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Principals' perspectives on the assignment of duties to deputy principals in selected township secondary schools

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Abstract

From a South African perspective, the job description of deputy principals, as stipulated in the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM), is not straightforward but requires some discernment from principals. In this article we report on a study in which we sought to understand principals' perspectives on the assignment of duties to deputy principals in selected South African township secondary schools. The distributed leadership perspective constituted the theoretical framework of the study. We adopted the qualitative research approach and a case study design to engage with principals who were purposively and conveniently sampled. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and subsequently analysed by means of thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the participating principals engaged in capacity-informed delegation, fostered collaboration between the principals and deputy principals, and positioned deputy principals as part of and leaders in internal committees. The principals followed this approach to prepare deputy principals for the principalship. The apt manner in which principals perceived and deployed their deputy principals, was noticeable. The principals appeared to invite their deputy principals to co-lead with them, which is a sign of distributed leadership.

Keywords: deputy principals; distributed leadership, experiences; leadership; principals

Introduction

Schools are critical institutions in the education system of any country; they play a significant role in imparting knowledge to and developing skills in children who are a crucial asset (Biesta, 2015; Ertürk & Akgün, 2021; Idris, Hassan, Ya'acob, Gill, Aziah & Awal, 2012). School stakeholders – including principals, deputy principals, departmental heads, teacher leaders and governing bodies – play different but significant roles in ensuring that schools provide quality education to learners. Although all stakeholders' positions are important, the position of a principal as the most senior leadership position in a school is pivotal. Scholars such as Hauserman and Stick (2013), Le Fevre and Robinson (2015), and Myende, Blose and Adebisi (2024), maintain that school principals' leadership largely determines their schools' success or failure, although they cannot be perceived as the only heroes in schools.

A school principal works with different stakeholders to achieve his or her vision in a school, of which a deputy principal is the closest stakeholder according to the school leadership hierarchy. Ho, Kang and Shaari (2021) view a deputy principal as a significant bridge between a principal's vision and other school stakeholders who should play different roles in realising such vision. Naicker, Blose, Chiororo, Khan and Naicker (2017) echo similar sentiments by likening the position of the deputy principal to that of a heart which distributes blood filled with oxygen and nutrients to different body components to ensure that they are nourished and oxygenated for the body to function well. Considering the above views, we assert that the positions of principal and deputy principal are very close, and they require incumbents to collaborate in many duties.

The job description of deputy principals in South Africa, as stipulated in the PAM document, is not straightforward, but leaves some discretion to the judgement of principals. This document prescribes six core duties of deputy principals but also maintains that the duties and responsibilities of deputy principals are individual and varied, depending on the approaches and needs of the particular school. These duties include administrative work, teaching, extracurricular and core curricular tasks, personnel management, interaction with stakeholders and communication (Department of Basic Education [DBE], Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2022). We argue that principals' discretion on the assignment of tasks impacts the clarity for deputy principals' roles. While we observe this in a South African context, it is also a concern in other emerging economies. For instance, Goksoy (2016) states that in Turkey a deputy principal carries out the duties assigned by the principal, apart from the ones defined in the job description. In Zimbabwe, Chitamba (2019) propounds that the role and functions of deputy principals are not clearly conceptualised and that this leads to role ambiguity. Macharia, Thinguri and Kiogno (2014) in Kenya refer to principals and deputy principals as duos that contribute to the administration of the school and team up in carrying out school discipline. Given that principals are deputy principals' line managers and that they play a pivotal role in assigning duties to personnel in schools, we were intrigued by principals' silence on the position of deputy principals in research. This silence prompted our study, in which we explored how principals in township schools navigate the assignment of duties to deputy principals.

