Principals' and Deputy Principals' Conference 2023

"*Sharing Responsibility*"

Discussion Paper

into

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

"Leadership in the twenty first century is a shared phenomenon, with the aim of empowering all members of the school community"- (O' Donovan, 2015)

Introduction

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Department of Education Circular 0016/73* which outlines the responsibilities and duties of Principal teachers. The Circular provides for the delegation and assignment of duties to promoted teachers within the school. Initially, delegation of duties was based on a hierarchical approach, however circulars on leadership and management in more recent years "envision a distributive leadership model based on shared responsibilities" (King and Nihill, 2019). Through distributed leadership many middle leaders may have different areas of responsibility (CSL, 2022). However, given the volume of tasks and responsibilities that principals encounter to meet the needs of the 21st century schooling, the sharing of responsibilities across the school community should also include teachers who have no formal leadership role (King and Nihill, 2019). This is echoed in the Looking at Our Schools document which emphasizes the standards for school leaders by encouraging them to "empower staff to take on and carry out leadership roles" (Department of Education, 2022). Recent studies on school leadership found that sharing responsibility not only enhances cooperation but is "emphasised in creating a positive school climate [leading] to greater job satisfaction of both teachers and school leaders" (European Education Policy Network, 2019).

Distributed Leadership- In action or inaction?

A brief look at other jurisdictions found that school system policies in Australia are "promoting and supporting a strong commitment to sharing leadership responsibilities and encouraging greater leadership density and capacity at the middle leadership levels" (Lacey and Gronn, 2006). King and Nihill (2019) opine that while there is an increasing emphasis on distributed leadership both in rhetoric and policy documents in Ireland, there is little engagement with what this means on the ground. This is borne out in recent research on teacher workload which found that just over a quarter (28%) of principal respondents identified delegation of tasks and fostering a culture of distributed leadership as an example of how they managed their workload (INTO, 2022). Similarly, a study by Rumeli et al. (2022) found that the practice among the headmasters in implementing distributed leadership is at a moderate level.

A key challenge in implementing a distributed approach to leadership seems to be to find ways of encouraging more teachers to become actively engaged in the leadership of their schools (Duignan and Bezzina, 2006). They highlight the need for greater openness, trust and collaboration as well as acceptance of sharing the responsibilities for leadership but emphasize that this "may require considerable cultural change, especially amongst teachers, in many schools" (Duignan and Bezzina, 2006). While it is submitted that distributed leadership is currently in vogue (Harris, 2004), King and Nihill (2019) contend that "in Irish education, the concept of distributed leadership is relatively new". In their submission to the Department of Education on the review of Looking at Our Schools, the IPPN

(2022, a) concluded that "it cannot be assumed that schools will organically move from a duties-focused consideration of an in-school management team to a team who has shared responsibility for the leadership and management of the school just because it is a policy imperative". In its report, the INTO found that there was some reluctance by Principals to share responsibility particularly where there was no remuneration. Many Principals also cited poor staff morale and the increased pressure and challenges throughout the pandemic period as a barrier to sharing responsibilities with colleagues (INTO, 2022).

Ceding Autonomy

According to Solly (2018) autonomy, capacity and accountability are three key principles to distributed leadership. While recognising the importance of accountability for distributed leadership, this discussion paper will focus on two of those principles, namely autonomy and capacity. Harris (2004) posits that distributed leadership requires those in formal leadership positions to relinquish power to others. This begs the question as to how much autonomy senior leaders are willing to cede and in what circumstances. Solly (2018) contends that leaders within a school need to be given the autonomy to make key decisions in their areas of responsibility. A study by Humphreys (2010) on the impact of distributed leadership found that, "many post holders did not perceive themselves as having any genuine leadership roles or any role in decision-making in schools". Harris (2004) surmises that this may be due to the "challenge to authority and ego" of the principal or that it would place them in "a vulnerable position because of the lack of direct control over certain activities". Solly (2018) posits that "affording members of [the] senior or middle leadership team this level of autonomy requires huge amount of trust and this is often outside the comfort zone for many headteachers".

