



AWARENESS OF, ATTITUDE TO, AND INVOLVEMENT IN DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Distributed leadership is a style of leadership devoid of vertical hierarchy – it involves multiple leaders at multiple levels. It is based on an interaction network – or community for action - where all school staff are leaders (subject leaders and/or event leaders). As this leadership style has been highly recommended since the 2010s for application in secondary school management, on the one hand, and has not been sufficiently applied or researched in Georgia, the topic of the paper is significant. Qualitative method of research was chosen to obtain a deeper insight into the issue under study. Two semi-structured interviews with educators were conducted. A purposeful selection of the interviewees was applied. The participants were four secondary school principals and ten teachers. It was concluded that in decision-making in Georgia, the principal and the vice principal are the major figures, however, teachers also matter. Collaboration and discussion do take place, mostly around curriculum development and innovative ideas. As for people between whom the responsibilities are distributed, the following ones are often named: teachers, the principal, mentor teachers, the vice principal, and colleagues. As for activities which are distributed, the following ones are often named: attending meetings, taking part in decision-making, discussion, facilitation, and contribution. It looks like the teachers rely more on people than activities (only training is mentioned once), among whom are (general) colleagues, more specifically, the principal, the vice principal, mentor teachers, and experienced teachers. Among people involved in distributed leadership mostly teachers are named, and some interviewees also mention the principal. Distributed leadership application is associated with: decision-making, accountability, problem-solving, collaboration, trust-building, and sharing knowledge. The results will be useful for education decision-makers both in Georgia and globally.

Keywords: distributed leadership, horizontal hierarchy in school management, principals' role, teachers' role

Introduction

Distributed leadership (DL) is a style of leadership introduced in the 1950s by Gibb (1954). However, it did not really take up till the 21st century. It was a reaction to a 'charismatic hero' (Fullan, 2005) as a leader who can motivate all his/her followers to fulfill the goal posed by him/her. Mayrowetz (2008) regarded it as a means for furthering democracy. Harris (2005) emphasized that this type of leadership is devoid of vertical hierarchy – it involves horizontal management, with multiple leaders at multiple levels. It is based on an interaction network – or community for action - where all school staff are leaders (subject leaders and/or event leaders).

Most research on DL has so far been done in Anglophone countries, especially the USA, the UK, and Canada. Since the 2010s it has become known around the globe, including in Georgia. It is strongly recommended for application by ETUCE (2012) for application at secondary schools. The

Council of the EU (2017) also believes that school leadership is effective only if it is collaborative and inclusive, recognizes the different capacities of teachers, distributes and shares power and authority, and supports teaching innovations. However, the research problem deals with the fact that the application of DL till today has had different degrees in different countries, and in Georgia, it has almost not been studied. Neither is it a common practice in Georgian schools, although to some degrees it is practised there. Therefore, the current article aims to cover this gap of knowledge and to study how aware Georgian educators of DL, whether their attitude to it is positive, and to what degree it is practised in the country.

Literature Review

The advantages of DL, based on Gronn (2002), Grenda and Hackmann (2014), Harris (2013), Leithwood et al. (2007), and Spillane (2006), include:



- unloading one leader (principal) and distributing the responsibilities (according to competence and desire/availability) among the team members;
- synergy in decision-making and fulfillment of educational goals;
- emphasizing long-term goals;
- developing a positive collegiate climate of trust, respect, and support;
- benefitting from diversity;
- increasing teachers' feeling of belongingness to their school;
- growing possibilities for professional and career development;
- change/improvement/innovations are enacted faster, more easily, and effectively.

However, DL, like any other leadership style, has some challenges/drawbacks:

- individual (lack of leadership knowledge/understanding, competence and experience, communication and social-emotional skills, and motivation; overload),
- group (lack of mutual support, trust, communication),
- organizational (accountability, decision-making, uncertainty about staff members' responsibility, hierarchical structure, lack of moral and financial support),
- And country/local/community (poverty, education level, authoritarian ethos) problems. To overcome the challenges, it is necessary to develop strategies, such as:
- organize training sessions on leadership;
- empower teachers and support their effort to apply innovations and to share their expertise with their colleagues;
- develop the educational staff's communication and social-emotional skills;
- assess the whole school and teams rather than individual teachers, to develop more trust and support among them;
- clarify the formal and informal leaders' responsibilities and reflect them in the contract and the salary;
- work on the change of public opinion on democratic processes in school (Grenda & Hackmann, 2014; Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2006).

