

## **Understanding distributed leadership in South African schools: Challenges and prospects**

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Prior to 1994, the South African education system was entrenched by authoritarian leadership in which ultimate authority was vested in school principals and power was not distributed to other members of the school. However, the importance of distributed leadership has increasingly gained prominence across the world. After apartheid in 1994, the government has attempted to educate school leaders on the efficacy of distributing leadership among all stakeholders and its effectiveness on learner achievement. This paper outlines distributed leadership and the need for it in schools. It then unpacks the South African school contexts during apartheid in relation to their management and leadership and considers the extent of departure of the current schools from those characteristics of the apartheid dispensation. The paper argues that, notwithstanding the government's efforts to implement educational reform in the nature of school leadership, the apartheid legacy still lives on, largely because the conditions that characterised the racially segregated schools during apartheid and their influence upon leadership still prevail. Since leadership is shaped by prevailing conditions and circumstances, this paper suggests a need to interrogate the nature of leadership across schools representative of the racial division of schools under the apartheid dispensation.

### **Introduction**

One of the problems affecting the South African education system is the decentralisation of authority in schools. During apartheid, all power and authority in schools rested solely with the principal, and teacher participation in decision-making and leadership roles was minimal or absent in most schools. In 1994, the government inherited differentiated education systems from the apartheid government characterised by immense inequality in resource allocation (Graven, 2014). Since then, the government has tried various equality and equity interventions to transform the education system.

One focus area for educational reform has been the quality of school leadership in the schools. Apartheid school leadership was largely authoritarian, hierarchical and centralised on the principal and resulted in low learner performance, because teachers did not work to the best of their abilities. School leadership was a microcosm of apartheid governance where the system dictated and the individual complied. Teachers' working environments were not conducive to the development of leadership in areas where they had potential and interest. They had no opportunity to demonstrate what they were able to do and hence there was no growth in their profession. Spillane and Healey (2010) viewed leadership as key to transformation in schools. Leadership in schools affects learners' performance. Cook (2014) argued that a good school is directed by a good leader who brings about an environment that is conducive for all stakeholders to realise their potential and strengths and to lead in new initiatives. Distributed leadership, a perspective gaining prominence in the world, is being advocated because it has the potential to make the

school leaders' demands successful, contribute to classroom achievement because correct decisions are done collaboratively, and affect the overall school reform in a positive way (Botha, 2016). Harris (2013, p. 12) called this leadership, 'leadership that is shared within, between and across organizations.'

This paper reviews the efficacy of distributed leadership and the manner in which different school contexts can influence various leadership styles. The paper is premised on the assumption that leadership affects learner performance and the better the leadership style, the better the learner performance in the school. The opposite in that case would equally hold true.

## **The conception and efficacy of distributed leadership in schools**

Numerous scholars have defined 'distributed leadership' differently. Elmore (2000) described distributed leadership as multiple sources of guidance and direction following the forms of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture, while Andrews and Lewis (2004) conceptualised it as a form of parallel leadership where teacher leaders work with principal leaders, in distinctive yet complementary ways, towards goals they all share. From the two definitions above, it is important to note the key elements of distributed leadership:

- There is social distribution of power and influence within a school
- Functions and activities of leadership are shared among individuals and are not monopolised by an individual (Harris, 2013)
- Every individual in the school is a leader in one area or another and there is interdependence between people
- There is collaboration to achieve goals and individuals share practices but work differently towards the same goals
- The purpose of distributed leadership in schools is to enrich teaching and learning by building teachers' capacity to lead learning
- Teachers can become generators of new knowledge rather than remain passive recipients of official policies.

Botha and Triegaardt (2014) argued that distributed leadership is based on the idea that all teachers can and must lead and contribute to leadership. Since distributed leadership has a social aspect, interaction takes place between the leaders as they share their views in the different aspects they lead. According to Spillane (2006), organisations, both formal and informal groups, constantly interact resulting in shared patterns of communication, learning and action. For Spillane, distributed leadership is central to the teaching and learning process and the distributed framework involves two core aspects which are the 'principal-plus' and 'practice'. Leadership is not restricted to only those in top leadership, such as the traditional 'leader-follower' dualism in which leaders lead 'followers' who are somewhat passive and subservient (Bolden, 2011), but it involves multiple individuals, 'leader-plus'. Spillane, Hunt, and Healy (2009) argued that the interaction of school leaders, followers and the situations in which the work is found, define leadership practice.