It could also be the case that while principals may believe that they are distributing leadership, this is not happening in any meaningful way. The reality- perceived or otherwise – is that middle and teacher leaders are working within tightly defined boundaries and on targets decided for them by the principal (Murphy and Brennan, 2022). Alzahrani (2018) surmises that in practice, middle leaders are controlled by the power of the policy and regulations that pull them back and prevent them from being autonomous. Likewise, King and Stevenson (2017) contend that it often merely represents "licensed leadership" where teachers are afforded autonomy and agency if it serves "managerially determined and imposed targets".

Rumeli et al. (2022) are of the view that "school headmasters still require further enhancement training in distributive leadership practices". This view is echoed by Murphy and Brennan (2022) whose research highlights a need to support principals, particularly around ceding power and influence. They are of the opinion that strategically letting go of leadership can be attained through a focus on organisational culture and accessing or promoting access to, rigorous and relevant professional learning (Murphy and Brennan, 2022).

Building Capacity to Empower

School leaders play a role in creating a culture of cooperation and unity. Such a culture "will help to proliferate the knowledge, skills, and expertise among teachers to work effectively and efficiently in

building teamwork" (Rumeli et al. 2022). Amels et al. (2021) highlight the importance of principals taking account of teachers' capabilities and expertise. They identify trust and a growth mindset as being necessary if teachers are to take the initiative assume responsibility, space should also be given. Risk-taking is a key component of the culture in schools which promote empowerment and the distribution of leadership (O' Donovan, 2015). Some school leaders may be more averse to taking such risks for fear it could spiral out of control and with diminishing or no accountability. The CSL (2022) emphasise that middle leaders, due to their significant role in schools, need well-constructed development opportunities that are facilitated effectively by senior leaders. Solly (2018) identified coaching as being widely recognised as having high impact in the leadership development of others. He contends that if they are serious about delivering a distributed leadership model, schools need to invest time and resources into developing high-quality coaching (Solly, 2018). However, the underfunding of schools in Ireland and a heavy workload for Principals pose difficulties in terms of provision of resources and investing in the necessary time. The time issue is borne out in study by Murphy and Brennan. They cite their participants who are of the opinion that the current primary school structures restrict the time necessary to facilitate distributed leadership (Murphy and Brennan, 2022). IPPN argue that to unleash the full leadership potential of this middle tier, with its capacity to enhance the effective leadership and management of the school, a systematic approach underpinned by planning and investment is required (IPPN, 2022, b).

Concluding Comment

There are many benefits to sharing responsibility through distributed leadership in schools. Not least it has the potential to alleviate school leaders from an over- burdening and over-complexity of their roles. A cultural shift may be required in schools to attain this. This includes senior leaders genuinely distributing leadership through giving autonomy to staff an in creating opportunities for teachers so that they may develop. To assist with a greater understanding of this potential amongst Principals and Deputy Principals, professional development opportunities which includes team coaching must be made available. In addition, the provision of time is of utmost importance. However, to release the full potential, the system must also support the sharing of responsibility. The full restoration of posts of responsibility would be a start towards this.

What INTO members say about Sharing Responsibility

To gather the views of teachers on Sharing Responsibility, the Principals' and Deputy Principals' Committee (PDC) set up five focus groups to discuss the topic. Each focus group had between four and ten participants. The focus groups were comprised as follows:
- Principals
- Deputy Principals
- Assistant Principal I
- Assistant Principal II
- Unpromoted teachers

The focus group discussions were conducted via Microsoft Teams during March and April 2023. Participants discussed a list of questions, some of which were common to each of the five groups and others which were specific to each of the groups. Deirdre Kirwan, former Principal of a large urban school facilitated the focus group discussions. The PDC wish to express their thanks to all of the participants for their engagement with the topic and particularly to Deirdre for skilfully eliciting their views on this theme.

