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Leadership Impact on Elementary School's Effectiveness and Improvement

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Abstract: Distributed leadership is engrossed by the global research community. It is the leadership which is distributed within the organization. According to Arrowsmith (2007, p.22) "distributed leadership is an emerging form of power distribution in schools which extends authority and influence to groups or individuals in a way which is at least partly contrary to hierarchical arrangements". The present study examines the distributed leadership in the school environment. The new public management led to the self-based school management. Consequently, school accountabilities became more, a fact that hindered the work of the heroic leader. As a result, the leadership started to be distributed among different individuals. The author argues that distributed leadership is the kind of leadership that can lead to school improvement and effectiveness. This study investigates how distributed leadership is viewed, distributed and exercised. It also examines whether distributed leadership leads to school effectiveness and improvement. The present project presents a small scale case study which took place in an elementary school in a district of Cyprus, in Paphos. The researcher used combined methods for the collection, analysis and presentation of the data. He conducted questionnaires, interviews and observation. He has also used minutes of meetings, logs and shadowing in order to gain validity of data. The study pointed out that distributed leadership is viewed as stretched leadership within the school and it is distributed to 18 different roles. The author presents the 18 roles and their main responsibilities. The present study has also led to the 5 major leadership capabilities for distributed leadership. Moreover, the research proved that distributed leadership is the kind of leadership that leads to a) the improvement of students' outcomes in Maths and Greek language, b) organizational effectiveness and c) job satisfaction. The writer presents his findings but he also challenges that distributed leadership has to be investigated in more depth and other concepts of it, have to be explored.

Keywords: Distributed Leadership, Leadership Roles, Leadership Capabilities, School Effectiveness.

1.0 Introduction

Leadership is about practice, leaders, followers and their situation (Harris and Spillane, 2008). In an elementary school, there is the headteacher who is the leader of the school and the subheadteachers and teachers who are the followers. Flockton (2001) referred that the headteacher has a variety of roles, such as: health and social services coordinator, public relations consultant, security person and resource manager. In Cyprus, as Englezakis (2002) and Tsiakkiros and Pashiardis (2006) studies underlined, one of the sources of headteachers' stress is the high level of responsibilities.

The main topic of this study is distributed leadership. Distributed leadership is about stretching the leadership responsibility among all the staff of the organization and facing work intensification. Regarding to Davies (2005, p.180) "in a complex, fast-paced world, leadership cannot rest on the shoulders of the few". The author chose to investigate this topic because he believes that the leadership is not related to only one person.

The research took place at an urban elementary school -with a low socioeconomic intake- in the district of Paphos, Cyprus. The school employees 27 teachers (special education, specialists in music, mathematics, physical education, Greek language and computer teachers), 1 head teacher, 2 sub principals and it has 280 pupils. The majority of the pupils come from low-income immigrant families and they are all receiving free breakfast.

Despite the fact that all schools in Cyprus are managed by the Ministry of Education and Culture, every school has developed its specific leadership style. Leadership at School Under Study (SUS) is not centralised to the headteacher. On the contrary, it is distributed among all the teachers of the SUS. Expertise and specific knowledge of the staff is highly counted. The responsibilities and duties are set according to the preferences and expertise of the staff. The teachers have good professional relationships. They have weekly meetings where they can define their targets, sets priorities and solve problems. Moreover, they have common values such as collegiality, collaboration, trust, equity and mutuality.

SUS belongs to the Zone of Educational Priority (ZEP). ZEP schools have students with a low socioeconomic background. The majority of students are foreigners. ZEP schools can run subsidiary programmes regarding their needs. SUS is running 7 programmes: emotional education, theatrical play, ecological consciousness, health and education, mentoring, Greek as a foreign language and psychotherapy via music. As a consequence, there are seven teachers that are responsible and accountable of each of the aforementioned programmes. Except of the aforementioned responsibilities there are also teachers that are subject leaders. Sometimes a teacher may be responsible for both subject and programme. The leadership is distributed among the teachers. The headteacher assigned the teachers to manage some programmes and promote their effectiveness. The present study is a case study because it targets to build up evidence and to understand distributed leadership.

Literature Review

The new public management refers to reducing the level to which decisions on public services were taken by professionals and to developing both local and central accountability led to the self-based school management. Consequently, school accountabilities became more, a fact that hindered the work of the heroic leader. As a result, the leadership started to be distributed among different individuals.

