'We did not put our pieces together': exploring a professional development initiative through a distributed leadership lens

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Abstract

Research in education leadership has been dominated by a traditional view of leadership which separates school leaders from teachers. More recent research calls for distributed forms of leadership where all teachers are viewed as having the capacity to lead and where power is redistributed across the organisation. This article argues for the critical importance of linking professional development initiatives to issues of leading. It explores specifically, teacher leadership in relation to a professional development initiative attended by educators from four schools in KwaZulu-Natal. It reports on qualitative data gathered from school management team (SMT) members, teachers and project leaders collected eight months after the initiative, using questionnaires, interviews and document analysis. Findings reveal that teacher leadership in terms of the implementation of the new pedagogic learning was restricted to individual classrooms with little take-up as a whole school initiative. This suggests that conditions in the schools were not always conducive to authentic collaboration, redistribution of power and teacher leadership. It further suggests the need for professional development initiatives to consciously address leadership issues and post-initiative support processes when they are conceptualised. The paper calls for a radical reconceptualisation of leadership where leadership is understood as a shared activity involving a range of social relationships with educators operating as agents for change as they work towards the goal of improved teaching and learning.

Introduction

This paper uses the concept of teacher leadership within a framework of distributed leadership theory to report on a school-based model of professional development which was explicitly designed to offer teachers opportunities to practise new pedagogic learning in an authentic teaching context before returning to their schools in order to assist with 'take-up' (after Adler, 2002) of the new learning in their classrooms and schools. In this paper I work from the premise that the central focus of education leadership is to set direction and guide the school in achieving its core function of effective teaching and learning. In order to achieve this core function, leadership must be understood as a shared process which involves working with all stakeholders in a collegial and creative way to seek out the untapped leadership potential of people and

develop this potential in a supportive environment for the betterment of the school. In other words, I am suggesting that teaching and learning is central to educational leadership. And, if this is the case, then it follows that the continuing professional development of educators is a crucial element of education leadership. So I argue that any teacher professional development initiative must be linked to issues of leading. For without addressing issues of leadership, the take-up of the new learning from any initiative is likely to remain at a personal level and become restricted to individual classrooms. It is within the framework of critical education leadership, I believe, that the take-up of new learning as a whole school initiative is more likely to occur. And this requires a culture of communication, collaboration and questioning in a distributed leadership context where teachers, whether operating as formal or informal leaders, create an environment in which to grapple with the new learning, share ideas, take calculated risks in implementing the new ideas and reflect critically on the process with a view to ongoing improvement. It is within these professional learning communities (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001) that power in the school is redistributed and where teachers can operate as leaders as they strive towards a more equitable society.

Leading through distribution

This paper works from the premise that 'leadership' is a process which works towards movement and change in an organisation while 'management' is the process which works towards the stability, preservation and maintenance of the organisation (Astin and Astin, 2000). Although distinct processes, both leadership and management are needed for an organisation to prosper (Kotter, 1990). However leadership and management processes have traditionally been located within a single individual and most often been equated with headship (Muijs and Harris, 2003; Grant, 2006). In contrast to this singular view of leadership, I believe that leaders can exist at all levels of an organisation and, in the context of this paper, a school. I particularly like Gunter's (2005) definition of education leadership because it links leadership to teaching and learning, it views leadership inclusively and it includes the capacity building of educators. Theorising from a critical perspective, she is of the opinion that

> education leadership is concerned with productive social and socialising relationships where the approach is not so much about controlling relationships through team processes but more about how the agent is connected with others in their own and others' learning. Hence it is inclusive of all, and integrated with teaching and learning.

> (Gunter, 2005, p.6)

This inclusive approach to leadership as well as its capacity building aspect is

at the heart of the distributive leadership model. As Harris and Muijs explain, "Distributed leadership concentrates on engaging expertise where it exists in the organisation rather than seeking this only through formal position or role (2005, p. 28). They go on to say that distributed leadership offers the school "multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organisation, made coherent by a common culture" (2005, p.31). For Gronn, distributed leadership is a group activity where influence is distributed throughout the organisation and where "leadership is seen as fluid and emergent rather than as a fixed phenomenon" (2000, p.324). Similarly, as Bennett, Harvey, Wise and Woods (2003, p.3) remind us, "distributed leadership is not something 'done' by an individual 'to others', rather it is an emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise".

