To What Extent Does Distributed School Leadership Work Effectively Within Two Kazakhstani Secondary Schools?

Almagul Sarsembayeva

Nazarbayev Intellectual School of Physics and Mathematics in Aktobe, Kazakhstan

Abstract.

This article shows the results of research on the perceptions of senior leaders and classroom teachers regarding the effectiveness of distributed leadership approaches within two secondary schools in Kazakhstan. Following the interpretivist epistemological position, this qualitative research generated knowledge by exploring perceptions of the senior leaders and classroom teachers about distributed leadership through online semi-structured interviews. The collected data was analysed through a thematic analysis approach. The analysis of the findings indicated that senior leaders from the two schools perceive the importance of practicing distributed leadership within their schools and they shared certain examples of the opportunities that they provide for teachers. Classroom teachers positively reflected on distributed leadership approaches that are taken by their senior leaders. They place a great value on the support and motivation that senior leaders offer them. By comparing two schools, certain recommendations made in terms of what each can learn from the other about effective distributed leadership approaches. Suggestions for future research arising from the results of this study is that there is a demand to examine educational reforms such as seminars and courses on school leadership in greater depth, and their implications for people's actions. This may be of interest for further research in the field of educational leadership and management.

Keywords: approaches, management, motivation, perceptions, reforms

1.   Introduction

To achieve educational goals, there is a demand to improve leadership within educational institutions. In this regard, there is a relatively new term, school leadership, which is used 'only to be quickly supplemented with more fashionable ideas or theories' (Harris, 2007, p.315). Most definitions of the term school leadership include a process of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001; Harris, 2004). The reason is that distributed leadership is 'most likely to contribute to school improvement and to build internal capacity for development' (Harris, 2004, p.13). Distributed leadership was simply defined in Spillane et al. (2001) as a theory of how leadership practice is distributed amongst many leaders. Spillane (2006) looks at leadership practice from a distributed perspective through three components, namely leaders, followers, and situations, and indeed the interactions between them (see Fig. 1). He claims that 'distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures' (Spillane, 2005, p.144) although he views leadership practice as an outcome of the interactions between

leaders, followers, and situation. By looking at interactions between leaders and followers, one can better understand leadership practice based on an assessment of their collective work rather than an individual's knowledge and expertise (Spillane et al., 2001; Fitzsimons et al., 2011).

Figure 1: Spillane's (2006) Distributed Leadership Framework
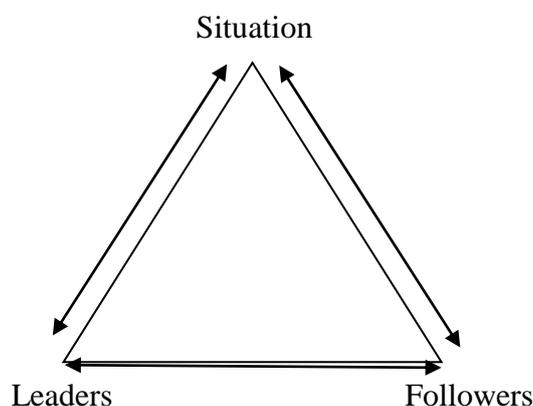
Source: Spillane, J. P. (2006) Distributed leadership. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

1.1 Research context

Kazakhstan achieved independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and started its 'new life' as a democratic republic with a presidential government (MoES RK, 2014). The educational system of Kazakhstan includes preschool, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and tertiary education. Secondary education is provided in public and private schools, lyceums, gymnasiums, and schools with extensive study in core subjects such as mathematics, chemistry, physics, etc. In 2008, the new 'intellectual schools', the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS), were launched, which were considered a platform for the development, monitoring, research, analysis, testing, and implementation of new educational strategies, policies and programmes (AEO NIS, 2020). NIS, as methodological centres in the regions, conduct systematic work to provide methodological support to secondary schools while introducing updated educational content and innovations, and professional development of teachers, and leadership (AEO NIS, 2018).

In December 2012, in the Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the people of the country, "Kazakhstan-2050 Strategy: a new political course of a successful state" set a new strategic goal for the Republic to become one of the 30 most developed states in the world by 2050 (Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2014). One of the key objectives to this concept is to improve the educational system of the country with particular attention being paid to the teacher development system. Because teacher training, professional development, and mentoring programmes can improve the status of the teaching profession (OECD, 2014), this, in turn, gives professional autonomy to teachers. They can participate in decision-making processes at the school level through distributed school leadership by working with other colleagues in the development of school programmes and organisation of the school.

