

Distributed leadership in South African schools: possibilities and constraints

Clarence G Williams
cwilliams@uwc.ac.za

Before 1994 South African teachers in general, but more specifically women teachers, were effectively excluded from fulfilling meaningful roles as leaders at school level. Since 1994 the Department of Education has promulgated a number of policies in an attempt to actualize distributed leadership in South African schools. Fundamental to distributed leadership is the belief that all teachers have the right and potential to participate in decisions that affect their work. This article unpacks the theoretical underpinnings of the notion of distributed leadership and then investigates the numerous and diverse factors which have prevented the actualization of distributed leadership in South African schools. It is suggested that distributed leadership within schools can be actualized if the combined knowledge, expertise and experience of various role-players and stakeholders are harnessed in a collaborative fashion. While a healthy bout of idealism is required it is important that this idealism be moderated by the recognition of the realities of the South African situation.

General introduction

Before 1994 the main purpose of the education system, which was characterised by hierarchical and authoritarian relations, was to restrict wider participation and to ensure political control by the top echelons of the education departments (African National Congress Education Department, 1994:20). The authoritarian nature, rigid bureaucracy and rule-bound hierarchy of the various education departments were often replicated at school level where most of the local power was vested in the school principals (Atkinson, Wyatt & Senkhane, (eds), 1993:4). The leadership style of school principals was rigid and domineering, with close and constant control over teachers and school activities (Calitz & Shube, 1992:37). This situation militated against South African teachers fulfilling their potential as leaders.

The situation was exacerbated by the fact that teachers were generally not prepared for the role of educational leadership. The workshops that were presented to prospective and newly appointed school principals were generally geared towards enabling school leaders to fulfil managerial and routine-clerical responsibilities. Informal help and “trial and error” were regarded as the most important means of developing leadership (Ramdass, 1987:169). The result was that many school leaders were self-made men, and to a much lesser extent women, or ended up emulating other school leaders (Theron & Bothma, 1990:86). This resulted in the perpetuation of the authoritarian leadership practices that prevailed at the time.

Although women formed approximately two-thirds of the total teachers corps in South Africa they were grossly underrepresented in educational leadership positions (Chetty, Chisholm, Gardiner, Magan & Vinjevoold, 1993:10; Greyvenstein & Van der Westhuizen, 1992:271). A number of factors, especially sexism, contributed towards this state of affairs. Effectively this meant that the leadership potential of the majority of teachers remained largely untapped during the apartheid era.

The above-mentioned indicates that during the apartheid era most South African teachers were effectively prevented from fulfilling meaningful roles as leaders at school level.

One of the most significant events in the post-apartheid era has been the acceptance of a constitution that is based on democracy, equal citizenship and the protection of fundamental human rights and freedom. In the education sector the South African Constitution has found manifestation in a number of new policies. One such policy is the introduction of democratically elected and representative School Governing Bodies at every public school. This policy recognises the rights of learners, parents and educators; thereby laying the foundation for community based partnerships to drive the process of educational transformation and renewal. By doing so the political space was created for the implementation of a form of distributed leadership. In practice, however, distributed leadership in South Africa has not been actualized as envisaged in official policy. Grant (2006:512) refers to the policy-practice divide.

The aim of this article is firstly to investigate the possibilities that distributed leadership provides for meaningful participation in decision-making processes by teachers. Secondly, the article interrogates the factors that are preventing distributed leadership from being actualized in South African schools. Lastly, this article proposes the use of collaboration as a way of contributing towards the actualization of distributed leadership.

