

AUTHOR:

Mrs Laurette Fourie¹ Dr Parvathy Naidoo² 

AFFILIATION:

¹STADIO University²University of Johannesburg,
South Africa

Middle leaders and managers' perspectives of distributive leadership during COVID-19

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Abstract

On a global level, COVID-19 has shaken the foundations of every sector. In the South African education context, the traditional methods of teaching, learning, and managing schools changed drastically overnight and management roles and responsibilities were pushed to unprecedented levels. Moreover, the roles of middle leaders and managers took place within a more distributive framework, encouraging school leaders to adopt varying styles of leadership to cope with the demands of COVID-19. For this study, middle leaders constitute departmental heads, grade heads and subject heads. This study utilised a qualitative research design, adopting a case study approach within the interpretivist paradigm. Three departmental heads and seven post level one educators who occupy grade heads/leaders' roles in a primary school constituted the sample. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with participants to gain their understanding of how distributive leadership was practiced during the pandemic. Four themes emerged, namely leadership styles and factors informing the leadership behaviour and leadership growth of middle leaders and managers in schools; middle leaders' and managers' perceptions of distributive leadership and the responsibilities of the different stakeholders; the impact of COVID-19 on distributive leadership as perceived by middle leaders and managers; and the advantages and disadvantages of distributive leadership practices. The study recommends that School Management Teams (SMTs) involve middle leaders and managers to a greater degree to secure an effective 'buy-in' to the concept of distributive leadership and that middle managers offer opportunities for others to lead, by developing leadership-specific courses for them. SMTs must also ensure that individuals have a stable working environment where their psychological, sociological, and emotional needs are respected, fulfilled, and validated during any pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, departmental heads, distributive leadership, leadership styles, middle leaders, post level one educators

1. Introduction

Pre-COVID-19, leadership roles and responsibilities in schools were traditionally determined by the type of leadership expected of the mandated role (Harris, 2020). Core functions of middle management which constituted heads of department; grade heads and educators assuming

leadership positions solely assisted the principal in managing the school curriculum and to corroborate that learning and teaching were executed in the most productive manner. During COVID-19, the roles of middle management were distributed where staff within phases/departments took on additional roles as leaders assisting educators with teaching using the online platform. Their responsibilities were pushed to extraordinary limits beyond any governing legislation. Although COVID-19 has changed the face of educational leadership forever, it has also pinpointed areas for improvement in management that cannot and should not be ignored. Since the onset of the pandemic, school leaders and managers have transitioned into “unprecedented territory” (Harris, 2020: 322) with very few clues or guidelines to guide them on the way forward.

The focus of this study is on the perspectives of middle leaders and managers regarding distributive leadership practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper was directed by the following overarching research question: “How did middle leaders and managers perceive distributive leadership during the period of COVID-19?”

Literature on leadership uses many connotations of the word, for example commanding, heading, leading, guiding, and assisting. Gronn (2002) describes leadership as a technique or process where one individual can influence a group of individuals to strive towards a common aim or objective, within any specific institution. Hastyar, Durmaz and Demir (2021: 26) describe leaders as individuals who have “full command of making decisions” that influence the actions of others. A few decades ago, principals were the sole leaders and managers. However, in more recent times educational changes have resulted in educators facing new and different challenges such as abuse of political and positional power, hostile staff, selfishness, violence, poor teamwork, lack of motivation, the absence of empowerment opportunities and ineffective communication. All this has necessitated a change in traditional styles of leadership at schools (Dampson, Havor & Laryea 2018). Lewin, Lippi and White (1939) identified three leadership styles that are seen as traditional leadership styles, namely autocratic (authoritarian) leadership where the leader makes all the decisions, democratic leadership where the leader involves individuals in the decision-making process and laissez-faire leadership that is also known as no leadership. According to Dyczkowska and Dyczkowski (2018), autocratic leaders make important decisions on their own, whereas democratic leaders seek a general agreement with colleagues. Furthermore, Bhatti *et al.* (2012:196) noted that with an autocratic leadership style, leaders force decisions on employees without their input, whereas democratic leaders (Bhatti *et al.*, 2012:193) invite contributions by employees before a final decision is made, although final decision still lies with the democratic leader. Moreover, Yusup (2022: 46) makes the point that traditional type of leadership is, “based on established beliefs in the sanctity of existing traditions and the legitimacy of the status of authority, because of heredity or inheritance.”

2. What is effective and efficient leadership and management in schools?

Effective and efficient leadership and management, according to Notar, Uline and Eady (2008) consist of these nine tenets: acting and thinking strategically; understanding and demonstrating the components of teams and teamwork; small group decision making; clearly defining roles and relationships; inaugurating and abiding by a leader-subordinate affiliation; achieving a systematic evaluation of policy; administering leader time and energy fittingly; setting comprehensible rules and procedures for meetings; and learning and developing steadily as a leader.