Leadership in secondary education is a relatively new phenomenon in countries like Georgia which are on the way to democratization of society, including the system of education. The country has a legal basis for carrying out DL (or another democratic by its nature leadership style). According to the Law of Georgia on General Education (2005), the school principals have to share their responsibilities for school quality and student outcomes with the administration ((involves, besides the principal, deputy principal(s) and an accountant)), Teacher Council (involves all teachers at the given school), the Board of Trustees

((involves representatives of teachers, parents, student self-government, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Defense, local self-government and benefactors' (if any)), self-government of pupils, and a disciplinary committee (article 35).

Methodology

Research Methods

The qualitative method of research was chosen to obtain a deeper insight into the issue under study (Tilley, 2019). Two semi-structured interviews with educators were conducted. A semi-structured interview permits the interviewer to follow a certain direction and at the same time to have more freedom for finding out the needed details (Ruslin et al., 2022).

Participants

A purposeful selection was applied, as two points of view on distributed leadership were needed – that of formal (principals) and informal (teachers) leaders. This method is applied in qualitative studies when interviewees with certain characteristics are needed (Palinkas et al., 2015). In the given case they needed to be aware of the study topic.

The interviewees were volunteers from the previous, quantitative (survey) study with 70 participants – four principals and ten teachers. They were explained that the topic of the interview would be the same and that its goal was to ascertain the survey results as well as to deeper understand the situation with distributed leadership in Georgia – awareness of it, attitude towards it, and the degree of involvement in it. Four secondary school principals and ten secondary school teachers volunteered.

Procedure

The interviews were organized as focus groups, to enable the educators to enrich one another's answers (Cheng, 2014). It was carried out face-to-face. The questions asked to both focus groups were the same. The duration of each interview was about one hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in the native language of the interviewees (Georgian) and the transcript was translated by the researcher into English for analysis purposes (the quality of translation was assessed by two experts). Content analysis with the help of NVivo software was carried out: the transcript was coded (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

Results and Analysis

Table 1 below presents the themes and codes obtained from the principals' interviews.

Table 1. Themes and codes of the principals' interview

| Themes | Codes |
|--|---|
| Theme 1: Decision-making (Q1, 2) | teachers (4), collaborate/collaboration (3), board of chairs (2), board of trustees (2), curriculum development (2), instructional strategies (2) |

| | |
|--|---|
| Theme 2: Responsibility distribution (Q 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10) | teachers (19), administration (15), meet/meetings (9), board of trustees (5), student needs (4), coordinate (2), implement (2), volunteer (1), facilitate (2), organize (1), parents (1), students (1), initiative (2), questionnaire (1) |
| Theme 3: Support (Q 4, 6) | Teachers/colleagues (13), training/trainer (5), administration (3), mentor teachers (3), guidance (2), support (2), councillors (1), leading teachers (2), professional development (2), survey (1), workshop (2) |
| Theme 4: Distributed leadership application (Q.11, 13, 15) | Teachers (8), decision-making (5), accountability/accountable (2), , team (2), salary (2), clearly defined responsibilities (2), sharing (2), multiple individuals (1), collective ownership (1), success/successful (2), administration (1), board (1), problem-solving (1), school improvement (1 alone (1), delegation (1), collaboration/collaborate (1), trust-building (1), losing control (1), facing risks (1), criticism (1) |
| Theme 5: Distributed leadership benefits (Q.12, 14) | Leadership skills (3), collaboration/collaborate (3), professional growth (1), projects (1), training (1), career advancement, school improvement, influence in school decisions(1), diverse expertise (1), ideas (1), improved outcomes (1), communication (1), teamwork (1), alignment of goals (1), sense of community (1) |