The possibilities provided by distributed leadership

According to Harris (2009:11) distributed leadership had its origin in the field of organizational theory in the mid-1960s, and has been promoted in various guises over the years: institutional theory, site-based management, dispersed leadership, shared leadership, distributive leadership and collaborative leadership. Until very recently, however, an individualistic view of leadership has dominated studies of leadership (Bottery, 2004:19-20). Theory on leadership has recently undergone a major paradigm shift: from the traditional view of leadership as centred in individual role or responsibility to alternative leadership theories which place the focus on multiple sources of leadership (Harris, 2005b). Sergiovanni (2001:55) ascribes this shift to disillusionment with the “superhero images of leadership”. In a similar vein, Fullan (2001:2) states that charismatic leadership can at most result in “episodic improvement” and eventually “frustrated or despondent dependency”. To Harris (2003a:7) this shift represents a shift from the “traditional transactional versus transformational” dichotomy to a “more sophisticated amalgam of theoretical lenses”. One of these theoretical lenses is distributed leadership which claims that leadership is not the exclusive domain of one individual, but resides in many people. Whereas transformational leadership places emphasis on the agency of the individual, distributed leadership gives prominence to “the social dynamics that emerges from the combined agency of people talking and sharing initiatives and responding to and building on these proactively and creatively” (Woods, 2005:23). Lakonski (2005:57) summarizes this paradigm shift as follows: “The weight of the leadership argument has been re-located from an over reliance on the leader’s influence to determining relevant variants of leader influence, to findings [sic] substitutes for it and to arguing for distributive leadership”. In this paradigm multiple sourced leadership is regarded as behaviour which facilitates “collective action towards a common goal” (Woods, 2005:xii).

While the notion of distributed leadership can be traced back to the mid-1960s it has only gained prominence during the last ten years, as evidenced in the research of Bennett, Harvey, Wise and Woods (2003), Goldstein (2003), Gronn (2000), Gronn and Hamilton (2004), Harris (2004), Martin, Tett and Kay (1999), O’Neill (2002), Ray, Clegg and Gordon (2004), Spillane,

Halverson and Diamond (2001) and Woods, Bennett, Wise and Harvey (2004).

An analysis of various definitions of the concept of distributed leadership reveals a number of features that can be regarded as essential elements of distributed leadership. These features suggest that distributive leadership is a form of leadership that should be seriously considered as a means of addressing the leadership crisis in many South African schools.

Hopkins and Jackson (2003:97) refer to leadership as "the intellectual capital of the organisation residing (sometimes dormant or unexpressed) within its members". Distributed leadership is based on the premise that all teachers can and must lead (Barth, 2001:85). According to Hopkins and Jackson (2003:100) all teachers have the potential and entitlement to contribute meaningfully towards leadership. It is important that their leadership capacity be unleashed and engaged in the interest of the school as organization (Harris, 2003b:78). It is the responsibility of the hierarchical leaders to facilitate this process by creating the requisite organizational conditions and climate and by providing the required support in order to unleash "the kinetic and potential energy of leadership" (Hopkins & Jackson, 2003:100). According to Harris (2003a), the notion that the leadership is not the exclusive domain of any one person is one of the most congruent findings of recent studies on effective leadership. Proponents of this notion include renowned leadership theorists like Sergiovanni, Barth and Fullan.

Research done by Fullan (2001) and Hopkins (2001) indicates that distributed leadership is the form of leadership most closely associated with improved learning outcomes. There is a growing recognition of the positive correlation between decisive and sustained school improvement and distributed leadership (Harris, 2003a:7).

Distributed leadership is dichotomous by nature. On the one hand, it is characterized by a strong framework of values, purposes and structures (Woods, 2005:87). There is a need for this framework that provides a sense of position and place in an organization, values and beliefs to relate to, and a common purpose. According to Woods (2005: 88), there is a need for "the structural pathways and signs that are the product of the cumulative organisational footprints of past actions". There is thus appreciation for the role of organisational culture in the effective implementation of distributive leadership. Woods (2005:92) refers to this as firm framing which provides structural support for democratic leadership. On the other hand, distributed leadership is characterized by flexibility making allowance for changing circumstances and emerging contingencies. Woods (2005:88) refers to this as free space which he defines as "loose-structured creative social areas where hierarchy and assumptions of knowledge, norms and practice are minimised". Within this free space creative interaction and deliberative exchange are encouraged. Furthermore, within this free space a rearrangement of power and a shift of authority within the organization occur (Harris, 2003b:75), and the power base and authority are diffused within the teaching community (Harris, 2003b:77). To Woods (2005:92) the free spaces provide teachers with the opportunity to shed the impediments that prevent them from becoming self-actualizing professionals, and they provide arenas for the often marginalized teachers to impact on organizational matters. In this regard Ray, Clegg and Gordon (2004:324) aver that the free spaces provide the teachers with an opportunity to challenge the notion that those higher up on the hierarchical ladder are the only acceptable "carriers of meaning" and "producers of truth".