A useful characterisation of distributed leadership is offered by Gunter (2005). She suggests that distributed leadership is currently, in research, being characterised variously as authorised, dispersed and democratic. Firstly, *authorised* distributed leadership is where tasks are distributed from the principal to others in a hierarchical system of relations where the principal has positional authority. This type of leadership can also be termed 'delegated leadership' and is evident where there are "teams, informal work groups, committees, and so on, operating within a hierarchical organisation" (Woods, 2004, p.6). Secondly, *dispersed* distributed leadership refers to a process where much of the workings of an organisation take place without the formal working of a hierarchy. It is a more autonomous, emergent process "through networks in which the private interests of the individual are promoted through group and/or collective actions, and through the community where the public good secures the defence of the individual" (Gunter, 2005, p.52). This type of leadership opens up the space for what Gronn terms "co- or partner principalships" (2003, p.151) and which centres on "spontaneity" and "intuitive working relations" (*ibid.*, pp.42–43). Dispersed distributed leadership, through sharing the leadership tasks more widely and redefining roles, shifts the power relations in the school in the achievement of the predefined organisational goals and values. Thirdly, *democratic* distributed leadership is similar to dispersed distributed leadership in that both have the potential for concertive action (Gunter, 2005) and both have an emergent character where initiative circulates widely (Woods, 2004). However, it is different in that it does not assume political neutrality, but instead engages critically with organisational values and goals (Woods, 2004) and raises questions that encompass "how meaning is developed, how experiences are understood and how we work for change" (Gunter, 2005, p.57).

Thus the concept of distributed leadership, as characterised above, is powerful in that it opens up a variety of possibilities for teachers to lead in different areas, at different times and with different purposes in their professional lives.

Teacher leadership

Implicit within the model of distributed leadership are the leadership practices of teachers. Teacher leadership, as it is known in the research literature, provides an important starting point in exploring how distributed leadership works in schools as it provides "operational images of joint agency in action and illustrates how distributed forms of leadership can be developed and enhanced to contribute to school development and improvement" (Muijs and Harris, 2003, p.440). Teacher leadership is understood and defined differently by many different writers internationally. But, as Harris and Lambert emphasise, the definitions tend to have one point in common which is that "teacher leaders are, in the first place, expert teachers, who spend the majority of their time in the classroom but take on leadership roles at times when development and innovation is needed" (2003, p.44). They further explain that teacher leadership has as its core "a focus on improving learning and is a model of leadership premised on the principles of professional collaboration, development and growth" (2003, p.43). In the South African context, the concept of teacher leadership is new and is slowly emerging as a new area of research interest (see Grant, 2005; Grant, 2006; Singh, 2007; Rajagopaul, 2007). Developing on the definition of teacher leadership by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001), I have argued that, for the South African context, teacher leadership can be understood as:

> a form of leadership beyond headship or formal position. It refers to teachers becoming aware of and taking up informal and formal leadership roles both in the classroom and beyond. It includes teachers working collaboratively with all stakeholders towards a shared and dynamic vision of their school within a culture of fairness, inclusion, mutual respect and trust.
>
> (Grant, forthcoming)

From the above brief discussion of teacher leadership it becomes apparent that, in order for teacher leadership to emerge in a school, certain structural and cultural conditions are necessary. These include, firstly, a culture of distributed leadership within the school (Grant, 2006) where teacher leaders are supported by school management and other teachers (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001); secondly, collaboration and shared decision-making within a culture of mutual trust, support and enquiry (Harris and Lambert, 2003); and, finally, support by the school's management team for teachers' professional development by providing time and resources for continuing professional

development activities and by validating the concept of teacher leadership (Muijs and Harris, 2003).

Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) call for schools to become professional learning communities where democratic and participatory decision-making exists and where teachers can thrive and make a difference through the actions they take in such school contexts. The concept of 'communities of practice' (after Wenger, 1998) is useful here to develop our understanding of this culture of collaboration and participation. People, and therefore teachers too, belong to many different communities of practice at different times in their lives, some of which are "sometimes so informal and so pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus, but for the same reasons are also quite familiar (1998, p.7). These communities are characterised by learning as social participation through mutual engagement and the negotiation of meaning where participation is a process of "being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 1998, p.4). Learning takes place, according to Lave and Wenger (1999), with the increased participation in communities of practice and it is within these professional communities, I argue, that one can find teacher leaders. However, as Ash and Persall (2000) emphasise, professional development initiatives should not be imposed by a central office but should rather be site-based and collaborative and should take cognizance of the goals of the school and the needs of individuals. To a large extent this was the case with the professional development initiative reported on in this paper. A further important point to make is that authentic teacher leadership too cannot be imposed but will emerge as teachers embrace new initiatives and innovate in a climate of trust and mutual learning (Grant, 2006). Explained slightly differently, teacher leadership is more a "form of agency where teachers are empowered to lead development work that impact directly on the quality of teaching and learning" (Harris and Lambert, 2003, p.43). It can involve teachers working for change in a school by changing classroom practice itself, by working together with other teachers on curriculum issues, by working at a whole school level to bring about change or by networking across schools (Grant, 2006). It must be emphasised at this point that pursuing teacher leadership within different communities of practice in a school does not suggest that the role of the principal becomes redundant. On the contrary, the role of those people in formal management positions is critical in enabling teacher leadership and creating opportunities for teachers to lead through the creation of a culture of collaboration and by using the strengths and talents of the individual teachers. The task of the SMT becomes one of holding "the pieces of the organisation together in a productive relationship" (Harris and Muijs, 2005, p.28).