Schools in South Africa are located in different contexts, including urban, semi-urban/townships and rural. The term “township” refers to low-cost non-white neighbourhoods (Jürgens, Donaldson, Rule & Bähr, 2013) located on city peripheries. During the apartheid era, township houses were designed for black labourers to accommodate them closer to their places of employment in cities and towns (Jürgens et al., 2013; Mampane & Bouwer, 2011). Townships are mostly associated with poverty, violence and crime (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011; Zulu, Bhengu & Mkhize, 2021), and schools in these communities are generally overcrowded (Du Plessis & Letshwene, 2020). Schools located in townships have been labelled as deprived and laborious for school leaders (Zulu et al., 2021). While the problem of duty assignment to deputy principals is not peculiar to a specific school context, we conducted this study in the township of Umlazi, in the KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. This site was chosen because schools in township contexts enrol many learners despite the fact that resources and facilities are inadequate, which intensifies the workload of school leaders. Therefore, we wanted to understand how principals in township schools assigned duties to deputy principals and why they assigned them in the way they did. To this end, we asked two critical questions:

- 1) How do principals assign duties to deputy principals in township secondary schools?
- 2) Why do principals assign duties to deputy principals in the way they do?

Relations Between Principalship and Deputy Principalship

The principal position is the most senior in schools, and incumbents occupying this position are perceived as key drivers of school effectiveness (Myende et al., 2024) and as playing a significant role in sustaining success in schools (Msila, 2019). In South Africa, principals represent the education department (the employer) in schools (RSA, 1996). As employer representatives, they are expected to be educational leaders who foster staff development, parent involvement, community support and student growth, and also succeed with major changes and expectations, among other things (Mestry & Singh, 2007). Although the principal’s position is significant in school leadership, shared and distributed leadership has been emphasised over the years (Fletcher & Käufer, 2003; Hallinger, 2010; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001). The notion of shared and distributed leadership does not diminish principals’ seniority in school leadership and management – they remain senior managers, and for this reason, principals may decide to either embrace shared leadership or not (Bhengu & Myende, 2016; Blose,

Mkhize, Ngidi & Myende, 2022).

The deputy principal’s position is ranked immediately below that of the principal and is also senior in school leadership. This position involves assisting and co-leading with a principal (Blose & Naicker, 2018). In addition, deputy principals act on behalf of school principals when they are away (RSA, 1998). Barnett, Shoho and Oleszewski (2012) and Schermuly, Schermuly and Meyer (2011) argue that deputy principals play different roles in different school contexts. Lee, Kwan and Walker (2009) support this view and explain (in the Hong Kong context) that when secondary schools qualify for two deputy principals, they are assigned different duties, for instance, academic duties, pastoral care and student affairs duties. A similar arrangement is prevalent in South African schools. However, instead of pastoral care and student affairs, they have administrative duties (Mnikathi, 2022). This arrangement further intensifies the ambiguity of the position of deputy principal.

The positions of principal and deputy principal are different but interrelated, calling for incumbents to work together regularly (Veerasamy, 2019). While the principal may have a special vision for the school, the deputy principal serves as a significant bridge between the principal’s vision and other stakeholders who are important for the realisation of this vision (Doring, 1993; Ho et al., 2021; Hughes & James, 1999). Given that principals are the most senior leaders in schools, they play a role in assigning duties to all personnel including deputy principals. When it comes to assigning workload to deputy principals, studies foreground a collaborative approach. Jansen and Du Plessis (2023) found that the assignment of duties to deputy principals is not an action performed by principals individually, but a collaborative endeavour between principals and deputy principals. This finding resonates with that of Lim and Pollock (2019) who found that principals in Canada, collaborate with deputy principals to determine the duties to be performed by deputy principals. While the above foregrounds the collaborative effort, other scholars highlight the capability of deputy principals. These scholars maintain that the allocation of deputy principals’ duties must be informed by capabilities, expertise, attributes and strengths (Hughes & James, 1999; Lim & Pollock, 2019; Ribbins, 1997).

Apart from the assignment of duties, principals also play a pivotal role in the professional growth of deputy principals. Principals may achieve this through organising development and mentoring programmes (Barnett et al., 2012). According to Oliver (2013), the relationship between a principal and a deputy principal should provide for the learning experience that a deputy principal may not obtain anywhere else.

