IMPLEMENTING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP WITHIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Effective school leadership is important for the overall success of a school and its members. The distributed leadership model is an approach that some school leadership teams have used to build capacity in members of the school community, foster a sense of community, and create better teaching and learning environments for all. This research investigates how formal school leadership teams implement distributed leadership, and the impact that distributed leadership has on school climate in two Urban Catholic Elementary schools. I begin by providing an understanding of distributed leadership based on review of the literature. Next, I present interview data from the school administrators regarding their definition of distributed leadership, the approach they take to implementing this model of leadership, and the perceived impacts it has on members of the school community. Finally, I draw connections between my research data and the literature that highlight the importance of communication, building meaningful relationships that foster a sense of trust, and using the strengths of staff members to successfully implement distributed leadership within the school.

Keywords*: trust, strength, leadership, support*

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Implementing Distributed Leadership Within Elementary Schools

Research Aims and Objectives

This research study investigates how formal school leadership teams implement distributed leadership and the impact this has on school climate in two Urban Catholic Elementary schools.

The research aligns with Edmonton Catholic School (2022) Division's plan for continuous growth 2020-2023 under the priority of "an excellent place to work and learn." More specifically, "the school division assures its schools will provide an optimal learning and working environment that fosters a culture of faith, trust, unity, inclusivity, confidence, respect, value and appreciation for one another." The research is valuable to Edmonton Catholic School Division and other jurisdictions as it showcases what leadership teams look like in two elementary schools, and how the leadership model impacts students and staff. These findings can support the Division's senior management team when creating administrative placements in schools. Members of the school-based leadership team need to be able to work in unison with one another by using the strength of each individual team member to support the collective work of the educational team. Furthermore, continuing the district's existing optional practice of pairing a group of new administrators with a more experienced administrator will allow for support and mentorship, guiding these new leaders as they seek to understand how to effectively lead and manage a team.

Establishing and maintaining compassionate relationships among staff, students and parents is crucial for educational leaders. An outstanding school culture is created

when a leadership team's members effectively communicate with one another, while also building trust and rapport with the greater community (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016). When the climate of a school is supportive and positive, students, staff, and parents enjoy being part of the school culture. Students' academic achievement improves, and negative behaviours decrease.

In this research, I seek to understand how members of formal leadership teams define and implement distributed leadership within their Catholic elementary school sites. Does their understanding align with how distributed leadership in schools is presented in research literature? What strategies do leaders use to implement distributed leadership and what factors do they see as limiting in their effort to implement distributed leadership? Finally, I examine the perceived effects of distributed leadership on a Catholic elementary school site, from the perspective of the school leaders interviewed.

Research Context

Edmonton Catholic School Division serves over 43,000 students and employs over 4,000 staff in its 96 schools. The school division's mission is to "provide a Catholic education that inspires and prepares students to live fully and serve God in one another" (Edmonton Catholic Schools, 2022). The core values of staff and students at Edmonton Catholic Schools are those of dignity and respect, honesty, loyalty, fairness, as well as personal and communal growth. Edmonton Catholic School District does not take a formal stance on distributed leadership; rather it uses the 10 Dimensions of Catholic Leadership (Edmonton Catholic Schools, 2022) along with the Leadership Quality Standards from Alberta Education (2020) to support administrators in their professional practice. As part of the Leadership Quality Standard, principals are expected to lead a

learning community, provide instructional leadership, and develop leadership capacity in staff members (Alberta Education, 2020).

Role of the Researcher

I am an elementary teacher employed by the Edmonton Catholic School Division. I am in my ninth year as a primary educator with this division and currently working in my fourth school. This experience has given me a window into multiple leadership styles which I would have missed if I had taught only in one or two schools. In the Master of Educational Leadership program, I came to understand that there are several models of school leadership, including instructional, managerial, transformational, and distributed (Bush & Glover, 2014). Through each leadership style there are impacts, both positive and negative, experienced by members of the school community. The idea of researching leadership teams stemmed from my interactions and observations as a teacher. I found I was able to build different types of relationships with different styles of leaders. As a teacher in these schools, I experienced leaders who successfully built and maintained relationships with staff, students and parents, and other leaders who were less successful at doing so. The desire of staff and students to be at school and participate in extracurricular activities; willingness from staff to lead events or be part of committees; and parents who provided their time on the school advisory council or volunteering their time in activities such as hot lunch varied in each school community but was often stronger when the school's formal leadership team was a cohesive unit. Furthermore, the leaders that were actively involved, visible both inside and outside the school during the day, and engaged in two-way communication with students, staff, and parents fostered the sense of trust, respect, and care that Edmonton Catholic School Division values.