A leader's main responsibility is not just to develop policy, but to shape the future of their school system and meet challenges by expanding mental horizons through diversity. Nowadays, leaders not only face challenges within the workplace, but also "economic, social, and environmental challenges, including globalization, economic recession and overpopulation" (Gorski, 2017: 372).

Another aspect of effective leadership is for leaders and managers to realise that they cannot function as islands (Lundmark *et al.*, 2020). Generally, leaders and their staff coalesce to act as one establishment, working towards the same goal. While team endeavours are often very fruitful, discord and conflicts do arise. This is when good leaders use their authority in positive ways to inspire allegiance, teamwork, and commitment to the successful attainment of goals.

According to Amanchukwu, Stanley and Ololube (2015), this can be fulfilled by having clear goals, defining specified roles within the team, coalescing members with different skill sets, devotion to team performance and success, developing trust, making timely decisions, and using the full capabilities of all members.

When leaders effectively lead and manage small group directing, time is spent on developing skills for productive teamwork. Well-deserved approval and praise are extremely important, as the efforts of educators need to be acknowledged for making a difference. When educators are satisfied with school rules, salaries, discipline, workload, leadership, regulations, facilities, awards, and co-workers, they tend to show loyalty to their leaders (Budiman & Budiman, 2021). Leaders and managers should ensure that the organisation runs effectively; those roles, responsibilities and relationships are clearly defined; and that each member's contribution to the team (as school governing body member, educator, curriculum leader, principal, student, parent, etc.) is clearly explained in terms of purpose and execution. In essence, an effective leader moulds an effective team (Khawam, DiDona & Hernandez, 2017).

All school stakeholders play an important role in establishing the effective application of policy, rules, and regulations. Carver (1990) emphasizes the importance of allowing staff to give input (within determined limits) to define the means whereby they may achieve certain levels of performance. Fapohunda (2013) further mentions that members should be permitted to give input in the designing and wording of goals, thereby enabling a leader-subordinate cooperation that will empower staff to do key tasks and be evaluated on the results produced.

As a leader and manager, the pressure to achieve targets and increase performance levels are ever increasing. Leaders and managers are expected to use feedback as a management tool to strengthen the organisation, according to Mamula, Peric and Bovan (2020), who argue that effective feedback encourages better performance, which is directly linked to institutional success. School leaders and managers perform a multitude of daily tasks and responsibilities and to manage all of them well is very challenging. Therefore, time management and efficient execution of responsibilities is vital. Notar *et al.* (2008: 28) identified certain arenas where leaders should focus their time and efforts. These are: "goal-setting sessions, analysing results, frequent group meetings and community interaction." Of the four arenas, the community aspect is becoming more important as it is changing the role of leaders and how their time is spent. Engaging with the community is important as it can lead to enhanced outcomes when organisations seek to understand the desires and principles of communities and address their issues of concern. Effective leaders and managers set clear

rules and procedures for meetings. The absence of effective leadership results in the lack of clear direction of the organisation as well as employee discouragement and loss of motivation (Atkinson & Mackenzie, 2015). Effective leaders manage meetings well - they keep them on track, solve problems collaboratively and ensure the holistic participation of all stakeholders.

Lastly, efficacious leaders learn and evolve continuously because they invest time in self-reflection and engage in developmental learning by drawing from past and present experiences (McDermott, Kidney & Flood, 2010). With all the changes that COVID-19 has forced upon leaders, it has become noticeable that many had no choice but to adjust to a new way of leading. Effective and efficient leadership cannot be viewed in isolation, as every situation is different and the goal to do the best possible at any given time, must be kept in mind.

3. Distributive leadership practices during COVID-19

Schools are becoming more complex in structure as argued by Crawford (2005) and face multifaceted challenges (Naicker & Mestry, 2013), requiring a more distributed form of leadership. Prior to COVID-19 rearing its ugly head in early 2020, distributive leadership was seen as a method of thinking and reshaping school leadership and a fresh alternative for improving the quality of education (Hamzah & Jamil, 2019). Distributive leadership was not exclusively about one school leader, but an undertaking involving the daily interactions of many individuals, together shaping leadership for the benefit of the whole school and community (Hamzah & Jamil, 2019).

Distributive leadership is rooted in social interaction among team members, where they discuss and give or receive advice (De Jong *et al.*, 2022). It is also noteworthy that work is distributed to numerous individuals and targets are met through the interaction and collaboration of many people (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001). Furthermore, distributive leadership is planned and coordinated (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008) where trust has been established (Harris, 2008; Crawford, 2012) and empowers the individuals involved (Crawford, 2012; Gronn, 2002), which can lead to school improvements (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008). According to Naicker and Mestry (2013), teaching is a knowledge-intensive enterprise which makes it nearly impossible to complete complicated tasks without distributing leadership responsibilities.

