

How distributed leadership can make a difference in teachers' organizational commitment? A qualitative study

Abstract

The present study explores the relation between distributed leadership and teachers' organizational commitment. Semi-structured interviews with teachers and school leaders of secondary schools were conducted. A comparative analysis of four schools with high and four schools with low committed teachers was carried out. Findings revealed differences in the leadership practices which influenced organizational commitment. The leadership practices include the quality and distribution of leadership functions, social interaction, cooperation of the leadership team, and participative decision-making. Teachers reported being more strongly committed to the school if the leaders were highly accessible, tackled problems efficiently or empowered teachers to participate, and frequently monitored teachers' daily practices.

Keywords: organizational commitment, distributed leadership, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Organizational commitment is a powerful predictor of teacher effectiveness (Dee, Henkin, & Singleton, 2006). Committed teachers have greater job effort and involvement, and are less likely to leave their positions and display other withdrawal behaviours, such as absenteeism (Singh & Billingsley, 2001). Also Firestone and Pennell (1993) claimed that organizational commitment is a critical predictor of teachers' job performance, as commitment is necessary for teachers to have the motivation to professionalize and pursue changes in their practice while dealing with the complex demands these changes present. Research showed that the organizational commitment of employees is positively related to organizational leadership practices (Meyer & Allen, 1997). This is also the case in the educational context (Nguni, Slegers, & Denessen, 2006). However, previous research examining the relation between school leadership and teachers' organizational commitment is restricted to the traditional 'superhero' leadership model, which holds that leading a school is a one-person business. Due to the increased complexity in the educational system, and especially in large secondary schools, it becomes probable that no one individual has all the knowledge, skills, and abilities that would enable him/her to accomplish all of the leadership functions, without distributing them among a team. A post-heroic leadership model has been developed (Conger & Pearce, 2003). In this model leadership is seen as a group-level phenomenon where leadership is distributed among the school team. Although distributed leadership is the new kid on the block (Gronn, 2003) and is currently en vogue (Harris, 2008), empirical research exploring distributed leadership from a descriptive perspective and examining the relation with school effectiveness and school improvement is still in its infancy. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) stated that the educational leadership literature is characterized by blind spots about the nature and necessity of distributed leadership. In the present study we explore the nature of distributed leadership and examine how differences in distributed leadership in schools might relate to teachers' organizational commitment by

using a qualitative design. Based on a previous quantitative study, we selected four high potential schools, where teachers' organizational commitment is high, and four low potential schools, where teachers' organizational commitment is low. In these two types of schools we compared the quality and distribution of two core leadership functions (i.e., supporting and supervising teachers). We further examine the cooperation of the leadership team, social interaction, and the level of teachers' participation in decision-making processes in the school.

2. Theoretical framework

In this study we follow Mowday, Steers, and Porter's (1979) definition of organizational commitment as a sense of loyalty to the workplace and individual identification with its values and goals. Organizational commitment implies that members of an organization wish to be active players in that organization, have an impact on what is going on in it, feel that they have high status within it, and are willing to contribute beyond what is expected of them (Bogler & Somech, 2004).

Several comprehensive studies have examined the antecedents of teachers' organizational commitment and indicated that teachers' organizational commitment is shaped by characteristics of organizational settings, like school leadership (Meyer & Allen, 1997; Nguni et al., 2006; Ross & Gray, 2006). In the present study we investigate if, and how distributed leadership, a hot item in the current educational management literature, is also related to teachers' organizational commitment.

Before focussing on the relation between distributed leadership and organizational commitment, we concentrate on the concept distributed leadership. Most researchers refer to Gronn (2002), who defined distributed leadership as an emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise. Also, the definition of Spillane (2006) is often cited, stating that leadership is stretched over a number of individuals, and the tasks are accomplished through the interaction of multiple leaders. Central in the theoretical framing is the social context and inter-relationships as an integral part of the

leadership activity (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007). However, from this point on many inconsistencies occur in the literature and no clear operationalization of the concept exists.

In the present study, we define distributed leadership as the distribution of leadership functions among the leadership team, which is a group of people with formal leadership roles (i.e., the principal, the assistant principals, and teacher leaders). This conceptualisation is in line with previous research (Heller & Firestone, 1995; Leithwood, et al., 2007; Pounder, Ogawa, & Adams, 1995). The restriction to the members of the leadership team as actors among whom leadership is distributed, is based on Camburn, Rowan, and Taylor (2003). They claimed that a limited number of formal members is involved in distributing leadership. However, following Copland (2003) and Elmore (2000), we believe that distributed leadership is not limited to those individuals at the top of the organization. Leadership can also be distributed among all members in the school. Therefore, we include the participative decision-making of all school members as a form of distributed leadership among the whole school team. This is in line with Leithwood, Mascall, and Strauss (2009) who claimed that participative decision-making is among the lines of leadership research closely related to distributed leadership. Furthermore, distributed leadership is not restricted to the aggregated effect of a number of individuals contributing their initiative and expertise, but also concerns the concerted action. Distributed leadership can be understood as the product of conjoint activity that emerges from multi-member organizational groupings acting in concert (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). Therefore, we include in our exploration of the distributed leadership, the social interaction and cooperation of the leadership team.