Moreover, the ability of the leader or leadership team to communicate effectively with all stakeholders played a significant role in their success in fostering a positive school climate.

Taking my experience into consideration, I wanted to find out more about leadership approaches and the perceived impact it has for all members of the school community. Being part of a school community where a formal leadership team recognized the strength of their staff members, valued what each person brought to the community, and aimed to build capacity by supporting staff members, are all important aspects of what a successful leader is in my professional opinion.

Related Literature

Distributed Leadership

Distributed Leadership Defined

For several decades in education, school leadership has been seen as an individual activity left to the principal (Crawford, 2012). Managerial leadership enables principals to be in a position of power and focus on functions, tasks, and behaviours (Bush & Glover, 2014). A national research study conducted jointly by the Canadian Association of Principals and the Alberta Teachers' Association (2014) noted that school leaders are looking for a new approach as their role intensifies with more educational reforms. This requires one to look deeper into other styles of leadership that support school leaders moving forward. Wright (2008) argues that having a model that looks at leadership as a social process rather than a managerial process is more effective. Moreover, a distributed

leadership model is an alternative that supports a school leader in moving from a solo, managerial approach to a shared, team approach (Flessa, 2009). If one person is doing it all, other people may not feel valued or be seen as capable as they have not been given opportunities to contribute. As Spillane (2006) explains it, distributed leadership is stretched over multiple individuals and the situation rather than relying on one person, which reduces the risk of burnout for that individual.

Although there is not one widely accepted definition of distributed leadership, research has shown commonalities in the understanding of this approach. Bush & Glover (2014) summarized distributed leadership as an evolution from a formal position of authority held by one individual (i.e. the principal) to a shared approach that engages expertise within the organization (i.e. teachers or instructional coaches). Individuals within a school district can climb the vertical leadership ladder when moving from a site-based administrator to a district consultant to deputy superintendent. Within a school, leadership can be distributed from administrators to learning coaches or classroom teachers. Distributing leadership both vertically and laterally, through formal or informal approaches, is more achievable when professional networks are decentralized (Bush & Glover, 2012; Kreshner & McQuillan, 2016). An assumption of distributed leadership is "that it will bring about beneficial effects that would not occur with singular leadership" (Bush& Glover, 2014, p.560). Distributed leadership is premised on interactions rather than actions, along with establishment of new teams, groupings, and connections for specific purposes (Leithwood et al., 2019, p. 9). Spillane's model of distributed leadership focuses on the social context and the significance of the interrelationships within a school (Cherkowski & Brown, 2013, 27).

Spillane (2009) distinguishes two core aspects of a distributed framework: leader-plus and practice. "The leader-plus aspect recognizes that leading and managing schools can involve multiple individuals, not just those at the top of the organization or those with formal leadership designations" (Spillane, et al., 2007, 108). Some of these individuals can include assistant principals, classroom teachers, curriculum specialists or department chairs. However, in most cases, each school can determine who is part of leading and managing. Spillane's second core aspect of a distributed framework is practice. Effective practice happens when the interactions among leaders and followers in a school along with the intersection of instructional improvement is prioritized (Spillane, 2009). An aspect of practice is organizational routines such as teacher evaluations, grade-level or staff meetings, analysis of student work and examinations, and shared lesson planning, all of which are significant when leaders are looking to improve instruction and student learning. Each member of the team has characteristics and expertise that will support the success of a distributed leadership approach. The distributed framework encourages administrators to look out for other leaders who can support in leading, managing, and improving instruction.

Characteristics of Leaders who Successfully Practice Distributed Leadership

A person's behaviour and attitudes, both good and bad, work together in defining one's character. Characteristics of successful leaders may differ slightly, but Cherkowski & Brown (2013) found that administrators in their study aimed to model strong character, moral courage, and integrity in their leadership, which inspired others to join them.

