

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The limited understanding of teacher leadership has contributed to the notion that teachers are leaders, exclusively, within their classrooms. While teacher leaders are expert teachers, their role extends beyond the classroom to the school and community. In order for this role to be developed and enacted fully, an understanding of how teacher leadership is conceptualised by both teachers and School Management Teams (SMTs) is necessary. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, if teachers can correctly conceptualise and understand teacher leadership, they will be better equipped to fulfil that role meaningfully. Secondly, an understanding of this concept by SMTs will facilitate the development of teacher leaders.

The leadership and management of schools are complex tasks that cannot be performed by a single heroic leader, the principal. In order for the variety of tasks to be completed effectively and efficiently, it is imperative that those tasks are distributed to staff with expert knowledge at all levels of the organisation. The development of teachers as leaders allows for the sharing of the workload, leads to the empowerment of staff, and to some extent erodes the bureaucratic top-down approach that has characterised education for many years. Some of the key issues around the topic of teacher leadership include the variety of meanings ascribed to the term, the role teachers, SMTs and district offices play in the development and support of teacher leadership, and the lack of empirical evidence to support the idea that teacher leadership leads to school improvement.

This research aims to understand how teacher leadership is developed in a secondary school. Focus is placed on how the concept of teacher leadership is understood and conceptualised by teachers and SMTs, as well as the effect this has on the development of teacher leadership in the school. There is further investigation into the barriers that prevent teacher leadership from being developed and/or enacted. Lastly, the research aims to provide guidelines as to how teacher leadership development programmes can be made more effective.

In South Africa the research on teacher leadership as a form of distributed leadership is limited. There have been only a few studies done, however, this is in no way comparable to the large amount of literature that is available in the United States and Britain. While this literature is an important knowledge base from which to start and even to cautiously draw comparisons, it is imperative that the unique contextual factors of South Africa's educational and political context be taken into account when trying to implement a concept new to the South African education system. Research on teacher leadership in South Africa is important in order to better understand the impact of these contextual factors, thereby contributing to the better implementation of the teacher leadership. Research in schools also creates awareness amongst those participating in the study. This may then lead to further discussions around the topic and a better understanding of the emerging roles available for teachers.

This research is a qualitative study, utilising a case study approach. As the author and researcher, I conducted my research in a single, secondary school and data was gathered by means of (1) a questionnaire; (2) semi-structured interviews; and (3) document analysis. The rationale for focusing on a single school is to allow for a deeper understanding of how teacher leadership is understood and the barriers that impede its development. In addition, to the findings providing clarity around the research questions, it ought to be noted that the findings from this study cannot be generalised to any other school.

1.2 Background to the study

In South Africa, the concept of teacher leadership is relatively new (Grant & Singh, 2009), yet this idea is not new to educational practice. In the United States, Canada and Australia, teacher leadership is well developed, and well-grounded in research-based evidence (Harris & Muijs, 2002). Teacher leadership is a well-known and acceptable form of leadership practice (Harris, 2003). Today in South Africa, under a new democratic dispensation, the South African Schools Act (1996), the Government Gazette for the Norms and Standards for Educators (2000) as well as the Task Team Report on Education Management (1996), requires schools to review their management practices and develop a new approach to managing schools.

The emphasis of these documents is to motivate towards a more shared and participatory approach to the practice of leadership and management in schools (Grant et al., 2010). In particular, the Task Team Report on Education Management calls for the internal management of schools to be accompanied by the internal “devolution” of power (Khumalo & Grant, unpublished). This policy shift offers the possibility for the emergence of teacher leadership. However, Grant (2006) argues that South African schools have not yet embraced the notion of teacher leadership as envisioned in the Norms and Standards for Educators (2000). This document requires teachers to take on seven roles, including those of leader, manager and administrator, previously deemed to be roles of formally appointed personnel.

The Norms and Standards for Educators (2000) calls for teachers who have leadership skills both within and outside their classrooms. It also calls for teachers to be involved in the decision-making processes of the school. In other words, the concept of ‘teacher leadership’ is implicit in current South African education policy documents. However, despite the aims of educational reform in South Africa, teacher leadership is not made explicit in many South African schools (see for example Grant 2006 & 2008). In addition, the policy does not clarify what teacher leadership entails, nor does it provide guidelines on how teacher leadership should be introduced in schools (de Villiers & Pretorius, 2011). The question that needs to be answered at present is how teacher leadership is both understood and developed in schools.