The professional development initiative

The project which frames this paper was a result of a partnership established between the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa and Bridgewater State College (BSC), Massachusetts, USA. The goal of the project was to develop and research a replicable and effective school-based model of professional development for teachers in KwaZulu-Natal (Farrar, 2006). This model was specifically designed to overcome some of the limitations of the 'cascade model' of professional development, a model which has dominated teacher professional development in South Africa during the last decade. Said differently, the aim of the school-based model was to introduce news ways of teaching and learning to teachers in a way which, after the initiative, would have a sustained impact on the schools.

Drawing on Thomson and Staknevich, (2007), Phase One of the initiative comprised five simultaneous Professional Development courses offered in one township school (School A) in Sobantu just outside Pietermaritzburg, during the July school holiday in 2006. The initiative consisted of five simultaneous week-long teacher development courses, identified by the teachers in the initial needs analysis and defined as crisis areas by the National Department of Education. The courses offered were Emergent Literacy, Reading and Writing across the Curriculum, Mathematical Literacy, Enquiry-based Learning and Reading Assessment and Instruction. This project involved a team of 29 staff and post-graduate students from UKZN and BSC and 33 educators from a cluster of four neighbouring primary schools in the Sobantu Township. The schools were selected because of their context of previous disadvantage, because of their proximity to each other and to UKZN and because relationships between the schools already existed. All four principals enthusiastically supported the initiative and played a vital role in the project and it was they who encouraged their entire staff to attend. Of the 33 educators who attended, 12 were SMT members (including three of the four principals) and 21 were post level one teachers. Learners from all four schools, divided into grade groups, were present for the entire week at School A. The school-based model used during the initiative simulated a real life teaching – learning situation and was specifically designed to increase potential for implementation of new strategies or take-up. Formal teaching was followed by exercises for practical application of the teaching with a group of real learners. During the five-day period teachers from each school were asked to sit with their colleagues at lunch time to share what was happening in the different courses and also to discuss take-up in the school afterwards.

This paper is concerned with Phase Two of the project which explores the take-up of the pedagogical learning in the four schools eight months after the curriculum courses were delivered. It does this through the lens of distributed leadership and teacher leadership.

Research design

Research questions

During this second phase of the project, the following broad research question guided the thinking of the researchers: "What leadership roles do teachers play in the take-up of the new pedagogic learning in their classrooms and schools? A secondary question was: what are the particular leadership challenges the educators face in implementing this new pedagogic learning?

Methodology

The research was qualitative in nature and took the form of a case study of the four schools involved in the professional development initiative. The participants were the educators (SMT members and teachers) from each of the four schools who had attended the initial courses as well as the project leaders (two UKZN academics). I would like to clarify at this point that I was not involved in Phase One of the project at all. I was invited to join the project at the beginning of Phase Two because the project leaders required an 'outsider' to be a part of the research process. It was hoped that this 'outsider' status would make it easier for participants to respond more honestly to my research questions, especially in cases where their reflections were critical of the initiative.

The research design involved collecting data using a multi-method approach in an attempt to obtain rich data so as, firstly, to describe the take-up of the new learning in each of the four schools and, secondly, to reflect critically on the professional development initiative. The *first* set of data was gathered from SMT members and teachers using semi-structured questionnaires which required open-ended qualitative responses. A total of 22 out of 35 questionnaires were completed and returned, a 63% return rate. School C had a low questionnaire return rate, due mainly to internal conflict in the school resulting from a dispute between the principal and deputy principal. A *second* set of data consisted of four semi-structured, focus group interviews with the SMT members, one at each school. A *third* data set consisted of three semi-structured, focus group interviews with the teachers. We did not interview