Research shows that individual commitment to one's leadership team members is another important individual characteristic (Lewis, 2013). This commitment reflects the

loyalty that members of a team have for one another. Distributed leadership has to do with establishing relationships where teachers' instructional and leadership skills can be showcased while making sure that teachers are not over-burdened with too many tasks (Cherkowski & Brown, 2013). Leaders display characteristics of respect and thoughtfulness when they listen and seek to understand the challenges and goals of their teachers and determine how to balance both. Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest a benefit of distributed leadership is positive changes in academic capacity and higher levels of student achievement (Cherkowski & Brown, 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2006).

When there are higher levels of shared values and trust within a school community and team of staff members, distribution is more likely to take place (Bush & Glover, 2012). Distributed leadership is popular because it is consistent with the notion that values should be shared by adults, including other professionals within the schools. However, a central issue in leadership is "who can exert influence over colleagues and in what domains?" (Harris, 2005, p. 165) because leadership is regarded as an influence process. Principals hold much of the formal authority in schools; therefore Hartley (2010, p. 82) concluded that 'distributed leadership resides uneasily within the formal bureaucracy of schools' (Bush& Glover, 2014, p.560).

What School Leaders Need to Develop Distributed Leadership

Several factors need to be addressed for school leaders to develop distributed leadership effectively. First, having leadership training for new school leaders along with on-going professional learning for experienced school leaders will support administrators

to stay current with educational research and the best practices for leading school communities.

Second, consistent, and adequate funding for teacher development is required. In Alberta, public education is supported and funded by the provincial government. Within the Edmonton Catholic School Division, administrators must allocate funding provided to their schools to pay staff salaries (including substitute teacher costs); support classroom instruction; support student learning (including educational assessments); and create marketing and communications. School leaders who implement a distributed leadership approach need to help staff to engage learning opportunities that staff members believe will benefit their instructional approach and professional goals. Professional development learning opportunities will benefit students as well because teachers come back with tools and strategies that are then implemented to support student learning. When professional development sessions take place, the school incurs costs for the session itself as well as the substitute teacher covering the classroom. The funding from the provincial government is to be used to support school leaders in this way.

Next, becoming successful at something takes time and support from all members. School leaders that aim to develop a successful distributed leadership approach at their site require the time to get to know each staff member and understand their goals, strengths, and areas for growth. This is done by building relationships with fellow colleagues that are rooted in trust and grounded in effective communication. Furthermore, having a shared set of values will support the school leader when distributing leadership amongst staff (Bush & Glover, 2014) as all members will have the common values top of mind when making decisions for the school community.

Finally, fostering a school climate that is welcoming is a crucial precondition for distributive leadership, so that members of the leadership team feel open to change and supported when speaking and taking on new roles or tasks. Developing a successful leadership team requires outlining specific roles, function, responsibility, and purpose of the team (Bush & Glover, 2012; Zappulla, 2003). When a climate is toxic or is known for power struggles, the relationship between leaders and followers are negatively affected, creating a 'dark side' of distributed leadership (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Law, et al., 2010). Under these conditions, school staff members are less willing to step up and be part of a distributed leadership team.

Current Importance of Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership is more important now than it has been in the past due to the increased workload for administrators, on-going expectation of student learning success, and the desire for a positive school climate. Leadership teams need to be effective for teachers to grow professionally in their understanding of curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, students need to see on-going growth in their knowledge and social development. Citing Jennings (2008), Lewis (2013, p. 146) defines an effective school leadership team as "a group of three of more educational leaders that share accountability and responsibility for the achievement of a common organizational goal."

Moreover, as we have seen throughout the pandemic, we do not know when teachers and leaders will become sick. If a distributed leadership model is in place, it makes it easier for someone to step in temporarily, taking over the responsibilities of the individual who is away ill.

Contexts for Distributed Leadership

Wright (2008) informed readers that in 2007, Alberta moved to a school-based decision-making model whereby major decisions are made at the school level regarding policies, instructional programs and services, as well as how funding is allocated. This decision-making model supports a distributed leadership approach because it allows the leaders at a site to build capacity in their staff and create an environment that fosters on-going staff learning and student success. Furthermore, section 197 of the Education Act (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2012) states a principal of a school must (a) provide instructional leadership in the school; (b) ensure that the instruction provided by the teachers employed in the school is consistent with the courses and programs of study prescribed, approved or authorized; (d) ensure that students in the school have the opportunity to meet the standards of education set by the Minister; (h) supervise the evaluation and advancement of students; (i) evaluate the teacher employed in the school.