1.3 Statement of the problem

As Grant (2006 & 2008) concludes, the concept of teacher leadership is implicit in policy, but has not become explicit in many schools. Following on from this discussion, it is also important to note that the concept of teacher leadership is one that lacks conceptual clarity, which could prove sufficient reason as to why the concept is not fully understood by teachers and SMTs. This lack of understanding has acted as a barrier to the development of teacher leadership in schools. However, it is not the only barrier to be found. The concept of teacher leadership is embedded in the notion of distributed leadership, which, with its emphasis on multiple leaders at all levels of the organisation, may be difficult to enact in

many South African schools, due to the legacy of traditional hierarchical systems and the roles that have in a South African circumstance characterised schools for many years.

Even in schools where the concept of teacher leadership is well understood, implementing it may prove a challenge to the culture of the school, where it may possibly be perceived as a threat by SMTs. In addition, teachers themselves, are not always willing to take on additional leadership roles without the additional pay. The development of teacher leadership is further hindered by the systems of accountability in schools. While policy calls for teachers to act as leaders within and outside their classrooms, district offices still perceive the principal as the person ultimately responsible for the school. Further to this, oftentimes it is only with the principal that district officials choose to liaise.

The lack of development of teacher leadership in schools means that the workload of the principal and the SMT is not shared. Not only does this contribute to the increased workload and related stress for the few members of staff, it also has the indirect effect of failing to adequately train and prepare teachers for their future roles as heads of department, deputy principals and principals.

1.4 Definition of key terms

This study draws on a number of key terms, namely leadership, management, distributed leadership, teacher leadership, teachers and School Management Teams (SMTs). These terms are essential to understanding the context of this research and also provide a basis for the analysis that follows. For the purpose of my research, an indication of how these terms are employed in the current study is relevant. The concept of teacher leadership lacks conceptual clarity. The term has a variety of definitions depending on the context in which it is used. However, in order to better understand teacher leadership and its multiple uses, it is imperative to understand some of the terms that provide the foundation and also the conceptual base from which it arises.

Two such terms are leadership and management. The concepts of leadership and management overlap with one another, and also with the related notion of administration (Bush, 2008). In addition, leadership and management are often used interchangeably to

refer to the various activities of leaders. These terms have also, over the years and by different researchers, been attributed with a variety of meanings. One of the clearest distinctions between leadership and management is provided by Cuban (1988) cited in Bush (2008). He links leadership with change while management is seen as a maintenance activity.

Any understanding of teacher leadership ought to be contextualised within the concept of distributed leadership from which it arises. Distributed leadership signifies a shift in focus from the attributes and behaviours of individual 'leaders' to a more systemic perspective, whereby, 'leadership' is conceived of as a collective social process emerging through the interactions of multiple actors (Bolden, 2011). Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) define teacher leaders as "teachers who are leaders within and beyond the classroom, [who] identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice". For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on teachers that are leaders, without formal appointment to leadership positions.

While the term teacher may be used to describe a broader profession, in this study the term teacher refers specifically to one who teaches directly. In particular, this study further uses the word teacher to refer to those teachers not in formal management positions. The Department of Education (DoE) refers to such teachers as being on Post Level One (PL1). The School Management Team (SMT) is sometimes also referred to as the Senior Management Team (SMT). In this study, the SMT refers to the School Management Team and comprises all members holding formal leadership roles. According to the DoE, the three levels of management in a school are as follows: the Head of Department (PL2), the Deputy Principal (PL3) and the Principal (PL4). The definitions provided here are limited and are only an indication of the variety of meaning, which will be further expanded on in Chapter Two.

1.5 Aims and objectives

The aim of the study is to establish whether teacher leadership is being enacted in the chosen school. The study further aims to establish the level of understanding of the concept of teacher leadership, and to determine whether that understanding impacts on the

development and enactment of teacher leadership within the school. The following objectives have been set, by which the overall aims will be addressed:

- To establish teachers and SMTs understanding of the meaning of teacher leadership;
- To identify the leadership roles that teachers are fulfilling and are these roles a result of a formal appointment;
- To ascertain whether SMT members are involved in the development of teacher leadership informally.

1.6 Research questions

1.6.1 Key research question

- How do SMTs conceptualise and develop teacher leadership programmes in schools.

1.6.2 Key sub – questions

- How do SMTs and staff conceptualise teacher leadership?
- How are teacher leadership programmes developed, implemented and evaluated?
- What are the barriers to teacher leadership development programmes?
- How can teacher leadership development programmes be made more effective?

1.7 Research design

A research design describes the procedures for conducting the study, including when, from whom, and under what conditions the data will be obtained (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The research design is very important, because certain limitations and cautions in interpreting the results are related to each design, and because the research design determines how the data will be analysed. There are four major categories of research design: quantitative, qualitative, mixed method and analytic. In addition, within each major category, there are different types of designs. These types of designs are often used to describe the study as, for example, a case study.