Linked to the afore-mentioned, distributed leadership and hierarchical forms of leadership are not necessarily incompatible (Woods, 2005:166). Distributed leadership is not meant to displace the crucial role of the school principal. In fact, for distributed leadership to come to full fruition the structural framework which is provided by hierarchical forms of leadership is

a prerequisite (Fullan, 2003:22).

For the firm framing to be conducive to democratic deliberation it should meet certain requirements: the school has to provide for institutional rationality and positively affirm the rights and agency of all role players to participate in decision-making; it should provide a democratic milieu which is committed to the aspiration of truth which is embedded in the ideas and ideals of the school; and it should provide opportunities for deliberative democracy and reinforcement of the importance of discursive rationality (Woods, 2005:93-103).

Distributed leadership is regarded as “an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals” and “the product of conjoint agency” (Harris, 2005a:163). According to Harris and Lambert (2003:16), the concept of distributed leadership extends the boundaries of leadership insofar as it entails higher levels of teacher involvement and utilizes a wide variety of expertise, knowledge and skills.

Using distributed leadership has epistemological implications for teachers: instead of being passive recipients and implementers of revealed knowledge as contained in official policies, they can become generators of new knowledge. In order for this to actualize Woods (2005:xxii) suggests the following conditions: ongoing dialectical relations between a rationalist epistemology which accepts that certain truths are known and provide fixed parameters of knowledge, and a critical epistemology which accepts nothing as axiomatic, but subjects all knowledge to critique; the sharing of experience and expertise amongst a network of learners; and the creative application of newly generated knowledge in practical situations.

According to Harris (2005a:169) distributed leadership provides exciting possibilities for the schools. It promotes the development of collegial norms amongst teachers which contribute to school effectiveness. By allowing teachers to work as a collective it provides them with a legitimate source of authority. It challenges existing assumptions about the nature of leadership, the context within which it occurs, and the relationship between power, authority and influence.

As indicated above, distributed leadership represents a major paradigm shift. Woods represents the most cogent realization of the constraints that have to be overcome in order to bring distributed leadership to fruition. Woods (2005:73-86) identifies three main obstacles that will inhibit the actualization of distributive leadership. These are context, people and practice. The context within which schools operate is generally not conducive to democratic leadership. This context encompasses the “non-democratic structure, culture and history of schooling”, “adverse political, social and economic forces”, and the “appropriation of ‘democracy’ and ‘democratic leadership’”. As far as people are concerned, the following are regarded as major obstacles: resistance due to self-interest of those who want to retain power or those who want to remain free from responsibility, traditional deference, belief in the superiority of hierarchy, apathy and reasoned scepticism as well as capacity problems. The following are the practices that could be regarded as problematic: ineffective democracy, unauthentic democracy, the reduction of interests as a result of competition and limited resources — especially time. This framework of Woods serves as the lens through which the constraints to the actualization of distributed leadership in South African schools will be interrogated in the next section of the article.

Factors inhibiting distributed leadership in South African schools

Since 1994 the South African education system has been transformed in many respects, with teachers increasingly being expected to contribute towards transforming their schools into

democratic, professional and collaborative learning and working environments. It is only when teachers have been empowered and the organizational conditions are conducive to democratic deliberation, that the devolution of power and authority to the level of teachers and their participation in the decision-making process can be truly meaningful. However, numerous factors have militated against distributed leadership becoming actualized. Some of the most important factors are interrogated below. An attempt has been made to present these factors along the lines of categorization (context, people and practice) suggested by Woods (2005: 73-86). However, an analysis of these indicates a high measure of overlapping of these factors due to the interrelatedness of context, people and practice.