Edmonton Catholic School Division Administrative Policy 430 also alludes to the suitability of distributed leadership when it states that "a principal must demonstrate, through daily actions, that he/she works in a collegial manner and exemplifies the qualities that are necessary to fulfill the expectations of Alberta Education's Leadership Quality Standard as well as Edmonton Catholic Schools' Embodying Catholic Leadership competency" (2022). This includes fostering effective relationships and embodying visionary leadership whereby a shared vision is created, and implemented focusing on student-success, engagement, learning, and well-being.

Based on Edmonton Catholic Schools' policy, a school principal would be able to implement a distributed leadership approach if they maintain a shared vision that focuses

on student success. Furthermore, the Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020) expects school-based leaders to foster effective relationships. For distributed leadership to be implemented successfully, communication, relationship, and trust needs to be established and maintained with all members of the leadership team. This includes teachers, support staff, and in some cases parents. Government and/or school divisions may provide school-based leaders with directives and initiatives for student learning. As per the Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020) and Edmonton Catholic School Divisions' Administrative Procedure 430 (2022), school principals need to ensure students have access to quality teaching and that there are opportunities for improving leadership, teaching, and learning. Having a distributed leadership approach for district or provincial pedagogical and curricular initiatives is a great way to support leadership qualities in the teachers at each site. Teachers can take on a greater leadership role in an area of interest or strength while still learning from fellow colleagues in other areas.

Lewis (2013) states that "effective teams demonstrate both process and behavior to address the task and relationship as they work together" (p. 13). Formal school leaders need to have a thorough understanding of the needs of the school, the steps teams undertake when given a task, and how communication and team dynamics affect the completion of the task.

School Climate

Isaksen (2007) defines climate as "the perceived and recurring patterns of behavior, attitudes, and feelings that characterize life in the organization" (p.456). When talking about a school's climate, people look towards the members of that community and the school itself to understand the conditions and feelings taking place. The literature

Lewis (2013) found regarding school culture notes the significant influence that culture plays in the success of teacher leadership and instructional initiatives because leaders who genuinely believe in their colleague's abilities and expertise will create a positive climate within the school that is built on trust and collaboration. In Wright's (2008) research a connection between distributed leadership and school improvement in the form of healthy relationships and improved school culture was reported by interviewees. Healthy relationships take place when trust is established and maintained. DeFlaminis (2016) recognizes the importance of trust in maintaining a positive school climate, underscoring the need for relational trust within social exchanges. Positive school culture comes from staff feeling supported, students being engaged in their learning and getting extra support when needed, and parents who are engaged in two-way communication about what is taking place in the school and classrooms.

Research Methods

My research aimed to understand how the formal leadership team within an elementary school defined and implemented a distributed leadership approach. I employed a qualitative case study methodology with a school site and its leadership team serving as the unit of analysis (Stake, 2005). Interviews with school staff were designed with a basic interpretive approach in mind, which in turn was grounded in a constructivist epistemology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). I used the collected data to see how it compared to the existing research in distributed leadership as there was limited research on this topic in Alberta urban Catholic schools. I worked with my school division, Edmonton Catholic School Division, to develop a list of potential participant sites based on a set of criteria which included sites that have had a formal leadership team who have

worked together for more than two years, same number of administrators, relatively

similar school size, and comparable demographics. The rationale was to select schools

that are roughly similar so that differences between the leadership teams can be compared

more easily. Furthermore, the potential participants could not include administrators I

have worked for or school sites I have worked at. For this research the names of both

school sites and the individual administrators have been changed.

Site A: Marissa Heights is an elementary school located in South Edmonton with a

population of 370 students. The students come from primarily middle-class

socioeconomic families and represent a diverse population where almost half of the

students are English Language Learners. They have 36 staff members working to support

the students and their varying needs. Parent support is positive in the community. The

principal, Connor, and assistant principal, Alice, are in their third year of working

together. Both Connor and Alice have been with the school division for over twenty

years, and in administrative roles for almost half of that.

Site B: Sheila Taylor is a school located in South Edmonton that offers a bilingual

language program. The student population at this school is diverse, with numerous

English Language Learners. The school has 35 staff members who support all students.

At Sheila Taylor, the parent community is very supportive. Lisa, the principal, and Tracy,

the assistant principal are in their fourth year together. Lisa and Tracy have been with the

school division for over fifteen years. Lisa has been an administrator for just over ten

years, and Tracy for six.

