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Distributed Leadership as a Path to Organizational Commitment: The Case of a Lebanese School

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ABSTRACT

This study explores distributed leadership in school characterized by high teacher organizational commitment using case study research. Leadership is distributed in formal and informal manners. Teachers were directly involved in academic but not in administrative decision-making. Although school lacks democratic leadership, teachers’ organizational commitment remained high. This is due to the surrounding authoritarian Lebanese culture that normalizes the formal leaders monopoly on decision-making especially administrative decisions perceived to be outside the realm of teachers’ expertise. Results suggest recommendations for the transformation of schools to professional communities that adopt a distributed form of leadership where teachers’ voices are invited.

Organizational commitment has been investigated by several educational researchers because of its impact on schools’ organizational processes and outcomes (Devos, Tuytens, & Hulpia, 2014; Hairuddin & Salisu, 2015), specifically the performance of teachers (Hairuddin & Salisu, 2015; Sezgin, 2009). As defined by Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979), organizational commitment is “the relative strength of an individual’s identification with, involvement in, and loyalty to a particular organization” (p. 226). Consequently, committed employees are defined as having a strong belief in the organization’s goals and values, willing to exert major effort on behalf of the organization and demonstrating a strong desire to maintain their membership in it (Mowday et al., 1979). In the context of schools, committed teachers are found to be hardworking, patient, involved in their work and less likely to leave their positions (Hulpia & Devos, 2010).

Researchers have also found that organizational arrangements that promote collaboration and learning are more likely to promote commitment toward the organization (Hulpia & Devos, 2010; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Professional learning communities, as a form of these arrangements, appear to hold considerable promise where leadership constitutes an important resource for teachers’ commitment (OECD, 2016; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Within this model, leadership is conceived as distributed, but most importantly as instructional support shared at all levels and aimed at improving student learning (OECD, 2016). In fact, participative approaches to leadership where teachers have more authority to influence decision-making on issues that matter to them were associated with effective leadership leading to: (1) a greater sense of teacher efficacy; (2) an increased level of trust; (3) greater job satisfaction; (4) greater sense of ownership and commitment to the organisation (Angelle, 2010; Devos et al., 2014; Fiorito, Bozeman, Young, & Meurs, 2007; Hulpia & Devos, 2010; Vescio et al., 2008).

Accordingly, there is a growing interest among researchers to explore in-depth the relationship between teacher’s organisational commitment (TOC) (Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz, & Seashore Louis, 2009) and the role of principals in fostering the development of distributed forms of leadership (Angelle, 2010; Saadi et al., 2009). Studies have found that TOC is positively related to the
practice of leadership (Sezgin, 2009) and specifically to distributed forms of leadership (Hulpia & Devos, 2010; Hulpia, Devos, & Rosseel, 2009a; Hulpia, Devos, & Van Keer, 2011). However, only few studies have explored the nature of distributed leadership as practiced and examined how differences in distributing leadership in schools might relate to TOC; thus, more research studies are recommended in this area (Harris, 2009; Hulpia & Devos, 2010; Hulpia et al., 2009a, 2011).

In the Arab context, there is a growing interest in researching distributed leadership in education within the framework of professional learning communities (Karami-Akkary & Waheed, 2018). However, available literature points to the fact that most approaches to leadership in Arab schools remain of the traditional, managerial and authoritative leadership styles where leadership is concentrated in the principalship (Karami-Akkary, 2013; Karami-Akkary & Waheed, 2018; Al Mousawi, 2000). Moreover, there are no studies that examine distributed leadership and TOC in schools in the Arab world (Karami-Akkary & Waheed, 2018).

This qualitative case study explores how leadership is distributed in a Lebanese school characterized by high organizational commitment. Specifically, it investigates the following research questions:

1. How is leadership distributed in a school characterized by high teachers’ organizational commitment?
2. How might the distribution of leadership contribute to the commitment of teachers?

**Theoretical background**

There is wide agreement that school leadership influences TOC (Darwish, 2000; Devos et al., 2014; Hairuddin & Salisu, 2015; Hulpia et al., 2011; Nguni, Sleegers, & Deneseen, 2006). Specifically, transformational and instructional leadership is found to provide the conditions that encourage TOC (Hulpia et al., 2011). However, researchers argue that the effect of these approaches to leadership is impeded by existing organizational norms and structures (Hulpia et al., 2011). Nonetheless, hierarchical structures that have defined schools are being challenged due to demands school systems face today, characterised by schools adopting less hierarchical structures, flexible role definitions, leadership roles that result from competence and experience and the replacement of isolation by professional collaboration (Angelle, 2010; Harris, 2009; Vescio et al., 2008). In fact, distributed leadership is found to be associated with characteristics of effective schools such as increased organizational performance, organizational change, teacher leadership and development of professional learning communities (DuFour, 2014; Harris, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2009; Vescio et al., 2008). Professional learning communities that combine a focus on instructional and distributed leadership have been advancing as the new model for effective organizational arrangements within schools (DuFour, 2014; OECD, 2016).