Based on the present operationalization of distributed leadership we examine how teachers' organizational commitment can be associated with the quality and distribution of leadership functions, the cooperation of the leadership team, the social interaction, and the participative decision-making of the school team.

2.1 *Quality and Distribution of Leadership Functions among the Leadership Team*

In this study, we focus on the quality and distribution of two core leadership functions: (a) supporting teachers, which involves setting directions and developing people, and (b) supervising teachers (Author et al., in press a). These functions were selected from the transformational and instructional leadership models (Hallinger, 2003). The supportive leadership function is characteristic of the transformational leadership model: the leader is responsible for fostering and setting a collective school vision, and motivating followers (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). The supervisory leadership function is characteristic of the instructional leadership model: the leader is the key actor in directing, controlling, and monitoring in schools (Bamburg & Andrews, 1990; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Research showed that supportive principals have a positive impact on teachers' organizational commitment. Teachers are more committed to the school when principals offer feedback, encouragement, acknowledgment, and clear school goals (Nguni et al., 2006; Park, 2005; Tsui & Cheng, 1999). For supervision, the literature is less unanimous. Somech (2005) stated that there is a positive relation between directive leadership, which is characterized by monitoring and supervising teachers, and organizational commitment. In contrast, Firestone and Pennell (1993) claimed that as feedback becomes less direct (i.e., comes from other sources than students) its influence on teachers' commitment becomes less clear, and as feedback becomes more evaluative teachers feel less committed.

Research concerning the relation between the distribution of leadership functions and teachers' organizational commitment is scarce. In general, it is acknowledged that distributed leadership has positive effects on teachers' self-efficacy and levels of morale (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Macbeath, 1998; in: Harris, 2008). Moreover, distributed leadership is widely promoted as a factor contributing to school effectiveness and school improvement (Harris, 2008). Therefore, it is assumed that distributed leadership is positively related with teachers' organizational commitment. However, other research indicated that

there are certain pitfalls of distributed leadership. For example, power is expected to stay at the top of the school, and the formal hierarchical structure remains a crucial element (Mayrowetz, Murphy, Louis, & Smylie, 2007). Furthermore, renegotiation of institutional roles can lead to role conflict and confusion over who should take final decisions (Smith & Piele, 1997; Smylie & Brownlee-Conyers, 1992; Neuman & Simmons, 2000). A question has also been raised as to whether distributed leadership simply results in a greater distribution of incompetence (Timperley, 2005). We believe that the benefits and pitfalls of distributed leadership can influence teachers' organizational commitment.

2.2 *Cooperation of the Leadership Team*

Based on previous research we define an effective cooperating team as a cohesive group with open expression of feelings and (dis)agreements, mutual trust among the team members, and an open communication (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003; Holtz, 2004; McGarvey & Marriott, 1997;). The members of the leadership team should have unambiguous roles, known and accepted by all team members and teachers (Barry, 1991; Chrispeels, Castillo, & Brown, 2000; Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Murphy, 2005; Muijs & Harris, 2007). Finally, the leadership team should have shared aims and objectives, and should be oriented towards the same school goals (Bennett et al., 2003; Briggs & Wohlstetter, 2003; Macbeath, 2005; Mayrowetz et al., 2007; Oduro, 2004).

In the characteristics of the leadership teams we can identify two dimensions: the rational-technical dimension and the cultural-process oriented dimension (First author removed for peer review, Verhoeven, Beuselinck, Van den Broeck, & Vandenberghe, 1999; van den Berg, Vandenberghe, and Slegers, 1999). The rational-technical dimension refers to the clarity of formalized rules and procedures, roles, task-specialization and hierarchy. The organic cultural-process oriented dimension is characterized by cohesion and trust, informal and personal communication, participation, unity and shared values. Research indicated that components of both dimensions can be important predictors of team members' organizational

commitment. For example, Wech, Mossholder, Steel, and Bennett (1998) stated that group cohesion reinforces the organizational commitment. Moreover, role clarity has a positive association with organizational commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Tao, Takagi, Ishida, & Masuda, 1998).

2.3 Social Interaction

The social interaction of multiple leaders is an important factor contributing to successful distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006). In order to study this social interaction in schools, we focus on the communication within the leadership team, and between school leaders and teachers. Previous research indicated that an open communication, which is defined by a work climate where people feel comfortable sharing ideas and information with other organizational members, strengthens organizational commitment (Dee et al., 2006). Similarly, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) claimed that good communication within the school enhances the work environment and increases organizational commitment.

2.4 Participative Decision-making

Research indicated a positive relation between teachers' participation in decision-making processes and their organizational commitment (Diosdado, 2008; Kushman, 1992). Graham (1996) stated that it is important for a teacher to have an active influence on the school culture. However, other studies could not confirm the relation between participative decision-making and organizational commitment (Bogler & Somech, 2004; Louis, 1998; Nir, 2002; Somech, 2005). According to Firestone and Pennell (1993), the effect of participative decision-making on organizational commitment varies in significance depending on a variety of conditions. These include the areas over which teachers have influence, administrative openness to such influence, normative acceptance of such opportunities among teachers, the organization of the participatory process, whether teachers really have influence, and the results of the decision-making process.