The factors that can be regarded as primarily context-based are dealt with first. Although policies have been enacted in an attempt to democratise the decision-making process, the authoritarian ethos that existed before 1994 still pervades the education system at micro and macro level. The national Department of Education (2003) refers to this as "... the entrenched bureaucratic and hierarchical management practices inherited from apartheid traditions." In a similar vein, Mathonsi (2001) refers to "a seemingly inherited ethos of the old bureaucracy." At school level, according to Grant (2006:513), school principals are only exhibiting a "rhetorical commitment" to democratic deliberations. An empirical study undertaken in the Western Cape amongst school governors has revealed that deliberations in the school governing bodies are still dominated by school principals on the basis of their authority (Adams & Waghid, 2005). Furthermore, decisions taken by school governing bodies are often ignored by the school management team under the guise of what is considered to be in "the best interest of the school". Grant (2006:525-6) attributes this affinity for autocratic leadership on the part of South African school principals to factors like an authoritarian mentality, fear of the loss of power, school cultures that are steeped in deeply ingrained attitudes, values and skills as well as ethnic, cultural and gender biases. These factors are people-based. Grant furthermore ascribes it to an understanding of leadership as being linked to a formal position due to, amongst others, a sense of insecurity on the part of teachers and official policy which emphasises principal accountability. Within this essentially top-down functionalist perspective of leadership in South African schools teachers are relegated to what Watkins (1986:4) refers to as "mere ciphers or automatons devoid of any semblance of human agency". A consequence of the authoritarian ethos that persists at many South African schools is the fact that it militates against the establishment of the free space in which creative interaction and deliberative exchange are encouraged. At such schools the possibility of teachers becoming agents of their own destiny as opposed to mere functionaries of the state is minimized. Mathonsi (2001) describes this situation as follows: "Lowly ranked managers are still on the level of depositing, serving mainly as administrators, not privileged to take initiatives, apply their creative skills and knowledge, participate in decision making, etc."

Another consequence of the authoritarian form of leadership has been the development of a tradition of non-participation in the decision-making process at school level on the part of the teachers. This factor can be regarded as being primarily practice-based. Amongst other things, this tradition has led to uncertainty about the value of greater participation and insufficient skills and lack of confidence to use these skills. In recent years South African education has experienced the emergence of a new dependence on academics and education consultants (Nxesi, 2001). Teachers, for example, have been excluded from the curriculum review process of 2001 and from the development of the whole school development policy.

Even though women have been increasingly appointed in leadership positions since 1994 and in spite of employment equity dictates, the practice of women being under-represented in

leadership positions in schools persists. In the Western Cape, for example, women dominate the teaching profession at entrance level (71.65%), yet at post level 3 only 28.3% of appointees are women and at post level 4 only 23.48% (Western Cape Education Department, 2005). This is in line with national trends in South Africa, and according to the national Department of Education (2005:43) the gender ratio has not changed significantly from 1998 to 2005 in spite of the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998. This means that that old adage of 'women teach and men manage' still applies in South African schools.

A plethora of factors are responsible for the slow pace of implementation of education policy, and which are preventing the development of a praxis in which policy and practice mesh to form a coherent whole. Many of these contextual factors occur at the micro-level of the school itself where the policy is supposed to be translated into practice, although factors at national and provincial level have affected policy implementation. A prerequisite for the successful implementation of distributed leadership at schools is the existence of a corps of educators who can actively contribute towards the establishment of distributed leadership. On the one hand, what is required are school principals who can provide what Woods (2005:92) refers to as firm framing, which is the structural framework required for distributed leadership. Distributed leadership can only come to fruition in a well structured organization which is characterized by shared values and beliefs and a common purpose. These school principals should also be empowered enough not to feel threatened by the perceived loss of status and power which accompanies the establishment of free spaces at their schools. On the other hand, what is required is a corps of teachers who have been empowered to participate meaningfully in the free spaces which have been created. The lack of appropriate leadership development opportunities for school principals and teachers is a major debilitating factor. Mangena (2002), the Deputy Minister of Education in South Africa at the time, made the following admission: "No matter how progressive and globally competitive our education policies, they will remain meaningless if we do not have adequately trained, motivated and dedicated personnel to implement at the point of service delivery." Nxesi (2001:7) bemoans the fact that there exists no national plan for teacher development. To him this represents "a reluctance to make resources available, and a failure to appreciate the importance of investing in human capital in a skilled labour market intensive such as education". This is confirmed by Nzimande (2001) who refers to the lack of a focused and systematic programme on teacher re-education and development. This can be ascribed to South Africa's macro-economic policy. Due to the pressure of globalisation and the ideological shift toward neo-liberalism, the South African Government has adopted a conservative macro-economic policy. The result is what Nzimande, as quoted by Nxesi (2001), refers to as a maintenance budget in which no funds are allocated for transformation and resources.

