV, students attend other centres, participating in exchange experiences between the centres. They also relate to the educational administration they depend on, to which they account, both in the organization of their human resources, supports teaching, etc. The different administrations are a support for the centres, but they also look for links with society for example: through non-governmental organizations, associations, etc. (Arias & Canton, 2006).

For the principal of the JV the priority is the management of the curriculum as expressed through a focus on objectives and learning criteria. One of the most positive features of principal OG is the demonstrated commitment to interact with all members of the internal and external school community. The school stands out for a large number of awards within the community of Madrid. This approach has promoted not only the distribution of the leadership but also the social distribution and the influence and reputation of the school in other ways. The Principal is influential in various educational groups (for example the AMPA. The Centre has secured scholarships for the dining room, competitions). In turn, these Principals exemplify the value of shared decision-making as identified in the literature (Harris, 2012; Gronn, 2002). In the exercise of DL, all members of the community are involved, so that

they are committed to the dimensions and project of the school (Spillane, 2017).

The school OG is distinguished by generating improvements in the educational curriculum, emphasizing the reinforcement of language and mathematics; special activities, and innovative projects in music teaching and technology.

It is observed that the Principal has expressed a commitment to the promotion of equity and social justice. Consistent with the ideas articulated by Ross and Berger (2009), the social, ethical and political commitment to public education are essential in order to level inequalities present in society.

Both principals consider and have demonstrated with facts that the important thing is to enrich and distribute the commitment to the education of the students through the available tools of the school, in spite of the many difficulties.

In this regard, Gómez (2014) argues that the active methodology has among the fundamental pillars of the so-called "methodological renewal". It is necessary to take into account the pedagogical renewal developed in Spain, studied through some of the most emblematic schools of the pedagogical panorama.

The JV works with values focused on shaping justice, solidarity, and tolerance; to develop critical capacities and the crucial spirit; educate in respect for the environment and develop the entrepreneurial spirit. At this point the JV Principal points out:

Of most importance in these times, to teach the values of the philosophy of formation for peace, cooperation and solidarity among peoples. The school must educate for the life and develop in the students the capacities and competencies necessary for active social participation. It must contribute to the awareness of all in the construction of a better world, a more just and more humane world within a democratic society, free, fair, responsible and in peace (Principal JV).

6. Conclusions

The perspectives on DL developed in this article has implications for research on school leadership and efforts to improve the PLD. This multi-case study offers important insights into the perspectives of two Principals related to their day-to-day leadership practices.

The distributed perspective also suggests ways of thinking about intervening to change school leadership practice. Rather than proposing to develop, articulate, and disseminate a context-

neutral, task-generic template for the moves that leaders should make, it argues for the development of rich theoretical knowledge from practice that is context sensitive and task specific.

The direction of OG has strong characteristics that approximate it to the institutional leader. Focused on MVSG. The Principal has clear and timely answers to the problems that throughout the development of her professional career in the centre have been raised.

The synthesis of the perception of the principal of the four dimensions of DL is: SD is the participatory structure, promotion of collaborative work, promotion of productivity and holistic vision. MVSG are all those commitments with the institutional goals, goals oriented to the needs of the students, to the families and the structure. PDL refers to the distribution of tasks, the use of skills, the delegation of leadership, responsibility, communication at all levels and access to collective knowledge and finally professional development is based on training, resources, technology, curriculum, motivation and complexity of the task.

The principal of the JV not only reviews, but also takes into account that everything is adapted from the norm. The Principal understands the importance of his specific role as communicator or collaborative promoter. He has understand the importance of sharing decisions rather than exercising top-down leadership. He encourages cooperation in the accomplishment of tasks, promotes communication, and group integration.

In the context of DLP, the teachers who assume new roles of leadership have greater access the collective knowledge of the organization. With regard to SD, they are characterized by a lack of a holistic mindset, but share a common curricular vision, commitment to cooperation, and receptive to the redesign of the organization that will enrich their professional practices.

Finally, as DeFlaminis et al., 2016 the distributed perspective also suggests that intervening to improve school leadership by focusing exclusively or chiefly on building the knowledge of an individual formal leader in a school may not be the most optimal or most effective use of resources. If expertise is distributed, then the school rather than

the individual leader may be the most appropriate unit for thinking about the development of leadership expertise. In addition, reformers might also think about how the tools they design represent expertise for leadership, enabling or constraining leadership activity.

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