Distributed Leadership: A Theoretical Framework

The notion of distributed leadership has been included in the scholarship of educational leadership for some time. Many scholars perceive distributed leadership as an antidote to heroic or focused leadership that equates leadership to individual leaders (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2005; Spillane et al., 2001; Yukl, 1999). We adopted Spillane et al.'s (2001) construction of distributed leadership to frame our understanding of principals' views on and experiences of assigning tasks to deputy principals.

According to Spillane et al. (2001), distributed leadership is a perspective from which leadership tasks are distributed to multiple leaders – both positional and informal – in a school context. Each leader provides different skills and knowledge. Spillane et al. (2001) explain that leadership tasks may be either co-enacted or carried out by leaders separately. In terms of co-enactment, different leaders work together on a task, and by doing so, they know and achieve more than each leader can do alone. Regarding separate work, leaders work independently on interdependent micro-tasks; in such arrangements, the leadership practice may be extended across the practice of two or more leaders (Spillane et al., 2001).

Apart from the leaders, the distributed leadership perspective acknowledges the context as a contributor to leadership practice. Spillane et al. (2001) argue that leaders' actions in the world are mediated by artefacts, tools, and structures of various kinds. Thus, to understand leadership practice, leaders should not be examined in isolation, but in conjunction with their contexts. For this reason, these scholars proffer that leadership practice does not rest upon an individual leader's ability, skill, charisma, and cognition, but other leaders, followers and the context matter in defining leadership practice. Hence, leadership practice is assumed to emerge through the interaction of leaders, followers, and situations (Spillane, 2005; Spillane et al., 2001).

In this study, the principals' experiences of assigning tasks to deputy principals were understood from the perspective of distributed leadership. The conception by Spillane et al. (2001) that leadership tasks may be co-enacted or carried out by leaders separately, framed our thinking in terms of leadership tasks assigned to deputy principals in schools. Also, we were cognisant of the participants' school contexts (situations) and other positional and informal leaders (followers in the context of this study) who interact with principals and deputy principals (leaders) in leading schools. Therefore, the framework of distributed leadership enabled us to understand principals' leadership distribution (reflecting their interaction with followers and the school context) and justification thereof.

Methodology

We positioned the study within the interpretivist paradigm, which is a worldview that involves a deeper understanding of human behaviour and human experiences (Burton, Brundrett & Jones, 2008). Within this paradigm, we engaged with the principals' experiences to understand their perspectives on the assignment of duties to deputy principals. In keeping with the interpretivist paradigm, we used a case study design to gain a deeper understanding of participating principals' qualitative experiences. Yin (2018) describes a case study design as an investigation into a phenomenon (the case) in its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident. We agree with Yin's (2018) notion of two variants of case studies, namely, single-case and multiple-case designs. In the study we report on, a multiple-case design was adopted as we engaged with participants from different school contexts. Five secondary school principals that were purposively and conveniently selected, constituted the cases that we examined in this study.

Regarding purposive sampling, principals who participated in this study were chosen based on our judgement that they each led a township secondary school and had two deputy principals in their schools. We purposefully selected principals of schools with two deputy principals, assuming that the presence of two deputies would intensify the cases. Apart from this, we applied convenience sampling and selected participants within close proximity (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). All participating principals were selected from the Umlazi township in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa for the sake of easy access.

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data. This data generation method is preferred for its flexibility, as it allows researchers to modify, exclude or rephrase questions, depending on how the interview unfolds (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010). Prior to the interview sessions, each participant consented to voluntary participation; they were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing negative consequences (Muzari, Shava & Shonhiwa, 2022). The interview sessions with participants ranged between 1 and 1½ hours; each session was audio-recorded and later transcribed to ensure that data were recorded accurately. Following the transcription, data were analysed by means of thematic analysis. This entailed creating codes of meanings that were later structured into chunks of meaning (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). Through the thematic analysis method, we identified, interpreted, and reported the patterns that emerged from the gathered data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in the form of themes.

All ethical principles, including autonomy and maleficence, were observed in the study. Regarding autonomy, permission to conduct the study was solicited from the provincial Department of Education and approval was obtained. In terms of maleficence, participants were assured that the study would cause them no harm. To this end, their identities and those of their schools were faded through the use of pseudonyms.