**Distributed leadership**

Distributed leadership is a commonly used concept by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to refer to a leadership model that transforms the organization of schools and extends leadership beyond a single individual (Harris, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2007). Scholars offer a wide range of definitions that collectively build this study’s theoretical understanding of distributed leadership. Spillane’s (2006) has drawn heavily upon distributed cognition, while Gronn’s (2003) is based in activity theory. According to Spillane (2006), “A distributed perspective is first and foremost about leadership practice framed as a product of the joint interactions of school leaders and followers” (p. 3). According to Gronn’s (Gronn, 2002, 2003) view, effective schools that follow the distributed leadership model are not led by a single leader but instead all members work collaboratively in an interactive and concerted manner, building an understanding of leadership that is fluid and emergent. Others explain leadership as a function or an action that exists within a group of people rather than the actions of one individual, namely the principal (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003). As such, multiple individuals take responsibility for leadership and can have either formal or informal leadership positions (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Accordingly,
the social context and interrelationships among school members constitute an integral part of leadership activities, and the distribution of leadership can vary across institutions and groups of people (Leithwood et al., 2009).

Multiple frameworks have been developed by researchers to understand how leadership is distributed in schools. Gronn (2002) developed three such frameworks that focused on interpersonal dynamics of work: spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practice. Spontaneous collaboration is when school members of varying knowledge and capabilities collaborate on a spontaneous task, then later separate. Intuitive working relations, however, emerge from two or more members who develop these relations over time. Lastly, institutionalized practice is established after organizational structures form to enable collaboration. Spillane (2006) developed another framework that includes collaborated, collective and coordinated distribution, showing different forms of work arrangements and their outcomes. Collaborated distribution of leadership occurs when individuals work together to fulfill an existing leadership routine; collective distribution occurs when individuals conduct separate but interdependent work to implement a leadership routine; coordinated distribution occurs when individuals work sequentially to fulfill a leadership routine.

In addition, MacBeath, Oduro, & Waterhouse (2004) suggested that leadership can be distributed in formal, pragmatic, strategic, incremental, opportunistic, or cultural ways. It is formally distributed when there is formal and intentional delegation of responsibilities, whereas pragmatic distribution entails a negotiation and division of leadership between individuals. Strategic distribution of leadership happens when individuals fulfill a leadership need. Incremental distribution of leadership takes place when individuals acquire leadership with experience. Opportunistic distribution of leadership is the ad hoc distribution of leadership responsibilities beyond one’s job. Finally, cultural distribution of leadership refers to the organic sharing of leadership by school members. These various frameworks offer a composite lens to examine and analyze how leadership is distributed in a school and to unpack its impact on teachers.

In order to better research and understand dimensions of distributed leadership, Hulpia, Devos, and Rosseel (2009b) developed and evaluated a tool, the Distributed Leadership Inventory, based on an empirically developed model. Using the Inventory, Hulpia and Devos (2010) operationalized functions and characteristics of distributed leadership by examining the cooperation between members of the leadership team, the formal distribution of leadership functions, support and supervision of teachers and the informal nature of leadership interactions among school members as reflected in participative decision-making. Informal leadership is defined as an action that can be performed through involvement of teachers in the decision-making process (Devos et al., 2014; Hulpia et al., 2011). Hulpia et al.’s (2011) model and the Distributed Leadership Inventory informed the data collection and analysis of this study.

Teachers’ organizational commitment

In this study, organizational commitment is defined using three main concepts; identification, involvement and loyalty (Mowday et al., 1979). Identification describes teachers’ belief in the organization’s vision, mission and values. Involvement reflects their willingness to put in extra effort and show dedication towards achieving the organization’s goals. Lastly, loyalty describes their desire to continue serving the organization. High commitment is achieved when teachers rank high on these three components (Mowday et al., 1979). Organizational commitment is found to predict absenteeism, performance, and turnover (Darwish, 2000; Fiorito et al., 2007). It is inversely related to the desire to find alternative job offers and the intention to leave the current job, and it leads to more positive organizational outcomes, including job satisfaction (Fiorito et al., 2007). While factors affecting organizational commitment are many, this study focuses on distributed leadership as one of the factors that studies have shown to lead to high TOC.
**Distributed leadership and teachers’ organizational commitment**

The few studies that examined the relation between TOC and school leadership were dominated by the superhero leadership model. This model was criticized for its view of the leader as the one individual who has all the leadership qualities, skills, and knowledge to accomplish any leadership function, without distributing them among colleagues (Hulpia & Devos, 2010, 2010; Hulpia et al., 2009a, 2011). Despite the limited research, studies that examined distributed leadership in relation to teachers’ organizational commitment have found that this leadership model contributes positively to TOC. Devos et al. (2014), Hulpia and Devos (2010) and Hulpia et al. (2009a), Hulpia & Devos (2010, 2011) conducted studies to examine empirically the relation between distributed school leadership and TOC. They explored patterns of distributed leadership, building on and extending Gronn’s (2002) and Spillane’s (2006) definitions of the concept and generating an empirically grounded understanding of the leadership distribution phenomena.