It is important to note that the research design categories are independent of the classification of research as it may be applied, basic, action, or evaluation, respectively. For the purpose of the current study, a qualitative research design has been chosen, with a focus on individual lived experience, a case study approach. Utilising a qualitative research design will enable me to place the subject's perspective as central. Further to this, a qualitative research design allows me to give detailed consideration to the holistic picture in which the research topic is embedded. My reason for choosing a case study is to explore the particularity of a single case, in this instance, teacher leadership development.

1.7.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is characterised by strategies that take the subject's perspective as central. This approach also pays significant attention to detailed observation in an attempt to produce a 'rich' and 'deep' description (Morrison, 2002). In qualitative research, detailed consideration is given to the holistic picture in which the research topic is embedded. The underlying idea is that researchers can only make sense of the data collected if they are able to understand the data in a broader educational, social and historical context (Morrison, 2002).

A qualitative research design is appropriate for this study, as it emphasises gathering data on naturally occurring phenomena. Furthermore, most of the data is in the form of words, rather than numbers, and the researcher is required to search and explore with a variety of methods, until a deep understanding is achieved (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). A quantitative, analytic or mixed method research design would not be appropriate for this study for the following reasons: (1) there would be an emphasis on objectivity through the use of numbers, statistics, structure and control; and (2) phenomena would be explored and examined through the analysis of documents. A qualitative approach, with its focus on producing a 'rich' and 'deep' description Morrison (2002), is therefore most appropriate to this study.

1.7.2 Study design

A case study is one approach to qualitative research. It involves in-depth research into a particular case, or a small set of cases (Thomas, 2009). The 'case' that forms the basis of the

investigation is normally something that already exists (Descombe, 2007); it is a “naturally occurring” phenomenon (Yin 1994, cited in Descombe, 2007). Cresswell (2008) refers to a case study as “an in-depth study of a bounded system based on extensive data collection”. It is also referred to as bounded means being unique according to place, time and participant characteristics by McMillan & Schumacher (2010). In this study, the school I have chosen to conduct my research at is a “bounded system”. While its uniqueness will provide richness in detail, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other situations.

The case study can be further defined by its special features. Qualitative case studies can be characterised as being particularistic, descriptive and heuristic. The uniqueness of a case study lies not so much in the methods it employs as in the questions it asked and their relationship to the end product (Merriam, 2009). The aim of using a case study approach is to gain a rich, detailed understanding of the case by examining aspects of it in detail. This is in line with the aims for this study to provide an in-depth understanding and description of teacher leadership development in a secondary school. The advantage of using a case study approach is that it offers the opportunity to explain why certain outcomes may occur, by focusing on the relationships and processes within social settings. In this respect, case studies tend to be holistic, rather than deal with isolated factors (Descombe, 2007).

1.7.3 Research instruments

One of the strengths of the case study approach is that it allows the researcher to use a variety of sources, a variety of types of data and a variety of research methods as part of the investigation (Descombe, 2007). In line with this, I have chosen to use three methods of data collection; semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire, and document analysis. My reason for doing this is that the use of multiple methods of data collection will enable me to add to the credibility of my findings or to reject an explanation. In addition, the use of multiple methods facilitates the validation of data through triangulation (Descombe, 2007).

I used a semi-structured interview schedule as the primary strategy for data collection. A semi-structured interview is a flexible tool that allows for the use of open-ended questions and for follow up questions where clarification is required. A semi-structured interview also allows the respondents to express themselves openly and honestly. In addition, I administered a questionnaire to all staff at the school. It was not possible in this study to

interview all members of staff due to time and financial constraints. By administering a questionnaire, I collected a significant amount of data, while taking account of the constraints of this study. The data gathered from the questionnaire and document analysis will contribute to the internal validity of these findings.

1.7.4 Population and Sample

I chose my own school as the case study school firstly, due to the surprise classification we received in 2012. Due to a significant drop in the matric pass rate, below the national average, the school was declared as “underperforming” for the next three years. Secondly, I would like my research findings to be utilised for the benefit of the school and staff. In selecting participants for the study, I want to research staff at various levels of the organisation. This is important, as I aim to explore the role of both the SMT and staff in the conceptualisation and development of teacher leadership. I chose the Principal, Deputy Principal, as well as three HODs and five Post-Level One educators to participate in the semi-structured interviews. In addition, all other staff at the school will be invited to answer the questionnaire.

The sample comprised men and women and participants are employed by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) and the School Governing Body (SGB). Regarding the sample of Post-Level One educators, I applied further selection criteria. I chose educators that had five or more years teaching experience, and had been involved in informal leadership roles at the school. In light of the above, I utilised convenience and purposeful sampling. A convenience sample is composed of members most easily available to the researcher, and not representative of a wider population (Fogelman and Comber, 2002). The participant selection is not representative of the entire school. Instead, I chose SMT members based on the role they currently fulfil and the implied responsibility it entails in developing teacher leadership at the school.