teachers at School B because of their non-involvement in the initiative. A *fourth* set of data was gathered from a semi-structured individual interview with each of the two UKZN project leaders while the *final* data set constituted the analysis of project documentation and reports. In a further attempt to make the findings more trustworthy, I and a researcher from the original team analysed the data together.
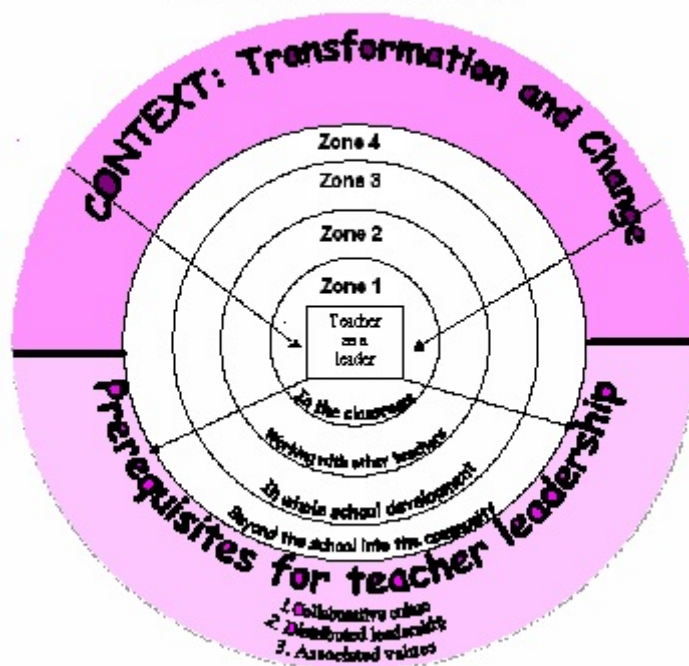
Data analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse the data in this study. Working inductively and deductively, I developed my own tool for analysis. I used the notion of 'zones' developed in my earlier research into teacher leadership in the South African context where I suggested that teachers lead in four semi-distinct areas or 'zones' (Grant, 2006). In that paper, I argued that teacher leadership exists within the classroom during the teaching and learning process. Secondly, it exists between teachers when they discuss curriculum issues and work together in order to improve their teaching and learning. Thirdly, it extends beyond separate learning area foci into whole school planning, development and decision-making. Finally it exists beyond the school boundaries into the community and between neighbouring schools. These four 'zones' of teacher leadership are broad and provide the first level of analysis in this study. Within these four zones, I then used the six roles of teacher leadership identified by Devaney (1987, in Gehrke, 1991) as the second level of analysis. The six roles (re-ordered by me to articulate more coherently with the four zones) are:

1.   Continuing to teach and improve one's own teaching
2.   Providing curriculum development knowledge
3.   Leading in-service education and assisting other teachers
4.   Participating in performance evaluation of teachers
5.   Organising and leading peer reviews of school practice
6.   Participating in school level decision-making.

The diagram that follows illustrates how the levels of *zones* and *roles* work together in the analysis of the data from the four schools.

Figure 1: Towards a model of understanding of teacher leadership in South Africa

Teacher Leadership	
First level of analysis: Four Zones	Second level of analysis: Six Roles
One In the classroom	**One**: Continuing to teach and improve one's own teaching
Two Working with other teachers and learners outside the classroom in curricular and extra-curricular activities	**Two**: Providing curriculum development knowledge
	Three: Leading in-service education and assisting other teachers
	Four: Participating in performance evaluation of teachers
Three Outside the classroom in whole school development	**Five**: Organising and leading peer reviews of school practice **Six**: Participating in school level decision-making
Four Between neighbouring schools in the community	**Two**: Providing curriculum development knowledge **Three**: Leading in-service education and assisting other teachers

Analysis: zones of implementation

In the following sections data drawn from the study reveal that, in each of the four schools, implementation of the new pedagogic learning was most strongly identified in the zone of the classroom (Zone One). Teachers also operated as leaders outside their classrooms while working informally with other teachers (Zone Two) as they grappled with the new knowledge and methods learnt. Some also operated as leaders as they networked with teachers from other schools (Zone Four). However, the take-up of the new pedagogic learning did not move into a whole school framework (Zone Three) in any of the four schools. This primarily suggests a lack of articulation between the design of the professional development initiative and issues of leadership and take-up of the new learning. It also suggests that some of the schools in the study did not have a culture of collaboration and shared decision-making with the necessary structures in place to support teachers in a process of critical reflection and inquiry in relation to the new learning. It is to the data that I now turn. This section is presented according to the *zones* where teachers lead (Grant, 2006).

Zone one: Teacher leadership in the classroom

Within the zone of the classroom (Zone One), we have examples of teachers from all four schools taking up leadership in their classrooms and experimenting with some of the new pedagogic learning from the courses in order to improve their own teaching (Role One). For example one educator was of the view that "In the learning area that you attended (at the workshop), you feel at ease to implement what you have learnt without planning because you use the previous experience from the workshop" (Educator, School C). For another her "attitude to teaching changed. I was now exposed to different approaches and teaching skills. I worked with the learners at their level and got better results" (Educator, School A). In the context of the *Enquiry-based Learning* course, the following SMT member spoke of the value of the new learning for her: "I used to teach and rush to complete the lesson I am teaching. But I noticed that now when you teach, you must go steady. You teach, you observe the learners, the things they are doing, like the structures. It was an ongoing process; step-by-step-by-step" (SMT member, School B). For another educator, the new learning was in the area of classroom management as a result of increased confidence: "I understand it (the technology content) now and love to teach. The learners like to be at school because I don't bully or scold them." (Educator, School C). In the context of the *reading courses*, one participant reflected: "I found that absolutely fascinating, and we saw how the children themselves ordered and re-ordered and they actually learnt. . ."