The focus of the interviews was to gather information that demonstrated leaders'

understanding of distributed leadership, to what extent it was implemented at the school

site, and any perceived impacts this approach had on members of the school community. Key understandings are tested against the assumption that distributed leadership "will bring about beneficial effects that would not occur with singular leadership" (Bush & Glover, 2014, p.560). Interviews took place one-on-one using a semi-structured format with open-ended questions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) as this allowed the participants to openly share their perspectives and understandings of the topic being presented. The interviews were recorded and took approximately 60-90 minutes each.

The audio data was automatically transcribed using Otter.ai software, followed by the researcher's manual review and corrections to the automatically generated transcript. The transcripts were coded using a constant comparative strategy (Mertens, 2010). Engaging in the first and second cycles of coding allowed themes to emerge and be analyzed for deeper meaning (Miles et al., 2014). In the first cycle, coding was organized by answering the research questions within an interview guide that the researcher created. During the second cycle of coding, the researcher looked for consistencies and contradictions across the interviewees, and any new themes that emerged. Participants were invited to review their transcripts to verify the accuracy and remove any details they did not wish to include in the study (Mertens, 2010). Finally, I debriefed with my supervisor throughout the analysis to discuss the findings, determine further coding was needed, and explore any biases in my own thinking that may have emerged.

Findings

Principals' Definition of Distributed Leadership

The administrators in the interviews struggled to clearly define distributed leadership. Connor described, "it's shared; there is kind of a collective". The consensus of the participant was that all staff members in the school community are a vital part to the success of distributed leadership. "This is how I look at it, we're all leaders in our building," stated Lisa. The participants understood that all staff members have strengths which need to be tapped into. Tracy stated, "I see the value of making sure you target certain people for certain jobs, leadership roles or tasks, because you've gotten to know that is their strength".

Formal leadership roles often have a defined list of responsibilities and as Alice described, "there are certain things that fall within the principal's portfolio". Through a distributed leadership model, the division of labour between leader and followers can be negotiated (Gunter et al., 2013) regarding who completes the tasks at hand based on the strengths or interests of each person. In his interview, Connor mentioned, "distributed leadership is realizing what you are good at and what other people are good at and letting them lead in those situations, letting them in and being okay with it".

Although clearly defining distributed leadership was a challenge for the participants, all respondents suggested in one way or another that social relationships and interactions in the organization are critical components when implementing distributed leadership. This affirms the research that defines distributed leadership. Cherkowski & Brown (2013) note that formal leaders who use a distributed leadership approach must foster a culture of respect and trust when establishing and maintaining professional

relationships. The school leaders that were interviewed recognized the importance of fostering relationships amongst colleagues to be able to effectively distribute leadership at the site.

Strategies Used to Implement Distributed Leadership

Implementing distributed leadership at these two sites were approached similarly. Connor, one of the principals, stated, "sometimes it is just sitting down at the beginning of the school year and going okay, what do you want to do and what do you want to accomplish"? In each site, communication between the administrators was the starting point as they needed to understand one another's strengths, interests, and goals. Assistant Principal, Tracy, also illustrated this early communication strategy, stating that her lead administrator, "was amazing. She slowly got to know what I could do and then gave me more and more responsibilities".

Following their initial goal setting meetings, formal leaders then approached staff. For Lisa this was accomplished "when they share their growth plan, then you can really have those conversations. We do one on one meetings". At Connor's site they "asked people to pick one [district initiative] they wanted to focus on, and we made little groups".

In some of the research literature, formal leaders along with the leadership team developed a shared vision for the school as a first step in implementing distributed leadership (Cherkowski & Brown, 2013; Lewis, 2013). The school leaders who were interviewed for this research study did not discuss if or how they developed a shared school vision, rather they focused more on the strategy or approach taken to engage their staff in implementing school division initiatives and tasks. Formal administrators who are

new to a school must first listen and engage in dialogue then take this feedback when working with colleagues to develop a shared vision and direction.

Limiting Factors for Implementing Distributed Leadership

The formal leadership teams identified staff readiness and time as the two most significant barriers to implementing distributed leadership effectively. These administrators recognize that staff members are in different places within their careers and have different degrees of willingness when it comes to implementing initiatives for student learning. "I find sometimes it could just be staff, as in teachers or support staff, that may not want to get behind or lead," observed Connor. Furthermore, teachers have the same amount of time but more demands than in previous times. Support staff do not have the same contract hours as teachers and therefore having time to meet with teachers to discuss the needs of students along with the support required for their success is often challenging. As an assistant principal, Tracy will "go into the class. I'll give you half an hour to meet with your Educational Assistant".