When choosing Post-Level One educators, I focused on those that had been involved in informal leadership roles at the school. This makes the sample selection purposive, which enables the collection of the kind of data that might adequately answer research questions. This selection criteria does not allow for the generalisation of findings beyond the selected group and context.

1.8 Significance of the study

Research in education has been dominated by a traditional view of leadership that separates schools leaders from teachers (Grant, 2008). More recent research, however, calls for distributed forms of leadership, where all the teachers are viewed as having the capacity to lead, and where power is redistributed across the organisation. Grant (2008) argues for the critical importance of linking professional development initiatives to issues of leading. Findings from her research (2008) reveal that teacher leadership, in terms of the implementation of the new pedagogic learning, was restricted to individual classrooms, with little take up as a whole-school initiative. This led the author to conclude that the schools' conditions were not always conducive to authentic collaboration, redistribution of power and teacher leadership.

It also further suggests the need for professional development initiatives to consciously address leadership issues, as well as for post-initiative support processes, when they are conceptualised (Grant, 2008). This supports the findings by Singh (2007) that SMTs play a role in developing teacher leadership and how teachers can lead beyond the classroom are not clearly stated in the South African policies. Research by De Villiers and Pretorius (2011) found that teachers' assumptions about teacher leadership were positive. Most teachers agreed with the need for teachers to take on leadership roles and responsibilities in the school. The research also indicated that teachers felt they had the appropriate knowledge and skills for the development and implementation of teacher leadership.

From this, it is evident that teachers are ready to embrace more democratic forms of leadership practice in schools. However, findings from De Villiers and Pretorius (2011), which correlate with those of Grant (2008), found that teachers are not sure of how teacher leadership is different from other forms of leadership, and that they are not found to be sure of the focus of teacher leadership. Educators from the study by De Villiers and Pretorius (2011) also indicated that professional development needs in the field of teacher leadership do exist. Yet, at present, principals remain the primary recipients of leadership development initiatives. This is in line with the assumption that leadership equates with position and authority. My study aims to explore whether the focus of leadership development is shifting to include the educator.

My interest in the topic stems from the view that the development of teacher leadership can have significant benefits for the school and for improved teaching and learning. As a member of the SMT at my school, I developed an interest in teacher leadership. The variety and complexity of tasks that a school is expected to deal with necessitates the need for multiple leaders at various levels of the organisation. The more I observed the way in which teacher leadership was developed at my school, the more interested I became in conducting the research at my school. It was important that I found out how teacher leadership was conceptualised by staff and SMT, and how this influenced the development of teacher leadership programmes and initiatives.

Teacher leadership is a relatively new concept in South Africa, making these findings a valid contribution to the existing knowledge on the subject in this educational context. As a SMT member, I also hoped that the proposed research would enable me to reflect on my own practices as a leader, and to determine to what extent my own leadership style facilitated or hindered the development of teacher leadership at my school. It was my aim that the outcomes of this study would help formal leaders at my school, so as to foster and develop teacher leadership. Lastly, I hoped that this study would enable teachers to see themselves as leaders, and to become active participants in their leadership development.

1.9 Overview of research in this area

Teacher leadership first gained prominence in the 1980s. Since then, the concept and practice of teacher leadership has continued to gain momentum. Studies on teacher leadership have been conducted throughout the world, and in a variety of learning organisations, particularly in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. More recently, studies on teacher leadership have also been the focus in South Africa. Yet, the construct of teacher leadership is not well defined, either conceptually or operationally. The collective literature is predominantly descriptive instead of explanatory, although several recent studies have begun to investigate the paths by which teacher leadership might influence improvement (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), while the empirical literature is characterised by several small scale qualitative studies.

The literature on teacher leadership has, thus far, focused on leadership from formal teacher leadership positions. Studies have focused on providing descriptions of teacher leadership practice, identifying characteristics of teacher leaders and describing the conditions that facilitate and hinder teacher leadership. The literature is less forthcoming on how teacher leadership develops, the effects of teacher leadership, and teacher leadership development plans or programmes (York – Barr & Duke, 2004). This study aims to examine how teacher leadership is conceptualised and developed in a school.

1.10 Organisation of the research report

This research report comprises five chapters and an appendix. Chapter One provides a brief overview of the research being undertaken. Chapter Two provides the literature review. Chapter Three discusses the methodology used in this study. Chapter Four presents the data presentation and analysis. Chapter Five concludes the research report with a summary of the research conducted, discusses the findings, provides recommendations for furthering the development of teacher leadership in School A and recommendations for further research.

1.11 Summary of the chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the topic being investigated so as to provide a rationale for the study that I have chosen to undertake. In addition, this chapter also provides the research questions and describes the research design. Lastly, an overview of research in this area aims to place my study in context. In the next chapter, the literature review will focus on some of the key concepts relevant to teacher leadership.