Distributed leadership, therefore, emphasises the relationship between stakeholders and their situations (Spillane & Diamond, 2007) and is not limited to principals alone. Gunter, Hall and Bragg (2013) noted that there is a functional understanding in which it is the leader's responsibility to share leadership and involve or empower others. Moreover, Bolden, Hawkins, Gosling and Taylor (2011, p. 36) observed that distributed leadership is represented "as dynamic, relational, inclusive, collaborative and contextually-situated". In a school system, the principal, teachers and parents learn together, collectively building meaning and knowledge.

Distributed leadership can contribute to improved student achievement (Botha, 2016) if it is implemented well. Recognition of the profession and more effective management change is implemented (Choi & Schnurr, 2014), and the teachers' role of teaching is also enhanced, where distributed leadership is practised in the right way. Research has also shown that in a school where distributed leadership is well practised, teachers are motivated and empowered to make decisions in relation to teaching, learning and assessments (Szeto & Cheng, 2017) and this boosts learners' achievement. Thus, in such a school there is a warm working environment, which keeps teachers happy and encouraged to work hard for the sake of the learners.

According to Volante (2012), benefits accumulate from sharing or distributing leadership in a group. For example, having diverse opinions and information from different people leads to better decision-making, compared to when decision-making rests solely with the leadership. Furthermore, Northouse (2016, p. 365) noted that shared leadership "makes members of the team take on leadership behaviors to influence the team and to maximize team effectiveness". Decision-making by leaders should engage other people with diverse knowledge and perspectives because diversity in a group leads to enhanced problem solving (Northouse, 2016).

Konsolas, Anastasiou and Loukeri (2014) asserted that distributed leadership strongly determines the motivation of teachers. This motivation leads to a strong bond between colleagues, mutual trust and support, which leads to improvement in the school. Distributed leadership encourages a sense of belonging among leaders where they feel they are valued members of the school (Hughes & Pickeral, 2013). This leads to a commitment to collaborate and allows the school system to work effectively.

Spillane, basing his study of leadership practices on cognition and the activity theory, identified the social context as the essential factor influencing distributed leadership (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). As "tasks, actors, actions and interactions of school leadership" unfold together in the school, they become essential factors of distributed leadership in school (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001, p. 23). The interdependence between people and their context is also important in distributed leadership. According to Spillane et al (2001, p. 23), "the interdependence of the individual and the environment shows how human activity as distributed in the interactive web of actors, artefacts and the situation is the appropriate unit of analysis for studying practice".

An interdependence exists between the teachers, learners, environment or context in which the school belongs, as well as the available resources. This is likely to give rise to different styles of distributed leadership based on the context in which the different schools are found. Leadership is influenced by the prevailing conditions in a school, and in this paper I argue that South African schools have different leadership styles because most schools have maintained the apartheid legacy. Since most schools have maintained the apartheid legacy, leadership styles today are in most cases as different as they were during apartheid.

## **Leadership styles**

Davies and Ellison (1997, p. 148) observed five levels of leadership that are apparent in our schools today. These are:

- Autocratic: in which the principal is in charge of all decisions while educators follow and do not question.
- Central: in which the principal is in charge of all decisions, educators cluster around the principal and make suggestions, but the principal's word is final.
- Transitional: the principal is central to all decision-making processes but allows some key members of staff to make decisions and have control in specified areas. Educators cluster around the principal for most decisions and a small team that works with principal is formed.
- Partnering/participatory: the principal allows the group to make decisions and partners with key staff members so that policy and vision are followed according to plan. Educators are able to take control and work as a team and the principal works with one or two others in a collegial fashion.
- Empowering: the principal acts as a mentor to the staff who have decision-making power although accountability lies with principal. Educators work as empowered and self-led teams.

The leadership styles that lead to high learner achievement and highly motivated teachers are the participatory and empowering approaches. Although not much research has been done on distributed leadership in South Africa, the few studies that have been done reveal that the autocratic and central leadership styles are still dominant, with relatively few schools practising distributed leadership. These studies are discussed later.

