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# Collaborative leadership as a necessary condition for successful curriculum implementation

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## Abstract

Schools are essentially concerned with people and the development of knowledge and skills. Schools are also tasked with being relevant in contemporary society, for the present and for the future. Like any other societal institution, schools require sound leadership that is apposite for the ‘business’ of teaching and learning. Even as school leadership structures are historically hierarchical in nature, more modern trends suggest a move away from rigid command leadership approaches to leadership styles that are more participative and collaborative in nature. Woven within the fabric organisation structure and relevance, is the premise that leadership exists in a form that requires further consideration and examination. Against this backdrop of the changing contexts of leadership, the authors examine the processes, structures and human interventions that lead to the successful curriculum implementation in the absence of the school principal. We argue that, while there are certain desirable conditions required, it is indeed possible for curricula to be implemented successfully in situations where the school principal is absent. We present rich texts from qualitative interview data and discuss three findings from this inquiry.

## Introduction

Is successful curriculum implementation at all possible in the absence of the school principal; and if so, what does this say about the conceptualisation of leadership as it is commonly known? In this article we illuminate successful curriculum implementation in spite of the absence of a school principal and argue that curriculum can indeed be successfully implemented in a collaborate culture. We understand that curriculum implementation is influenced by two significant factors. The first relates to curriculum implementation as change and the second indicates that collaborative leadership is often argued as an essential aspect of dealing with this change and the implementation of the curriculum.

Effective collaborative leadership is frequently presented as a fundamental feature for successful and sustained functioning of an organisation as well as an important requirement for dealing with change. This holds true for

commercial organisations, organs of the state and most certainly for schools. One such an example, the ‘National College for School Leadership in England’, illustrates that British education authorities recognised the need for leadership as part of their school improvement programme. Such leadership makes a difference and it can play a significant role in the success of a school. Conversely, poor leadership or the lack of leadership skills can adversely affect the entire process of teaching and learning as well as the development of a positive school culture. Fullan (2004, p.16) appropriately cautions, “only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment, can implement the reform that leads to sustainable improvement in student achievement”.

Even though we fully appreciate and accept the vital role that leadership plays, for the purpose of this article we examine and report on the structures, processes and human interventions that lead to the successful implementation of the curriculum, in the absence of the leader, here the school principal. In the next section we contextualise the changing nature of school leadership drawing on national and international thinking.

Conceptual framework for school leadership in the absence of the principal  
In recent years, a shift has occurred in the understanding of best leadership practice in schools. For the purpose of this inquiry we focused on five broad themes of this changing perspective. The first theme suggests that a school is similar to any other business or commercial endeavour and therefore similar models, approaches and leadership styles can be imported. Here practitioners and school leaders alike place confidence on the premise that this practice would produce successful schools and high levels of learning and achievement. Southworth (2005) challenges this line of thinking and argues that school leadership is quite different from leadership in other organisations. The distinguishing factor is that school leaders have the responsibility to create and lead an environment that enhances and supports learning. He argues also that, “it is precisely this focus on students’ development, which makes school leadership distinctive and different from other forms of leadership” (*ibid.*, p.75). Furthermore, effective school leadership is synonymous with leadership that effectively manages change. Harris, Day, Hopkins, Hargreaves and Chapman (2005, p.11) note that “the current focus on leadership stems from the need to cope with discontinuous and accelerating change”. This is particularly relevant within the current South African educational milieu, which could be regarded as a society in which the virtues of democracy, transparency, openness, participation and consultation are placed in high regard. Principals who are able to manage change in their schools effectively can be characterised as being transformative rather than transactional,

invitational rather than autocratic and empowering rather than controlling (Harris, *et al.*, 2005).