Engagement and Involvement

Each focus group initially considered the sharing of responsibility amongst teaching staff. It emerged from each of the groups that there is a high level of willingness amongst all staff to share responsibility. One Principal remarked on the "extraordinary amount of enthusiasm" of teachers to become involved and work together in teams on new initiatives. Participants of other groups outlined their motivation for sharing responsibility e.g. career progression. Others outlined how they take on responsibility by assuming roles, helping out and becoming involved in leading initiatives "for the benefit of the children and the school". Unpromoted teachers reported that they too become involved due to area of interest. One AP2 postholder highlighted the importance of involving staff to bring "new ideas and new perspectives" to the table. This willingness of staff was welcomed by Principals with one remarking that they "take things off my table" thus assisting with their workload. One participant remarked that "you want the principal to know that they can hand something over to you". Another participant highlighted that there are those who have official leadership roles and others who have assumed roles and taken on initiatives, albeit unofficially.

In terms of how responsibility is shared amongst teachers it emerged from the focus groups that a variety of approaches and strategies are employed. Principals themselves recognised the potential of staff to lead certain areas especially if they hold an interest in those areas. The tapping into the area of interest of staff was explored. One unpromoted participant outlined how committees for certain topics are established for teachers to become involved with sign-up sheets circulated in September to opt in. The Principal having an awareness of teachers' strengths and interests featured as a response. One participant outlined how the Principal would review CVs to their ascertain what areas individual teachers may be interested in, and would give a little nudge to encourage them to become involved. Principals recounted that when they approached staff to become involved they found that they, "were delighted to be invited". The approaches of gentle persuasion, planting seeds, invitations being issued for staff to become involved were not always welcomed and perceived- with a view being expressed by one unpromoted teacher -as "getting drafted into being involved in all of these different initiatives".

Empowering and Building Capacity

How capacity is built and how teachers are empowered and supported was also discussed. While Principals emphasised the importance of "leading by example" a view was expressed that not all staff are ready for collaboration and that this takes time to build. Leading by example was also identified as a

factor by unpromoted teachers. One participant expressed the view that "it's very difficult for other people to want to have responsibility in the school if you can't see it coming from the top down". Principals highlighted the issue of time to build capacity with one remarking that "sometimes you're quicker to do a thing yourself than to ask somebody". Also Deputy Principals expressed a desire to model and instruct but identified the requirement of time to enable this to happen. It was felt that due to the lack of promotional opportunities "building capacity in a smaller school can be more difficult".

The importance of relationships with staff was emphasised for building capacity. It was felt that a lot depends on the relationships with the staff in the school. One AP1 expressed the view that "when you've built relationships with your staff, the staff feel trusted to be heard". The view was also expressed that how well teachers worked with others impacted on how supported and valued they felt. Many participants were also mindful of staff relations with one expressing concerns "about stepping on other people's toes" when others have the shared responsibility. Principals too expressed concerns about some staff "not pulling their weight or being overly dominant". One participant emphasised the importance of staff relations with another remarking that "if you have the right people in place everything will work". Clear communication and conveying expectations were also recognised as important factors for building capacity.

Do you feel that you have a genuine leadership role?

Focus groups discussed whether they felt they had a genuine leadership role in their schools. Deputy Principals whilst acknowledging that they had their own "list of jobs" to do, reported a good degree of collaboration, discussing matters and involvement in decision making with the Principal. They described working in partnership with the Principal and "seeking out each other's opinion or support for something for implementation". They also outlined stepping in and covering for the Principal and having matters escalated up to them to deal with which cemented that leadership role. In addition, they highlighted the importance of meeting and touching base with the Principal regularly to ensure that they were "singing off the same hymn sheet". They reported that such engagement varied from occurring on an informal level and ad hoc basis to a more formalised structure. Deputies also highlighted the challenges of trying to support the Principal "whilst balancing the duties of teaching". One participant outlined the challenges of "leading or developing the organisation" particularly with a class and managing day to day issues.

One Deputy Principal remarked that prior to taking on the role, their AP2 post was "more a list of duties". This was a consistent response from the AP1 and AP2 postholders, many of whom saw their roles as a combination or a mixture of delegated tasks to complete, to leading some initiatives which have a genuine leadership element. One AP2 participant remarked that they, "would see it more as a list of jobs rather than a sign of leadership". It was reported that there is more scope to lead initiatives and share responsibility amongst teams in larger schools. One participant remarked how it was "hard to take initiative in a small school" and felt it was more of a case of supporting the Principal and Deputy Principal with their assigned tasks.