The time that a formal leadership team has together at a school site can impact their ability to effectively implement distributed leadership within a school. Based on my experience in the school division, school leaders usually stay at a site between three to five years before being moved to another school. Lisa indicated, "three to five years is what I understand is kind of the timeframe for an administrator. There are administrators that are at schools less time, and there are administrators at a school more time".

Funding came up as another barrier when implementing distributed leadership. Staff members who are taking on new leadership capacities require professional

development, which costs money itself for fees, tuition, and travel. Additionally, schools incur the cost of a substitute teacher to cover the teacher's classroom.

Time and funding as limiting factors were affirmed with the research literature. First, school leaders who seek effective teamwork and collaboration when implementing a distributed leadership model recognize the importance of providing adequate time to all members of the team (Bush & Glover, 2012; Cherkowski & Brown, 2013). Second, using funding in the most effective way is crucial for school leaders. The needs of the school and instructional focus should inform funding decisions specifically as it relates to staffing and resources (DeFlaminis, 2016). These two limiting factors place undue pressure on administrators and school staff as they try to deliver effective instruction and engaging learning opportunities for students.

Effects of Distributed Leadership in Catholic Elementary Schools

All four administrators interviewed reported that distributed leadership had positive effects at their site. "The whole purpose is you're looking to do things to make that positive change in your school," explained Connor. McKeever (2003) believes a continuous improvement process must focus on creating cultural norms to support student achievement. This process was inferred to be taking place at both school sites as Alice reported, "it's having the common goal of we're there for the kids so how are we going to do what we need to do to get this done because it needs to benefit children".

A team approach leads staff to interact in different ways, building relational trust (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016). According to interviewees, teachers were happier because they were supported, trusted, and empowered as professionals. Alice highlighted this point when saying, "there's buy-in, ownership, and passion, because you are doing

something that you want to do, your voice is being heard, you're making an impact, and you're appreciated." Furthermore, teachers were able to focus on only one or two tasks rather than multiple tasks because the initiatives were spread-out over-all staff members and each member was able to share what they learned, building their capacity as leaders.

School staff not only use instructional strategies to support student learning, but prior to the global pandemic, staff also ran extracurricular activities for students such as intramurals or clubs. Situations that are out of a person's control can make it challenging to see the positive impacts that distributed leadership has on the greater school community. "The bigger impact [of distributed leadership] was the relationships with the kids and with the parents," noted Connor. Connecting with parents regularly is important to understand the impact leadership is having in the school and on their children. Formal school leaders who value all members of the school community will seek to engage parents, and students when appropriate, on a regular basis. "I can answer those questions [from the division] and give you everything that we do, but do our parents know everything we do? And they do," expressed Lisa.

A distributed leadership approach that seeks out the strengths in others, provides manageable tasks, and allows for on-going dialogue will have a positive impact on staff, which then has a meaningful impact on students and parents. Alice noted, "everybody wants to be appreciated and it just really pumped up the morale for the staff. Students are more involved, parents are happier, and it just all trickles". The interviewees' responses affirmed that leaders who implemented a distributed leadership approach have had positive effects on school climate. Along with the responses from the school leader, my personal experiences triangulate the findings from the research literature.

Key Learnings

The two sets of formal leadership teams saw a distributed leadership model as a collective, shared approach where all staff members contributed to improving student learning, fostering a positive sense of community, and actively worked on building leadership capacity within their staff. "In all highly effective teams, the importance of relationships developed amongst the team appeared to drive the dedication to the task" (Lewis, 2013, p.158). The four administrators in this research study highlighted the importance of building a relationship with their colleagues to understand the strengths, interests, and vision of all members.

Similar research with more sites within the Edmonton Catholic School Division would provide further information about how distributed leadership is implemented, and the benefits perceived by all members of a school community. It was noted in the interviews that the administrators are moved between school sites generally every three to five years, however that can vary for any number of reasons. By having research data to show how formal school leaders effectively implement distributed leadership, the school division will understand the benefits of keeping an administrative team together for a longer period of time. These benefits include building capacity in staff and supporting students' learning success.

