

MITIGATING THE MICRO-POLITICAL DIMENSION OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP: AN UBUNTU PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Distributed leadership has been widely adopted as an apolitical leadership model with little attention paid to its political dimension and its attendant implications. This study explored the inherent dynamics of the grossly overlooked micro-politics within the distributed leadership framework. It offers a novel perspective on conflict resolution anchored in Ubuntu principles. Grounded in the interpretive paradigm, the study employs qualitative methods and draws primarily from secondary data sources. The Ubuntu Theory serves as our conceptual lens with emphasis on its principles of interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and conflict resolution. Rodger's Concept Analysis Research Design (CARD) was employed to depict distributed leadership's fluid and dynamic nature with emphasis on contextual variability. The design also enables us to make sense of the data from academic literature, pertinent texts and theory. The study proposed a framework that can be harnessed to counteract the effects of micro-politics distributed leadership practice. This we believe will empower educational leaders to foster inclusivity, equity and collaborative decision-making. This study contributes to the evolving discourse on distributed leadership by offering a fresh perspective anchored in African philosophy with global implications for educational leadership practices.

Keywords: *Distributed leadership, educational leadership, micro-politics, Ubuntu perspective, conceptual analysis.*

1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, distributed leadership model has garnered significant attention as a transformative framework among scholars, policy makers and education practitioners. The model challenges the conventional hierarchical structures that were prevalent in educational institutions (Spillane, 2006; Joslyn, 2018; Potter, 2023). Central to distributed leadership is decentralising leadership practices across stakeholders deemed capable of holding leadership positions rather than ascribing authority to the school principal or administrative leader. The model has been applauded for its attribute to cultivating an inclusive, participatory, and dynamically responsive school system. However, the normative proponents of the model depict it as apolitical- showcasing it as immune from the entanglements of micro politics (Harris, 2008; Berkovich, 2020; Or & Berkovich, 2023). The apolitical perspective overlooks the complexities of distributed leadership, especially in educational settings characterised by power relations, networks of influence, and subtle political manoeuvres. Regardless of their magnitude of influence, such micro-political forces shape distributed leadership practices in schools (Gronn, 2000; Bush, 2022). Therefore, ignoring these political implications in distributed leadership may undermine its objectives (Piot & Kelchtermans, 2016).

This study attempt to fill the identified in previous studies by examining the overlooked roles of micro-politics in distributed school leadership. The study utilised Ubuntu Theory principles to counteract the adverse effects of micro-politics with a view to enhance school leadership effectiveness cum inclusivity. It is our hope that this exploration will not only expand theoretical understanding but also offer practical insights. Thus, we propose a framework that leverages Ubuntu's philosophy to mitigate the potential negative impact of micro politics within the distributed leadership model. This we believe will be beneficial to educational practitioners and policy makers.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do micro-political dynamics manifest within distributed leadership structures in educational settings?

2. What are the implications of these micro-political influences on decision-making and leadership effectiveness within distributed leadership models?
3. How can the principles of Ubuntu Philosophy be leveraged to mitigate the negative impact of micro-politics and enhance the functioning of distributed leadership structures?

2. Theoretical underpinning

2.1. Distributed leadership theory: An overview

Distributed leadership theory is a perspective that views leadership as a collective phenomenon that is distributed among multiple actors in an organisation rather than a role or position that is assigned to a single individual (Spillane, 2006; Bush, 2023; Sasere & Makhasane, 2023). It is a leadership model that challenges the traditional assumptions of hierarchical, top-down, and individualistic models of leadership by emphasising the importance of collaboration, interaction and shared decision-making among leaders and followers (Harris & Lambert, 2003; Leithwood et. al., 2006). However, distributed leadership theory also faces some challenges and criticisms, such as the lack of clarity and consistency in its definition and measurement, the potential for role confusion and conflict among leaders and followers, and the difficulty of balancing distributed and formal authority in schools (Göksoy, 2015). Specifically, the challenge of role confusion and balancing formal authority gave room for micro-politics to manifest within a distributed leadership structure. Therefore, distributed leadership theory requires further empirical and conceptual development to address these issues and to enhance its relevance and applicability for educational institutions.