3. Research Objectives

In the present study, we attempt to clarify the relation between distributed leadership and teachers' organizational commitment. We explore the differences in the distribution of leadership in four high potential schools where teachers' organizational commitment is high, and four low potential schools where teachers' organizational commitment is low. By means of semi-structured interviews we investigate how these differences have influenced teachers' organizational commitment.

4. Methodology

4.1 *Data Collection*

The present study is part of a larger research project on school members' organizational commitment. A quantitative study, performed during the spring of 2007, included 1 902 respondents from 46 schools in Flanders (Belgium). The main conclusion of the qualitative study was that teachers' perceptions of the quality of the supportive leadership function and the cooperation of the leadership team were the key factors in predicting teachers' organizational commitment. Teachers' organizational commitment was also associated with participative decision-making, and to a lesser extent with the distribution of support. The distribution of supervision was marginally, negatively related to teachers' commitment and the quality of the supervisory leadership function was not associated with teachers' organizational commitment (Author et al., in press a, in press b).

The present follow-up study uses a qualitative design. Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted in winter 2007-2008 on two sets (high and low potential) of four schools, selected from the 46 schools which participated in the previous study (see 3.2 data sampling). In each school selected for the present study, we conducted individual interviews with the principal, minimum one assistant principal, minimum one teacher leader, and focus group interviews with approximately four teachers from the second stage (i.e., 14–16-year-old pupils). All interviewees were selected at random by the principal. In total we conducted 34 interviews with 59 respondents. The triangulation of perceptual viewpoints helped to validate

the responses of the different subgroups. An interview protocol based on the research objectives was set up. This interview protocol focused on the quality and distribution of the supportive and supervisory leadership function, cooperation of the leadership team, social interaction, teachers' participative decision-making, and the organizational commitment. On average the interviews lasted 1 to 1.5 hours each.

4.2 Data Sampling

In order to select two sets (high and low potential) of four schools, a purposeful sampling of extreme cases was carried out based on the data obtained from the 46 schools which participated in the previous quantitative study. Due to this selection process differences on specified characteristics were maximized (Taylor & Tashakkori, 1995; Wiersma, 2000). First, the individual responses of teachers on the quantitative survey were aggregated for each school, which resulted in one score on each study variable per school. Second, we developed one component by performing a principal component analysis of the study variables, which in previous research revealed a significant positive relation with organizational commitment (i.e., quality of support, distribution of support, cooperation of the leadership team, and participative decision-making), and organizational commitment. Based on this analysis we ranked the 46 schools, and the schools with the lowest and highest scores were selected for the follow-up interviews. The two sets of four schools were labelled as high potential (HIGH A-D) and low potential (LOW E-H) schools. Information of the high and the low potential schools is provided in Appendix.

4.3 Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and a coding scheme was developed based on the theoretical framework and research objectives of the present study. The coding scheme had seven categories (i.e., setting directions, developing people, supervision of teachers, cooperation of the leadership team, social interaction, participative decision-making, and organizational commitment). Each category had several subcategories to allow finely tuned

analysis. Two coders (i.e., the first author and a researcher not familiar with the study) analyzed the data. After a training, in which the study objectives were illuminated, the meaning of each category was discussed in detail, and six interviews were coded simultaneously, the two coders analyzed all interviews independently. The intercoder-reliability, was 82%, which is comparable to the standard of 80% (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The interview transcripts were analyzed using within- and cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). First, each interview transcript was coded as a single case, looking for themes or patterns in participants' responses. Each unit of meaning, which is a consistent theme or idea, was given a code. Second, the within-case analysis was extended by conducting a cross-case analysis of all interviewees in one school. Third, a cross-case analysis was conducted, where the eight schools were compared with each other. Finally, the within-case and cross-case analyses were synthesized to generate overall findings. The Atlas.ti 4.1 software tool was used to organize the interviews.

5. Results

5.1 Organizational Commitment

In line with the quantitative study, the qualitative study revealed that in the high potential schools, teachers reported that they felt committed towards the school; that they were proud of their school and were willing to exert themselves for the school. Interviewees reported a positive dynamism, which was appreciated by the school leaders and in turn stimulated teachers to do more. In the low potential schools, however, teachers' morale was very low. They reported that they believed that being a teacher stops at the classroom-door and as a consequence they did not feel committed to the school. Remarkably, the school leaders recognized this problem, but they felt unable to conquer the negativism, which demotivated school members who were initially committed to the school.

In what follows, we compare the high and the low potential schools, focussing on variables related to distributed leadership. The main differences are summarized in Table 1.

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5.2 Quality and Distribution of Leadership Functions among the Leadership Team

In the large secondary schools which have extensive leadership teams, we expected a strong and rigid task-delegation, where school leaders perform different functions independently. Surprisingly, the data revealed that this was not the case in the high potential schools. In these schools, minimal one strong leader was responsible for setting directions, developing people, and monitoring the daily practices of teachers. However, the other members of the leadership team were also involved in the leadership functions, each on a different level. Conversely, in the low potential schools it was unclear who actually took the leading role. Furthermore, in the high potential schools, much importance was attached to an educational vision and professional development. In the low potential schools, that was not a priority for the school leaders. Differences also occurred in the monitoring culture of teachers' daily practices. In the high potential schools the monitoring of teachers' day-to-day practices was a main concern, whereas in the low potential schools this monitoring was non-existent or not imbedded in the school culture. Below we discuss these results more in depth.