Findings

The findings are presented in two sections. The first section provides answers to the first research question and focuses on principals' assignment of duties to deputy principals as their co-leaders. The second section provides answers to the second research question and indicates why principals assign duties to their deputy principals in the way that they do.

Section 1: Principals' Assignment of Duties to Deputy Principals

In this section we provide answers to the first research question. Three themes emerged from the generated data: capacity-informed delegation, fostering collaboration between principals and deputy principals, and positioning deputy principals as part and leaders of school committees.

Capacity-informed delegation

The participating principals appeared to rely on capacity in delegating work to deputy principals. They assigned tasks based on the deputy principals' capabilities, strengths, knowledge and skills. To explain this reliance on capacity, Mr Phewa (pseudonym) said the following:

The strengths of deputy principals inform the way I assign work to them ... A deputy principal who is a good planner, talker, and listener can handle administrative tasks, while a deputy principal who is more inclined to teaching and learning can handle academic tasks. (Mr Phewa)

Mr Mzimela shared similar views; he explained how he delegated work to his deputy principals:

Delegation must be informed by knowledge and skills we have on the task at hand. For instance, in a case where one of my deputy principals does not have much expertise to do something and the other one does, I delegate that task to the one who is capable of performing it or attending to it, if it is a matter. (Mr Mzimela)

Mr Hlongwane agreed with these views and also assigned work according to the deputy principals' capabilities:

I do compare the capabilities of my deputy principals ... for example, when running the external matric examination for our learners and learners from neighbouring finishing schools who write their exams here at our school, we need classes, seating plans, and so on. To get this work done, I know that the deputy principal who deals with administrative duties is fast in planning and executing external examinations, while the deputy

principal responsible for academic duties is not very good at this task, but can handle internal examinations. (Mr Hlongwane)

From the above data, we learnt that the participating principals considered the deputy principals' abilities when assigning duties. The principals who all had two deputy principals seemingly made one deputy principal responsible for administrative duties and tasked the other with academic duties. In this way, the principals knew that if a task was administrative in nature, it made sense to delegate it to the deputy principals responsible for such tasks. The same principle applied to deputy principals responsible for academic duties. This finding agrees with that of Jansen (2019) who found that principals in schools in the Tshwane south district determined their deputy principals' duties according to their strong points, expertise, specialities, and experience. The practice of capacity-informed delegation seems not to be peculiar to South African schools, as scholars in other contexts made similar findings. For instance, Hughes and James (1999) found that in South Wales, Wales, the duties of deputy principals were assigned based on their attributes and expertise. Likewise, Lim and Pollock (2019) found that in Ontario, Canada, principals assigned tasks to their deputy principals based on the latter's strengths.

The practice of capacity-based delegation by the participating principals reflected a quality of distributed leadership. Harris (2003) and Harris and Spillane (2008) mention that distributed leadership allows the members of an organisation to execute tasks by using and capitalising on their individual skills, abilities, and strengths. Likewise, Davison, Brown, Pharo, Warr, McGregor, Terkes, Boyd and Abuodha (2013) and Storey (2004) state that distributed leadership allows individuals in the organisation to do tasks for which they have the most capabilities.

Fostering collaboration between principals and deputy principals

Although principals who participated in this study delegated different duties to the deputy principals, they also fostered collaboration between themselves and the deputy principals and among the deputy principals. This suggests that deputy principals were not simply delegated tasks and left to work in isolation; they collaborated with or solicited assistance from their principals or fellow deputy principals. Mr Nzimande explained how he collaborated with his deputy principals:

... we work collaboratively ... I and my deputy principals sit down as a team and discuss what needs to be done in our school. When we need to execute something, we sit down, discuss and decide on aspects each of us should perform. For example, when it comes to the admission of learners, we do this collaboratively with my deputy principals. I

like it if this task is shared because we would have agreed prior on the targets ... So, I do not have a situation where I instruct them in terms of who must do what; whatever we do in the school, we do it together. (Mr Nzimande)