2.2. Ubuntu theory

Ubuntu is an humanistic philosophy from African tradition that emphasises the value of community, compassion, and respect for others. (Rasweswe, 2024). It is encapsulated by the aphorism that states "I am because we are," meaning personal identity is formed through communal relationships (Tutu, 2011; Paulson, 2019; Chigangaidze et al., 2021). It is worth noting that Ubuntu was instrumental in fostering social transformation and justice in post-apartheid South Africa – a politically polarised country in the past (Tutu, 2011). Ubuntu is enshrined in the principles of *interconnectedness, collective responsibility, respect and dignity as well as conflict resolution and reconciliation*. **Interconnectedness:** This principle underscores the consciousness of connection that exists among community members. It holds that individual well-being is inextricably linked to and depicts communal health. By extension, the tenet holds that the connection transcends human-to-human relations to include the relationship between humans and nature (Poovan et al., 2006; Gade, 2012). Drawing from interconnectedness principle, individual derive their relevance from others. Hence, people should be kind and compassionate while dealing with others. **Collective Responsibility:** Given that Ubuntu is characterised with a sense of community togetherness, this principle promotes joint responsibility among community members. It encourages individuals to contribute to the common good and support one another. This ethos fosters solidarity and generosity especially towards the needy and vulnerable (Poovan et al., 2006; Richard, 2009). **Respect and Dignity:** Ubuntu places emphasis on the respect and dignity of community members in addition to the principles mentioned earlier. Through this principle, Ubuntu promotes empathy, compassion, and concern for others' well-being while also valuing diversity, tolerance and inclusion across different cultures (Paulson, 2019; Thompson, 2023). **Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation:** Noting that conflict is inevitable where protection of interests are involved, Ubuntu advocates open dialogue, forgiveness, and reconciliation with a view to heal divisions and strengthen community ties. Additionally, the principle emphasis restorative justice rather than punitive measures (Paulson, 2019; Tutu, 2011).

3. Methodology

3.1. Concept analysis research design

The study adopts a Concept Analysis Research Design (CARD) to bridge the gap in the normative apolitical distributed leadership perspective. Concept analysis, as proposed by Rodgers (1989), is a systematic approach used to clarify and provide a deeper understanding of complex concepts within a specific context. It involves developing and clarifying concepts (Toftthagen & Fagerström, 2010). The design assumes that concepts are dynamic and change over time which indicates the evolution of knowledge and practice. In the context of the present study, the normative distributed leadership model has gained global momentum as an ideal leadership framework that is apolitical. Essentially, CARD offers a structured and thorough comprehension of a concept and its interconnections with other concepts. Its purpose extends to guiding research, education, and practical applications. This design is particularly suitable for unpacking the intertwined nature of distributed leadership and politics in educational institutions. In addition, during analysis, we adhere to Laurence & Margolis (2003) principles of logical induction, deductions, and critical arguments within the existing literature.

4. Literature review

This section presents the literature review with a view to locating this study within the body of knowledge in the domain of education leadership with a special focus on micro-politics and distributed leadership.

4.1. Distributed leadership: The revelation of its political dimension

Distributed Leadership Theory is one of the leadership models used in contemporary contexts to understand and improve educational leadership. It advocates for a collective and collaborative approach to decision-making, where leadership roles and responsibilities are shared among multiple actors. However, some scholars question the political nature of distributed leadership and whether it is truly apolitical or neutral. Hence, we examine some of the scholarly debates on this topic and explore the implications and limitations of the prevailing normative and prescriptive distributed leadership theory from a political perspective. This we do first by asking a pertinent question: Is distributed leadership truly apolitical? We also examined the intricacies of balancing collaboration with authority, the inadequacy and variability of empirical evidence, contextual variations and the decision-making process vis-a-vis leadership effectiveness.