This section concludes with the presentation of key insights on teachers organizational commitment resulting from the examination of three dimensions of distributed leadership: cooperating leadership teams, support, and supervision as leadership functions and participative decision-making.

**Cooperating leadership team**

Devos et al. (2014) and Hulpia, Devos, and Van Keer (2010), Hulpia et al. (2011) showed that the perceptions of teachers as members of cooperating leadership teams, characterized by leadership that is cohesive and cooperative with clear and shared goals, are positively related to TOC. Hulpia et al. (2010) also found that when there was task division and centralization at the level of leadership team, teachers were committed due to cohesion, shared values and regular/open communication.

**Support and supervision as leadership functions**

Results in studies conducted by Devos et al. (2014) and Hulpia et al. (2010, 2011) found that support and supervision as leadership functions are associated with organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Their studies also demonstrated that what matters is the frequency of leadership practices rather than the extent to which they are performed by someone in a leadership role. However, Hulpia et al. (2010, 2011) indicated that the school principal remains the most influential actor in providing support and supervision in a school with distributed leadership. On the other hand, studies revealed that, neither the amount of supervision, as a leadership function, nor its quality was significantly related to teachers’ organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Instead, Hulpia et al. (2010) found that the distribution of supervisory leadership function had a significant negative impact on TOC. Teachers did not appreciate the excessive formal supervisory function, especially when it was focused on summative evaluation.

**Participative decision-making**

Teachers who believed had a say in decision-making felt more committed to the school than colleagues who expressed that they did not have similar opportunities (Devos et al., 2014; Hulpia & Devos, 2010; Hulpia et al., 2010, 2011). In fact, employees who perceive their superiors as adopting participative leadership behavior are more likely to be satisfied and committed to their organizations and have higher performance in their jobs (Darwish, 2000). Furthermore, Hulpia and Devos (2010) observed that in committed schools led by strong school leaders, participative decision-making was encouraged and valued. Alternatively, in schools where morale and commitment ranked low, teachers believed their role was restricted to the classroom and did not include participation in the decision-making process.
Context of the study: Lebanese education system

Education in Lebanon has been influenced by its heritage, legacy of colonialism and social and economic divisions and disparities (Frayha, 2009). The educational system in Lebanon is divided between private and public/state-funded systems, and the quality varies among regions and schools. Public schools are centrally managed by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (Karami-Akkary, 2013; Bahous & Nabahani, 2008). Public schools have been known to be ineffective as they provide low-quality education, often due to political interferences, corruption, and low funding. Consequently, there is a lack of faith in this system (Karami-Akkary, 2013; Frayha, 2009). For these reasons, almost 75% of eligible children are enrolled in private K-12 schools, which are loosely monitored by the Ministry (Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD), 2015). This makes Lebanon’s education system one of the most privatized systems in the world (Chapman & Miric, 2009).

Despite relative autonomy from governmental oversight, the organizational structure in most private schools is predominantly hierarchical and equally centralized, reserving power and authority to principals in the top formal leadership position (Karami-Akkary, 2013). Teachers are hired on a contractual basis where the terms of their contract are left to the discretion of the school administration. Many private schools depend on a large percentage of part-timers, often more than half of their teaching body. Teachers who end up assuming leadership positions at their schools tend to be hired from among those who are tenured. They are typically full-timers at the school and expected to fulfill additional duties beyond their teaching hours.

Methodology

This article reports the results of a two-phase study following a qualitative approach and a multi-case study design. It relies on the distributed leadership framework to gain an in-depth insight into how leadership is distributed from the perspectives of teachers and leaders.

The case school

The study took place in a large, private, Lebanese-Anglophone school, located in Beirut, Lebanon. The school was selected from among six large Anglophone private schools that were randomly selected to participate in the first phase of the study. All willing full-time teachers in these schools were invited to complete the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire developed by Mowday et al. (1979). The questionnaire has been used in Western (Fiorito et al., 2007; Hulpia et al., 2010; Nguni et al., 2006) and non-Western cultural settings (Al-Meer, 1989; Darwish, 2000). The questionnaire was used to rank the six schools based on the average of their teachers’ commitment scores. The case school was purposefully selected after it received the highest rank among the six schools on the Questionnaire based on the average score of 75% of its full-time faculty.