Mr Phewa also collaborated with his deputy principals in performing leadership and management duties:

I and my deputy principals always collaborate on the duties of the school ... for instance, we alternate in terms of chairing staff meetings, sometimes a meeting is chaired by a deputy principal, and at times it is chaired by me. Also, when there are briefing sessions, they can be led by a deputy principal or myself. So, whatever we do, we alternate because I cannot run the school alone and I do not want to be seen like I am running the show alone. (Mr Phewa)

Dr Mthabela indicated that he believed in teamwork and thus collaborated with his deputy principals on many duties to be carried out at his school:

... I believe in a teamwork strategy, whatever I want to implement in the school, I always meet and discuss it with my deputy principals as senior management members; after our discussion, we plan as a team in terms of how we share the tasks among ourselves. (Dr Mthabela)

Mr Nzimande also fostered collaboration, but his focus seemed to be on collaboration among the deputy principals. He said the following:

... my deputy principals work collaboratively, but it depends on the type of matter that is being addressed. If it's an academic matter, the deputy principal responsible for academic duties take the lead, but he sources assistance from the other deputy. The same applies to administrative matters. (Mr Nzimande)

From the above remarks, it becomes clear that even though the deputy principals had their designated roles (i.e., administrative, and academic), the principals still fostered collaboration between themselves and the deputy principals. This finding agrees with the sentiments of Spillane et al. (2001) who explain that leadership tasks from a distributed leadership perspective may be co-enacted or carried out by leaders separately. By fostering collaboration, the participating principals ensured that their expertise and that of the deputy principals were exploited to ensure the smooth running of the school. In addition, if one deputy principal were to be absent from school, the other deputy and the principal would not be clueless about the work usually handled by their absent colleague. A study by Jansen and Du Plessis (2023) reveals that principals in the Pretoria area of South Africa perceived leadership as a collective endeavour rather than an action performed by the principals alone; hence, they assigned duties to deputy principals that required of them to lead and manage collaboratively.

Positioning deputy principals as part and leaders of school committees

One of the tasks delegated to deputy principals is the provision of leadership in school committees. Schools have functional committees, including (but not limited to) a special events committee, disciplinary committee, examination committee, assessment committee, sports and recreation committee, timetable committee, fundraising committee, and data capturing committee. The participating principals indicated that their deputy principals played a pivotal role in these committees. Mr Hlongwane explained:

We have four committees in our school ... We have a special events committee, a disciplinary committee, an exam committee, and a COVID-19 [Coronavirus disease 2019] committee. So, each deputy principal is a member of two committees ... In the COVID-19 committee, a deputy principal ensures that the school as a whole follows the COVID-19 protocols. In the special events committee, the deputy principal with members of the committee organise every event taking place at school. For example, on the 15th of October, we are opening a computer laboratory so they are organising for this event to happen.... (Mr Hlongwane)

Mr Phewa also explained that his deputy principals lead committees:

... for instance, one of my deputy principals is part of the assessment committee, disciplinary committee, and irregularity committee ... in the assessment committee, he assesses whether we as a school have covered the curriculum in all subjects and whether the examinations were written well. In the disciplinary committee, both my deputy principals and myself are involved; in this committee, we deal with disciplinary matters relating to teachers and learners. (Mr Phewa)

The involvement of deputy principals in Dr Mthabela's school was different from the situation in the other schools. He explained that his deputy principals were not necessarily members of committees, but that they oversaw the committees:

Besides the work I assign them of handling administrative and academic duties, they also oversee committees within the school. Our school has 21 committees. We have a sports and recreation committee, a timetable committee, a fundraising committee, a data capturing committee, and so on ... All these committees have coordinators and some of the coordinators report to the deputy principal responsible for administrative duties, while some report to the deputy principal responsible for academic duties. (Dr Mthabela)

Although not all the participating principals' views have been cited above, they all held related views about the deputy principals' participation in school committees. As members and leaders of school committees, deputy principals generally took part in activities that contributed to the functioning of

the school. The participating principals' practice of positioning deputy principals as part and leaders of school committees is in keeping with the PAM document, which stipulates that a deputy principal in a school is expected to help the principal with the running of the school by liaising with all school committees that are critical to the functioning of the school (DBE, RSA, 2022). Mafora (2013) and Mokoena (2011) who conducted studies in South Africa found that, apart from their positional duties, deputy principals also had specific responsibilities to fulfil in school committees.