5.2.1 Supportive leadership

a. Setting directions. Major differences existed between the high and low potential schools in the way directions were set and in the way the school vision was developed. In all high potential schools, at least one member of the leadership team was a strong transformational leader who developed a clear vision, directing teachers towards the same goals. In HIGH C and D the implementation of the school vision was a formally distributed practice among the principal (who was the main actor), the assistant principals, and the teacher leaders. For the implementation of the school vision in HIGH A and B, the principal was the central figure. Nevertheless, in these schools the educational project was discussed

regularly within the leadership team, which indicates the presence of an informal distribution of leadership in HIGH A and B. It was remarkable that, although there were differences between the high potential schools in the formalization of the distribution of setting directions, the data revealed that this leadership function was not a one-person business. All members of the leadership team were directly or indirectly involved. Furthermore, in the high potential schools, teachers were involved in developing and implementing the school vision. For example, in HIGH A the school mission had recently been readapted based on the input of the teachers. A workshop concerning the school mission was set up and all teachers completed a survey. Based on the results of this survey, an ad hoc committee of teachers and leaders developed a first version of the new school mission, which was discussed with the teachers and again readapted by the committee. Finally, at the end of each school year teachers were questioned about how they achieve the school mission. This example shows that in these high potential schools, the development of a school vision started at the level of the leaders, but also teachers were involved in the process of developing the vision of the school. Due to the involvement of teachers, there was a lively school vision, known and accepted by the school team. To conclude, a collective aim to achieve common goals and directions was indicative of the high potential schools.

In contrast, in the low potential schools, setting directions and developing a school vision was formally limited to the school principal. The other members of the leadership team were less involved in this leadership function and teachers were neglected as active participants. Furthermore, the development and implementation of school goals was not a priority for the leaders of the low potential schools. Managing the school, such as administrative tasks or preparing for the inspectorate, received more attention than creating a unified educational mission. “Do we have a vision?”, was a question echoed by the teachers of the low potential schools. We believe that due to the disregard for setting directions, and the limited involvement of the school team, a sense of unity in the school vision was absent,

and clear directions for teachers were lacking, which was a source for the low organizational commitment of the teachers.

b. Developing people. An important difference between the high and low potential schools was the extent to which the professional development of the staff was distributed. In the high potential schools, teachers recognized that developing people was not a function of one leader. Instead it was performed by all members of the leadership team. Due to the role division, teachers of the second stage (i.e., 14–16-year-old pupils) mainly received support from one leader, but the other leaders were also supportive. Developing teachers was a central concern for all school leaders of the high potential schools.

In contrast, in the low potential schools, developing people was not a main concern and it was unclear who actually performed this leadership function. For example, in LOW E developing people was officially restricted to the principal. But, due to his responsibility as a coordinating principal of the regional educational agency, he had no time to effectively support teachers in his school. In LOW H developing people was mainly performed by the ad interim assistant principal. However, she was overburdened because her task was pupil support, and teachers' claimed that developing and supporting teachers must be a core job of the principal. In LOW G and F developing people was less centralized, and sufficient coordination of the task was lacking. Consequently, no leader performed this leadership function effectively.

The differences between the high and low potential schools also appeared in the informal support of teachers. Within each high potential school, there was evidence of a supportive culture. Teachers were encouraged to take initiatives, they felt respected, and received professional recognition and rewards: "They are always right behind us and very often they just ask: 'How are you?' Nothing official, but they ask." (teacher HIGH B).

This supportive culture did not exist in the low potential schools. For example, a teacher of LOW E stated: "We have to solve our own problems. The principal loses himself in details.

The important things, like supporting and encouraging teachers, that doesn't happen.” But how can you expect to have committed teachers, if they never hear they are doing a good job? Support and developing teachers was not prioritized in the low potential schools.

We don't have enough time to give support. We are overburdened. There is a lack of time to recognize when somebody needs a pat on the back. (teacher leader LOW G)

A self-evaluation revealed that in our school there is a lack of communication and a lack of appreciation from the leaders towards the teachers. And it's true, teachers do need more support, but I don't know how. (principal LOW H)

These quotes imply that school leaders knew that teachers needed more informal support, but no attempts were made to respond to this. In LOW G, the principal could not solve the problem because his physical presence in the school was limited. In LOW H, the principal only performed a managerial role from behind his desk, and he lacks the competence to tell people they are doing well.

5.2.2 Supervisory Leadership

The interviews did not reveal differences between the high and low potential schools for the distribution or for the quality of formal evaluations of teachers. The main distinction occurred for the monitoring of teachers' daily practices. In the high potential schools, exams, school reports of pupils, and reports of subject meetings were regularly read, checked, and commented on by the principal and/or assistant principal. School leaders also personally addressed teachers who were underachieving, stating “what doesn't get attention fades away” (principal HIGH A). The principal and assistant principals of the high potential schools put great effort into monitoring teachers, but this supervision was not experienced as something negative. In contrast, teachers considered the supervision as motivating as it implied that leaders were involved in the teaching process and that teachers were appreciated and valued. Also, it was remarkable that school leaders of the high potential schools did not avoid difficulties and intervened when problems occurred. For example, in HIGH B teachers started

gossiping about a retired teacher who, according to some teachers, was not invited at a reception. Immediately, the principal copied the invitation and confirmation of this teacher and hang it on the wall of the staff room. She stated: “I directly try to stop the negative. You can ignore it, but then it accumulates and creates a negative atmosphere. I react”. As can be expected, ignoring these little problems was indicative for the low potential schools.