The private school is owned by a religious institution and is located in an affluent urban neighborhood that is characterized by its religious diversity. It comprises 160 staff members and 1200 students from all religious sects in Lebanon. The formal leadership team consists of 42 officers, including three leadership boards. The school has an elaborate organizational structure that was newly adopted at that time of the study with various formal leadership roles: principal, directors, and heads of the different administrative and academic departments, heads of divisions and assistants of heads of divisions. The selected school has most of the characteristics of a “typical” private school in Lebanon in term of size, location, staff of qualified teachers and a curriculum that aligns with the national curriculum. It caters to middle- and upper-class families that seek university preparation for their children. However, this school holds some unique organizational arrangements that emerged as a result of an initiative to institutionalize a modernized organizational structure. The school is one of three working under the umbrella of one institution, all led by a general director. The schools share
one vision, mission and set of policies. They have one organizational chart revealing the different members occupying formal leadership positions. Each school has a principal, heads of divisions and assistants of heads of divisions, but directors and department heads as well as support teams play leadership roles at the three schools.

**Participants, data collection and data analysis**

The participants in the present research study were full-time faculty members comprising of teachers, teachers assigned formal leadership roles (subject matter supervisors) and full-time formal leaders (supervisors, heads of divisions, and assistant principals). Data were collected from multiple sources: (1) individual interviews and focus group interviews with teachers; (2) individual interviews with academic and administrative leaders; (3) documented organizational policies and procedures; and (4) notes from participant observation of team meetings and executive board meetings. The main sources of data were the individual and focus group semi-structured and open-ended interviews.

Interview protocols were developed for this study based on the Distributed Leadership Inventory designed by Hulpia et al. (2010). These protocols focused on experiences of teachers and leaders regarding cooperative practices within their leadership team, leadership practices at the school, supportive and supervisory functions and teacher participation in decision-making. Twenty randomly selected teachers were invited to participate in two focus group interviews. Ten teachers and 10 leaders were randomly selected to participate in in-depth semi-structured individual interviews (Merriam, 2009). The researchers took extensive written notes and taped these interviews, which were later transcribed and translated from Arabic to English as needed. The researchers collected further data by examining school policies, meeting minutes, handbooks and policy documents that reflected leadership practices of the school.

The researchers followed interpretive data analysis procedures and treated the study as a comprehensive case (Merriam, 2009). The analysis progressed in four phases: (1) data preparation; (2) data identification; (3) data manipulation; and (4) comparative analysis. Data preparation involved transcribing interviews and typing notes. One researcher completed this phase and the second researcher proofread the transcripts for completion and clarity. Both researchers worked on data identification and manipulation through separately coding segments of the data, comparing the codes and refining them. Coding began soon after the first interview and served as a foundation for further data collection and analysis. After finalizing the codes and their corresponding categories, the codes were compared across interviews and with the theoretical framework.

**Limitations**

Findings from this small-scale case study in Lebanon are not generalizable to other contexts. Participation was limited to the teachers and administrators in one school that had recently adopted new organizational arrangements and as such was gradually drifting away from the dominant structure adopted by the majority of Lebanese private schools. Consequently, the school experience might not reflect those of other schools. Data collected from the focus group interviews might have prevented “dissent” and encouraged group think among the teachers. On a number of points, there was a group who might have opted to stay silent rather than voice concerns or disagreement with their more vocal colleagues.

**Findings**

**Distribution of formal leadership positions**

Based on participants’ responses, the school is led by a leadership team headed by the general director. The leadership team is composed of two main boards (executive and academic) and has 48
members, 42 of whom are in leadership positions. In addition, six teachers represent the teaching faculty on these boards. The identified number of leadership positions constitutes around 30% of the total number of school employees, showing that leadership is distributed among a significant portion of school members.

**Characteristics of formal leadership team**

Results reveal that the leadership team is perceived as cohesive. Participants observed that the key characteristics of this team include: (1) clarity of leadership tasks; (2) regular and open communication; and (3) a culture of trust.

**Clarity of leadership tasks**

The majority of the participants perceive that the members of the leadership team have clear roles based on the individual's specialization. One leader said,

> The roles of administrators are differentiated; each is specialised and responsible for a particular domain: academic, research and development, special education, medication, transportation, janitors, etc. …

**Regular and open communication**

During the focus group interviews, teachers agreed that regular and open communication characterizes the leadership teams and facilitates constructive and cooperative interactions. The head of division, assistant head of division, head of the academic department, and head of the educational program department directly approach teachers and follow-up on their work on a daily basis, providing them with professional support. Teachers mentioned regular scheduled and nonscheduled meetings at different levels of the organization, noting that building relationships with teachers is central to leadership practices. A leader explained communications:

> We discuss new projects, then we vote, explaining why we support or oppose decisions to reach consensus. Respect is at the core of the relationship; respect for students, for colleagues, and for the profession and its objectives.

**A culture of trust**

Both teachers and leaders seem to associate commitment with the presence of a culture of trust. Teachers considered that leaders are accessible and caring individuals who foster a culture of trust and understanding. Teachers related that at their school, they feel comfortable sharing concerns with leaders. One leader asserted, “If teachers want to report to superiors their views, opinions, ideas, demands, or complains; they do it through me …”

**Leadership support**

Participants found leadership practices supportive and their descriptions revealed that these practices are widely spread across the school. According to teachers, supportive leadership appears to characterize the work of the formal leaders who directly interact with teachers. Leaders in four formal leadership positions (head of division, assistant head of division, head of academic department, and head of educational program department) explained that they build supportive relationships with teachers by communicating their shared vision, valuing teachers’ contributions, rewarding teachers’ hard work, providing professional development and fostering growth of a professional and collaborative community.