Pre-COVID-19, the prevalent leadership style at most schools was traditional, where the main function of school leaders was to manage or lead the school and ensure that learning and teaching took place (Bush & Glover, 2016). Although distributive leadership has many advantages, some limitations have surfaced over the years. Bill and Melinda Gates (2017) pointed out four aspects regarding distributive leadership (DL) in the article *4 Key things to know about distributive leadership*. They are the following:

- DL constitutes an instructional leadership team consisting of team members with expertise in a specific area.
- DL involves assuming different tasks which include the deliverance of quality education and teaching, observing, and providing feedback, in-service training, and continuous improvement.
- DL is sustained by principals and deputy principals building the leadership capacity and providing sessions where knowledge can be shared so everyone works together to improve the outcomes for students; and

- DL involves interactions among leaders and managers and colleagues to ensure the improvement of the system to reach a high-quality standard of teaching and an environment where all students can reach their full potential.

It is therefore imperative to distinguish between distributive leadership and the practice of delegation in the school environment, since distributive leadership is often perceived as the delegation of duties according to Gómez-Hurtado *et al.* (2020). Göksoy (2016), highlights the difference as delegative leadership being synonymous with shared leadership (as the leadership is not related to the knowledge and skills of only one leader, but relies on the participation of many individuals), whereas distributive leadership is where the leader and followers interact, not merely by assigning individuals to specific tasks, but through collective learning.

Schools need leaders and managers who are visionaries, mentors, motivators, and team players who lead by example rather than sit in their offices, distributing their responsibilities - because responsibility, unlike authority, cannot be delegated (Stein, 2016). Leadership is ever-changing and evolving towards new approaches as society evolves, moving from individual leadership approaches to others of a more distributed nature.

Over time, leadership has evolved, and more leadership styles have emerged, including distributive leadership. Distributed leadership leans towards an approach whereby leadership and management responsibilities are shared, and individuals are given the opportunity to contribute (Bolden, 2011). According to Harris (2008), distributed leadership overlaps with shared, collaborative, democratic and participative leadership. Distributive leadership involves all individuals, no matter the leadership status and focuses on expertise rather than hierarchical authority (Thien, 2019). Delegative leadership, also known as *laissez-faire* leadership (Khan *et al.*, 2015), is characterised whereby the leader or manager offers no guidance to members and leaves all decision-making to these members. The big difference between distributed and delegative leadership, “is how leadership is facilitated, orchestrated and supported” (Harris, 2008: 173).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the complexity of school practices and processes has been unprecedented, as education had been “re-crafted, re-designed and re-booted” (Harris, 2020: 321) changing methods of teaching dramatically. It was a hard lesson to learn that unpredictable events bring about extreme changes with exceptional consequences. Where management and leadership styles seldom changed over past decades, this had to be quickly reassessed to fit into the ‘new normal’. Management responses to COVID-19 meant that more work had to be distributed to curriculum middle leaders to lighten the load of the principal and deputy principal. Bagwell (2020: 31) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic is “rapidly redefining schooling and leadership” and recommended that leaders build resilient organisations by creating and promoting distributive leadership structures. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) also suggest that academic leaders use the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to distribute leadership duties wherever possible. As a result, more work was delegated to post level one educators, as many middle management leaders were “running on empty” (Harris & Jones, 2020: 246) due to the swift and sudden challenges and increased workload caused by COVID-19. Harris and Jones (2020) mention that distributive leadership has become a way of surviving the extreme demands that COVID-19 has brought upon leadership and management in schools.

COVID-19 did not only bring stress and uncertainty to everyone, but also a change in leadership personality characteristics and style (Dumulescu & Muțiu, 2021). Educator well-being suffered during the pandemic because of increased workloads and became an important issue with potentially momentous consequences for students, leadership, and management (Kwatubana & Molaodi, 2021). Before COVID-19, many educators at South African schools stared burnout and distress in the face (Kwatubana & Molaodi, 2021). Adding COVID-19, social distancing, and level five lockdowns to the list of already undesirable teaching conditions such as inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, lack of digital infrastructure and high educator workload (Mungroo, 2020), demotivated educators to an even greater extent.

Leaders distributing responsibilities had to be considerate towards educators, and factor in already heavy educator workloads, deviation from working patterns, the potential health risk to educators over sixty and those with comorbidities, the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), poor hygiene measures in disadvantaged schools (Kwatubana & Molaodi, 2021) and they also had to consider that meetings and decision-making had to be conducted via online platforms like Zoom and MS Teams.