Due to the lack of funding the staff development programmes which are provided at provincial are generally sporadic and often take the form of crash courses to acquaint educators with some of the new policies they are expected to implement. Workshops for leadership development are generally geared towards school principals while the leadership development needs of the other educators are not addressed. There is a mistaken assumption that those principals who attend the workshops would impart their newly acquired knowledge and expertise to the rest of the staff members as part of the so-called cascade system. These programmes are not intended to empower educators to become self-fulfilling and self-sustaining leaders, but unintentionally perpetuate the cyclical hierarchy of dependency.

The majority of South African schools function in contexts which are generally not conducive to distributed leadership. The transformation of the South African education system

since 1994 has resulted in what one school principal referred to as “policy overload”. In an effort to deal with the transformational initiative, educators have generally become strained and spent, and increasingly unmotivated and frustrated (Williams, 2001:92). The National Union of Educators (2002:9) describes the teachers as being “pressurised, stressed, angry and bewildered”. Furthermore, many South African schools — especially historically disadvantaged schools — are generally regarded as being dysfunctional as confirmed by, amongst others, the erstwhile Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor (2004). This impacts negatively on the feasibility of schools implementing a form of distributed leadership.

The above-mentioned factors have resulted in the under-utilization of South African teachers as leaders. While the various new policies in the South African education system have offered teachers an opportunity to participate in meaningful decision-making, the conditions to do so have not been conducive to distributed leadership, neither have teachers in general been empowered to do so. In this regard Pandor (2006) refers to the inability of role players “to mobilize the space opened up by democracy to achieve educational liberation” from “the intellectual prison that was Bantu Education”. In the next section of this article a way forward is suggested.

The way forward: some implications for professional development

According to Bennett *et al.* (2003) the following implications for professional development result from the implementation of a form of distributed leadership at schools: extending the reach of leadership programmes and continuing professional development so that all teachers have access to leadership development opportunities; creating alternative modes of opportunities for group, team and whole school to be the focus of a continuing professional development event and programme; developing team work skills; addressing culture and cultural change; facilitating situational and organizational analysis; opening up the choices concerning the degrees of control and autonomy which are reliant on factors like values and educational purpose. To prepare educators to assume the role of distributed leadership will be an arduous task. It is thus proposed that a concerted effort be made to harness the collective human and financial capital available in South African society. What is required is a high level of collaboration amongst role-players like the national and provincial education department, higher education institutions, parastatal institutions like the Education, Training and Development Practice Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP-SETA) and the South African Council of Educators (SACE), professional organizations and non-governmental organizations.

The overarching purpose of the collaborative effort should be to provide relevant leadership development opportunities that will empower all educators in the various provinces to develop, update and expand knowledge and skills required for creating teaching and learning communities for a diverse learner population. More specifically such collaboration should serve a multiple of objectives: to develop a set of core standards that would underpin the activities of school leaders; to empower educators to undertake a critical analysis of education policy; to provide leadership for systemic educational reform in South Africa; to upgrade the professional knowledge and skills of school leaders in an intensive and focused way; to provide problem sharing and solving opportunities with others who are experiencing similar problems; to provide school leaders in the various provinces with opportunities for networking, field work, school visitations and collegial conversations; to provide school leaders with an opportunity to participate in the development of other schools’ leaders in a collegial coaching process; to equip educational leaders with the knowledge and skills required to reflect on and transform their practice; to contribute towards the transcendence of the dichotomy that exists

between education policy and practice at school level; to provide exposure to experts in the field of educational leadership in South Africa and further afield; to conduct educational research to advance knowledge, to improve the teaching and learning process, and to influence educational policy and practice.

Through collaboration, cooperation and connectivity, there is much that can be accomplished. Funding from public and private (local and international) sources will have to be acquired to enable the role payers to present programmes that are not only attractive and of a high quality, but also affordable to potential participants. Although the importance of the quality of the content of the various programmes should not be minimized, the endearing quality of leadership development programmes will lie in the opportunities they provide for collegial networking where educational leaders can break out of their professional isolation. It is equally important that the best expertise available should be utilized, especially at school level. This recommendation is based on the axiom that school leaders learn best from their peers, especially if learning takes place in a non-threatening environment free from what Woods (2005: 89) refers to as “the usual constraints of hierarchical and bureaucratic relations or the social and competitive pressures and distinctions that characterise performative and market cultures”. It is extremely important that leadership development programmes be developmental and not remedial in nature. Caution should be exercised to prevent the creation of a perception that the programmes are intended for ill-performing school leaders. Linked to the aforementioned is the fact that the programmes should not be regarded as quick fixes for the very complex challenges that face the South African school leaders. What should be envisaged is offering ongoing and sustainable programmes to school leaders. Time-off from official duties should be negotiated with the various education departments so that school leaders can participate in leadership development programmes without unduly disrupting the day-to-day running of the schools. It is this regard that the collaboration of the provincial education departments will be of the utmost importance.