4.2. Is distributed leadership truly apolitical?

One of the main debates on the political nature of distributed leadership is whether it is possible to distribute leadership without introducing political elements. Some scholars contend that the very act of distributing leadership inherently involves negotiations, power dynamics, and the potential for conflict (Hangartner & Svaton, 2022). They argue that decision-making, regardless of the structure, is influenced by different actors' interests, values, and agendas. For instance, Maxcy and Nguyen (2006) explored the intricate political dimension of distributed leadership within the education system. They contend that these frameworks often adopt a traditional and depoliticised approach to the concept of leadership distribution. Literature indicates the challenge of balancing collaboration with authority and contextual variability as a basis for micro-politics as indicators of micro-politics that characterised distributed leadership. ***The challenge of balancing collaboration with Authority:*** According to Spillane (2006), leadership responsibility could be conferred on a staff member who demonstrates competency in a given area, even if such staff have no formal leadership portfolio. However, distributing leadership responsibilities to individuals with no formal/official portfolio often results in difficulty in balancing collaboration with authority in leadership. This situation raises questions of legitimacy in exercising authority by those conferred with such responsibility. This view was shared by Atencio and Herbst (2022), who noted that maintaining the balance between collaboration and authority within distributed leadership could be challenging. Additionally, the challenges of collaboration with authority in distributed leadership include difficulty, lack of follow-through, lack of efficiency, lack of acceptance, and dealing with immature team members. In a recent study, Hangartner and Svaton (2022) explored power relations between headteachers and teachers in the context of distributed leadership in Switzerland. The study reveals that New Public Management reforms (which subscribe to distributed leadership) lead to tensions between headteachers and teachers due to conflicting expectations. ***Contextual Variability as a Basis for Micro Politics:*** The apolitical perspective of distributed leadership models acknowledged the role of institutional forces in introducing a distributed leadership model into an organisation. However, it overlooked the specific effects of unique organisational contexts. Harris et al. (2022) state that "it is more difficult to empirically investigate distributed leadership because of the multiple sources of influence, but it is not impossible", p. 441. From a continental perspective, Lumby, Crow and Pashiardis (2009) compare how distributed leadership is practised in different countries and regions, such as England, South Africa, China, and Latin America. The result suggests that various factors influence distributed leadership, such as historical traditions, cultural norms, institutional policies, and external pressures. In another study, Ciuk and Schedlitzki (2022) investigated how context influences the development and distribution of leadership within an organisation. The study was an in-depth case study of a private organisation trying to recover from a turbulent past by adopting a distributed leadership model. The findings indicate that social and political dynamics cum overarching forces significantly shape the objectives and effectiveness of distributed leadership.

4.3. Micro-politics influences on decision-making process and leadership effectiveness

The impact of micro-political influences on decision-making and leadership effectiveness within distributed leadership models is a subject of growing interest and importance (Or & Berkovich, 2023). Micro-politics encompasses the subtle and often concealed forces that shape organisational behaviour and actions, including factors such as power, values, emotions, and personal agendas. In the context of distributed leadership models, where leadership responsibilities are shared among multiple individuals,

these micro-political influences exert a profound effect. Recent research by Or and Berkovich (2023) underscores the impact of micro-political influences on decision-making and leadership effectiveness within distributed leadership models. Their study explored participative decision-making processes in both individualist and collectivist cultural school contexts. The findings reveal that micro-political tactics, such as information manipulation, coalition formation, and social influence are frequently employed during participative decision-making processes. Given the above exploration, it is evident that distributed leadership is not totally devoid of politics. Hence, we advance a framework to mitigate the negative impact of micro-politics within distributed school leadership.

5. Proposed framework: Ubuntu-Informed Distributed Leadership Framework (UIDLF)

Drawing from the Ubuntu theoretical underpinning, we proposed an Ubuntu-Informed Distributed Leadership Framework (UIDLF) as a remedy to the micro-political dimension of distributed leadership. Specifically, UIDLF aims to mitigate micro-politics by emphasising interconnectedness, collective responsibility, respect and dignity, and conflict resolution. We posit that, *interconnectedness* fosters stakeholder collaboration (Radwan, 2019), while *collective responsibility* diffuses power concentration and power struggle (Rogers et al., 2020). We also advance that, *respect and dignity* guide leaders to value diverse viewpoints (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Mkhasibe, 2023), while *conflict resolution* promotes enduring peace (Tiky, 2018; Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017). Overall, it is believed that UIDLF will serve as a framework for school leaders to mitigate and navigate micro politics in their schools.

6. UIDLF implications for global educational leadership practices

It is pertinent to state that Ubuntu-Informed Distributed Leadership framework transcends cultural and geographical boundaries; it is globally adaptable across diverse educational contexts. Regarding its global relevance, the framework promotes inclusivity and equity, fosters collaborative decision-making, enhances cultural sensitivity and tolerance and mitigates power struggles and micro-politics.

7. Conclusion

The study examined the intersection of distributed leadership theory, micro-politics dynamics influencing school leadership and the mediating potential of Ubuntu Theory. We unpacked the interconnectedness of these concepts to illuminate a new trajectory for school leadership that transcends apolitical distributed leadership paradigms. Hence, we advanced an Ubuntu-Informed Distributed Leadership Framework (UIDLF) as a strategy to mitigate the detrimental influence of micropolitics in school leadership.

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