Table 2. Themes and codes of the teachers’ interview

| Themes | Codes |
|--|--|
| Theme 1: Decision-making (Q1, 2) | Principal (18), curriculum development (9), Vice Principal (6), collaborate/collaboration (6), teachers (5), discuss (3), board (2), ideas (2), responsibility (1) |
| Theme 2: Responsibility distribution (Q 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10) | Teachers (33), Principal (21), meet/meetings (11), decision-making (9), organize (7), mentor teacher (7), activity (7), Vice Principal (5), colleague (5), board (4), discuss/discussion (3), initiate (3), facilitate (3), contribute (3), administration (2), student needs (2), students (2), opinion/view (2), department chair (2), task (2), professional development (2), coordinate (1), curator (1) |

| | |
|---|--|
| Theme 3: Support (Q 4, 6) | mentor teachers (6), colleagues (6), Principal (3), Vice Principal (3), experienced teachers (2), training (1) |
| Theme 4: Distributed leadership application (Q 12, 14) | Teachers (8), lack of qualification/competencies (5), extra load/responsibilities (5), Principal (3), decision-making (2), love of power (by Principals) (1) |
| Theme 5: Distributed leadership benefits (Q 11, 13) | Developed sense of responsibility (4), promotion (3), salary increase (1), self-confidence (1), gaining popularity (1), professional development (1), helping others develop (1), team-building (1), synergy (1), pulling together diverse skills (1), problem-solving (1), developing trust (1) |

Below see some interesting/typical answers (P stands for Principal, T for teacher):

Q1. When a decision needs to be made, who typically takes the lead in your school?

P4. Every individual (school councillors, self-governor, boards of departments and trustees, administration) participates in decision-making processes in our school.

T4. The Principal. Of course, he discusses the issue on the board.

Q2. How often do teachers collaborate on curriculum development and instructional strategies? Do all teachers collaborate or only a few?

P2. The majority of our teachers systematically participate in collaboration during the development of curriculum and instructional strategies.

T3. Teachers do not collaborate on curriculum development, because we know that the final decision will be made by the Principal.

Q3. In school-wide initiatives, who plays a key role in coordinating and implementing them?

P3. Everybody who volunteers to participate in school-wide initiatives together with school administration, play a key role in coordinating and implementing them.

T9. Teachers who initiated and are responsible.

Q4. When faced with job-related challenges, who do teachers turn to for guidance and support?

P3. Teachers can count on a particular group of teachers who are allocated and are councilors for job-related challenges.

T5. To their friends among the colleagues.

Q5. How are responsibilities for mentoring new teachers distributed among the staff?

P2. Newcomer teachers are actively involved in training modules (according to their interests) that are provided within our school by mentor or leading teachers.

T4. Nobody has such responsibilities. Who does it, does so out of goodwill.

Q6. Who facilitates professional development opportunities within your school?

P1. It depends. At the beginning of the school year, our school conducts research to find out in which field our teachers especially need help. According to the data, we offer some training modules and workshops within our school (by mentor and leading teachers) or invite guest speakers and trainers (from some universities or training centers).

T9. Everybody who often attends training sessions.

Q7. When organizing extracurricular activities who takes charge and ensures their success?

P3. Every teacher who takes the responsibility to organize the extracurricular activity and school administration.

T6. Those teachers who organize the activity, the principal, and the vice principal.

Q8. How do teachers collaborate on identifying and addressing student needs and challenges?

P1. We have regular meetings, once a week, where teachers actively collaborate on identifying and addressing students' needs and challenges.

T10. During board meetings.

Q9. Who represents the school governing board in discussions with school administration and stakeholders?

P4. The board of trustees - with the school administration and the school administration with the stakeholders.

Q10. How do teachers contribute to decision-making processes within your school?

P4. Once a week, after the lessons, our school teachers hold meetings to contribute to decision-making processes within our school.

T8. If we are asked to, we contribute, but generally, we do not.

Q10. Are you personally involved in distributed leadership? Can you give a couple of examples?

T10. I am active in extracurricular activities. Not professional ones, but organizing excursions, competitions, etc.

Q11. Do you apply distributed leadership in your school? Why (not)? Can you give a couple of examples?

P4. More or less I apply distributed leadership in our school, I think, but, as I do not have much information about distributed leadership, I do not know exactly whether the leadership we apply in our school is distributed or not. We work as a team and contribute to decision-making processes, our school team (students, teachers, and parents) support

newcomer teachers, we participate in global projects, and are ready for changes. I encourage my staff and students to be more successful.