## **Problems with implementation of distributed leadership**

Harris and DeFlaminis (2016, p. 143) observed that "distributed leadership is not a panacea; it depends on how it is shared, received and enacted." They argued that there are some people who see distributed leadership as a way of exploiting other members who are not formal leaders, for example, credulous teachers given more work than they are supposed to do (Lumby, 2013). Thus, according to Harris (2013), distributed leadership can be destructive and damaging if it is not implemented the right way and it has potential to yield both positive and negative outcomes (Harris & DeFleminis, 2016), hence their

argument that distributed is not the answer to leadership but it depends on how it practised. Bush (2011) concurred with them, noting that those with formal leadership can sometimes encourage or aggressively prevent others from taking opportunities to lead new initiatives or bring about change. Harris and DeFleminis (2016) continued to argue that “distributed leadership does not imply that everyone is a leader... but it is for those best equipped or skilled or positioned to lead, in order to fulfil a particular goal or organizational requirement” (Harris & DeFleminis, 2016, p. 144). Hence distributed leadership ceases to be of any positive impact if the leadership is done by anyone or by all. Therefore, distribution of leadership has to be carefully implemented (Camburn & Han, 2009).

On one hand, it is true that in many schools, shared or distributed leadership sometimes does not exist because the formal leaders do not prefer collective and collaborative work. Some leaders want to hold on to their authority and like to command and control others (Bolden, 2007). On the other hand, distributed leadership has been used by teachers in other schools to undermine the authority of the principals and to negate the principals’ influence (Harris, 2013). In both cases, distributed leadership becomes destructive because it is misused. There is therefore, a need to “maintain a balance of control so that no individual or group can undermine, disrupt or derail the efforts of formal leaders to move the organisation forward” (Harris, 2013, p. 552) as well as the formal leaders not to hold on to power whilst failing to empower others.

Williams (2011, p. 198) contended that implementation of distributed leadership is problematic because sometimes “the context within which schools operate is generally not conducive to democratic leadership”. By context, Williams referred to “non-democratic structure, culture and history of schooling, adverse political, social and economic forces, and the appropriation of democracy and democratic leadership” (2011, p. 198). These factors may hinder the implementation of distributed leadership. With the legacy of the apartheid education still rife in most schools in South Africa, November, Alexander and Wyk (2010) argued that principals are traditionally power hungry, which makes them authoritative and undemocratic. Consequently, a gap exists between the talk of shared or distributed leadership and its reality in many schools.

According to Naiker and Mestry (2013), the leadership exercised by some South African school principals is autocratic as they fear the loss of their power and they are cultural and gender biased (Grant, 2006). As a result, in “such schools the possibility of teachers becoming agents of their own destiny as opposed to mere functionaries of the state is minimized” (Williams, 2011, p. 194). Williams (2011, p. 194) also noted that:

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.

Hence, teachers do not have opportunities to demonstrate new skills and they lack confidence in using the insufficient skills they have. They are not empowered to lead. In order to understand how school contexts determine leadership styles, it is important to

explore the differential system of education in apartheid South Africa and the racial segregation of the schools under different education departments, where the education and resource allocations were deliberately differentiated. This will give a clear picture of how school context and condition affects leadership and how leadership in turn affects learner performance. The assumption made in this study is that good leadership spurs high learner achievement.

### **Contexts of South African schools during apartheid**

In the apartheid dispensation, schools in South Africa were divided along racial lines, where there were separate schools for coloureds, whites, Indians and blacks. Learners were compelled to attend their racial schools located in their exclusive residential areas. The different types of schools operated in radically different ways. The school management, teacher qualifications, teacher-pupil ratios, funding, physical infrastructure, equipment and material provision differed. Schools for whites were more privileged in all respects compared to any others, followed by Indian and coloured schools, with schools for blacks withstanding the worst of the disadvantage. The schools mirrored and perpetuated the social conditions of privilege and deprivation established by the apartheid system. As an example, 30% of the black schools did not have electricity, 25% had no running water and half had plumbing problems (Clark & Worger, 2004). On the other hand, in 1983, white education took up over 50% of education spending with per capita spending on white pupils being approximately eight times more than that for blacks. Blacks, Indians and coloureds did not receive free education. While it was compulsory for white (from age 7 to 16), Indian and coloured (from 7 to 15) children to go to school, even the sub-standard education offered to blacks (from 7 to 13) remained a privilege, not a right (Clark & Worger, 2004). White schooling achieved high rates of retention through to matriculation and higher education, while black schooling was characterised by high rates of absenteeism, repetition and dropouts. Such diversity in the nature of schools serving different racial constituencies necessitated equally diverse management and administration systems.