**Communicating shared vision**

Most teachers and leaders (75%) linked a clear understanding of a shared school vision to feeling supported by leaders. According to the participants, they feel supported when the vision of their leaders is clearly articulated and successfully put into practice.
Valuing the contribution of teachers

Participants agreed that teachers’ perspectives are always encouraged during meetings. The HR director asserted that encouragement of the input of teachers was affirmed on an internal school survey by 90% of the participants as evidence that teachers’ contributions were valued. Two leaders mentioned: “We consult the opinions of teachers to prepare our work and build on it.” Two teachers agreed during the interviews how being professionally appreciated empowers and motivates them to “come up with the best ideas” and “provide more effective input.”

Regular meetings that take place between leaders and teachers are the second factor identified by most of the participants showing that teachers’ contributions are valued. Many teachers said that they feel appreciated when superiors regularly meet with them to discuss professional issues. The HR director and other interviewed leaders described how their first meeting at the beginning of the academic year informs teachers about the yearly plan, while the end of year meeting allows those involved to discuss the new plan for the upcoming year. During the year, leaders also have scheduled and unscheduled meetings with teachers on individual basis.

Rewarding teachers’ work

All of the leaders and most of the teachers (75%) confirmed how leaders supported teachers by: (1) providing them with regular positive feedback; (2) appointing them to formal leadership positions; and (3) giving them financial rewards.

Most participants (75%) stressed how providing teachers with positive verbal feedback was viewed as rewarding. Many teachers mentioned that their formal leaders frequently acknowledged and thanked them for their collaborative work or for their extra individual efforts. One of the teachers explained that even when teachers are just doing their job, receiving positive feedback can “empower teachers and encourage them to exert more efforts.” One leader explained, “As a head of division, I often send thank you letters to teachers … . other teachers have received oral acknowledge-ment … .”

In addition, most teachers (75%) and all leaders discussed how leaders recognize hard work and achievements of teachers by formally assigning them leadership tasks or roles. Participants remarked that delegating responsibilities to teachers gives them visibility, which they consider to be an indirect form of recognition to their work. Many participants pointed out that most of the individuals occupying high positions are teachers who got discovered based on their outstanding work as teachers before they were assigned a formal leadership role. More than half of the teachers (65%) and 80% of the leaders said that extra effort at school is acknowledged and financially rewarded. Teachers get bonuses on their salaries and, as a result, feel valued and appreciated. One of the leaders noted, “We are asking for a lot from the teachers; in return we must reward them.”

Providing professional development

The HR director discussed extensively the school’s continuous efforts to foster teachers’ professional and personal growth as an indicator of supportive leadership. Most teachers (75%) and all leaders agreed that the school provides these opportunities through the resourcing program. Teachers and leaders spoke with excitement about the school’s resourcing program, which is a professional development initiative that empowers teachers and leaders professionally and provides them with support to grow and learn. Two leaders explained how due to the resourcing program, teachers were able to find time to regularly read different topics and improve their practice. A novice teacher explained that scheduled resourcing hours provided them with much needed support during the implementation of the school inclusion initiative at the school. The teacher asserted that the opportunity to take part in the program “generates knowledge for teachers” so that teachers might be better equipped to serve the students:
Including students with special needs is now one of the themes of our school vision. After reading, writing, and discussing findings with colleagues, I can tell which students in my classroom need special care, how to approach them, and how to provide better assistance.

**Fostering a collaborative community**

More than half of the teachers (65%) and all leaders stated that leaders in direct contact with teachers foster a collaborative community through: (1) building caring relationships with teachers; (2) adopting a collaborative supervisory approach; (3) mentoring novice teachers; and (4) consistently responding to teachers’ needs.

The HR director, more than half of the teachers (65%) and all leaders affirmed that the leaders were friendly and treated teachers with care. One of the leaders explained:

> With my positive attitude, I try to make them feel comfortable. I always reassure teachers by saying things like it’s going to be fine, things will work out, let’s sit and talk about it ...

Teachers interviewed in the focus group made a similar point. Many said that whenever they “felt overwhelmed,” they sensed their head of division and head of administrative division’s empathy. Some teachers asserted, “They keep calling to ask us if we felt better.” Teachers also agreed that leaders are friendly, accessible and show care to teachers. In this regard, they talked about a spirit spread in the school regardless of who occupies a leadership position, agreeing when one teacher shared, “Since 11 years I worked with five HODs [head of department]; although people are changing and each HOD has a different character but they all work with the same spirit.”

More than half of the teachers (65%) and all leaders found that encouraging collaboration mostly manifests in supervisory practices. Teachers noted that they feel that they work collaboratively with their supervisors to solve problems and implement the school vision. Teachers from the focus group stated, “We feel comfortable referring to the head of the advisory program and the head of the educational program department to seek help managing our classroom problems.”