1.2 Research Aims, Objectives and Questions

The overall aim of this research is to explore the perceptions of senior leaders and classroom teachers with regard to the effectiveness of distributed leadership approaches in two secondary schools in Kazakhstan. To achieve the aims of this research, an in-depth review of the relevant literature and the collection and analysis of empirical data will be performed. These activities will be guided by the following objectives of this research, which are to:

1. Identify the understandings of distributed leadership from the existing literature.
2. Critically evaluate any theoretical frameworks and approaches relevant to distributed leadership.
3. Explore the perceptions of senior leaders and classroom teachers related to distributed leadership.
4. Formulate recommendations on effective distributed leadership approaches for two schools.

The research questions to be addressed are:

1. What are the perceptions of Senior Leaders about the effectiveness of distributed leadership approaches in two secondary schools in Kazakhstan?
2. What are the perceptions of classroom teachers about the effectiveness of distributed leadership approaches in two secondary schools in Kazakhstan?
3. By comparing two schools, what can each learn from the other about effective distributed leadership approaches?

2.   Methodology

2.1   Research design

Following the interpretivist epistemological position, this study intends to generate knowledge by exploring individuals' perceptions and understandings of social phenomena, and their experiences. Moreover, this position can be linked to the ontological stance of constructivism 'where the nature of a social phenomenon is in the understanding and meanings ascribed to the social phenomenon by the social actors' (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p.28). Regarding the nature of this research, exploring stakeholders' views through interviews implies that this research is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research tends to explore people's perceptions of the world and allows one to produce data about people's feelings, beliefs, and their experiences (Bell & Waters, 2018; Wisker, 2008).

2.2   Method of data collection

Since objective 3 of this research implied collecting data about the perceptions of deputy directors and classroom teachers related to distributed leadership practice, there was a need to choose a qualitative method of data collection. Yin (2011) claims that conducting qualitative interviews allows one to have two-way interactions whereby a participant might even query the researcher. Therefore, a qualitative interview is an appropriate way to achieve objective 3 of this research work, as it allows to examine participants' views on the issue more thoroughly through the conversation during the interview. This study used semi-structured interview questions.

2.3   Data analysis

The research data was analysed through a thematic analysis approach (see Fig. 2). Thematic analysis is a widely used method for 'identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Since thematic analysis is a type of qualitative data analysis, it is well suited to the research questions, aims, design and data collection techniques used in this research. By using thematic analysis, it is possible to identify themes related to research questions such as perceptions of teachers and deputy directors of challenges, opportunities, and approaches of distributed leadership within their schools.

Figure 2: Data analysis process
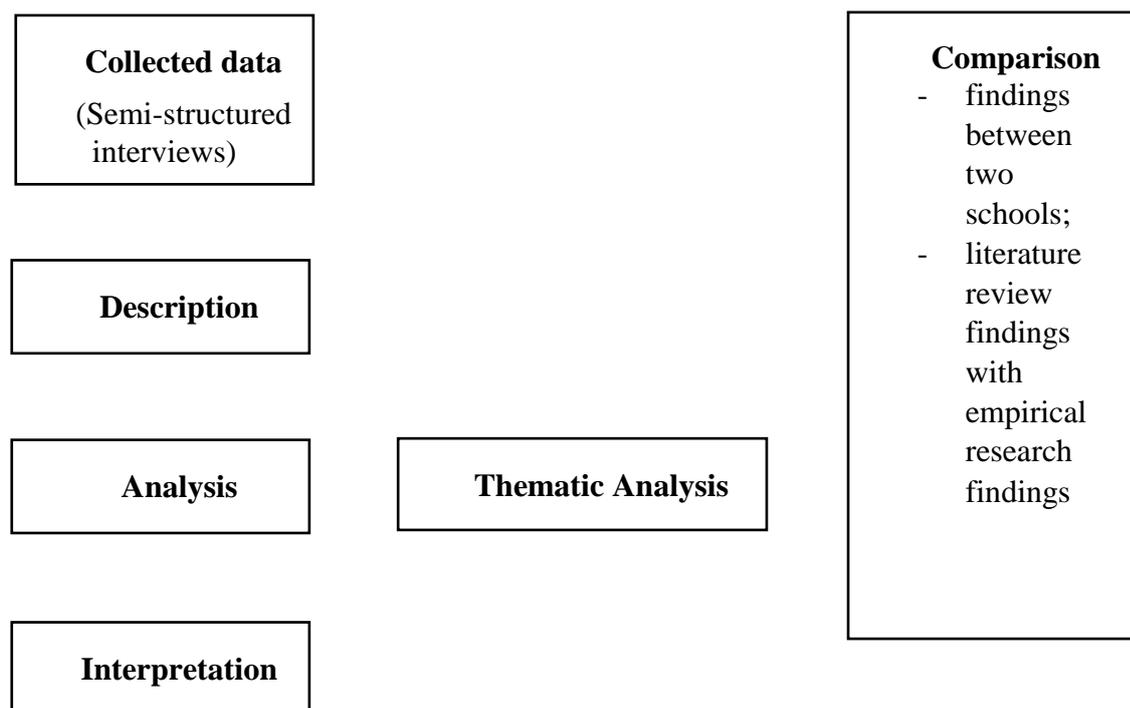
2.4 Ethical considerations