Educational attainment by race was not equal. According to National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI, 1993), 80% of white and Indian learners entering school were expected to complete matriculation but only 20% of blacks and coloureds did so. Therefore, unequal school achievement and attainment was more likely due to the imbalanced distribution of resources in the different schools. There were also inequalities in school administration departments. White schools had a network of committees and subcommittees that involved teachers, parents and trustees who were responsible for the support of the school functions and which the departmental administration supported and monitored, whilst, black rural and township schools did not have these functioning school committees. The principal was responsible for a substantial teaching load in addition to some managerial functions and the support and monitoring from the department was casual and sometimes absent. This racial inequality could be one of the many factors that led to dysfunctional schooling in those schools that were formerly classified as black and coloured schools. According to Williams (2011), the majority of South African schools

function in contexts that are generally unfavourable for distributed leadership. Naidoo (2012) confirmed that the predominantly authoritarian nature of the schooling system we have in South African schools is attributed to the apartheid system.

### **Appraising the current context of South African schools**

While the demise of apartheid outlawed the division of schools along racial lines, it did not eradicate the privileges and disadvantages some schools had inherited in the apartheid dispensation. A new policy that was designed to change the top-down leadership system was not successfully embraced by the schools. Although the government tried to address the issue of equal quality education for all, it failed to consider the historical inequalities in the schools and the conditions of most South African schools (Biko, 2013). In spite of the restructuring of funding by the South African government in favour of the historically disadvantaged communities, the former white school learners still perform much better than the black schoolchildren (Poopedi, 2011). The schools mostly perform according to their apartheid conditions, with the former white and Indian schools at the top and the rural and township black schools at the bottom (Biko, 2013). The former white schools managed to use the new management distribution to raise fees, pay teachers supplementary salaries and offer a content rich curriculum. Their leadership and management system allowed schools to run efficiently and satisfy the staff and consequently there was high learner performance. On the other hand, for the majority of poor schools, parents could not pay fees for their children, there were insufficient resources, their governing bodies were incapable of leadership, the teachers were not motivated by anything and learners continued to underperform.

The situation continues even today, as learners in the former white schools perform well while those in the former black schools underperform (Well, 2013). The 'Model C' school of apartheid (now called former Model C schools), which were also former white schools, continue to be well resourced and produce high academic standards. They are sometimes called the public fee-paying schools. The former poor black schools became the public no-fee schools that are still characterised by poor resources and results. Children whose parents earn a low income and are found in rural areas and urban working class areas normally attend these schools. According to Spaul (2013), these schools lack qualified and motivated teachers, textbooks and time for tasks. There is therefore, a big gap between these schools and historically advantaged schools. This means even though in South African schools access to schooling has been improved, access to quality schooling for most of the learners has not been attained. Only a few learners enjoy quality education in South Africa (Spaul, 2013).

A study by Ngcobo and Tikly (2010) in KwaZulu-Natal found that there is still a big difference in the qualifications of the teachers in the former white and former black schools. Many rural and township schools had many unqualified teachers. The teaching methods used in these schools were reminiscent of the apartheid times. The teachers were sometimes absent or they were not punctual for classes. Classes were overcrowded and the learner-teacher ratio was high. Conversely, the former white schools were well