Distributed leadership is often characterized by different names, such as shared leadership (Judge and Ryman, 2001; Pearce 2004), team leadership, democratic leadership (Bass, 1990; Rutherford, 2002) dispersed leadership (Bryman, 1996), collective leadership (Burns, 1998).

Copland (2003) referred to the school as a community and defined distributed leadership as a set of shared functions among administrators, teachers, community members and expertise. Arrowsmith (2007) supported that “[d]istributed leadership is an emerging form of power distribution in schools which extends authority and influence to groups or individuals in a way which is at least partly contrary to hierarchical arrangements” (p.22).

According to Duignan and Fraser (2005), distributed leadership can be viewed differently by different people inside a school. The present study investigated how the distributed leadership is viewed in Cyprus, specifically in SUS.

Spillane (2006) referred that one of the most important concerns of distributed model of leadership is leadership practice and its impact on organizational improvement. According to Hallinger and Heck (2003) “there is very little evidence of a direct causal relationship between distributed leadership and school achievement” (quoted in Hartley, 2007, p.202). Similarly, Mayrowetz (2008) claimed that there is no strong link between those variables.

On the contrary, Mulford and Silins (2003) and Leithwood et al. (2007) have named distributed leadership as one of the factor that leads to school improvement and high student’s outcomes. At the same time, the studies of Beattie (2002) and Timperley (2005) have proved that distributed leadership can be effective and contribute to school improvement. Harris (2007) supported that there is a positive relationship between distributed leadership and change. A year later, Mulford *et al.* (2008) study proved that distributed leadership has helped to organizational change and improvement. The author also investigated the effectiveness of distributed leadership at SUS.

Mayrowetz (2008) referred to distributed leadership as a human capacity building. Distributed leadership is an extremely significant part of the heart of capacity. Capacity building includes distributing leadership opportunities and roles. Additionally, Harris (2004) pointed out that “distributed leadership equates with maximizing the human capacity within the organization” (p.14). At the present study, the author took into consideration the leadership capacities pointed out by Leithwood et al. (1999) and the study of James and Vince (2001) about developing the leadership capabilities of headteachers.

The research questions of this study are the following:

1. Does the distributed leadership lead to organizational effectiveness and improvement?
2. How the distributed leadership is developed and distributed?

3. Which kinds of distributed leadership are effective and in which situations?
4. What are the essential leadership capacities for distributed leadership?

Methodology

The collection of data was accomplished by qualitative and quantitative approach. The author used a range of tools such as: questionnaires, field notes, observations, interviews, logs and minutes of meetings. He used mixed methods research, because this leads to methodological triangulation, an approach which adds strength to the research. The sample of the research was the 30 teachers of the SUS.

The first research method was the in-depth interview. Many advocates of interview defined it as a conversation with a specific purpose (Berg, 2007; Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 2000; Denzin, 1978). In-depth interview is an interview with a small sample of respondents investigating a specific idea, circumstances or program (Boyce and Neale, 2006).

The second research method was logging (learning diary). At the initiation of the research all colleagues have been asked to maintain a log. The log was designed in a way that all leadership activities and functions would be noted. As Spillane et al. (2006) study pointed out that logging is a good way of securing and checking the validity of interviews' answers.

The third research method was observation. Gorman and Glayton (2005) stated that observation is the research that "involves the systematic recording of observable phenomena or behavior in a natural setting" (p.40). At the present study the observation was accomplished by the critical friend of the author who works at SUS.

The fourth research method was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used in order to support the interview. It extracted demographic data and additional information about the research topic. The questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter asking for collaboration explaining the aim of the study. It is valuable to note that the questionnaire was anonymous and was given "in situ". In situ means that, the researcher gathered all the teachers, he distributed the 30 questionnaires at the same time. The questionnaires were distributed during a staff meeting, in the conference room, in order to secure familiar environment for the participants.

The data of the research had to be robust, reliable and valid. Regarding the reliability of the data, "the informants have to be representative of the population under investigation and replicable" (Research Methods in Education, p.166). Despite the fact that the sample was small, it is representative. Despite the specificities of the school setting, the organizational structure is similar with other Cypriot schools.

The data had to be valid as well. "Validity is about ensuring that you build into your research sufficient robustness to have the confidence to make generalizations" (Hart, 2007, p.334). As the author already mentioned, he used mixed methods research in order to gain validity. The answers of the questionnaires and interviews were compared. Moreover, learning diaries and shadowing made the data even more valid. Thus, there was a double check of the data. Lastly, the piloting of questionnaire and interview was another way to avoid bias and sustain validity.