Of the low potential schools, a formal supervisory culture existed in LOW F and G. In LOW F two underachieving teachers were recently suspended. However, the suspension was unprecedented, and due to the lack of communication with the other teachers about this decision, it led to negativism. In LOW G the leadership team had just started to monitor one department per year. For the teachers this supervision was a culture shock, because the school evolved from a laissez-faire culture to a more repressive culture. So, both LOW F and G were characterized by a supervisory culture, which arose from a negative, punishing culture. In LOW H and E there was no monitoring culture, and teachers who did not act upon the school goals (e.g., not attending compulsory professional development) were not reprimanded. Both school leaders acknowledged this limitation:

What is lacking in our school is the follow-up of teachers. (principal LOW H)

There is limited control. There is just no time for it. (principal LOW E)

Again, the school leaders knew what was going wrong in their school, but excuses were made and nothing changed.

5.3 Cooperation of the Leadership Team

As mentioned before (cf. 2.2) two dimensions of leadership team characteristics can be identified: (a) the rational-technical dimension, which refers to the clarity of formalized rules and procedures, roles, task-specialization and hierarchy, and (b) the cultural-process oriented dimension, which refers to cohesion and trust, informal and personal communication, participation, unity and shared values (First author removed for peer review, Verhoeven, Beuselinck, Van den Broeck, & Vandenberghe, 1999; van den Berg, Vandenberghe, and

Sleegers, 1999). As represented in Table 2, the leadership teams of two low potential (LOW G-F) and two high potential (HIGH D-F) schools are strongly characterized as rational-technical teams, with clear roles and task-specialization. The leadership teams of the other low potential (LOW E-H) and high potential (HIGH A-B) schools are limitedly characterized as rational-technical teams, because the roles are less clear and there is no hierarchy. For the cultural-process dimensions, Table 2 shows that the leadership teams of all high potential schools are characterized by cohesion, trust, and unity, and therefore are strongly related to the cultural-process oriented dimension. In contrast, the leadership teams of all low potential schools are only limitedly characterized by the cultural-process oriented dimension. Hence, the data suggested that only the characteristics of the cultural-process oriented leadership team differed for the high and low potential schools. It is not important for teachers that their leadership team has clear rules or hierarchies. More important is that the leadership team is characterized by cohesion, communication, participation, unity and shared values. This is an important result, adding new insights to the current knowledge concerning effective teams (cf. Hackman, 1990).

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5.3.1 Rational-technical leadership teams

Two high potential schools (i.e., HIGH D and C) were characterized by clear role divisions based on the expertise of the leadership team members, known and accepted by all school members. This was exemplified during the focus group interview in HIGH D where a teacher showed the formalized role division between all school leaders, which he always carried with him.

According to the leaders of all low potential schools, the leadership teams were also highly centralized and bureaucratic, with a lot of formalization and standardization. In LOW G and F teachers also believed that the new leadership teams had relatively clear role divisions, and formalization. However, in LOW H and E teachers did not confirm the school

leaders' opinion and the school leaders of these schools misjudged teachers' perceptions of the leadership team. The teachers stated that the roles of the different leaders were not clear, nor were they sufficiently communicated. For example, the principal of LOW H admitted: "We have a document with the specific role divisions, but if you want to understand it, you must know the school already." Furthermore, a teacher of LOW E stated: "These assistant principals are there, but what their functions are, remains a mystery. It is complete chaos."

HIGH A and B also scored low on the rational-technical aspects, because there was no task specialization, or clear centralization. These schools had fluid role divisions at the level of the senior managers. We assumed this lack of rational-technical characteristics of the leadership team would have a negative impact on teachers. However, this was not the case. According to all interviewees the fluid role division was not an obstacle, because: "teachers can always park their questions." (principal HIGH A) or "teachers feel that the tasks are performed correctly and they can always call on both of us." (principal HIGH B).

5.3.2 Cultural-process oriented leadership teams

The data revealed that the leadership teams of all high potential schools scored high on the cultural-process oriented dimension. The interviewees from these schools defined their leadership team as a hard working cohesive and open group, with positive team dynamics and all members on the same wavelength. The meetings were characterized by open expression of ideas and intense discussions, which were seen as an enrichment. They came to one final decision, which was expressed to the teachers in a unified voice. If changes in the management structure occurred (e.g., HIGH D and C) they did not influence teachers' perceptions concerning the cohesion of the team, because the changes did not result in a gap with the former school policy or the working methods, and because the profound communication with teachers concerning the changes. In HIGH D and C there was a stable long term vision of the leadership team, which was sustained even when changes occurred. Therefore, teachers accepted the changes and claimed that an effective cooperative team led

the school. This implies that change does not necessarily lead to negativism. When the changes are well-prepared and communicated, and do not result in major breaks, it does not have a negative influence on teachers' commitment.