Further study regarding how formal school leaders work to determine a vision for the school community would be beneficial, especially to support new school leaders. This shared vision is important for moving forward with successful distributed leadership as the principal or formal leadership team can effectively step back and know that all staff

are able to move forward in a unified vision (Cherkowski & Brown, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2019).

Although the interviewees stated some barriers that school leaders face when implementing distributed leadership, they did not discuss conflicts or micropolitics that can arise and how they would navigate this to a resolution. Formal school leaders have a level of authority, but "how they exercised that authority" (Firestone, 2005, p.37) affects the micropolitics within the school. When conflicts arise and leaders do not engage in adequately resolving the conflict, staff feel alienated and belittled. Both formal and informal school leadership includes management and micropolitics (Flessa, 2009) therefore leadership who desire to implement a distributed leadership approach effectively need to understand management and micropolitics on a deeper level.

The formal school leaders participated in numerous types of leadership training over the course of their career with the Edmonton Catholic School Division. Lewis (2013) notes "organizational leaders need to develop and educate school principals on the most beneficial ways to progress a team through the matrix of tasks and relationships (p.157)". The Division's leadership training courses provide administrators with the understanding of how to support their staff and lead effectively within their sites. Furthermore, experienced administrators in Edmonton Catholics Schools can sign up to be a mentor for new principals and assistant principals. Going forward, pairing a newer administrator with a more experienced administrator will allow for support and mentorship, especially when it comes to providing guidance on how to support and lead staff effectively.

Limitations

The research study sought to understand how formal school leaders in an urban Catholic elementary school implement distributed leadership and the perceived impacts it has within the school community. The study had some limitations which hindered me from exploring distributed leadership to the depth I would have liked. First, being unable to investigate more at the district level through interviews narrowed the understanding of how often and why school leadership teams change. Second, due to the short window of time for this research study, my sample size was small. Third, as I only completed interviews individually, I was unable to investigate the dynamics between school leaders on the team. Furthermore, due to the global pandemic, I was unable to attend in-person to observe the dynamics across the leadership teams and their staff. Finally, as noted in the previous section, setting a vision (and the potential politics of this) is an important aspect that I was unable to get much data on.

Conclusion

In this study the administrators' responses provided insight as to how they lead through a distributed approach, reiterating the importance of building relationships built on trust and communication. Furthermore, the school leaders in this study shared the positive impact that a distributed leadership model has on the members of their school's community.

A distributed leadership model is an effective approach for formal leaders who value all members of their school communities. A leader who implements a distributed

model effectively will look to the strengths of everyone, engage in dialogue to understand

the individual's goals, and work together to move forward effectively.

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Appendix A: Participant Information Letter

Email Text Invitation

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Masters Degree Research Project About Distributed Leadership

Dear School Leader,

You are being invited to participate in a research study about how school leaders understand and try to implement distributed leadership.

I would like to invite you to participate by agreeing to a 60-90 minute individual interview. In the interview, we will discuss the role of distributed leadership in your school and the Edmonton Catholic School District. I will be conducting these interviews between January 4 th, 2022 and February 1st, 2022.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please review the enclosed letter. It explains the nature of the research, along with potential risks and benefits to participation. You may sign the letter at any time in advance of participating in the interview. You may also contact me or my supervisor if you have any questions before agreeing to participate in the research.

Your participation in this research will assist my learning as a Master's degree student at Concordia University of Edmonton, and may benefit your school as well. You will have an opportunity to explore and reflect on leadership practices in your school, and in the Edmonton Catholic School district.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. I look forward to hearing from you. Once you respond, we will schedule an interview at a time that is convenient for you. We may use Zoom, Google Meet or telephone, according to your preference.

Sincerely,

Kyla Prystupa

Edmonton Catholic Teacher

Master of Education Student, Concordia University of Edmonton

kprystup@student.concordia.ab.ca

Appendix B: Research Consent Form

Dear School Leader,

You are being invited to participate in a research study about how school leaders understand and try to implement distributed leadership. Please read this consent form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

Study Name:

Implementing Distributed Leadership within an Elementary School

Researcher:

My name is Kyla Prystupa. I am a practicing teacher in the Edmonton Catholic School Division, and a Master of Education Student at Concordia University of Edmonton, If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact Kyla Prystupa by email at kprystup@student.concordia.ab.ca or by phone at 780-718-1493.

My research supervisor is Dr. Laura Servage. She may be reached at laura.servage@concordia.ab.ca, or by phone at 437-213-7780.