Conducting the research, the writer faced some ethical issues. Firstly, the author came across to the problem of identifying sources of information within the corpus of findings. Basic characteristics of this research are anonymity and confidentiality and to facilitate them a pseudonym was assigned to the School, namely SUS. Furthermore, the names of teachers were protected. However, SUS is a school in a small area with specific context and staff (only three schools have low socioeconomic intake in Paphos). So, the author solved this ethical issue by showing the participants the experimental records and ensured their consent for research purposes. Related to this, the author wondered if he had to inform the participants about the exact theme of the research. He took into consideration the problem of truthfulness and the avoidance of bias. Sproull (1995) underlined the "possibility of inaccurate data because people may lie, omit information or use selective recall" (p.165). In order to solve this issue, he decided to compose a very broad speech about the research foci before the interview and then to share the results with the participants at a later stage (Research Methods in Education). This lead to openness which "...is a condition that ensures that all participants have free access to information..." (Tickle, 2001, p.348). Finally, at the SUS environment, the researcher had to decide on covert or overt

observation. In covert observation the teachers “may feel that they have been treated as objects of measurement without respect for their individual values and sense of privacy” (S.R.A., 2003, p.27). It was decided to conduct an overt observation.

Presentation and Analysis of the Data

The interviews generated rich and complex data in which some meaningful patterns emerged. Similarly, the questionnaires and the observations enriched and supported those patterns. In this part, the author will present and analyze the data. The main topic of the research was distributed leadership and how it was viewed by the teachers of SUS. Here are some representative definitions of distributed leadership given by the teachers:

Distributed leadership is about giving the opportunity to every person, who has the ability, to lead within school. Distributed leadership takes into advantage the expertise of teachers. (Subject-Leader Teacher, Interview, March, 2012)

Distributed Leadership is the leadership which is distributed among the colleagues. There is not only one headteacher who leads the school. Some teachers have responsibilities as well. (Programme-Leader Teacher, Interview, March, 2012)

When the leadership does not belong to one person but to a group of people of the same organization then it is distributed. (Sub-principal, Interview, March, 2012).

It is obvious that all the teachers have in mind the same view of distributed leadership that the leadership does not belong to the heroic leader any more. Since the distributed leadership was viewed similarly by the staff, the answer of the question “*Is distributed leadership developed in your school?*” was valid. All teachers agreed that distributed leadership is developed in SUS.

But how the leadership is distributed and exercised? Is it given or taken? Results showed that all teachers have leadership roles. Specifically, at Figure 1, it seems that not only they have responsibilities but also the 33% of the teachers has increased accountabilities (are both programme and subject leaders).

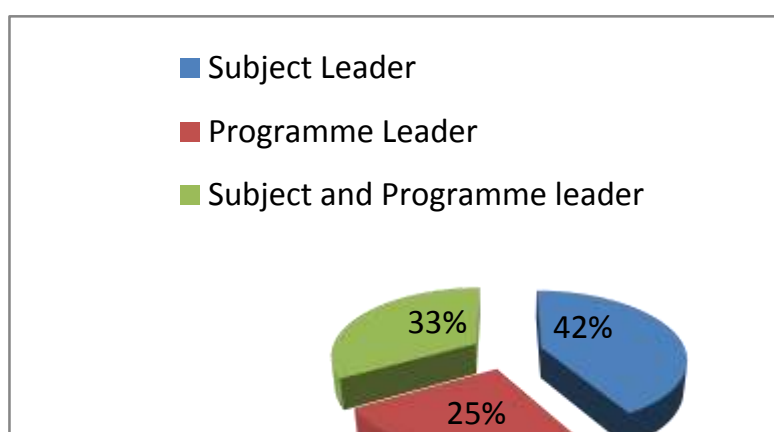


Figure 1: What is your leadership role?

How the leadership was distributed? Correlated data extracted from interviews and questionnaires are the following.

In September, when the school opened, I checked out our needs and I knew what to ask and from whom. At the first meeting, we had a conversation and we concluded in each one role. Some teachers asked for some responsibilities while some others where buttoned-up and guided by me. (Headteacher, Interview, March, 2012)

It was very democratic, since the headteacher asked for our preferences and expertise. She did not force us to take after a duty that we did not like. (Subject leader, Interview, March, 2012)

The leadership was distributed very fairly. Each one got a responsibility. Some of us asked for more responsibilities. (Subject and Programme leader, Interview, March, 2012)

The comments of the interviewees lead us to the “taken and given distributed leadership” (figure 2). It seems that on the one hand the headteacher guided some of the duties while on the other hand the teachers asked for them.