While it seems that this practice is helpful in achieving effectiveness in school committees, it adds to an excessive workload of deputy principals. Scholars have for some time lamented the excessive workload of deputy principals; for instance, Khumalo, Van Vuuren, Van der Westhuizen and Van der Vyver (2018) raised concerns that deputy principals did additional tasks or served in different school committees whose duties took place after school hours. Furthermore, scholars such as Barnett et al. (2012), Blose (2018), Blose and Naicker (2018), Brinia, Mastora and Psoni (2020), and Craft, Malveaux, Lopez and Combs (2016) maintain that deputy principals are expected to carry out multiple tasks and have numerous responsibilities in schools, hence, their workload becomes challenging and unmanageable.

Section 2: Principals' Justification for Deploying Deputy Principals the Way They Do

In this section we provide an answer to the second research question. Only one theme emerged from the generated data, namely, the deployment in preparation for principalship.

Deployment in preparation for principalship

The participating principals seemed to hold a similar view regarding the reason for their assignment of duties to deputy principals. In the previous themes, we learnt that the participating principals applied capacity-informed delegation; fostered collaboration between principals and deputy principals; and they positioned deputy principals as part and leaders of school committees. The data generated in our study show that they did this to prepare the deputy principals for principalship. Mr Nzimande explained:

... whatever my deputy principals do, they do it collaboratively. I do not want my deputy principals to be strictly academic and administrative specialists because when they become principals, they will need to engage with both academic and administrative duties. (Mr Nzimande)

Dr Mthabela, who shared the same sentiments with Mr Nzimande, said the following:

My deputy principals always work together as a team. Once you have such deputy principals, it becomes easier to prepare them to be principals. Do you know why? When they are principals, they must understand both roles – academic and

administration because as principals they will be expected to perform both. So, I am preparing them. (Dr Mthabela)

Mr Hlongwane shared the following regarding the need for deputy principals to work together:

... by working collaboratively, they learn and understand both the administration and academic duties ... For instance, let us say my deputy principals get to be principals in a school environment like this one where there are two deputy principals! So, in a situation like that, they would be able to manage those schools because they understand both the administration and academic aspects of management. (Mr Hlongwane)

Dr Mthabela believed that even deputising during his absences prepared deputy principals for principalship. He explained:

... If my deputy principals are acting principals, let us say I am attending a workshop, they take decisions as principals. They cannot say they are waiting for me because I allow them to make decisions when I am away ... So, I am preparing them for the future so that they will know and understand how to run their schools. (Dr Mthabela)

Mr Hlongwane agreed with Dr Mthabela:

... well, let us say I am going to a meeting, I call both of them and tell them what needs to be done. Then they decide between them who is going to do this task and who is going to do that task. So, by doing that, they get an experience of the things I do which will help them when they become principals. (Mr Hlongwane)

The above extracts suggest that the participating principals had similar reasons for assigning duties to their deputy principals in the way they did. The principals deployed their deputy principals according to their capacities but also promoted collaboration to expose them to all facets of management, thereby preparing them for principalship.

The participating principals displayed features of the distributed leadership approach. This approach enables individuals of an organisation to develop knowledge and expertise by working collaboratively (Harris, 2003). In addition, the distributed leadership approach allows members of an organisation to engage in collective work, thereby engaging in concurrent collective learning (Goksoy, 2016).