Social researchers are obliged to pay careful attention to the impact that taking part in the research might have on participants both after and during participation and conduct everything in such a way as to protect participants' rights (Cohen et al., 2011); therefore, considering different ethical issues before starting any research effort is crucial. Punch (1994; cited in Punch, 2005) outlines the main ethical issues in social research, namely those of consent, harm, privacy, and confidentiality of data. All documents concerning ethics, such as the consent forms, information sheet, and interview recordings and their transcripts, were securely stored during the research, where only the researcher had access to them. All these points were made clear to the participants before each interview.

3.   Findings

The data collected using online semi-structured interviews was analysed through thematic analysis by identifying codes from the transcribed data, which were then collected into themes. Figure 3 illustrates four potential themes that were identified during the thematic analysis:

Figure 3: Themes
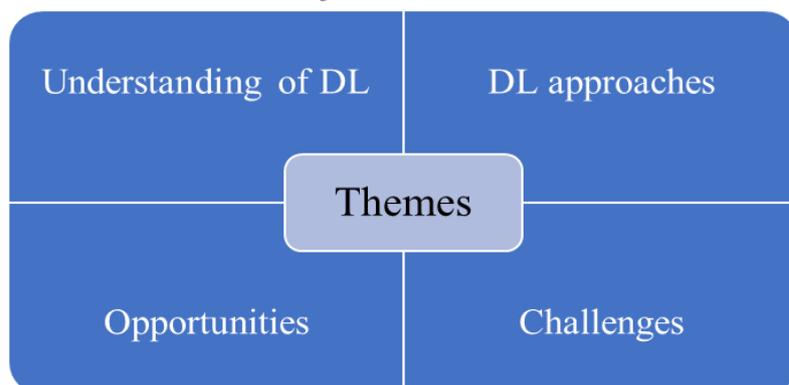
According to the data, all participants were familiar with the term except one teacher from School 2, who then reported that she knew about it in practice but not theoretically. Participants' understandings of the term distributed leadership mostly resonate with those discussed in the Literature Review Chapter. Most of the participants perceive it to be the distribution of roles and tasks among the members of the school. However, their understandings vary between distributing roles among people holding formal positions and those holding informal ones. Only one participant understood distributed leadership as a combination of individual and group work.

The participants pointed out numerous DL approaches. They believe that it is possible to achieve the best practices of distributed leadership within their schools if they apply appropriate approaches. The approaches interpreted from the data are using teachers' expertise, creating opportunities, forming a group of creative people, and providing people with support and motivation. Senior leaders stated various opportunities that teachers have in the process of distributed leadership whereas teachers reported few such opportunities. Therefore, the number of challenges noted by classroom teachers was large, namely issues such as workload, insufficient time, and personal traits such as being humble or a pessimist.

4.   Discussion

4.1   Understanding of DL

The first theme identified from the thematic analysis was understanding of DL, which is essential to explore for this empirical research as the first research question is concerned with perceptions of senior leaders and classroom teachers. A Deputy Director of Education from School 1 reports the simplest definition by saying that distributed leadership is seen in the process of "assigning, determining and distributing roles and tasks" (S1P1), however, she believes that only the principal can distribute tasks to teachers. This means that this person sees distributed leadership as a process that takes place only at the higher levels of the organisation. This account contradicts Harris's (2004) point of view, claiming that distributed leadership exists within the whole organisation not only among those who have formal positions or roles. However, a Deputy Director of Methodology from School 2 can see a leader in each person and proves this by reporting that distributed leadership is "fulfilling functional responsibility, it's a duty of teachers, headteachers and deputy directors" (S2P2). This view resonates with the definition given in Bennett et al. (2003), perceiving distributed leadership to be a network of people wherein each person shares his or her experience.