How much autonomy do you feel you have?

Focus group participants were asked to consider how much autonomy they had or how much autonomy they were willing to give in order to make key decisions. Feedback from each of the groups indicated a certain level of autonomy in making decisions for example in purchasing equipment and deciding on competitions to enter. There was consensus amongst the Principal participants that they did not want every little decision to be run by them and that they wished to avoid micromanaging when responsibility is shared with one expressing the view that "there's nothing more disempowering than trying to micromanage someone". However, there was a reluctance expressed by Principals for teachers to go on "solo runs" for major decisions. The unpromoted teachers too highlighted that they were not given "free reign". One AP2 outlined how they were "entrusted to make big decisions". Principals also emphasised the importance of teachers coming to discuss proposals and for them to act as a soundboard. One Principal remarked that in doing so "you're allowing them to see how your own mind works".

Some participants acknowledged that whilst they may not be "taking the final decisions [their] opinions can certainly have an impact" and expressed feeling valued by having such an input. While there is a degree of autonomy, there was a view expressed that at the end of the day the buck stops with the Principal. As one Principal summarised "there are moments when the distribution of leadership disappears and the buck is right in front of you". This view was echoed by another Principal who stated that when push came to shove there can only be one leader.

The importance of the culture of the school and the trust of the Principal for such autonomy was highlighted. One AP2 outlined how there is a "certain freedom as there's definite trust from the Principal". One Principal outlined how they have reached "seventh heaven" due to the "high trust environment". While trust was a consistent response from each of the focus groups, including staff but particularly the management team, one Principal remarked that "you've got to be a truster, a wise truster not a foolish one".

When responsibility is shared do you feel supported?

Unpromoted focus group participants taking on initiatives stated that they did not wish to be left on their own but that they are supported not only by leadership but other staff in the school. Responses from focus groups indicated generally feeling supported by the leadership of the school and particularly feeling supported by Principals. This occurred through encouragement, exchange of ideas, being 'backed up', being given space and an acceptance of "when things haven't gone the way they should". Notwithstanding feeling supported participants across all groups emphasised the importance of acknowledging the efforts of those who take on responsibility. One AP2 participant stated that "people want some credit or acknowledgement for what they are trying to do". This was also echoed by the unpromoted teachers who stated that it "would be nice to have the recognition". Giving such recognition was discussed with some participants outlining how opportunities were offered to spotlight matters and the time was taken to publicly acknowledge their efforts. One unpromoted participant remarked that "our

Principal is very good at the kind of recognition thing". Participants reported that such recognition led them to feeling valued.

What is required for creating a true model for sharing responsibility?

A number of areas were identified from each of the discussion groups for creating a true model for sharing responsibility. These included:

    (i) **Culture -**the creation of a culture of collaboration within the school including fostering a team culture, building a culture of trust and striking the correct balance.

    (ii) **Role of the Principal-**identifying strengths of staff, communication from and consultation with the Principal and recognition of teacher's efforts, whether a postholder or not.

    (iii) Positive Staff Relations-creating, fostering and maintaining positive staff relations.

    (iv) Time -to engage, instruct, model and collaborate. The need for release time for Deputy Principals and administrative Deputies in larger schools.

    (v) **Training** for management, middle management and for the whole staff. The content of such training to include conducting meetings, expectations of staff, planning and collaborating together.

    (vi) Posts of Responsibility -for the removal of any barriers there may be and for recognising, recompensing and providing development opportunities for teachers.

Conclusion

The relevant research and the focus groups outline how distributed leadership can play a part in the sharing of responsibility in schools. While there was a variety of views expressed by focus group participants, the need for trust, respect, understanding, partnership, cooperation, cohesiveness and a shared understanding emerged from the focus groups as common themes. There was also a consensus from the participants that a successful model for sharing responsibility needs to be resourced and given the time and space to succeed. It seems that there is a very clear view emerging about building a culture to give effect to this. The importance of relationships with colleagues including the Principal were also recognised as important factors in determining whether teachers feel that they have a genuine leadership role. To what extent school leaders can be supported in terms of sharing responsibility, and what additional resources are required from the system to do that will be the subject of discussions at the Consultative Conference.

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