Moreover, all leaders believed that encouraging collaboration made teachers more confident and motivated. One leader further clarified:

> Working collaboratively with teachers to help them deal with problems is an achievement for me. Next year we will be working together on the ‘mode of communication’. We will arrange for more meetings just for teachers, heads of divisions and heads of academic departments, to sit and talk.

All leaders and more than half (65%) of the teachers agreed that mentoring novice teachers is an integral part of the leadership practice implemented at school and a reflection of their attempts at building a collaborative community. Leaders explained that they are expected to act as mentors who “assist, guide, and coach novice teachers during their first year of teaching, and help them seek solutions to problems, get equipment, and even learn about school culture ….” One leader noted:

> Universities do not prepare teachers; they just give degrees. For this reason, after selecting fresh graduates, we train them on the job to prepare them on how to become part of our professional community.

Teachers and leaders also agreed that building a collaborative community necessitates that leaders show support through responding to the needs of teachers. More than half of the teachers and all leaders defined supportive and responsive leadership as the extent to which the leaders value teachers’ time and consider their demands. They associated the fact that teachers are granted some flexibility and can leave early when they have no classes to teach at the end of the day with support that fosters the spirit of collaboration at the school. They also agreed that transferring teachers’ demands promptly to the administrators through the teacher committee as another indicator of collaborative community at the school. One of the teachers elaborated, “We needed a lot of technological devices for our math classes. Once we communicated our need for extra materials to implement effective teaching and learning activities, and they were immediately provided.”
Leadership as supervision

Leadership as supervision was found to be highly centralized at the school. Only two formal leaders – the head of division and the head of academic department – were responsible for the supervisory functions of monitoring and evaluating teachers’ work. Participants confirmed that monitoring and evaluating teachers through direct observations is kept to a minimum and seems to be restricted to those in need of special assistance or novice teachers. Many associated their leaders’ supervisory practices with their empowerment and growth.

When participants were probed to reflect on supervisory leadership practices, 60% of teachers and 75% of leaders agreed that leaders mostly adopted a supportive evaluation approach that included regular follow-up on teachers’ work and clear evaluative feedback. Half of teachers and 75% of leaders believed that their academic supervisors cared about their work and supported them when they failed to manage issues on their own. According to the leaders, a supportive evaluation approach included follow-up with teachers after every action plan for improvement, as one of them reflected, “I am against formal appraisals of teachers on yearly basis because they will cause stress. This is not the case with a regular follow-up where leaders know if there is a problem.”

Half of the teachers stated that after every follow-up session, the head of the division and the head of the academic division provided them with clear feedback in a detailed report. One of the teachers during the focus group explained that “evaluating teachers’ performance is not based on how leaders see things, but rather on accepted professional criteria.” Another teacher sums it up by saying:

I used to teach in a different school; at the beginning of the academic year the head of academic department, told me that my students are too quiet; that I need to make class more active. At the end of the academic year he told me that my class is too noisy; that I need to calm down students. I remember that all I heard is negative comments; never why or how … At my present school, it is not the case. Remarks are made clear; in addition to different methods or strategies to improve our performance.

Teachers’ participation in decision-making

In this study, 70% of teachers and 75% of leaders described the participation of teachers in the decision-making as indirect. When participants were prompted to share their views about the influence that teachers have on decision-making, 50% of the teachers and 75% of the leaders explicitly stated that teachers do not vote and are not directly involved in the executive or academic boards. Closer examination of their answers revealed more nuanced variations of the nature and level of participation, especially with respect to their understanding of the terms “academic decisions” and “administrative decisions.” The former refers to the day-to-day instructionally focused decisions, whereas the latter points to strategic and managerial matters.

In the academic domain, respondents shared evidence of teachers’ influence on the decision-making process. At the classroom level, most teachers reported feeling like leaders in their classroom. One teacher interviewed in the focus group explained:

Although plans are set with the heads of divisions; in the end, I am the decision-maker in my classroom. I decide how to deal with my students and my subject matter. I feel confident that I am responsible for the teaching in my class.

Moreover, most teachers and leaders agreed that academic and day-to-day decisions were taken at the departmental level and completed in collaboration with the heads of divisions and teachers. One of the leaders explicitly stated:

On a weekly basis, the heads of divisions coordinate with teachers to discuss and follow-up on the pace of teaching inside the classroom. The heads of divisions check on the work and give their final approval, but teachers are at the base: they are the ones making those daily decisions.
Additionally, participants explained that academic decisions made at the top school leadership level are communicated as general guidelines rather than specific directives. These include decisions related to the curriculum, programs, and school projects. Moreover, participants insisted that for these decisions, teachers’ experiences were taken into consideration. A teacher stated, “In our math department, the curriculum is being revised and new decisions taken are based on teachers’ experiences in the classroom.”