Some members of the leadership teams of the low potential schools also believed that they had characteristics of the cultural-process oriented type. However, this was not confirmed by the teachers. Furthermore, in some leadership teams of low potential schools there was a lack of unity or shared values. In LOW H the technical assistant principal noted:

We make a decision, but afterwards it turns out that the technical teacher leader communicates it differently, or acts differently, against our will. We make clear agreements, but he has another opinion. During the meetings he won't express his opinion, no, but afterwards he will explain his own ideas to the teachers of his department.

In all leadership teams of the low potential schools, major changes have taken place in the composition of the team. Compared to the high potential schools, the changes were not well-prepared and there was no sufficient communication to the teachers. Therefore, the changes were not accepted by the teachers, which negatively influenced teachers' perceptions concerning the cohesion, the unity, and the shared values of the leadership team.

5.4 Social Interaction

The data revealed that a main distinction between the high and low potential schools was situated in the social interaction. Senior managers of high potential schools invest in their visibility, approachability and direct communication with teacher leaders and teachers. In contrast, school leaders of the low potential schools were less visible and/or approachable. In the following part we discuss this more in depth.

An important difference between the high and low potential schools was the communication between the senior managers and the teacher leaders. In the low potential schools, except for LOW G, the interviewees complained that there were no structured

meetings between the senior managers and the teacher leaders. It is clear that each group of leaders worked without formal communication or coordination between the groups, which was perceived as a deficiency by all interviewees.

Additionally, the high and low potential schools differed in their informal communication with teachers. In the high potential schools, interviewees believed that all members of the leadership team were visible, accessible and listened to their problems. For example, in HIGH B the assistant principal noted:

I'm always in the staff room during the breaks. The principal also does that. When you are there, you hear a lot and people can approach you. This accessibility is really important.

The priority of being approachable was also exemplified by the principal of HIGH B, who moved her office from an obscure place on the second floor to a room next to the school entrance, in order to be easily accessible for everybody. Furthermore, in the high potential schools, school leaders individually and personally interacted with teachers to provide job-related support. For example, the school leaders individually addressed teachers to stimulate their professional development. The leaders admitted that this personal interaction was time-consuming and administrative tasks consequently had to be postponed until after the school hours.

In the low potential schools there was limited personal interaction between leaders and teachers. For example, in the low potential schools professional development was only stimulated indirectly through brochures in the staff room. Being accessible was not a main concern of the school leaders. For instance, in LOW F the school leaders were not accessible due to regular meetings preparing for the inspectorate, or discussing the changes in the management team; in LOW E the principal was often out of the office; and in LOW H the teachers claimed that in the beginning of their teaching career they did not know who the principal was, and the principal did not recognize the teachers. In contrast to the other low

potential schools, LOW G was characterized by more openness and accessibility of the new leadership team. However, this openness worked counter-productive for the school leaders.

I can't manage to do all my work. And why not? Sometimes teachers enter my room and ask me for a piece of chalk. But I'm not the person who should solve that. (principal LOW G)

Did this problem of over-questioning also occur in the high potential schools? No, in these schools materialistic questions were canalized, for example through the secretariat.

Additionally, not only the amount and directness of communication, also the style of the communication differed between the high and low potential schools. In the high potential schools, teachers noted that things were asked of them ("Is it possible?"), while teachers from the low potential schools remarked that some leaders were too directive and dictated to the teachers ("You have to!"). The interviews revealed that teachers were very sensitive about these small differences.

Finally, there was a discrepancy between the two groups of schools in the personal contacts between teachers and school leaders. In the high potential schools, interpersonal relationships between teachers and leaders were characterized by an empathic and attentive atmosphere (e.g., attending weddings or funerals, calling teachers who are on sick-leave). This did not happen in the low potential schools.

5.5 Participative Decision-making

There were important differences between the high and low potential schools in the participative decision-making. In the high potential schools, teachers were enthusiastic to take part in the school decisions, in formal structures as well as in ad hoc committees. In the low potential schools this was not the case: although the participative structures existed, there was limited participation of teachers. Therefore, while both types of schools offer opportunities for teachers to participate, there are differences in the level of participation of the teachers. One

explanation may be that in the low potential schools, teachers felt that the leaders disregarded their input. Below we discuss this in more depth.

In the high potential schools, there existed many formal structures in which teachers were actively involved. There was a broad participation and representation of teachers in working groups and various initiatives or ad hoc committees. In HIGH B the extensive involvement of teachers in several committees was compulsory because the school had no formal teacher leaders. The principal stated:

The school is carried by the whole school team, not a middle layer selected by the principal. I want to run the school with the whole team. If teachers are not empowered, it fails.

In the other high potential schools, participative decision-making was not an obligation. However, the school climate and the social peer pressure led to the participation of most teachers. For example, in HIGH C a new committee was set up; six members were asked for, but ten teachers voluntarily applied for membership. It is important to note that in all high potential schools, such active involvement was a criterion in the recruitment of teachers: teachers knew that their job was more than just being a classroom teacher; they were assumed to be team players and involvement in school decision-making was expected.