resourced (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). A case can be made that the different kinds of schools as presently constituted retain the legacy of the past and that they have largely inherited the management and leadership roles of the past. How could one expect uniform leadership among schools characterised by such great diversity? Even the racial segregation still lives on. A case in point is Gauteng in South Africa, where the Education Department requires that learners attend school within their areas of residence (which were racially demarcated during apartheid). The fall of apartheid saw people retaining their residential locations prescribed to them during apartheid, which also defined their economic status. This meant that what are regarded as former coloured or former Indian schools, for example, are to a large extent coloured and Indian schools. This makes the designation 'former' a misnomer because it does not denote something in the past but something existing presently. Poor children are required to attend school in the under-resourced schools in their areas while children from affluent areas learn in the well-resourced schools of their areas. As indicated earlier, a case can be made to say the differential resource allocation (financial, material and human) is still apparent. If, as argued earlier, leadership is shaped by the prevailing conditions and circumstances, then there is a need to interrogate the nature of leadership across schools representative of the racial division of schools under the apartheid dispensation. It is difficult and slow to transform the apartheid school system. There is still work that needs to be done to educate principals in South Africa in the area of distributed leadership and management (Maringe & Moletsane, 2015). One may also question whether the Department of Education should attempt to inculcate uniform leadership ideals among the principals and the teachers in the face of such diversity in schools.

Taylor (2009) reported on a Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) study showing high levels of teacher absenteeism and late coming in the four poorest quintile schools of the South African education system, and 97-100% of principals of these schools confirmed that this was a major problem in their schools. Poor school leadership and management may account for this. Taylor (2009, p. 19) argues that, "it would seem that South African teachers, managers and officials have not transcended the dependence culture fostered by successive authoritarian regimes over the last three centuries".

Christie (2010) noted that educational administration during apartheid was characterised by a high degree of centralisation, which operated in a bureaucratic administrative way in order to separate education systems with separate purposes, values and leadership styles (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). Pelsler and van Wyk (2016) also contended that some of the key characteristics of this bureaucratic system are, to some extent, still in operation in schools today.

In another study of distributed leadership by Grant (2008) in the KwaZulu-Natal, it was found that in most schools where the research was done, the school cultures believed in the ultimate authority and decision-making of the school principal and hence the aspect of distribution of leadership was unsuccessful in these schools. Because of this study, the DoE (2008, p. 61) concluded that:

From this preliminary research one could conclude that in a South African scenario the concept of democratic decision-making, the principle of Ubuntu and the development of collaboration may be at a rhetorical level only and that what is happening is still very much a practice where 'top-down' decisions are the norm.

Grant (2008) also observed that teachers in the schools were active in professional development in order to improve their knowledge but did not take part in school level decision-making, in leading peer review programs or in performance evaluation of teachers. Therefore, the teachers did not participate in important matters of the school.

Naicker and Mestry (2013) in their study in Soweto primary schools, in Gauteng, found that principals still used autocratic leadership and that distributive leadership is not yet fully practised. The school principals of the studied schools still stick to traditional leadership practices with a strong hierarchy, and principals who use autocratic leadership styles where non-participative decision-making presents powerful barriers to distributed leadership (Naicker & Mestry, 2013). Thus in these schools we would have expected distributed leadership in which teachers also make decisions in the schools, and that principals and the other management let go of their power to others so that teachers can also demonstrate what they can do and what they know. On the contrary, power and decision-making are done by the principal and school management team and other staff members do not take part in decision-making. A participative approach to leadership helps to reduce the workload of the principal through the distribution of leadership functions and roles and it also pools all the expertise available to the organisation (Bush, 2013). The school climate of the schools was also negative (Naicker & Mestry, 2013) and this hindered the distribution of leadership. The teachers were demotivated because their needs were not met.

Weeks (2012) observed that almost three quarters of South African schools are officially known to be dysfunctional. Although the government of South Africa has tried to redress the issues that cause this dysfunctionality, there is little evidence that these interventions have helped to solve the problems. Poor performance by learners still continues to exist (Maringe & Moletsane, 2015). The two researchers identified what they called "multiple deprivation" which is the combination of factors that weaken the learning of children. Therefore, in the process, school leaders are challenged in their leadership roles, partly because most of them are appointed to the leadership positions without being trained, or they lack knowledge and experience of teaching in rural disadvantaged schools (Maringe & Moletsane, 2015). As research has noted that there is a positive relationship between good leadership and school improvement and efficiency (Huber & Maijs, 2010), failure to lead schools by most of the leaders of the disadvantaged schools means failure by learners to achieve. The researchers suggested that transformational, distributed, instructional and ethical based leadership be implemented in the South African schools which are multiple deprived (Maringe & Moletsane, 2015).