4. Research design and methodology

A qualitative research design, situated within an interpretive paradigm, was used in this study (Maxwell, 2004). Interpretive research turns away from less-humane research and focuses on humanised, contextual approaches where the emphasis is on meaning making and knowledge (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). This paradigm seeks to “get into the head of the subjects being studied” (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017: 33).

The researchers employed a single case study approach - defined by Yin (2009: 14), as “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. According to Lucas, Fleming, and Bhosale (2018), a single case study is seen as a study that stands alone and allows the researcher to explore sub-units within the case, whereas with a multiple case study the researcher is studying more than just one case. Mariotto and Zanni (2014) note that by using a single case study, important contributions towards theory development can be made as it is seen as an opportunity to make alterations in an already clear understanding of reality. This approach provided a unique example of real people in real situations, which enabled the researchers to understand ideas more clearly than simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:181; Shadish & Sullivan, 2011:972), since the researchers intended studying the phenomenon of “distributive leadership” during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1 Research site and participants

The selected school is situated in a semi-urban area in Gauteng, South Africa. It is a mainstream school open to all races and has 1063 learners between the ages of four and thirteen, from grade RR to grade seven. There are fifty-four curriculum staff members: forty-seven educators, one deputy principal, the principal and five departmental heads.

The sample of ten participants comprised of three departmental heads (previously known as heads of departments or middle managers) and seven grade heads, who serve in management positions heading respective grades. Through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2009; Etikan, 2016) the selected individuals were identified according to their knowledge, skills,

abilities, and duties relevant educator qualifications (B.Ed. degree or Diploma in Education). The departmental heads were selected for their experience and leadership positions, which they must have held for two or more years. The researchers also considered those educators who occupied current or previous acting positions as departmental or grade heads.

We utilized probing open-ended questions and follow-up questions for clarification on participants' understanding of distributive leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 Data collection

Jong and Jung (2015) note that interviews are one of the main data collection methods in qualitative research, hence individual interviews were conducted with the participants. Frances, Coughlan and Cronin (2006) note that individual interviews give researchers the opportunities to interpret non-verbal cues by observing body language, facial expressions, and eye contact. Ismail (2017) also mentions that messages are transferred by both verbal and non-verbal means.

We utilised individual interviews to probe the participants' understanding, feelings, experiences, and insights about distributive leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview schedule was designed in an open-ended format to enable the participants to freely express and openly respond to the questions posed (Alase, 2017). The interviews were conducted face-to-face, following all COVID-19 protocols. Prior to conducting the interviews, written permission to conduct the study was granted by the University of Johannesburg Ethics Committee (number SEM 2-2021-133), the Gauteng Department of Education, the principal of the school, the school management team and the ten participants. All participants granted written and verbal permission to be audio recorded. After the face-to-face interviews were scheduled, they were conducted on the school premises after working hours. The duration of each interview varied between 30-50 minutes.

4.3 Data analysis

Once all interviews were concluded, we transcribed the interviews (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2019). Each audio-recorded interview was transcribed verbatim by uploading it into "Otter.ai". We then began analysing the data by doing content thematic analysis of the transcriptions, which offered us a clear understanding of participants' responses. Coding and categorisation were executed through the various phases of content thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Creswell, 2009; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Coding and categorisation were executed through the six phases of content thematic analysis, as outlined by Clarke and Braun (2013) and Creswell (2009). The six phases were synthesised as follows: Firstly, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data, by reading through the data many times to get a sense of the participants' views, experiences, and thoughts. In the next phase, they generated initial codes, by reflexive journaling, using a coding and categorising framework, while maintaining an audit trail of codes and categories. The researchers then searched for common ideas/thoughts, phrases, etc., developing diagrams to make sense of themes emerging, their connections and whilst detailed notes about developments were drawn. During the next phase, the researchers reviewed the emerging themes to ensure that all data gathered was relevant to each theme. Phase five entailed defining and naming the themes, by testing for referential adequacy by returning frequently to the raw data and the final phase involved writing the report on the findings (Creswell, 2009; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Maree, 2007; Silverman, 2013).

5. Presentation and discussion of findings

The researchers observed the unfolding of four themes arising from the participants' discussions when analysing the results. The report below identifies the themes, supported with quotations from participants and relevant extracts from the literature. For ease of reference, we named the ten participants P1 up to P10.