When it came to “administrative issues,” participants’ responses revealed that teachers stopped participating and their opinions were rarely solicited. A further examination showed that strategic decisions for the whole school and those related to bureaucratic operations and administrative tasks were exclusively taken by individuals occupying the formal leadership roles. Although these decisions are reached through a voting system that takes place among the members of the administrative leadership team, most teachers and leaders asserted that the teachers’ influence on these decisions was very limited.

Results revealed that all strategic decisions were taken at the board level. However, there was a disagreement on the degree of influence teachers have on these decisions. Some participants spoke of “indirect” teacher participation and argued that it could take different forms. Half of the teachers and half of the leaders agreed that, despite the fact that some strategic decisions are imposed by those at the top of the hierarchy, since teachers are sometimes informed about decisions before they are asked to implement them, they have an informal opportunity to voice their concerns. Moreover, this group considered that indirect teacher participation takes place often when leaders involve teachers by explaining the aims behind their plans. Teachers explained that although they were not directly involved in setting the school’s vision, changes were explained and rationalized to all members.

Additional arguments for indirect participation of teachers included examples of how teachers’ input might reach decision makers at the top of the hierarchy and is selectively taken into consideration while making strategic decisions. The HR director explained that some strategic decisions are often triggered by teachers’ proposals and can go beyond curriculum-related matters. A teacher confirmed this stating, “When I recommended monitoring the hallways during recess time for students’ safety, it was approved.”

Last, results revealed that many teachers believe that they indirectly participate in decision-making by being involved in program evaluations. The HR director explained, “To evaluate our system, we were all involved in the SWOT analysis with teachers. Everything they mentioned was taken into consideration …” Nonetheless, respondents agreed that whole school administrative decisions related to scheduling, assignment of duties, vacations and teachers’ code of conduct are exclusive to formal leaders and considered beyond teachers’ authority.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine how distributed leadership is practiced in a private Lebanese school that is characterized by high organizational commitment of its teachers and explore how this distribution might have contributed to this high commitment. Based on this study, the leadership practices can be characterized as distributed and seem to suggest a positive influence towards promoting TOC, in alignment with findings in the relevant literature (Hulpia & Devos, 2010; Hulpia et al., 2010, 2011).

First, findings reveal that leadership is formally distributed in the school with a large leadership team expected to collaborate with teachers. School members’ experiences align with dimensions of distributed leadership like shared vision and goals, division of tasks and responsibilities and open communication (Devos et al., 2014; Hulpia et al., 2010, 2011). Interpersonal dynamics of work described by the participants offer evidence for what Gronn (2002) described as spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practice. The latter is reflected in the established leadership teams that constitute organizational structures form to enable collaboration and shared decision-making. According to the participants, distributed leadership practices
provide appropriate support, thus encouraging teachers to implement and commit to the vision. Similar to the results reported in Darwish (2000) and Hulpia et al. (Hulpia & Devos, 2010; Hulpia et al., 2011), teachers in this study receive opportunities for professional and personal growth through supportive supervisory practices and are invited to share their views on several issues, showing that their views influence the system.

The case school then offers a unique example of leadership when compared to the dominant centralized and authoritative organizational context of Lebanese schools (Karami-Akkary, 2013). While there is evidence of pragmatic, strategic, incremental, opportunistic or cultural ways of distributing leadership in line with MacBeath, Oduro, & Waterhouse (2004) framework, the findings indicate the distribution seems to be predominantly institutional. There is an intentional delegation of responsibilities and institution of governance bodies with wide representation among school members, a practice that deviates from the centralized structures and power concentration reported in Lebanese schools (Karami-Akkary, 2013; El-Amine, 2001; Ghamrawi, 2013) yet demonstrates the possibility of such a system functioning in the Lebanese context.

Despite the noted evidence that leadership is distributed at the case school, teachers are not involved in critical domains of decision-making. Results show that while teachers indirectly participate in academic decision-making, they do not partake in strategic and administrative decisions. Only a group of formal leaders in the executive and academic boards are directly involved in that process. In fact, the responsibilities assigned to the school’s formal leadership teams and the formalized coordination mechanisms seem to mainly facilitate collaboration and distributing authority among them. However, the relationships between the leadership team members and teachers are more contrived. Though described to be based on collegiality, open communication and mutual trust, opportunities to interact across different levels of the hierarchy are carefully crafted around select topics and issues, restricting the participation of teachers in decision-making to consultations on academic matters and limiting communication on school-wide issues. There was no evidence that teachers are actively consulted on strategic decisions, nor that they see themselves as responsible for actively engaging in such decisions. These results indicate that, examined against the Western conceptions (Woods & Gronn, 2009), the practice of distributed leadership in this school falls short of promoting the form and values of shared governance that facilitate the participation of teachers and collaboration among school members who do not occupy formal leadership positions in decision-making. A critical examination of who controls distribution, how it is taking place and its nature reveals that it could be reinforcing the leadership and authority of those in formal leadership positions as noted by Bolden (2011). This might be explained by the tradition of centralized and authoritative structures and paternalistic cultural norms that continue to characterize educational organizations in Lebanon (Karami-Akkary, 2013; El-Amine, 2001). As such, the distribution of leadership, as manifested in this school, could be considered as shaped by the cultural context in which it is practiced.