In the low potential schools, formal structures and ad hoc committees for teachers to participate also existed. However, most teachers were not involved in decision-making processes. The teachers reported that they felt indifferent and apathetic towards participation, and the committees were perceived as unnecessary or meaningless. In the low potential schools, formal and/or ad hoc committees often did not have enough participants to operate effectively. The teachers of LOW E and F claimed that their lack of willingness to participate was because they were not listened to when they made suggestions. At first sight, the formal participation of teachers in LOW H and G seemed effective. In LOW H the principal even boasted that there were extensive opportunities for teachers to participate in formal

committees. However, teachers did not know about these opportunities and/or were not interested in them. In LOW G, participation of teachers in decision-making was a new phenomenon, because the school culture was characterized by a traditional top-down management style. However, teachers saw the new formal structures as an opportunity to complain about ‘futilities’, instead of participating in broader school decisions. Additionally, in the low potential schools, participation stopped at the level of the formal structures. One teacher of LOW H stated: “This is a form of false participation. It’s an empty box”, because only the elected members knew what was discussed or decided. There was limited involvement in school decision-making of the classroom-teachers: participative decision-making was restricted to ‘the happy few’, contrary to the participative decision-making in the high potential schools.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study is one of the few studies exploring the relation between distributed leadership and organizational commitment of teachers. The interviews with school leaders and teachers revealed that the distributed leadership of four high and four low potential schools differed considerably. Previous research reported that schools that are led in an ineffective way create major obstacles to teachers’ organizational commitment (Firestone & Pennell, 1993), which is in line with our findings. Several important issues were discussed during the interviews that revealed teachers’ perceptions about distributed leadership.

First, the high potential schools had minimum one strong transformational leader, who put much emphasis on the personal interactions with teachers. This interaction was important in order to set directions, provide support, and monitor teachers’ daily practices. Furthermore, the distributed leadership in the high potential schools was not restricted to a formal delegation of tasks. In contrast, all members of the leadership team were, formally or informally, involved in the leadership function. In the low potential schools the leadership was vague. There was no presence of strong educational leadership, and the distribution of

leadership was limited to a rigid delegation of tasks, without a dynamic interaction between leaders and followers and their situational contexts. Following Gronn (2002) and Spillane (2006), this interaction is, however, essential in distributed leadership. In LOW G and H, the core leadership functions were expected to be performed by the school leader. However, due to poor time-management or other priorities, the leadership functions could not be performed effectively. In LOW E and F, it was unclear who took the lead in the leadership functions; because of the strict delegation of leadership functions, neither the other members of the leadership team nor the teachers were engaged in leading the school. It is remarkable that although different leaders were part of the leadership team, they could not manage to run the school effectively. In these schools the teachers did not receive the support they needed and their daily practices were not monitored by the school leaders, which negatively affected teachers' organizational commitment. These findings correspond with previous research (Nguni et al., 2006; Park, 2005; Singh & Billingsley, 1998; Tsui & Cheng, 1999) which suggests that providing sufficient support and monitoring teachers' daily practices is crucial for teachers' organizational commitment. Based on the present study, we can extend these findings and conclude that this is not only true for the traditional 'single person' leadership, but also for distributed leadership. The interviews showed that it is not the numerical action of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002) or the leadership-plus aspect (Spillane, 2006), which is the aggregated effect of a number of individuals contributing their individual initiative and expertise in different ways to a group organization, that is important for teachers' organizational commitment. Rather, it is the concertive action of people working together within a pattern of interpersonal relationships (Gronn, 2002), or the practice aspect of distributed leadership, which moves the focus from aggregating the actions of individual leaders to the interaction among leaders, followers, and their situation (Spillane, 2006), that is crucial for teachers commitment to the school.

Second, in the present study we examined the operation of the leadership team by distinguishing two dimensions: (a) rational-technical, and (b) cultural-process oriented dimension. Our findings revealed that in the low potential schools, a rigid formalization and specialization existed, which is characteristic of the rational-technical dimension. We expected that these characteristics of the rational-technical team would reduce teachers' perception of the role ambiguity of leaders, and thus lead to more commitment. However, due to its bureaucratic nature, and the limited interaction at the level of the leadership team, teachers' questions often remained unanswered. In HIGH C and D there was clear task division, and centralization at the level of the leadership team, but due to the cohesion, the shared values, and the regular, open communication, teachers were committed. The leadership teams of the other two high potential schools, HIGH A and B, were less characterized as rational-technical teams. At first sight it is striking that the lack of formalization or standardization, specialization, and centralization did not cause any problems in these schools, as each member of the leadership team was accessible and all school leaders were involved in the leadership functions. In HIGH A and B the distribution of leadership resulted in a unified cooperation of all leaders who worked together in a cohesive way towards the same school goals. This cohesion was definitely not the case in the low potential schools. To conclude, the cultural-process characteristics of the leadership teams were key indicators for teachers' organizational commitment, and not the rational-technical characteristics of the leadership teams. Furthermore, the leadership teams of the high potential schools were stable teams, whereas the low potential schools were characterized by organizational instability of the leadership teams, which according to Hackman (1990) invariably leads to problems, and therefore may have a negative influence on teachers' organizational commitment. Leadership teams are vulnerable to membership changes (Gronn, 2003). Based on the present study, we want to modify this statement. It appeared that some schools are more vulnerable than others. It was not the change in the leadership team that influenced teachers' perceptions; instead it

was the preliminary process preceding this change which affected teachers' perceptions of the leadership team. If the changes in the leadership team were well-prepared and sufficiently communicated with the teachers, they did not encounter problems. If the replacements of members of the leadership team occurred unprepared and the communication was ineffective, and led to a break with the former school culture, the changes in the leadership team had a negative influence on teachers' organizational commitment.