5.1 Theme 1: Leadership styles and factors informing the leadership behaviour and leadership growth of middle leaders and managers in schools

An effective leadership style is critical for the success of any organisation (Murati, 2015:31). Leadership theories have been evolved as time has gone by, but "none of the theory is completely irrelevant" (Khan, Nawaz & Khan, 2016: 1). Kaleem, Asad and Khan (2016:1) note that leadership styles in any situation are dependent on the circumstances of that situation. Furthermore, Kaleem *et al.*, (2016) mention that innovative leaders change their leadership style to suit the situation, whereas less innovative leaders tend to abide by only one style of leadership.

There is no agreement among scholars on the specific definition of leadership, as this varies based on interchangeable "abilities, personality traits, influential relationships, cognitive versus emotional orientation" and much more (Murati, 2015: 30).

Through literature reviews many different leadership styles have been identified, including: "autocratic, bureaucratic, charismatic, democratic, *laissez-faire*, people-oriented, situational, servant, task-oriented, transactional, transformational, abusive, ethical, primal, entrepreneurial, distributive and transcendental leadership" (Murati, 2015: 31).

The dominant leadership styles during the COVID-19 pandemic, as identified by the participants, were democratic and diverse leadership styles. To illustrate the democratic leadership style, P1 (Participant 1) indicated that, "*I firmly believe that the world doesn't revolve around me...*" and "*... I always allow the opportunity, someone to give input and their opinion or their idea could be far better than mine...*". Similarly, P9 explained that "*I do believe in an open-door policy ...*" and "*... my leadership style is to make other people grow ...*". This clearly shows a democratic leadership style, described by Sharma and Singh (2013) as being a type of leadership that encourages participation in decision-making and offering guidance to group members.

Participant 4 had this to say about diverse leadership: "*I try and use a diverse amount of leadership I'm very diverse, especially with who the person is that I'm leading ...*" and "*... the type of situation definitely does change the leadership style ...*". P10, similarly mentioned the following "*... so I don't think I have one specific type of leadership, I think I have a variety depending on who am I working with at that particular time ...*" and explained that "*... as a subject leader it's more of a democratic, participatory style ...*" and "*... as an HOD, sometimes you have to be authoritative ...*". Such statements support the notion of Kaleem *et al.* (2016:1), that diverse leadership styles is indicative of innovative leaders.

Participants also had different views on factors that motivated their type of leadership. When asked what specific factors informed their type of leadership, it was evident that when a specific situation arose, participants would sometimes respond in different ways. The most

common responses of post level one participants in acting leadership positions were to involve the whole team and to consider other opinions before making a unified decision.

Post level two participants indicated that having a large staff influenced their leadership style. P7 said that "... I will lead by considering other people's opinion or asking, valuing them, their points of views ...". However, Terricone and Luca (2002), point out that successful teamwork requires that team members must never be fully self-directed or completely independent. At times, taking people's opinions into account is not always possible due to time and managerial constraints and the number of individuals involved. P10 noted this dilemma by expressing that "... when it comes to dealing with the whole school, and the school that is so big, sometimes you must be authoritative, unfortunately, because of the large staff. And when decisions must be made, you cannot take 30 staff members opinions all into consideration, because you will never get a consensus".

According to participants, factors that affect leadership styles include working with leaders, one's past experiences, the availability of leaders to give advice, growth opportunities and development courses. P2 in this regard, stated that "... what informs the role would be experience. So, if you've been, you know, working as a grade leader, you would draw to that - I haven't personally had that experience. Working with other leaders, that's what's helped me very much". P6 explained that "... if you only allow people to do what they good at, they don't get any better ...". By only allowing individuals to do what they are good at, no development or growth will take place. Echoing the words of Anderson (2013), that mistakes pave the way to great ideas and innovation, it is important for leaders and managers to allow individuals to make mistakes, because they force people to step out of their comfort zones to grow and discover. Leaders and managers need to remember that mistakes should not be seen as failures, but as a process of elimination to see what works and what does not.

5.2 Theme 2: Middle leaders' and managers' perceptions of distributive leadership and the responsibilities of the different stakeholders

In a school setting there are many stakeholders including the principal, deputy principal, governing members, school management team, academic heads, educators, and parents. Everyone plays a critical role in the daily functioning and operation of the school. Distributive leadership, as perceived by middle leaders, has been compared to delegative leadership.

P1 explained the difference between distributing and delegating, by stating that "... even though distribute means to give out or to pass on and almost seems very similar to delegating ... it feels like to me like an oxymoron because while distributing or giving out tasks, you know, is very like delegating in that, if that makes sense, the leadership part comes". Here, P1 pointed out that distributive leadership has a leadership component, whereas delegating lacks the leadership component. P7 states that "... I looked at the definition of distributive leadership and it, it's so many sounds so similar to delegating, yet it's not ...", but then later P7 mentions that "... to me these, although they say it's not the same as delegating, to me, it's very similar ...". It is easy to understand why individuals assume that distributive and delegative leadership is similar, as in both leadership styles work is given or passed on to other individuals.