Second, the prevalence of these distributed leadership practices at the school, though at times contrived, suggests that they could have a role in enabling teachers’ commitment to their organization. As conceptualized by Mowday et al. (1979), TOC manifests in behavior that reflects identification with the institution, involvement, and loyalty. Teachers’ responses reflect their identification with the school mission and vision, connecting it to positive relationships with their leaders and to their appreciation of distributed leadership practices. The results showed that teachers view that leaders work hard at being successful in communicating a shared vision. They also considered their leaders to be responsive to their professional needs by constantly providing encouragement, support, and opportunities to take the lead in tasks. Teachers believed that the presence of a supportive relationship characterized by open communication with the school leaders facilitates the enactment of their values and their alignment with the organization’s mission. More importantly, the leadership team of the school expressed understanding of teachers’ need to develop professionally, and were viewed by teachers as providing the means to do so.
Moreover, teachers related two different leadership practices to the feeling of being involved in the school, namely the available opportunities to participate in the decision-making process, and the supervisory approach that gives recognition for their work. First, teachers’ responses revealed their excitement about the opportunities they had to make meaningful contributions to improving the school. In addition, teachers’ responses reflected their satisfaction with the practiced instructional supervisory approach, which offered them opportunities to be involved in their school. Teachers explained that the centralization of this function and the way leaders approached them while monitoring and evaluating their work made it less stressful and helped improve the overall quality of their work. They also associated the recognition of their efforts and positive feedback with the drive to give back or reciprocate the organizational support they received. Last, teachers associated their positive working conditions, including professional collaboration and caring relationships, with their loyalty to the organization. In fact, these teachers seemed eager to guide and coach their inexperienced colleagues and considered it a privilege rather than an added task to be burdened with.

While there are promising signals that the formal distribution of leadership at the case school has enhanced TOC, the researchers are left wondering whether we can make this claim in a school that lacks two key dimensions—widespread democratic practices that invite teachers’ voices and a view of collaboration that promotes agency rather than dependency. Despite the variations in the teachers’ responses, they converge on indicating the valuing of a positive collaborative “spirit” at the school in connection with their sense identification, involvement, and loyalty. However, when examined closely, the teachers’ conceptions of “professional collaboration” indicate a dependent caring and kindness through vertically constructed relationships rather than encouragement of active engagement of all staff in thinking systemically and expressing views on issues beyond classroom practices.

Within the Lebanese cultural context, these results suggest a more nuanced understanding of teachers expressing organizational commitment and its possible antecedents. Perhaps rather than celebrating distributed leadership, the teachers are expressing their excitement for a school climate of care and respect, which is a considerable improvement on the dominant authoritative leadership practices and the widespread culturally based acceptance of concentrating authority in one formal leader (Karami-Akkary, 2013). The normalization of nonparticipative practices could explain the teachers’ tolerance of their contrived decision-making power, considering it as a source of satisfaction leading to their high commitment.

Conclusion

While the findings from this small-scale case study of a private school in Lebanon are not generalizable to other contexts, they extend the existing literature on distributed leadership and how this model can be applied beyond the Western context. The findings suggest first that distributed leadership can be instituted in a cultural context characterized by power concentration and authoritarian leadership through introducing formal roles that distribute decision-making authority and increase the representation of members of the school community in this process. The new structure includes opening formal communication channels that encourage teachers’ voices and facilitate their active engagement. The findings also support, to an extent, the proposition that adopting a distributed leadership approach helps schools enhance TOC.

Findings also offer additional evidence to scholars who advocate the adoption of a distributed leadership approach as a means of transforming a traditional school into a professional community to increase the commitment and involvement of teachers (Hulpi & Devos, 2010, 2010; Hulpi et al., 2009a, 2011) and to improve performance (Fiorito et al., 2007; Sezgin, 2009). Adopting the distributed approach is both possible and promising in the context of Lebanese schools.

Strategies to implement distributed leadership in such a context include, but are not limited to: (1) re-examining current school structures in order to build collaborative systems that support and enhance professional dialogue; (2) redesigning supervisory approaches with a focus on formative evaluation that promotes professional learning; (3) prioritising teacher empowerment and
motivation to remain at the school as active contributors to its growth; and (4) reforming the decision-making processes by distributing authority in such a way that teachers’ voices are taken into consideration through active participation. Researchers recommend that leaders rethink and rebuild the school structure in a manner that allows school members, regardless of formal leadership positions, to engage in professional collaboration and learn how to learn together (Senge, 1990). Nevertheless, it is important to take the cultural context into consideration while examining the nature and extent of leadership distribution and accounting for the dissonance such implementation might trigger in organizational contexts that still normalize authoritarian forms of governance.

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