The second theme that addresses best leadership practice in schools relates to the role of principal as curriculum leader. Lambert (2002, p.37) explains that “the days of the principal as lone educational leader are over”. She elaborates that the “old model of formal, one person leadership leaves substantial talents of teachers largely untapped” (*ibid.*, p.37). As such therefore, curriculum leadership should not lie solely with the principal, but teachers should be directly involved and responsible for driving educational processes, including curriculum development, and for providing leadership at various levels within the school structure. Also, teachers have to lead the process of curriculum implementation as well as curriculum development. The responsibilities of the principal in this regard lie in providing a suitable and supportive pedagogic environment where curricula can be effectively and efficiently implemented. A desirable characteristic that emerges from such a situation, in which the principal considers himself as the curriculum leader, is when the role of curriculum leadership is distributed amongst teachers at different levels in the school. We support Manthey’s (2004, p.13) assertion that “leadership that matters is leadership that is sustained, which requires that it is distributed to others”. This proposes that leadership is in fact most powerful when it is shared with others (*ibid.*). Day, Hall, Gammage and Coles (1993) fittingly refer to ‘enabling leadership’ in discussing curriculum leadership. They comment that all teachers within a school community should be involved in curriculum development and implementation and not just those who have been assigned with such tasks. Appropriately, the prime task of the curriculum leader is viewed as one of stimulating staff initiatives and encouraging creative thinking around curriculum matters. This proposes that curriculum leaders enable teachers to actively participate in the process of curriculum implementation and development (Day, *et al.*, 1993).

The third theme speaks to sustainable leadership, which implies a shift from the single charismatic leader, who although exerting immediate influence, is evanescent (Hargreaves, 2005). Sustainable leadership lasts in that it “secures success over time”. It is also patient in that “it defers gratification instead of seeking instant results” (*ibid.*, pp.185–186). A credible measure of sustainable leadership practice can only be assessed once the leader has left the organisation. Appropriately, Manthey (2004) explains that the success of leaders with regard to student learning cannot be measured by their impact on student learning at the end of their tenure, but rather by the number of quality leaders that remain at the school when they leave. In the act of developing sustainable leadership, the principal is required to play a carefully balanced

and thoughtfully executive role. The principal's role includes assuming the role of instructional leader as well as empowering teachers to be and become collaborative leaders themselves. By adopting a collaborative leadership style, the principal is still regarded as the instructional leader, with an added dimension. Instructional leadership is distributed and disseminated to teachers who are empowered to be instructional leaders in their own right. The task of the instructional leadership and curriculum implementation is therefore a shared one, and one that can develop sustainability in instructional leadership.

The fourth theme speaks to the absence of the school principal in a variety of scenarios. The first scenario is where there is no principal at all, which was the focus of this inquiry. In a report compiled by O'Brien, Murphy and Draper (2003, p.46) it was explained that in approximately one third of cases studied, the situation of permanent absent leadership arose from "retirement, resignation and, a much smaller third cause, promotion". The second scenario presents as a situation where there is physically a principal in the position, but his/her leadership style is so far removed from the daily processes of the school that in all practical terms, s/he may be regarded as absent. The third scenario is similar to the second; the principal is so far removed in interest and leadership in matters of teaching and learning, that they may be regarded as absent with regard curriculum implementation. Absent leadership, therefore, may suggest that there is no leadership at all. It may also suggest that, in spite of a leader being present, there is still no real evidence of leadership. Also, the absence of a leader does not necessarily imply that there is no leadership at all in the school. Leadership activities may be present at different levels of the organisation, the school.

The fifth and last theme addresses leadership style and collaborative leadership. We draw a distinction between leadership style and leadership approach. While commonalities certainly exist, we suggest that a leadership approach differs from a leadership style in that it seeks to create an environment in which teaching and learning can occur most effectively. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive; the leadership style gives rise to the creation of an environment, which is conducive to successful curriculum implementation, whereas the leadership approach is that which creates a climate, ideally a collaborative culture that facilitates successful curriculum implementation and school improvement. Bearing in mind that curriculum implementation is essentially associated with educational change, the value of the creation of a school climate and school culture that is conducive for successful implementation of curriculum and the ability to deal with change, cannot be over emphasised. Collaborative cultures are characterised by their ability to deal with change and their ability to overcome the failures and

pitfalls associated with the process of change. In the context of an absent school principal, the approach towards change and the ability to cope with change is often attributed to the attitude and personality of the individual person. These attitudes are often shaped by the approach to leadership and the creation of a school culture that facilitates and supports the process of change.

To this end, we argue that collaborate leadership is a precondition for the creation of a collaborative culture. A central role that the collaborative leader plays is to create an environment where there is a shared vision. This involves joint strategies and goes beyond the purview of any individual or group of individuals. Shared vision is a “process that leads to the establishing of common ground” (Chrislip, 2002, p.109). This directs a group of people working together through the creation of a shared vision (Chrislip, 2002). Vandal (2006, p.55) adds that school leaders must not regard teachers as “troops to be deployed but rather as colleagues in service of children”. He maintains that, “the strongest vision for action is one that is shared”. Importantly, is that this ‘shared vision’ extends further than a mere consideration for the work that must be completed. Shared vision must also include the type of working environment that is strived for. This can be referred to as the work ‘culture’.