Alternatively, you can contact Edgar Schmidt, Dean of the Faculty of Education at Concordia University of Edmonton. Edgar can be reached by phone at 780-479-9277 or email at edgar.schmidt@concordia.ab.ca.

Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this research is to understand how distributed leadership is defined and implemented within a Catholic elementary school. I would like to invite you to participate in an individual interview in which we will explore leadership within the school district, leadership at your specific school site, and the perceived impacts of leadership.

Procedures:

Should you agree to an interview, this will be one-on-one and will take place off school property, either face to face or by video conference through Zoom or Google Meet. Your colleagues will not know that you are participating in a research project unless you choose to share this. In this way, your privacy is assured. The interview will be recorded and take 60-90 minutes. After the interview is complete, I will transcribe it and provide you with the opportunity to review a digital copy of the transcript. From there you can let me know if there is any information you would like removed or changed.

Risks and Discomforts:

A potential risk is that you and/or your school may be identifiable. To mitigate this risk, your data will be anonymized. Your name, others' names and the name of the school will be changed to pseudonyms, and other potential identifying information, including the neighbourhood location of your school, will be altered as necessary to preserve anonymity.

We do not foresee any other risks or discomfort from your participation in the research.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You:

You will benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your leadership practice and recognize the strengths as well as effective strategies you have as a leader. The school district will benefit from this research by understanding how distributed leadership can unfold effectively in elementary schools.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer any questions you are uncomfortable with during the interview. You will also have the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview, and to remove or change details at that time. You may withdraw from the study for up to six weeks after the date of our interview. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the Edmonton Catholic School Division.

Confidentiality, Storage and Use of Data:

The information from the audio recording gathered during the interview will be kept confidential. Once the interview has been completed I will use the transcription software, Otter.ai. To minimize risks with the transcription software, transcripts will be deleted from the Otter website once they have been completed, and then be stored in encrypted local files. You will also be offered the opportunity to decline use of the Otter.ai service, in which case I, the researcher, will manually transcribe the files.

There will be no printing or physical copies of data kept from the interview following the review and approval of the transcripts by the participants as they will be destroyed at this time. The audio data and transcripts will be an encrypted file on my, the researcher's, computer. I and my supervisor, Dr. Laura Servage, will have access to this information and participants will have access only to a copy of their respective digital transcript. The encrypted files will be kept until June 1, 2023, at which point it will be permanently deleted.

Findings from this study will be used to complete my Masters thesis, which will be published on the Concordia University of Edmonton website. Findings may also be shared at academic conferences.

Confirmation of Agreement:

I, _____, consent to participate in *Implementing Distributed Leadership in an Elementary School* conducted by *Kyla Prystupa*. I acknowledge that I have read the information and consent letter

I consent to the following:

To participate in an individual 60-90 minute interview, and have it recorded. _____

To have my interview transcribed using Otter.ai transcription software. _____

I understand that:

I will have an opportunity to review my transcript and make changes ____

I may withdraw in full or in part from the study for up to six weeks from the date of our interview. ____

My data will only be viewed by the researcher, Kyla Prystupa, and her supervisor, Dr. Laura Servage.____

I will receive a copy of this agreement for my records.

Name   of   Participant   (please   print)

_____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

 Name of Researcher (please print): Kyla Prystupa

Signature of Researcher: Kyla Prystupa

Date _____

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. **Introduction and Background**

Tell me about your work experience as an educator and administrator.

How long were you teaching before you became an administrator?

How long have you been an administrator with Edmonton Catholic Schools?

Were you an administrator with another school district, if so, for how long?

Please explain your understanding of leadership teams within Edmonton Catholic Schools.

How often do leadership teams change in this school division?

What are some potential explanations for changes in school based leadership teams?

Tell me about your leadership team.

How long have you worked together as a team?

How do you divide your responsibilities?

2. **Understanding of DL**

Please explain what distributed leadership means to you.

How did you come to this definition?

3. Implementation

Tell me about the extent to which distributed leadership is taking place in this school.

How is the leadership team implementing distributed leadership here?

4. Barriers and Enablement

Please explain the barriers that the leadership team face when implementing distributed leadership.

How did you, and the team, overcome these barriers?

5. Perceived Impacts on school community

Tell me about the changes that have occurred because of distributed leadership.

What impact, if any, did it have on staff?

What impact, if any, did it have on students?

What impact, if any, did it have on families?