Third, following Dee et al. (2006) and Mathieu and Zajac (1990) we expected that social interaction would strengthen organizational commitment. We found that in the high potential schools leaders were visible and accessible and they directly approached teachers. Frequent personal interaction was a priority for all leaders. In contrast, in the low potential schools the school leaders stayed in their office without making much direct contact with their followers. We believe that reciprocal approachability between teachers and leaders is an important driving force for teachers' organizational commitment. This finding confirms the research of Barnett and McCornick (2003), who stated that building relationships with teachers is central to the leadership of school leaders, because it is through these relationships leaders establish the leadership and encourage teachers to apply their abilities, skills and efforts towards shared purposes.

Finally, we explored the level of participative decision-making of teachers of the high and low potential schools. Although the high potential schools were led by strong school leaders, this did not imply that they run the school in a dictatorial way. In contrast, participative decision-making of the whole school team was encouraged. As a result teachers reported that they felt included in decisions that matter to them, their knowledge and expertise were acknowledged and they were motivated to participate in decision-making. The participation of teachers in the decisions of the school intensified their commitment to the decision making process, and the school in general, which corroborates the results of Tschannen-Moran (2001). The opportunity to participate in the decision making in the school

was also offered in the low potential schools. However, teachers perceived their participation in the school decisions as pointless and remarked that the school leaders did not take their opinions into account. Therefore, teachers remained only leaders in their classroom, without participating in the broader school policy. Our findings indicated that leadership should not be restricted to the top of the organization and that teachers should have meaningful input in school decisions.

Based on these study findings, we believe that the differences between the two types of schools may have two main origins: (a) the accuracy of priorities, and (b) the problem solving skills.

a. The accuracy of priorities. The school leaders of some low potential schools had the skills to, for example, support teachers in an empathic way, but due to their limited presence in the school there was insufficient time to effectively perform the leadership functions. These school leaders worked towards managing the school; they were only involved in maintenance matter with a fire-fighting approach. No effort was put into setting directions, developing teachers, and/or the monitoring of teachers, because these functions were not the leaders' main priority. In the high potential schools, these functions were the top priority of all members of the leadership team. Being a school leader requires a lot of time and energy, especially concerning availability, and social interaction. In consequence, the administrative tasks were postponed after school hours or distributed among the other members of the leadership team.

b. The problem solving skills. School leaders of the low potential schools were unable to identify solutions for 'problems' occurring in the school. As the results of the interviews showed, the school leaders knew the school's weaknesses, but they admitted that they failed to effectively tackle the problems. In contrast, all school leaders in the high potential schools had the knowledge, competences, and the social skills to solve problems and to lead the school effectively.

There were some limitations to the present research. First, focus group interviews might have a synergetic effect, and the statements of the participants can be influenced by group interaction and the opinions of others, which can lead towards a dilution or an overstatement of the own perceptions by the group pressure. Second, only interviews with school leaders and teachers were performed. Direct observation of the leadership teams during their work and meetings, or the shadowing of school members would have added useful information. A third limitation is related to the reliability and validity issue in qualitative research. It would be interesting to give the results of the interviews back to the schools in order to enhance the validity of our findings. By allowing participants to read the researchers' interpretations, they could be given the opportunity to re-express their thoughts and verify the researcher's interpretation. However, due to anonymity of the participants this was not an option. Finally, other variables may also affect teachers' organizational commitment and could be examined in further research. Empirical research showed that other organizational factors, such as school climate, and school culture (Reyes, 1992), or personal variables, such as self-efficacy (Ross & Gray, 2006), also affect teachers' organizational commitment. We did not include these variables in our study.

Nevertheless, the findings of the present study showed that there were important limitations in the distributed leadership of the low potential schools, which did not occur in the high potential schools. Therefore, our findings have important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, our study responds to the need to understand distributed leadership in practice, and how it might influence teachers' organizational commitment, which is strongly related to teacher effectiveness (Park, 2005; Singh & Billingsley, 2001). Most research on distributed leadership focused on the work that leaders do, the practices which are distributed, and who takes on which practices (Mascall, Leithwood, Strauss, & Sacks, 2008). The present study extends the management literature by uncovering differences

in characteristics of distributed leadership and its relation with teachers' organizational commitment by using qualitative research.

Our study also has important practical implications for school leaders in order to enhance the commitment of teachers to the school. In addition to creating leadership teams with members who have professional skills, school leaders must be aware of the interpersonal issues that arise in their leadership team. Members of the leadership team must be able to work together in a collaborative way, and communicate openly towards each other and towards the teachers. Furthermore, school leaders should have the skills to support and monitor teachers by being visible and accessible and directly approach teachers. This is not a one-person business, but a culture that exist in the school. Finally, the importance of stimulating teachers to actively participate in school decision-making so that teachers' opinions and propositions may result in concrete actions, should be acknowledged by all school leaders. These practical implications are not self-evident to implement in large secondary school, especially personally supporting, monitoring, and empowering teachers to participate in decision-making. However, in the studied high potential schools these practices are the main priority of all leaders. It is indeed time-consuming for school leaders, but the positive influence on teachers' organizational commitment towards the school is worth the effort, and therefore should receive extensive attention in the recruitment and professional development of all school leaders.

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