Q12. Do you think distributed leadership is beneficial for teachers? If so, in what ways?

P1. Sure. Teachers gain leadership skills, take responsibility, plan and organize extracurricular activities, school projects, and training sessions, participate in conferences, and are role models for other teachers.

T10. Yes, team building and such things. And it's just enjoyable.

Q13. Have you noticed that some teachers do not want to participate in distributed leadership? What do you think, why?

P1. Because of increased responsibilities and low salary.

T3. Teachers have a fear of making mistakes or not meeting their colleagues' expectations in leadership roles.

Q14. Do you think distributed leadership is beneficial for school administration? If so, in what ways?

P4. I think it is very beneficial, as collaborative leadership structures promote better communication, coordination, and collaboration among staff members. This can lead to improved teamwork, alignment of goals, and a stronger sense of community within the school.

T3. It is definitely beneficial, but they need to realize it, instead of fearing for their chairs.

Q15. Have you noticed that some principals do not want to participate in distributed leadership (to share their responsibilities with teachers)? What do you think, why?

P2. Sure, because some principals have a more traditional or hierarchical leadership style, where they prefer to make decisions alone, by themselves rather than sharing authority among others. This could be due to their personality, experiences, and beliefs about effective leadership.

T1. Some principals are afraid of changes. They do not have the desire to change anything.

Q16. Make some final comments, if you wish.

P2. When staff members are actively involved in decision-making processes and have a sense of ownership over initiatives, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated. This can contribute to a positive school culture and improved job satisfaction.

Discussion

It was found in the research that Georgian educators are more or less aware of DL and are involved in its application. However, their involvement is of average level – they attend board meetings but some of them are passive during them, not all teachers are involved in teamwork and at least periodically participate in school leadership. This is in line with Gorgodze (2016), and Bitsadze (2019) findings and confirms Velečić

and Olsen (2021) finding that Georgia belongs to the group of countries where DL is “balanced and all indicators are moderately represented” (p.27).

The attitude towards DL among school principals was found to be reserved – they acknowledge it and its benefits for themselves and teachers, however, the decision-making process is still rather hierarchical. An analogous situation is characteristic of many Asian countries confirmed by the following studies: Terrell Hanna and Sales, 2024; Shahid and Babar, 2022; Karadag, 2020; Tian & Virtanen, 2021).

The attitude towards DL among teachers is positive enough, however, they fear that it will add responsibilities to them which will not be compensated financially. Analogous findings were made by Tian & Virtanen. (2021) and Hobbi Ghratapeh et al. (2022).

Research Ethics

The researcher obtained consent from all interviewees who were informed about the anonymity and confidentiality of the results as well as the possibility for each of them to quit the interview if they felt that the questions were somehow unacceptable to them, but nobody quit. Permission to record the interview was obtained from the interviewees. The recordings and transcripts were kept confidential.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are related to the research method – qualitative study (interview) and the number of participants, which does not enable to obtain generalizable and objective results. This limitation, however, to a certain degree is compensated by the earlier conducted studies – experiment and observations (Khmaladze, 2024a, 2024b, and 2024c).

Conclusions

- 1) In decision-making in Georgia, the principal and the vice principal are the major figures, however, teachers also matter. Collaboration and discussion do take place, mostly around curriculum development and innovative ideas.
- 2) As for people between whom the responsibilities are distributed, the following ones are often named: teachers, principal, mentor teachers, vice principal, and colleagues. As for activities which are distributed, the following ones are often named: attending meetings, taking part in decision-making, discussion, facilitation, and contribution.
- 3) It looks like the teachers rely more on people than activities (only training is mentioned once), among whom are (general) colleagues, more specifically, principal, vice principal, mentor teachers, and experienced teachers.
- 4) Among people involved in distributed leadership mostly teachers are named, and some interviewees also mention the principal. Distributed leadership application is associated with: decision-making, accountability, problem-solving, collaboration, trust-building, and sharing knowledge.

- 5) Among the reasons why teachers avoid participation in distributed leadership low salaries, lack of time, and extra load were named, on the other hand, some Principals do not want to let their indivisible power go.
- 6) On the whole many benefits of distributed leadership were named, however, only a developed sense of responsibility and promotion repeatedly. Some named benefits are egoistic, others are altruistic.

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