A high degree of collaboration can be fostered if a general climate of openness and trust is generated amongst the role players. Smulyan (1987:57) avers that effective collaboration requires frequent and open communication, adequate time and other resources, facilitative leadership, and a commitment to the concept of parity especially regarding the contribution of each member's insights and skills to the functioning of the effective and efficient leadership.

Concluding remarks

Like all other approaches to leadership, distributed leadership is not beyond criticism. Wright (2008) provides a cogent summary of some of the main limitations of distributed leadership. According to her proponents of distributed leadership are often unmindful of the situation which constitutes and defines leadership practice. She makes specific mention of school principals who necessarily by the nature of their appointments participate as “unequal subjects”. Often too the roles and responsibilities of school principals that are defined at provincial and district level are not conducive to the implementation of distributed leadership. Insufficient consideration is often given to ethical and micropolitical issues. Furthermore, distributed leadership is often implemented in what can be referred to as misguided delegation and in worst cases scenarios as coercion. Distributed leadership is also predicated on the assumption that all teachers are willing and able to assume leadership responsibilities. Contrary to Fullan (2001), Hopkins (2001) and Harris (2003a), Wright (2008) states there is very little empirical evidence to support the claim that distributed leadership leads to improved teaching and learning. In fact, “student learning is not visible through an opaque film of lofty rhetoric and

theory". Where distributed leadership is implemented measures have to be put in place to assess the correlation between leadership effectiveness and improved learning outcomes. However, means of assessing leadership effectiveness, beyond learner achievement, should also be determined. Wright (2008) makes specific reference to factors like the sense of community instilled, the creation of engaged citizenry, and the development of compassion and understanding within the school.

As indicated in the introduction, distributed leadership is the preferred approach to leadership among the policy makers at national level. However, the viability of distributed leadership at schools is dependent on several variables. These are the level of control and autonomy allowed by departmental officials at provincial and district levels, the organizational structure and agency of the school, the social and cultural context of the school, and the source of the impetus for developing distributed leadership (Bennett *et al.*, 2003:8). All of these variables should be considered in order to determine whether distributed leadership is in fact a viable proposition. In some instances other forms of leadership or a combination thereof might be more desirable and advantageous to the school. To impose distributed leadership regardless of the prevailing conditions would be imprudent. In other instances varying degrees of distributed leadership might be desirable. By taking due cognisance of situational factors many of the perceived limitations of distributed leadership can be moderated. In addition, where distributed leadership is the preferred form of leadership measures must be put in place to determine the effectiveness thereof.

Law and Glover (2000:4) caution against what they refer to as "ready made or universally applicable theories that we can simply pull off the shelf". Woods (2005:92) too concedes that it would be extremely difficult to develop free spaces which can serve as independent zones where the teachers can gather to deliberate on issues of common concern. These free spaces represent status-free arenas which allow uninhibited interaction across social and hierarchical categories. What will be required are collective responsibility, assertiveness, belief in collegiality, activism and reasoned confidence in democratic leadership (Woods, 2005:217). All of this will have to be underpinned by a healthy amount of idealism and a belief that school leaders can be emancipated and empowered to become self-directed professionals, as opposed to mere obedient functionaries of the state. It is, however, important that the idealism be moderated by recognition of the realities of the South African situation. It may therefore be necessary to formulate long-term goals to serve as a beacon to direct the efforts of the role players. The long-term goals should be complemented by the short-term goals that do not only take cognisance of existing constraints but aim to overcome them.

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Author

Clarence Williams is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of the Western Cape and has been involved in teacher education for 22 years. His research focuses on educational leadership and management, school governance, and employment equality and equity.