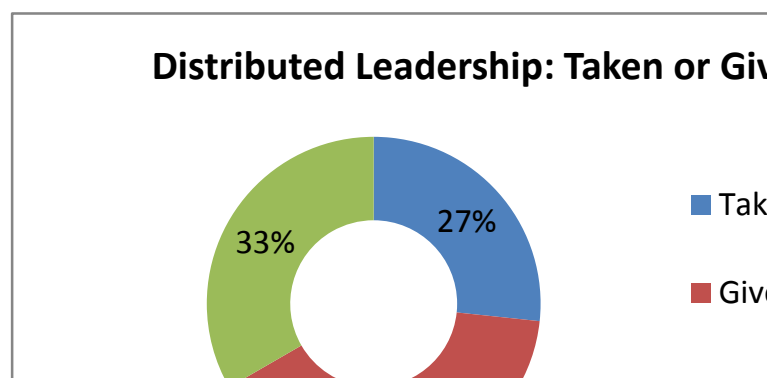


Figure 2: Given or Taken Distribution of Leadership

But what were exactly the distributed roles and how the leadership was exercised? In the SUS there were 18 formal leadership roles (table 1). Each role had its own accountabilities. The author tried to group the common roles and gather them. The subject leaders have similar roles, and programme leaders as well.

Table 1: Leadership Roles

	Distributed leadership role	Number of teachers
1	Headteacher	1
2	Sub-principal	2
3	Canteen leader	1
4	Excursion leader	2
5	Greek Subject leader	4
6	Maths Subject leader	4
7	History Subject leader	1
8	Geography Subject leader	1
9	Arts Subject leader	2
10	Music Subject leader	3
11	Physical Education Subject leader	2
12	Greek Programme leader	2
13	Emotional Education Programme leader	3
14	Theatrical Play Programme leader	1
15	Ecological Consciousness Programme leader	2
16	Health and Education Programme leader	2
17	Mentoring Programme leader	4
18	Psychotherapy Programme leader	2

Some subject leaders gave model lessons to the teachers in order to show them new approaches and help them for better performance. Physical Education Subject leader (Learning Diary, March, 2012), Maths Subject leader (Learning Diary, 15 March, 2012), Greek Subject leader (Learning Diary, March, 2012) and Music Subject Leader (Learning Diary, March, 2012) conducted sample lessons.

The programme leaders and sub-principals have more administrative role. The following statement of the ecological consciousness leader and a sub-principal are very representative.

What we have to do is to design, organise and implement the programme. It is like a leadership activity. (Ecological Consciousness Programme leader, March, 2012)

I am accountable for all the subject leaders and I am also a canteen leader.... I visit subject leaders and evaluate their work... (Sub-principal, Interview, March, 2012)

Another crucial research question is the following: In which lessons the distributed leadership is more effective? As it seems from the Figure 3, the data of the questionnaires showed that 47% of teachers supported that distributed leadership is more effective in Greek, 33% in Maths, 13% in music, 7% in physical education and nobody in arts, history and geography.

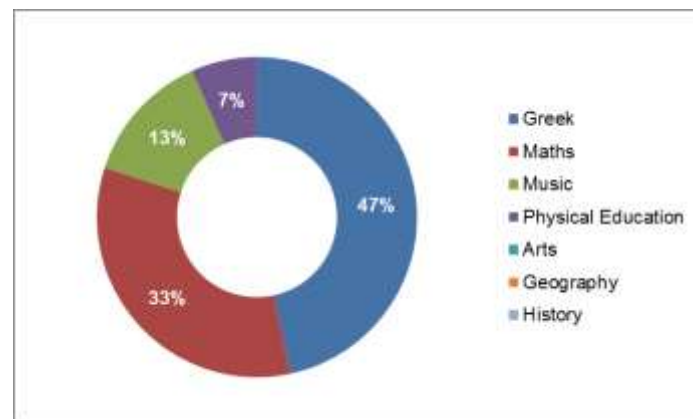


Figure 3: In which lessons distributed leadership is more effective?

But why distributed leadership is more effective in Greek? The author believes that this is due to the fact that the SUS is a school with foreigner students. Thus, the Greek language is not known to the pupils. As a result, the teachers try to do whatever they could in order to teach the students Greek. Greek subject leaders became the centre of the leadership because everybody wanted to gain something new and improve student's outcomes. Furthermore, maths is also supported by sufficient teachers. Maybe, the success in Greek and Maths are depended on the number of leaders. Both, Greek and Maths have 4 subject leaders each. Consequently, the work is divided and more folds of the subjects are investigated.