(SMT member, School D). Tangible learner outcomes were reported by another participant: "My learners gained much from the language experience which also enhanced their vocabulary. Because of this my learners (Grade One) were able to compose a book in their own handwriting and illustrations by September which was exhibited at our Art and Culture exhibition" (Educator, School D). In the context of the *Mathematics courses*, an educator made a connection between method appropriateness and the age of the learner: "discovery of themes and concepts (in Mathematics) is far more interesting for the little child than learning or being told by the teacher or just informed" (Educator, School D). For another participant, the new pedagogic learning had resulted in an increased professional identity and confidence in teaching: "I really moved my mindset about Maths. It wasn't a science anymore. Now I know I can play games with Maths and talk about Maths!" (SMT member, School D).

From the data we get a picture of curriculum change in the classrooms as a result of the initiative. This suggests that the structure of the professional development initiative, organised around practical sessions with children, made it possible for teachers, on their return to schools, to take on leadership roles by experimenting in their classrooms with the strategies taught during the initiative. Of course, educators were conscious of and vocal about the barriers to implementing the new learning. The two most common barriers that emerged from the data were, not surprisingly, the difficulty of large class size and the issue of second language as the language of instruction for the majority of learners. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these barriers.

Zone two: Teacher leadership through working with other teachers

There was varying take-up of teacher leadership in Zone Two in the four schools which, in most instances, was affected by a combination of school structure and teacher agency. In two of the four schools there is sufficient evidence to indicate the existence of teacher leadership in Zone Two where teachers, either in formal or informal positions of leadership, worked together with other teachers to grapple with the new pedagogic learning in order to improve their classroom practice. Within this zone of teacher leadership, I caught glimpses of the following three roles working together (Devaney, 1987 in Gehrke, 1991): providing curriculum development knowledge (Role Two), leading in-service education and assisting other teachers (Role Three) and participating in performance evaluation of teachers (Role Four).

In School A there was much evidence of teachers working together, discussing the new content and methods and attempting to implement this in their classrooms (Roles Two and Three) as the following quotation depicts: "After the winter holidays we held numerous informal group discussions, one-on-one talks and even talks to some that were unable to attend the workshop" (Educator, School A). An SMT member concurs: "Especially when they (the teachers) have a problem with a certain thing, they share ideas from that workshop. Try this and that" (SMT member, School A). At this school, the involvement of the SMT, and particularly the principal, in the courses seemed to have benefited the teachers implementing the new learning in their classrooms. This principal immersed herself in the courses and "really had a sense of how important the good teaching function is" (Project Leader 1). All the questionnaires spoke of a supportive SMT which: "encouraged us to implement what we have learnt during the workshop and they tried to organise a time for us to share ideas" (Educator, School A). Another educator adds: "Although we didn't meet formally but educators shared them during breaks and in the mornings" (Educator, School A). From the above quotations we get a feel of the encouragement and recognition that Harris (2003) argues is important for teacher leadership. The data offer us a picture of teachers providing curriculum knowledge to their colleagues through informal in-service education such as through discussion, reflection and mentoring. We get a sense of the teachers operating as leaders as they communicate with each other about their teaching in their communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Regarding the role of performance evaluation of teachers (Role Four), one SMT member reflects with honesty on her failure to observe her peers, citing time as a barrier: "As an HOD, I am a full-time teacher, There is very little chance that I get to go out and observe, and to see how its being implemented" (SMT member, School A). However, another SMT member refers to a teacher who invited one of the university academics to observe her "because I felt I have really gained" (SMT, School A).

It seems from the data that at School D there were different levels of take-up of the new learning depending largely on the learning area concerned. For example, in Foundation Phase Mathematics the following happened: "In my phase meeting there were discussions on the different methods. Arrangements and discussions were made on how to implement the ideas. . . .The Grade 2 teacher drew up work based on the workshop. She shared her ideas with other teachers in her grade" (Educator, School D). However, in the Intermediate Phase language learning area the SMT member explained that she "did not get a chance to give any feedback to the staff or to any members of the SMT" (Educator, School D). This differentiation in terms of pedagogic take-up does suggest that some teachers were offering informal in-service education by

sharing the new methods and operating as leaders in developing work plans for the grades (Roles Two and Three). In this instance we have an example of a community of practice in action, characterised by learning as a social participation through mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998).

It is not really possible to discuss how teachers at School B worked together with other teachers as no teachers from that school attended the courses and therefore could not be expected to lead this process. In terms of School C, I do not feel sufficiently confident to claim how the new pedagogic learning was introduced due to the poor return rate of questionnaires from this school. The interview data from this school is, at times, contradictory in relation to this *zone* and so I make no claims about Zone Two at School C. In summary, the data thus far point to teacher leadership roles being taken up in Zone One in all four schools and in Zone Two at two schools. We now turn to Zone Three where a very different picture emerges.