There are essentially four viewpoints of characteristics of collaborative leadership. The first, views collaborative leadership as a “function performed and not a position held by one” (Marshall, 1995, p.68). The outcome of such a point of view is that everybody in the organisation is a leader and leadership is regarded as situational. Leadership therefore depends on circumstances and not on position or authority. The second view deals with the role of power and, paradoxically, powerlessness. Pascarella, (1984) argues for greater participation and power sharing, as opposed to accumulation of power. Realising the importance of power and its link to self esteem, he adds that “participative management is really about people and that it begins with nurturing their self esteem” (Pascarella, 1984, p.139). The response to true leadership is based then on the manner in which educational leaders deal with the issue of power. Power in the educational sphere is explicated by Blasé and Blasé (1996, p.2): “principals who embrace teacher professionalism, do more than share power, they multiply it”.

The third and fourth views on collaborative leadership are closely linked in that they deal with the mutual benefit of working together and the notion that successful collaborative leadership depends on the quality of the relationships. The mutual benefit of working together, as argued by Chrislip (2002) is more than the sharing of knowledge and information. In fact the relationship allows

each party to achieve its own goals. Mature, professional and high quality interpersonal relationships are imperative if the shared vision is to be made real. In a context where collaborative leadership is practiced, a collaborative culture can emerge and flourish. Notably, relationships that are reciprocal in nature, give rise to the creation of a collaborative culture. Furthermore, Chrislip (2002) contends that joint decision making in reciprocal relationships leads to coherence, which in turn leads to action. Collaborative cultures are thus characterised by inclusiveness. Emanating from inclusiveness is the value of relationships, the role which Rubin (2002) regards as being central to collaborative cultures. He refers to them as “relationships that bind” (*ibid.*, p.17). The concept of collaborative leadership and the creating of a collaborative culture are presented as a leadership approach that will most likely support and facilitate the effective implementation of curricula. Collaborative leadership creates a climate that serves as a platform for successful curriculum implementation. According to Sergiovanni (2004, p.49) this approach leads to the formation of a “collaborative culture”, where each person must view their specific role as part of a “reciprocal relationship that spells out mutual obligations” (*ibid.*, p.49). In such a relationship a balance between individual autonomy and collaborative work are achieved.

## Research design and methodology

The design type or the design genre (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit, 2004) of this inquiry is a qualitative case study of a private secondary school. This design is governed by fitness for purpose, which means relating the research questions to data and selecting appropriate tools and procedures for answering of the research question. This inquiry embraced an “interpretative, naturalistic approach” to its subject matter and this translated to studying and interpreting phenomena in natural settings by examining the meanings that people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, pp.22–25).

Six participants were purposively selected, the acting principal, the deputy principal, a housemaster, and three experienced teachers. These participants were members of staff at the research site (the school) during the time when the phenomenon of ‘absent principal’ was evident. The research site was a school in a well established urban area. It has a long and proud history of excellence on the sports field as well as in the classroom. In this school, not only was the new curriculum successfully implemented, but this was achieved in the absence of the principal.

The process of data collection took place at a school, which Patton (1990, p.169) would regard as an “information rich site”. The site was well suited for the research as it had experienced the phenomenon of an absent principal for approximately nine months. It was during this time that the new curriculum (Revised National Curriculum Statement Grade 8 and 9, 2002) was implemented and developed. Also, the preparation for the implementation of the Further Education and Training Curriculum was undertaken (National Curriculum Statement Grade 10–12, 2003).

We used individual semi-structured interviews with convergent and divergent questions. Interview questions related to management issues, teaching and learning aspects, learner and parent matters, and follow-up questions as they occurred in the various conversations. Together with these face-to-face interviews, we also conducted dyad interviews, a technique in which the responses of two participants are stimulated through the questions posed. The interviewer (one of the researchers) encouraged the participants not only to respond directly to the questions posed, but also to discuss and debate aspects of the phenomenon between themselves. It was through this interaction with each other (the two interviewees) that understanding and meaning of the phenomenon of the absent principal and curriculum implementation was gleaned.