The main question of the research is if distributed leadership leads to organizational improvement. The majority of the teachers (27) agree that distributed leadership leads to organizational improvement.

Additionally, during staff meetings, the teachers indicated that distributed leadership leads to organizational improvement.

Sharing ideas, taking part in decision making and be a leader make me feel valuable and want to offer more. (Subject leader, Minutes of Meetings, April, 2012)

This kind of leadership, distributed leadership roles, made easier our work...and I love what I do. I can give more! (Sub-principal, Minutes of Meetings, March, 2012)

We all now know our responsibilities and we work in our expertise area in order to achieve in every way the desired outcomes. (Programme leader, Minutes of meetings, April, 2012)

Similarly, the interviews proved that organizational improvement took place. The author presents some of the data.

My lessons are more organised because I learned a lot from the subject leaders...and when I had a problem they kindly help me to come over it. (Programme leader, Interview, April, 2012)

I became more responsible, I feel that I can lead without having doubts about myself. This is a fact that made my work more effective. (Subject leader, Interview, April, 2012)

We divided the work like a puzzle, each one has its own working area, but we all cooperate for the same outcomes. We developed a common culture that promotes collegiality, self esteem and collaboration. We became a stronger team....We managed to have remarkable results in Greek and Maths. (Headteacher, Interview, April, 2012)

The pupils seem to develop interest about arts, geography and history. (Sub-principals, Interview, April, 2012)

The author presents the data regarding the essential leadership capacities for distributed leadership. The author used the model of Leithwood et al. (1999) in order to come across to the main leadership capacities.

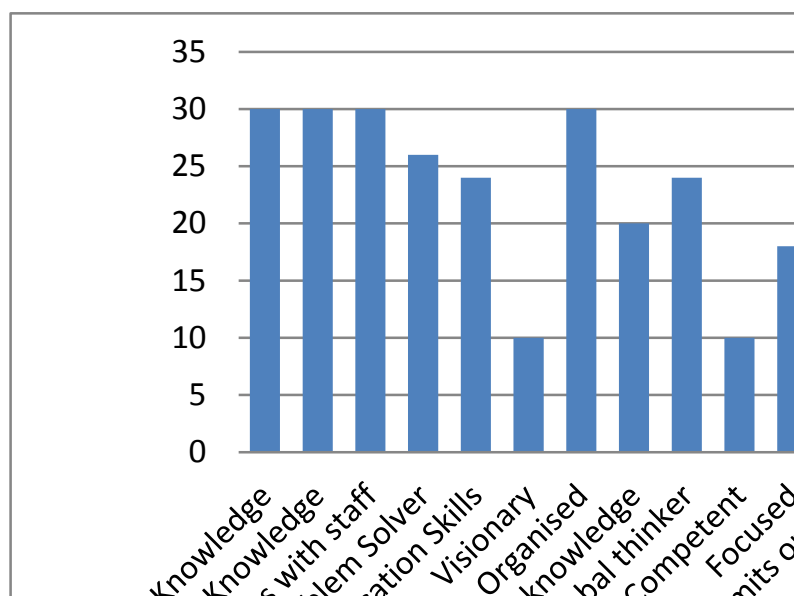


Figure 4: Which are the essential capacities for distributed leadership?

The main four essential capacities which were mentioned by all teachers are Procedural Knowledge, Declarative Knowledge, Relationships with staff and Organised. "Procedural Knowledge refers to knowledge teachers have about how to carry out leadership tasks" and declarative knowledge "refers to knowledge about specifics aspects of the profession" (Leithwood et al., 1999, p.193). Being a problem solver and have emotional intelligence (James and Vince, 2001) is mentioned by 26 teachers, while having communication skills and be a global thinker are mentioned equally by 24 teachers. In the category of other capacities, 10 teachers have mentioned the expertise and the experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this part the author presents the main conclusions and recommendations of the research considering the analysis of data. It is crucial to mention that the conclusions and recommendations cannot be freely generalizable since the research is a small case study in a small town of Cyprus. Nevertheless, it can be useful and relevant to other schools in Cyprus which are ZEP and have similar educational context. Distributed leadership is viewed as a kind of leadership that promotes effectiveness and change. According to the interviews, the author can give a definition of distributed leadership. Distributed leadership in education is the leadership that is distributed among the teachers who have the ability and the expertise to lead within the school. All teachers at SUS have leadership roles. There are a headteacher, sub-principals, subject leaders and programme leaders. The distribution of the roles happened democratically and there was a tendency of asking for them. The teachers did not stay only with their given roles by the headteacher. The teachers started to feel more confident, valuable, and contributive via distributed leadership that's why they are asking for it. They also work hard for organizational improvement and effectiveness. The author investigated how the distributed leadership was exercised at SUS. "Every person has a role to play; no other person can make the exact same contribution" (Bryant, 1998, p.220). The author concluded to the following main common actions of the leaders as shown in the following table:

Table 2: Main Actions

Subject leaders	Programme leaders	Sub-principles	Head teacher
• Lead the subject • Inform the teachers about Ministry Policies. • Give guidelines for the subject • Promote new methods and present new knowledge • Solve problems in the specific subject • Evaluate teacher's work and student's outcomes • Communicate with the Parents' Association • Manage financial resources • Target to improvement and effectiveness	• Organize and implement the programme • Evaluate the activities • Organize school events • Manage financial resources • Target to improvement and effectiveness	• Mentor the subject leaders • Be subject leaders • Evaluate the programmes • Manage financial resources • Target to improvement and effectiveness	• Coordinates the sub-principals • Evaluates the activities • Informs the staff about the formal policies • Cooperates with external factors and stakeholders • Gives help and advice to everybody • Solves school's problems • Manages human and financial resources • Targets to improvement and effectiveness

The distribution of leadership changed the frames of the teachers. They felt important, valuable and ventilated. The feeling that they were responsible for a leadership field, gave them the passion for work. However, in some cases, it was the ambition for power that initiated the passion. Despite of this, the distributed leadership led to job satisfaction and similarly with Lumby (2003) increased the volition of the organization. Additionally, the research proved that distributed leadership led to the improvement of pupils' outcomes. Distributed leadership is more effective firstly in Greek and then in Maths. On the one hand, the subject leaders for these courses were more in number and on the other hand, Maths and Greek were subjects with high priority in SUS. The author believes that if the subject leaders were double and the SUS gave the same gravity to all subjects then distributed leadership might help to the improvement of the rest lessons as well. Besides, some pupils have already started to give attention to arts, history and geography. This is a result of the distributed leadership. It seems that when the teachers are interested and accountable for a subject, become more passionate with their job and offer more to the pupils. However, the limited change in the other lessons might be because of the difficulties in language. The improvement in Greek language, might lead to the improvement of the other courses also.

Moreover, the present study revealed the most important leadership capacities of distributed leadership. A minority of teachers mentioned expertise and experience as one of the capabilities. Nevertheless, in order to be a leader you must develop the main five following leadership capacities: Procedural Knowledge, Declarative Knowledge, Relationships with staff, Emotional Intelligence and Be Organised. Despite the fact that SUS promoted capacity building and worked as a flourishing learning community, the improvement of outcomes in Greek and Maths might be because of the more developed capacities of the Greek and Maths teachers. Consequently, SUS has to train all the staff in order to develop their leadership capacities. Moreover, the teachers have to be encouraged to develop their individual capacity building; go to seminars, watch sample lessons, visit other classes and attend professional development courses.

"The improvement is more likely to occur when there are opportunities for teachers to work together and to lead development and change" (Harris, 2008, p.46). SUS has successfully developed and exercised distributed leadership. The author concluded that distributed leadership can be effective and lead to improvement and change under the following conditions: Promotion of leadership, Clarity of accountability, Strong structure, Developing leadership capacities, Clarity on educational targets and Shared culture of trust and collegiality.

Distributed leadership proved to be effective in SUS. The author believes that the SUS gave a variety of distributed roles and practices that can be adopted by similar schools. Furthermore, SUS study gave hope for school improvement via distributed leadership. Undoubtedly, “effective change takes time” (Fullan, 2001, p.196). SUS change was obvious but not a changeover. More research of educational leadership must be done in Cyprus. It is an emergency to study distributed leadership in a broaden field and get to generalizations. Some other questions that can be researched in Cypriot Education System are: “How leadership capabilities are developed?”, “What is the role of students in distributed leadership?”, “How external factors influence distributed leadership?”, “What is the relationship between human resource management and distributed leadership?” and “How policy context impact on distributed leadership?” Concluding and as Hargreaves and Shirley (2007) stated, the priority of the educators has to be the public school reform, which can be succeeded only by taking the risk and use new approaches such as distributed leadership.

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