Other participants expressed the view that distributive leadership in a school context is stipulated within the job's responsibilities. The Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM), found in the Employment of Educator's Act 76 of 1998, (Education Labour Relations Council, 2003: C58), clearly states the core duties and responsibilities of educators, head of

departments, deputy principals and principals in public schools. When asking P6 what was understood by distributive leadership, the response was: *"it's a collaborative process, you involve everybody, from principal down to the learners, giving them responsibilities and tasks that are within the job description ..."*, as clearly indicated in the PAM document (1999: 41), where it states that one of the core responsibilities of the principal is "to ensure that workloads are equitably distributed among the staff".

Distributive leadership not only provides for skills development but focuses on the future of the school. P10 noted that the *"... School Management team creates opportunities for different teachers in different areas to actually use their ability to be leaders ..."*, where educators are given the opportunity to develop skills, grow and eventually fill the shoes of top management. The knowledge and skills of management should be shared with prospective leaders to assist with the smooth functioning of the school in the future. Participants feel that for this to be successful, the principal, as the leader of the school has a duty to filter down information. To illustrate this, P3 described the process as follows *"... your principal is the top leader within a school, then it filters down to HODs, then to your grade leaders"*. According to Farah (2013), the principal is the leader and manager of a school. As the main leader, he/she ultimately takes responsibility and is accountable for everything at the school, whether it be academic improvement, support staff improvement, counselling or distributing leadership roles.

The explanation of P7 regarding the responsibilities of the principal and management team, concludes this section: *"I firstly believe that it is the responsibility of the principal, the certain things, you know, that starts at the top. And if it filters through correctly, then everything will fall into place. If the principal distributes leadership, firstly to the deputy and to the HODs, and the HODs back to the grade leaders and then to the teachers, then you will see efficiency in management, you will also see proper success in your school"*.

5.3 Theme 3: The impact of COVID-19 on distributive leadership as perceived by middle leaders and managers

COVID-19 disrupted the work environment and daily management of all schools. On 18 March 2020, when schools closed for the level five lockdown due to COVID-19, the research site school bid farewell to their principal, who had been in that position for seventeen years. Thus, the school was without a principal for over a year, resulting in the deputy principal deputising and the SMT supporting him. Finally, in term 2 of 2021, a new principal was appointed. The year 2020 had brought on drastic changes in staff and the work environment. Not surprisingly, leadership styles were affected as emotional factors influencing morale began to surface.

Odor (2013) describes organisational change as the complete or partial adaptation of new ideas, concepts, or behaviours by members of an organisation. Regarding the change in leadership, P6 mentioned that *"I found it from my perspective, it became a much more autocratic, dictatorial situation."* An autocratic leadership style is characterised by an organisation (or management) that uses its authority and status to manage activities without considering employee feedback or suggestions (Jaafar, Zambani & Fathil, 2021), and a dictatorial leadership style is where the leader lays down the law and members are expected to perform without questioning authority (Khan et al., 2015). P6 supports this view by stating that *"... it became much more where you are going to do it this way. I don't care what your opinion is, or what your needs are what your, what's going on in your life"*.

Comparing the types of leadership, P10 noted that *"I just think that our leadership style completely changed. Our school has become more delegative."* A delegative leadership style is also known as *laissez-faire* leadership, where leaders offer little to no guidance and leave decision-making to group members who are expected to solve problems on their own (Khan et al., 2015). Although a delegative approach has some advantages, the disadvantages include overstepping limits, dissatisfied employees, resignations and the lack of responsibility or initiative. This is suggested by the following comment by P5: *"And then we got a new principal. And to me, she is not a leader. She is a delegator and I think as a leader, you cannot be a delegator, you've got to have an active role."* Examples given by P5 to support this include the principal not leaving the office, learners not knowing who the principal is, what she looks or sounds like, and the principal not knowing the staff. P10 voiced that *"we feel like a bunch of personal assistants that must take on all the responsibility that comes with it, until it suits me - until it suits high up."* Additionally, P4 mentioned that *"I feel like we didn't need to include the whole school, but the grade leaders, it would have been nice to have been included and needed during that time"*, clearly showing that even grade leaders were excluded from decision-making.

The school's work environment inevitably underwent great changes during the pandemic. Due to lockdown levels 4 and 5, educators were forced to adapt lessons to suit an online environment and to develop study packs, as learners were permitted onto the premises. Consequently, the workload of educators increased tremendously. P2 confirmed that *"there [are] more tasks, roles and responsibilities that have been implemented since"*. P3 added that *"I think because of workload, and that might not necessarily be deliberate, but I think with the department wanting more and more from people, we are being given more and more because the people who are supposed to be doing what they are supposed to, aren't coping."* With the onset of COVID-19, schools had to assign a COVID officer to oversee the reporting of all COVID-19 related cases to the department. This increased the workload of grade leaders and the COVID officer, who is a member of the SMT. This was confirmed by P7 who said that *"I think more so in 2020, we find that more people have to do more"*.