Data were analysed for content, using colour coding. To this end, interview data were audio taped, with the necessary consent, confidentiality and anonymity, including ethical clearance from the University. These data were transcribed and inductively analysed, fittingly for semi-structured and dyad interview data, without any pre-coding. Furthermore, we used the Grounded Theory approach to qualitative data analysis according to Charmaz (2006), open, axial and selective coding, building categories, which we constructed into content themes or categories of the empirical data. The identification of data themes was as a result of placing similar units of meaning into categories and sub-categories. During the analysis we also used a number of memos, personal, methodological as well as theoretical memos (Charmaz, 2006). Methodological norms such as trustworthiness of the inquiry in terms of the credibility of the findings were ensured through prolonged engagement in the research setting, together with member checking of the interview data. Interpreted findings of this inquiry, which are collaborative leadership, power and authority, and school culture could possibly be transferred to similar school contexts.

## Collaborative leadership

As with any organisation or situation where a group of people are led, the leader, by virtue of the authorised position, competence or style injects into the 'space' certain energy. This creates the atmosphere in which people work and take on their professional duties and responsibilities. In our particular inquiry where there was an absent school principal, teachers at different levels of the organisation were required to assume certain roles. Duties and responsibilities were delegated to a number of teachers who assumed roles of leadership in order to ensure the efficient daily functioning of the school and the successful implementation of the curriculum. These roles were often new and different to their usual tasks and responsibilities. What was required of teachers was a high level of understanding and appreciation of the overall goal, vision and purpose to ensure successful implementation of the new curriculum; in sum, a shared and common understanding of what was at stake in the wake of absent leadership. It is for this reason that Lambert (2002, p.37) comments that a principal is no longer a "lone educational leader". In fact the act of leadership is not the sole domain or responsibility of the principal. Here Murphy and Seashore Louis (1994) explore the evolution in educational leadership, explaining a paradigmatic cognitive shift from a traditional view of a principal as the expert, to a more modern understanding of the principal as supporter and facilitator of educational processes. Many effective principals delegate power and authority to staff members at different levels of the organisation, which implies that in situations where there is an absent principal, there may be an absent school principal, but not necessarily absence of leadership. Noteworthy for this inquiry therefore, is that collaborative leadership in general and instructional leadership in particular, is an activity that can be undertaken by teachers at different levels in the organisation. Despite the absence of the principal, who is regarded as the leader of the school, we learnt in this inquiry, rather paradoxically, that collaborative leadership was the precise reason for the efficient daily functioning of the school and the effective implementation of the curriculum.

## Power and authority

The presence or absence of power and authority are important factors for successful and effective leadership. This inquiry revealed that where the school principal was absent, the existence and location of power and authority was not clearly defined. Often, the absence of the leadership does, however, suggest that if an individual assumes a leadership role, often s/he possibly lacks the necessary skills, competences, power and authority to successfully



fulfil the requirements of the said role. While competencies and skills may be learned and acquired, the same may not always be true for power and authority. When a school principal is absent, some confusion may exist with regard to the amount and the extent of the delegated authority of the acting principal. Some staff are indeed able to cultivate power and authority. By employing leadership techniques that are participative, people centred and sincere, sufficient authority can be cultivated to enable the successful daily functioning and even the flourishing implementation of new policies and curricula. In this particular case study, the deputy principal adopted certain strategies, which effectively enabled him to cultivate the necessary power and authority to successfully carry the school through the period of an absent school principal through participative leadership, a “process of involving subordinates in the decision making process” (Anthony, 1978, p.3). This not only united the staff but created a forum for discussion and joint problem solving.

## School culture

The data sourced from the empirical work provided evidence that a collaborative school culture existed at the time when the principal was absent. In addition, the responses of the participants support the main characteristics of this culture, which includes careful management of interpersonal relationships. When questioned about the factors that facilitated the running of the school and the implementation of curriculum, participant H told us that . . . *this was made possible by the quality of relationships, co-operation and communication. It all boils down to relationships and we're all working at it.* Aptly, Raffoni (2005, p.136) explains that a communication strategy such as, ‘Managing One to One’ builds interpersonal relationships. Together with the existence of clearly defined policies and procedures, it was the school culture, which created the necessary climate for the school to function on a daily operational level as well as successfully implement the new curriculum. Leading on from the above, we propose that collaboration has the power to connect people. Participant ‘O’, in the dyad interview, commented about her direct line superior during the time when the school principal was absent: *it is encouraging to know that he was supporting you and that he was there.* Then again, one cannot assume that merely establishing a collaborative school culture is sufficient in dealing with the challenges and reforms that schools face. Issues such as resources, teacher training and competency, socio-economic factors and the prevailing political climate are just some additional facets that influence successful implementation of new policies and curricula. Furthermore, Hargreaves (1994) in this context argues that although he recognises the unifying power of collaboration, he alerts to a type of