Zone three: Teacher leadership and whole school development

Leading, sharing and planning for the new pedagogic learning as a whole school initiative did not happen formally at any of the four schools. In describing the process of implementation at School A, a participant says: "We didn't actually have a formal meeting where we cascaded them on the information we received but we did meet informally in our groups and we discussed the methods used" (SMT, School A). At School C a similar picture emerged, described in a slightly different way: "We did not put our pieces together. I don't know what they did; they don't know what I did. But at that point we were busy with policy. There was so much else" (Teacher, School C). Similarly, at School D the teachers reflected that: "We never really had a chance to talk about the different courses. . . I would have liked us all to come together and share – the whole staff. Especially for those of us working in the same phase" (Teacher, School D). For School B, the situation was different. The data spoke of the attempts of the SMT to introduce *Enquiry-based Learning* as a school based initiative, for example, a teacher comments: "To be frank enough, I did not attend the workshop but we had feedback from our Head on what transpired from the workshop. More emphasis was on Technology. As a school we have just started to look at the importance of Technology and seen the need to teach it in a proper way" (Educator, School B). The feedback to staff was SMT-led through informal meetings and one-on-one discussions with teachers.

It can be seen from the above discussion that the take-up of the new pedagogic learning by teachers as a whole school initiative did not happen in any of the four schools. There were no formal school meetings dedicated to the professional development initiative where staff members were given a chance to discuss and give feedback on their experiences in the courses. Neither were staff development meetings set up for teachers to reflect critically on the new learning in terms of its potential and relevance for implementation in the context of the school (Role Five). Teachers were not engaged in school level decision-making about the initiative and the associated new learning (Role Six).

Zone four: Teacher leadership between neighbouring schools

While the professional development courses were particularly valuable for the curriculum knowledge and methods learnt, an additional benefit was that they gave educators a chance to work closely with educators from nearby schools, some with different racial and cultural backgrounds. As one participant shared: "We gained a lot of experience in different methods and we also got a chance to network with other schools and mix with people from overseas" (Educator, School A). Another participant concurred: "Now I know and like to network with other educators, even those outside our school" (Educator, School C). However, the benefits of cross-school interaction, the sharing and the learning, ended for some at the end of the professional development initiative. As one participant admitted: "We haven't been able yet to network with other schools who actually participated because of time frames. So all the excitement that went with the course, a lot of it gets lost along the way. And that's just a fact. Not because we do not want to do it, but because people are all busy with their own programmes – the reality of it" (SMT member, School D). And yet for some teachers the collaboration continues: "We met teachers from different schools and shared many ideas. We are still networking with those teachers" (Educator, School C). It is clear from the data that the take-up of teacher leadership across school boundaries in an attempt to continue professional relationships was uneven across the schools in the study. The take-up, where it occurred, demonstrates the agency of individual teacher leaders.

So far in the paper I have described, using the zone and role rubric for analysis, the take-up of teacher leadership in the context of the professional development initiative. The evidence of teacher leadership is convincing in Zone One in all four schools; convincing in Zone Two in two of the four schools and, while there is commitment in theory to teacher leadership in Zone

Four, there was very little evidence of this in practice. The lack of teacher leadership in Zone Three is sobering and demands our attention. What were the barriers that impeded the take-up, or otherwise, of the new learning at a school level and how did this relate to issues of leadership? It is to this question that I now turn.

Discussion

Barriers to teacher leadership in the context of the four schools in this study

In this study there was a varying take-up of teacher leadership in the four schools in relation to the professional development initiative in terms of zones and roles. The context of each school, together with its unique structure and culture, impacted on how the take-up of teacher leadership occurred. The data point to different barriers to whole school take-up of the new learning in each school. I now move on to each school and give a brief description of the type of leadership and identify what I consider the major barrier to the take-up of the new learning.

In *School A* the principal and the majority of staff worked together and were involved in discussions regarding curriculum development in the school. As researchers we got the sense of leadership as "fluid and emergent" (Gronn, 2000) with real collaboration where teachers were working effectively, supporting each other and working collegially (Hargreaves, 1992). Dispersed distributive leadership was evidenced through the flatter organisational structure, the level of teacher agency and co-leadership. Teachers did not resort to blaming the SMT for non-implementation of the initiative at a school level but owned the 'failure' for themselves, with *time* being the major barrier: "Teachers are just, as I say, trying to manage their time. And time is just of a major issue in our lives. Teachers from the schools that were here are willing, they want to, but they just don't find the time because many of the teachers that were on the workshop are studying as well" (SMT member, School A). This level of teacher leadership evidenced at School A is an example of the shift "away from traditional top-down management and getting teachers to take responsibility and to accept some accountability" (Harris and Muijs, 2005, p.42).