Discussion

The positions of principal and deputy principal are interrelated (Doring, 1993; Ho et al., 2021; Hughes & James, 1999), and how principals assign duties to deputy principals as their co-leaders in schools is crucial. The aim of the deputy principal position is to assist principals in managing schools (Chitamba, 2019; Goksoy, 2016; Macharia et al., 2014). According to the PAM document, the duties and responsibilities of deputy principals are individualised and varied, depending on the approaches and needs of the particular school (DBE, RSA, 2022). This provision gives some

leeway for discretion from school principals concerning the assignment of duties and responsibilities to deputy principals. In our study, we engaged with the experiences of five purposefully and conveniently selected township secondary school principals to understand the manner in which they assigned duties to deputy principals, and also to understand their justification in this regard.

Three basic principles appeared to underpin principals' manner of assigning duties to deputy principals. Firstly, they applied the principle of capacity-informed delegation. Considering that principals who participated in this study had two deputy principals in their respective schools, they assessed their deputy principals' abilities and then allotted tasks matching these abilities. This recognition of abilities resonates with the views by Lim and Pollock (2019) and Ribbins (1977), that deputy principals' tasks must be allocated by principals based on capabilities. The finding also reflects the notion of Spillane et al. (2001) that leaders who engage in a distributed leadership approach bring different skills and knowledge to the fore.

Secondly, the participating principals fostered collaboration between principals and deputy principals. Such collaboration between senior school leaders is critical, as it enables the sharing of expertise. Within the distributed leadership perspective, the assumption is that leaders who collaborate know and do more than each of them can do alone (Spillane et al., 2001). Therefore, effective collaboration between principals and deputy principals has the potential to drive a school's leadership toward success. Finally, the participating principals positioned deputy principals as leaders in internal committees. This practice does not only keep the principals and deputy principals acquainted with and informed of happenings in all the committees, but creates opportunities for deputy principals to collaborate with teachers in various dealings of schools. This finding shows an understanding of school leadership as a distributed practice, extending throughout the school's social and situational contexts (Spillane et al., 2001). Only one reason emerged from the generated data on why principals assigned duties in the way they did – deployment in preparation for principalship. Participating principals agreed that their motive for assigning specific duties to deputy principals was to prepare them for principalship. This finding shows the level of connectedness of the positions of principal and deputy principal and emphasises the benefits that may arise when these stakeholders collaborate. Barnett et al. (2012), who highlight the need for principals to offer mentorship to deputy principals, support this view. A similar sentiment is echoed by Oliver (2013), who maintains that the relationship

between principals and deputy principals should provide the learning experience that a deputy principal may not obtain anywhere else.

Conclusion

We drew two lessons from the findings of this study; firstly, we observed aptness in the manner in which principals perceived and deployed deputy principals. The principals who participated in our study paid attention to the abilities of their deputy principals, thereby ensuring that tasks were assigned to suitable persons. Secondly, the principals appeared to invite their deputy principals to co-lead with them. The principals seemed not to perceive school leadership as their sole preserve, but they were ready and willing to distribute and share leadership with the deputy principals. The practice of distributing leadership appears not to be limited to deputy principals, but the principals further distributed school leadership by positioning their deputy principals in different school committees, which are platforms where ordinary teachers air their voices.

To conclude, we admit that the study reported herein was a small-scale qualitative multiple-case study in which we explored principals' assignment of duties to deputy principals in five schools. Considering the small sample size, the findings of this study may not reflect the views of all school principals in South Africa, and it was not our intention to generalise the findings. While we engaged with the experiences of only five principals, there were indications of a productive relationship between principals and deputy principals and of clear benefits obtained by fostering such a relationship. Therefore, we acknowledge that this study only scratches the surface in terms of understanding the work of deputy principals in South Africa; however, its findings may be useful not only in South Africa but also in other emerging economies. We see a need to further explore the phenomenon of the assignment of tasks to deputy principals in South African schools and schools in emerging economies; to this end, we suggest that larger research populations and other research methods are considered.

Authors' Contributions

SB conceptualised the article and was responsible for the abstract, theoretical framework, methodology, analysis, and discussion. PM collected the data, drafted the introduction and literature review, and contributed to the writing of the analysis.

Notes

- i. This article is based on the master's dissertation of Phumlani Samuel Mnikathi, completed at the University of KwaZulu-Natal under the supervision of Sibonelo Blose.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

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