collaboration that brings about a divide amongst teachers. This occurs when teachers are separated into “insulated and often competing sub-groups within a school” (*ibid.*, p.213). This form of teacher culture is termed “balkanisation”, which occurs when teachers work neither in isolation, nor with the majority of their colleagues but rather in smaller sub-groups that exist within the larger school community (*ibid.*).

We fully recognise and accept these deliberations in identifying a positive school culture. We also acknowledge, evident from this inquiry, that the creation of a collaborative culture serves to enhance and facilitate the successful implementation of curriculum during the absence of the school principal. Moreover, collaborative cultures may enhance the potential for success in situations where leadership is frail, by facilitating the process of dealing with change and stimulating people to a common purpose and shared vision. This is particularly true when management structures of internal policies and procedures are well established, accepted and collectively understood.

## Implications for policy and practice

The findings give rise to four possible implications and suggestions for educational policy and practice. The first implication concerns sustainable school leadership, which ought to become an important consideration at the micro as well as the macro levels. In schools, principals are required to consider succession planning both in matters of school leadership and in matters of curriculum implementation. Also, continuity and smooth transition are important components of successful curriculum implementation. In effect, they serve to reduce the debilitating effects of anxiety and uncertainty that is often associated with change. Therefore, it is essential that policy makers introduce purposeful programmes that seek to train and develop future school leaders. Not only will this serve as training for future leaders in education, but it will assist to retain suitable teachers in the profession.

The second implication considers the link between policy as text and policy as practice or implemented policy. Regarding the implementation of curriculum (text to practice), the disjuncture between policy and practice is possibly the most significant hindrance to success. In order to bridge the gap between the two, we propose that policy writers and policy makers pay closer attention to the levels of proficiency and curriculum literacy of principals and teachers, which are required to implement the policy. Also, the amount of support that is required for the development of teacher guides and learner material ought to be thought about. This implies that practicing teachers and school principals

must be made part of the process of implementation if success is to be achieved.

The third implication speaks to power and authority issues. In democratically governed countries such as South Africa, highly rigid and autocratic governance structures will find it difficult to remain relevant. Relevance will be achieved when school structures mirror those virtues that are regarded as most important for an economically productive and integrated society where differences are tolerated and celebrated. Policies on school governance should therefore consider and promote leadership styles that embrace the principles of participative leadership and the development of collaborative cultures in schools. At the same time, however, education departments must delegate sufficient power and authority to school principals so that they are able to manage their schools efficiently and successfully to implement change. In conjunction with delegated power and authority, principals have a responsibility to cultivate their own power and authority through the leadership practices and approaches they employ. This is particularly true for matters of curriculum implementation and development.

The fourth and final implication involves school cultures. In this particular case study the collaborative school cultures demonstrated conducive for the development of individual talents, the management of change and the implementation of curriculum. Furthermore, this collaborative school culture transcends social cultures and serves to unify the school community and encourages the community to set differences aside and strive for a common good. In practice, this may enhance relationships, which are essential for the successful functioning of schools. It may therefore be helpful that principals and educational leaders give due consideration to the development of collaborative school cultures in their institutions.

## Some concluding thoughts

The investigation exposed how human actions and interventions took place in successful implementation of the curriculum in a context of an absent principal. It revealed appropriate findings and practical considerations for school leadership and curriculum implementation. From these findings, we are able to deduce that although there are tensions in the absence of the school principal, successful implementation of the curriculum is still possible in a context where there is clear intention to pursue a collaborative school environment, where leadership is distributed to different levels of the organisation and where power and authority are not the sole privilege of the principal. Schools are essentially concerned with people and the relationships

that exist between them. The value of sound interpersonal relationships and a guiding purpose cannot be overstated. Productive, mature and interdependent relations are the bonds that will sustain a school in a time of change and curriculum implementation.

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