With the increased workload, change in leadership and fear of contracting COVID-19, emotional strains adversely affecting educator morale became apparent. Emotional factors included compassion fatigue, feeling unappreciated, no recognition for extra work done, not knowing what was going on, feeling unworthy of a title and grief because of the loss of loved ones due to COVID-19. P5 gives this example: *"it almost is because you do all this work for zero recognition. And like, there's no perks anymore"*. It came to light that grade leaders used to get a monetary incentive at the end of each term, thanking them for the extra work that they do, but without any communication, it was discontinued. P5 voiced that it felt like *"... so it's you're a leader, but you're not a leader"*. P4 added that *"... I felt I could have almost been taken away, because we didn't have a say. And anything that we did have a say with had to be checked or signed off ... I felt a lot of our own way of running things got taken away"*. P6 mentioned that *"I don't know if it's, if it's compassion fatigue, maybe that people are suffering from, but it's like, nobody actually cares about anybody anymore"*.

Figley (2013) describes compassion fatigue as "secondary traumatisatioⁿ". Other synonyms used for secondary traumatisatioⁿ include emotional exhaustion, feelings of detachment, a lack of accomplishment, and burnout - a state where a person has been physically and psychologically exhausted for a long period of time (Devilley, Wright & Varker, 2009). Figley (2013) mentions that secondary traumatisatioⁿ occurs as the result of emotional

strain when working with individuals suffering from traumatic events. Here, a stressor giving rise to compassion fatigue is an event that is found outside the range of normal human experience that would be markedly distressing to almost everyone (Figley, 2013). Two such events that had never been experienced before are COVID-19 and the lockdowns, which had a huge impact on the whole world. Almost no-one was spared from the lockdown limitations, emotional distress and loss of family or loved ones. All these factors contributed to general burnout in many schools.

5.4 Theme 4: Advantages and disadvantages of distributive leadership practices

From the onset of COVID-19, many schools were under increasing pressure to perform and improve student achievement, and school leaders and managers had to adapt quickly to deliver on this expectation. Distributive leadership involves the cultivation of a system that binds elements of the organisation together, holding individuals accountable for their contributions (Grenda & Hackmann, 2014). When looking at the effects of COVID-19 on organisations, it becomes clear that distributive leadership has adapted to the current situation at schools. Harris and Jones (2020:246) state that *"most school leaders will be running on empty given the myriad of challenges that COVID-19 has created for them, so distributive leadership is a necessity to survive"*. Even before Covid-19, Naicker and Mestry (2013) described teaching as a knowledge-intensive profession, where it is nearly impossible to complete tasks successfully without distributing leadership. Lumby (2013) further points out that distributive leadership forces staff members to willingly commit to an ever-increasing workload. This is because, as previously noted by Stein (2016), responsibility, unlike authority, cannot be delegated.

Many participants mentioned that the advantages of distributive leadership are getting to know the strengths and weaknesses of individuals, providing opportunities for growth and spreading the workload. P1 states that *"management and leadership will get to know their employees better."* Grenda and Hackmann (2014), confirm that individuals have different things they are good at, thus strengths are used to assist each other so that *"many hands make light work."* P1 observes that *"once they know those strengths, it helps them identify people for the right tasks so that those tasks can be done exceptionally well"*.

The most frequent answer from participants regarding the advantages of distributed leadership, was that it provides an opportunity for growth. Distributed leadership recognises leadership attributes in others and encourages individuals to grow and develop skills (Samancioglu, Baglibel & Erwin, 2020). Fullan (2001) adds that good leaders are those who develop other leaders at different levels for the future benefit to the system. In this vein, P6 commented that another advantage of distributive leadership is that *"People grow. People become; they work smarter, not harder"*.

Challenges described by many participants include lack of expertise and unfair distribution of work. Timperley (2005) concludes that distributive leadership can be risky and result in the distribution of incompetence, which ties in with the disadvantage mentioned by P1 and P7 that unrealistic goals result in being overwhelmed with work. P10 agrees that *"it can place undue pressure on inexperienced or unskilled staff"*. Tahir, Lee, Musah, Jaffri, Said and Yasin, (2016) argued that some educators see the implementing of distributive leadership as increased workloads and more responsibilities. Dampson, Havor and Laryea (2018), in their study on distributed leadership in schools in Ghana, quoted a head educator who stated that some

educators did not want to take up extra responsibilities, due to the fear of failure. Indeed, a lack of expertise in a certain assigned area could result in the fear of failure.