A *lack of teamwork, collaboration* and *shared vision* seemed to be a major cultural barrier to professional development in *School B*. The absence of teachers from the courses frustrated the Principal and HOD, and this non-

attendance was attributed to the fact that there were *no financial benefits* for participation (SMT member, School B). The non-participation of teaching staff in the courses resulted in an SMT-led rather than teacher-led curriculum development initiative with the SMT having authority because of their participation and knowledge and where they were attempting to motivate teachers within a 'culture of encouragement' (Harris, 2003).

While a good number of SMT members and teachers in *School C* were involved in the professional development initiative, the major barrier to the take-up of new learning at a school level was due to a later disruption of the formal leadership in the school as a result of a dispute; in other words, due to what Hargreaves (1992) terms the 'micropolitics' of the school. The absence of the Principal for a large part of a term followed by the departure of the Deputy Principal to another school left teachers feeling isolated and "without opportunities to collaboratively solve problems, share information, learn together, and plan for improving student achievement" (Ash and Persall, 2000, p.15). During our visits to the school we got the sense of a culture of cautiousness and reserve, rather than 'a culture of mutual trust and respect' (Grant, 2006). The *internal school conflict* resulted in a level of 'bruising' which operated as a barrier to distributive leadership. However, the agency of individual teachers comes to the fore in the following quotation and demonstrates a form of teacher leadership as "ownership of a particular change or development" (Harris, 2003, p.79): "The responsibility was on us. I kept saying to Y (another teacher), because she did Maths, we must sit. We must sit. It's commitment and time. The other way we could have done is to go to someone and say I have got this and just ask" (Teacher, School C).

The literature points to successful teacher leadership where formal school leaders become involved in pedagogic learning and spend lots of time "with teachers, in and out of classrooms, engaged in conversations about teaching and learning" (Ash and Persall, 2000, p.18). In School D, the Principal and Deputy Principal did not attend the professional development initiative and their absence was felt by the majority of the educators: "Maybe the *whole SMT* (my emphasis) should have been present, helping us to integrate the whole thing, putting it together and bringing it down to the staff level" (Teacher, School D). The major barrier to teacher leadership at this school was *'top-down' leadership and hierarchical school structure* with power and decision-making firmly in the hands of the Principal. One teacher explains that "it was hard for us as teachers to organise a workshop. If somebody *higher up* (my emphasis) had organised it, it would have been easier" (Teacher, School D). An SMT member explains that: "We have freedom with consultation or with his approval. He's *strong at the top* (my emphasis) and his management

is. . . I don't know, we are all a good team. . . There is nobody who is going to challenge him, I don't think" (SMT member, School D). Here we have a form of authorised distributed leadership with controlled delegation and no real devolution of decision-making. Even the two HODs appear powerless to initiate curriculum change in the face of their senior colleagues: "Us, you know, having this information and then coming and saying this is what we've learnt. Let's implement this. They (the principal and deputy principal) won't say no but then they need to create time and they need to create the structure in the school so that we can implement" (SMT member, School D). This lack of agency centralises the power and decision-making at a school level firmly in the hands of the principal and deputy principal at the top of the pyramid.

Any discussion about teacher leadership and the challenges to take-up of the new learning in schools in the context of the professional development initiative would be incomplete without a critical look at the professional development initiative itself and it is to this that I now turn.

Reflections on the professional development initiative: what can we learn?

Working from the premise that leadership is fundamentally linked to issues of teaching and learning, this study suggests that any professional development initiative should, in some way, be explicitly linked to leadership and, in particular, teacher leadership. For, without this link, I argue that the learning from any development initiative is likely to remain at the level of the individual teacher and be restricted to the zone of the classroom. And, in some instances, this may be sufficient. However some professional development initiatives, like the one discussed in this paper, have broader organisational goals that target not only the individual teacher but the school as well. During the planning phase of this initiative, meetings were set up with each of the four the principals to discuss and negotiate the goals of the initiative in the light of individual school needs and their Integrated Quality Management Systems (IQMS) processes. The initiative also aimed to motivate teachers to form a community of practice *within* their schools, grounded in the belief that these communities of practice would promote sustainability, increase the take-up of the new learning and "would most likely increase the ongoing impact and enable teachers to implement practices they examined in their courses" (Farrar, 2006, p.29). In addition it was anticipated that "teachers might even form a community of practice *across schools*, as the schools are all situated near each other and are in a natural relationship with one another" (*ibid.*, pp.29 –30). These goals, laudable as they were, met with limited and uneven success

and the data point to the design of the initiative as one possible reason for this. In the planning phase of the initiative, the programme focused on the content of the five curriculum areas and the only time allocated to discussions on take-up in schools was at the end of the teaching day. In practice the educators negotiated to have this discussion time moved earlier and it therefore occurred informally during lunch breaks and only amongst educators from schools A and C (Verbeek, 2006). A project leader reflected that "unless you really work very closely on trying to convince one of the individuals to take that responsibility (of leading the initiative back at school), it doesn't happen. So I think we failed on that score" (Project Leader 1). A weakness of the design of this initiative was that there was no planned post-initiative school support and this view was communicated by the teachers in School A who felt there should have been more contact between the course facilitators and the educators after the initiative at a grade level and a school level (Teacher, School A). A project leader endorsed this point: "I've personally not followed up in the schools and that's a huge gap. I think that's a huge gap in the project" (Project Leader 2). In some instances, course facilitators compiled resources to help teachers to hold the experiences (Project Leader 2), but this was as far as the support went. The project leaders were in agreement that subsequent school-based professional development initiatives "should involve major changes to the design" (Farrar, 2006, p.32) and more time should also be given to the planning process (Project Leader 1).