More recently Bush and Glover (2016) made a systematic review of the South African school leadership literature, after South Africa became a democratic country. The study revealed that there is a development of leadership and management in schools, but

prevailing challenges remain, including poor learner achievement, squabbles in teacher unions, and poor relationships between school leaders and their governing bodies. Leadership in schools is focused on administration rather than teaching and learning. As discussed earlier, Bush and Glover (2016) also found that the education system in South Africa differs in quality depending on the social classes of the learners, confirming the premise made that the apartheid legacy still reigns in schools.

Although participative leadership styles are being promoted by the South African Education Department, there is still a gap between policy and the practice of participative leadership styles in schools in Soweto. Thus, South African schools have plenty to deal with in order to put the distributed leadership into implementation. Naicker and Mestry (2013) recommended that there is need by the Department of Education to provide professional development training programs and workshops for principals and teachers, to educate them on the benefits of distributed leadership in schools.

Although there are leadership challenges in most of the disadvantaged schools in South Africa, some principals are trying their best to implement distributed leadership. Naidoo, Mncube and Potokri (2015) reported on two schools where the principals led and managed democratically. In these schools, leadership extended to the whole school community, including teachers, parents and learners. This assisted in eradicating the hierarchical and authoritarian leadership style that is found in most schools. Naidoo, et al. (2015), therefore, argued that as long as school leaders are willing to implement democracy in their schools, decision-making is shared, stakeholders in the school work collaboratively, and learner achievement rises. Botha and Triegaardt (2014) also explored how effective distributed leadership contributes to school improvement. In five schools in South Africa, their study established that distributed leadership has a positive impact upon school improvement in schools that are functional. Distributed leadership also enables educational progress “as they will be able to provide schools with guidelines to increase positive perceptions regarding the role of distributed leadership in school improvement.” (Botha & Triegaardt, 2014, p. 309).

Furthermore, some poor schools and ‘resilient schools’ perform well regardless of their limited resources and this speaks to the importance of how effectively resources are managed (Taylor, Muller & Vinjevold, 2003). Some schools have little support from the government but they cooperate with their communities to run the schools effectively. They rely more on their effective and efficient leadership styles and management approaches. According to Bush (2013), in South Africa as well as in other countries, there is a need for effective leaders and managers in schools if successful learning is to take place.

There is therefore, a need to prepare for the role of instructional leadership through in-service professional development so that the leaders may become effective instructional leaders (Maringe & Moletsane, 2015) who create a conducive learning environment and contribute to transforming the education system of South Africa. The South African government is encouraging school leaders to move towards distributed leadership, in which every member of the school works together in a collaborative way (DoE, 2008) and

every member of staff makes decisions. Schools that are well run and have happy and satisfied staff members are those where leadership is distributed, and where all staff members are empowered to make decisions that promote effective learning and can take new initiatives in the schools.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The paper has reviewed the concept of distributed leadership and it has been revealed that distributed leadership in South African schools is in its very early stages. Not much research has been done in South Africa on this leadership style, especially in high performing, well-resourced schools. Research has been done in some 'resilient schools' in South Africa to investigate why these schools' performance is high notwithstanding their poor resourcing. Research has also been done in poor primary schools of Soweto to investigate whether distributed leadership is being practised and it was revealed that in most of the schools studied, principals still utilise autocratic leadership and teachers are not involved in important decision-making of the schools. Some principals also still want to hold onto their power and do not like to let go of some leadership roles. There is therefore, a gap between the empty talk of shared or distributed leadership and its reality in many schools.

There is still a need for more research on distributed leadership in primary and secondary schools in South Africa. The South African context offers prospects for understanding the interplay between race, resource allocations and the nature of leadership. There is also a need to investigate the extent to which resource allocations have equalised formerly segregated education systems, as resource availability also influence how schools are led and managed. Has there been over- or under-compensation of the disadvantaged schools to arrest the cycle of disadvantage? How much of the culture of the schools adopted during the differential system of apartheid education is apparent in the schools and how has it influenced the leadership? An empirical paper currently underway by the same author will focus on these questions.

## Acknowledgement

The SANRAL Chair in Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Technology Education at the Free State University in South Africa supported this research.

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**Please cite as:** Sibanda, L. (2017). Understanding distributed leadership in South African schools: Challenges and prospects. *Issues in Educational Research*, 27(3), 567-581.  
<http://www.iier.org.au/iier27/sibanda.pdf>