6. Discussion

In response to our guiding research question, this study highlighted the importance of distributive leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also points out how distributive leadership is understood by middle leaders and assessed how this leadership style affected teaching and learning during the pandemic. True distributive leadership can only exist when all leaders work together towards the same goal. From the available literature, it was evident that it is an effective leadership style that promotes participation and growth within an organisation if implemented correctly, as it can open boundaries that encourage leadership teams to adapt to grow and expand membership within teams.

The first theme addressed leadership styles and factors that inform leadership behaviour and leadership growth of middle leaders and managers. Hence, we looked at the different departments and what middle leaders and managers thought the leadership role of each was in the context of distributive leadership. The different areas of inquiry identified were links to other leadership styles and responsibilities executed by the Department of Education and District offices and members of the SMT. This theme highlighted the benefits of teamwork and a combination of different leadership styles that were warranted in diverse contexts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second theme addressed middle leaders' perceptions of distributive leadership and the responsibilities of the different stake holders. This theme looked at the different departments and what the middle leaders thought the role of each was in distributive leadership. It was unanimous that middle leaders and managers felt that their leadership style contributed significantly to leadership growth and the element of distributed leadership commenced with the principal, then filters down to other members of the SMT and eventually to the post level one educators

The third theme focussed on the impact that COVID-19 on distributive leadership practices, as observed by middle leaders and managers. Participants voiced their concern in the change of leadership and leadership styles in 2020 and 2021 and the effects thereof. Participants mentioned feeling unappreciated, unworthy of the leadership title such as middle leader, and compassion fatigue, which contributed to lower morale and negatively impacted the well-being of staff. Ultimately, this theme brought to light the effects of staff burnout, secondary trauma, emotional distress, exhaustion, fatigue, feelings of detachment as some of the many side effects of the pandemic.

The fourth theme examined the advantages and disadvantages of distributive leadership practices as perceived by middle leaders and managers within the context of COVID-19 and beyond. This theme brought to the fore the intensity of leadership tasks being distributed during a pandemic due to the myriad of challenges experienced during the pandemic. In the context of this study, distributive leadership provided opportunities to staff for personal growth and development within the school. On the negative side, the practice of distributive leadership can be impeding, brought about by undue pressure on staff, fear of not meeting expected standards and a mismatch between task and skills.

We align ourselves to Kathirvel (2020), who states that individuals experienced emotional disturbance, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms after being quarantined during the pandemic. The possibility exists that long-term impacts, including anxiety, anger, depression, and substance abuse could be the aftermath of COVID-19 infections. Furthermore, Galea, Merchant and Lurie (2020) argued that prolonged social distancing could lead to increased loneliness, anxiety, depression and violence towards women and children, whereas isolation could lead to social withdrawal. The importance of principals being alert to these effects cannot be underestimated. Fullan (2001) states that good leaders are those who develop other leaders at different levels for the future improvement of the system.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The researchers embarked on this study to explore the perceptions of middle leaders and managers regarding distributed leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Distributive leadership provides opportunities for growth by recognising leadership attributes in others, which in turn encourages individuals to grow and advance their leadership skills. The researchers reasoned whether COVID-19 would re-model the educational middle management system, return to the old normal or would there be an integration of leadership styles.

It was evident from the findings of this study, that participants understood what distributive leadership was, the characteristics of distributive leadership and where it should be filtered down from. The researchers endorse the core functions of middle management are to assist the principal in leading and managing the school and ensuring that learning and teaching was the core business of the school. Principals and the Department of Education authorities should acknowledge that middle leaders and managers are first and foremost educators, who manage a teaching workload with the added responsibility of leading a phase/department. Regarding challenges experienced by the participants included the lack of expertise and unfair distribution of work. Indeed, this may somewhat support Timperley's (2005) point that distributive leadership can be risky and result in the distribution of incompetence.

We therefore recommend that SMT members should involve middle leaders and managers to a greater degree, so that there is an effective "buy-in" to the practice of distributive leadership. This is likely to occur if the concept was sufficiently understood by participants and real empowerment of all stakeholders takes priority. We also recommend that middle leaders offer leadership development opportunities for others and train them to lead, by developing courses that embrace elements of distributive leadership, as this will support and guide all staff.

Finally, we support the notion that staff be exposed to a stable environment during any pandemic or natural occurrence, where their personal and professional needs are catered for. Furthermore, their emotional, psychological, and sociological requirements must be regarded as valid, and important to the culture of teaching and learning. It is therefore imperative that the SMT monitors staff well-being and offers wellness support during any pandemic.

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