So what does this mean when we design professional development initiatives? Working from the premise that "professional learning communities hold the key to transformation – the kind that has real effects on people's lives" (Wenger, 1998, p.85), I argue, firstly, that we need to build into our professional development initiatives discussions on the possible barriers that teachers may face in the take-up of the new learning in schools and ways in which these may be overcome. We need discussions about the value and role of teachers in developing professional learning communities and offer educators strategies for developing ways to build learning communities in schools because, as Harris and Lambert (2003) explain, these do not occur naturally. We need to discuss the important role of teachers as leaders in this process of building learning communities and offer teachers some strategies for taking the new learning back into schools. Secondly, and equally importantly, the design and aims of the professional development initiative should be discussed and negotiated with the SMT of the school to ensure that the SMT owns the initiative and participates in the training, as their teaching responsibilities should be central to their leadership work – they are first and foremost teachers. They should therefore experience professional development together with the teachers in their school. Finally, once the initiative has

ended, course facilitators should build on the professional relationships they developed with teachers and principals by "developing sustained, resourceful relationships that support professional growth and the emergence of local school leadership" (Farrar, 2006, p.32). However, it must be argued that reflection and critique on and take-up of the new learning in schools are not solely the responsibility of the project leaders and course facilitators. Schools themselves, and the leadership therein, have a critical role to play as agents of change.

Conclusion

While teacher leadership was supported as a concept across the four schools in this study, the extent to which it operated in practice was limited. The take-up of new curriculum knowledge and methods by teachers was restricted to individual classrooms and informal teacher discussions but did not move formally into the whole school arena. The reasons for this restricted take-up resided in the school culture and differed across the four schools. Teacher leadership within a collaborative culture was most prevalent in School A with a lack of time within the constraints of an already full teaching programme being the main barrier which impeded staff from taking initiative. In schools B, C and D teacher leadership was not as widespread as in School A due to a range of cultural and structural barriers that did not support teacher leadership. These included the non-involvement of all staff in the original initiative (School B), the fraught 'micropolitics' within School C and a forceful principal within a hierarchically organised School D. A further barrier to teacher leadership in school D was the non-involvement of key SMT members in the professional development initiative. This case study has highlighted that a commitment to the rhetoric of teacher leadership will not, in itself, make it happen in practice. Instead it needs to be "facilitated and embraced as a cultural norm within the school" (Harris and Muijs, 2005, p.120). Given the limitations of case study research, I make no further claims from this study but raise a number of questions which a larger study might well be able to answer. How does one develop in educators a critical notion of agency for the take-up of democratic distributed leadership and teacher leadership? How can we get educators to look critically at the notion of schools as hierarchies and to expand their understanding of leadership beyond formal role or position? How do we get principals to work within a distributed leadership framework without feeling threatened?

So what can be learnt from the experiences of this professional development initiative to improve school-based professional development models? This

paper has argued that professional development initiatives for educators must be linked to issues of leading if the goal is to have sustained impact on the whole school context. It has also suggested that when designing these initiatives, time must be allocated for discussions around teacher leadership as well for the development of strategies for teachers to initiate professional learning communities on their return to schools. The following questions might be of use when designing professional development initiatives: Have we included workable leadership strategies into the courses to support educators in taking the new learning back into their schools? Have we grappled with the composition of educators attending the workshop and asked questions such as 'who will lead the process once educators return to schools'? How do we get teacher leaders to deal with structural barriers and resistant principals? These questions, I believe, are critical to the successful implementation of new learning in schools as a result of professional development initiatives and, if disregarded, will restrict the take-up of new learning to individual teachers in individual classrooms.

In conclusion, I argue in the context of South African schools for the radical reconceptualising of leadership (Gunter, 2001) and for debates about critical education leadership, distributed leadership and teacher leadership. I believe there is a need in our country for more research into teacher leadership primarily because, in the words of Farrar, "Education reform rests on effective professional development that is sustained by teacher leaders" (2006, p.33). And, as Muijs and Harris contend, teacher leadership "reclaims school leadership from the individual to the collective, from the singular to the plural and offers the real possibility of distributed leadership in action" (2003, p.445).

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