Classroom teachers were also asked to share their understandings of distributed leadership to compare their perceptions with senior leaders' views. Most teachers from School 1 perceive distributed leadership as distributing roles and tasks, similar to their deputy director:

> "One person cannot be scattered in all areas, he must lower tasks, also have his own mini leaders who will take one task and will work on it." (S1P3)

> "… when the leader distributes between his deputies and each deputy in his area is a leader. Because he is a professional in this area and, naturally, he can lead people …" (S1P4)

However, unlike their deputy director, they believe that tasks should be distributed not only among people who have formal positions but also among those who have not. This is gratifying because it means that teachers can see themselves as leaders even if they do not have any formal leadership roles. This resonates with findings from Harris's (2011) research where it is suggested that headteachers should delegate authority and power to others within the school.

4.2   DL approaches

During the interviews, participants were asked to share their experiences of distributing tasks and their answers led to the creation of a new theme, DL approaches. What should senior leaders do for the best practice of DL? Both deputy directors reported that senior leaders have to consider people's skills, desire, work experience and personal traits when distributing leadership tasks. By considering these features, senior leaders could identify middle leaders and exercise distributed leadership better. However, Spillane et al. (2004) recommend exploring leadership through interactions among leaders rather than people's skills, charisma, and abilities.

Moreover, both senior leaders indicated that they use teachers' expertise and collaborate with experienced teachers:

> "Experienced teachers give demonstrative lessons for novice teachers - how to conduct lessons properly, solving situational problems." (S1P1)

> "I used to notice experienced teachers; I take a certain person from the elementary level and then select the same experienced person from the secondary or high level." (S2P2)

This approach was also mentioned by Nurlanov et al. (2018), the Kazakhstani project named "School of the reserve of leading staff" aims to train promising teachers with the help of experienced teachers in order to improve the school. Experienced teachers might be a bridge between deputies and teachers by sharing their experiences through collaboration with teachers.

Classroom teachers were also asked about their experiences regarding distributed leadership and the way the senior leaders in their school deal with it. An additional approach to the realisation of distributed leadership that was identified during the interviews was taking part in seminars and forming collaborations.

> "… forming a group of people, and they have some common interests, and one, in any case, should be, well, roughly speaking, the instigator in the good sense of the word." (S1P4)

> "They (administration) conduct various events, coaching on a specific topic, thereby motivating us to further work on certain specific topics. They teach us, help us, and lead teachers forward by conducting seminars." (S2P5)

Teachers from both schools see the importance of participating in seminars. When they lead workshops, they can feel as though they are leaders and in collaboration with their colleagues and deputy directors, they can make events useful and practical. This finding resonates with findings from Yakavets's (2017) research in Kazakhstani context where one participant described distributed leadership as 'the work that has the character of collaboration' (p.458). Harris (2004) also highlights the importance of collaboration, where she perceives collaboration to be the core of distributed leadership.

4.3   Opportunities

A number of senior leaders reported that they provide certain opportunities for teachers; therefore, this was identified as the third theme. The Deputy Director from School 1 believes that teachers should exhibit their leadership skills and strengths by themselves:

> "For example, someone can work on computers well and he takes a position of a system administrator, someone has organisational skills, someone can do paperwork, office work, when a person shows his strengths it is easier to distribute tasks." (S1P1)

Exhibiting leadership skills depends on relationships between colleagues, whether it is trusting or not (York-Barr and Duke, 2004). This recalls Spillane's (2006) distributed leadership framework, where he recommends studying leadership practice from a distributed perspective through interactions between leaders. Although it does depend on the people you are working with, your relationships with them, it is always you who decides whether to exhibit leadership skills.

Teachers, compared to deputy directors, cannot see enough opportunities though they did indicate some such. Participants think that teachers should be confident, they should show perseverance, patience, desire, and interest in what they are doing. The following quotations are proof of this:

> "The person who is confident in his strengths, in his capabilities, will be confident that he will be supported in the team. Well, such qualities are what the goal should be, perseverance, patience, and, well, the desire to reach the end." (S1P4)

> "I think to take an active part in the life of the school, to suggest some innovations, to strive for something, to show oneself." (S2P5)

From the transcripts above, we can understand that teachers perceive autonomous motivation to be opportunities. This should be something that comes from within the person themselves. However, according to Eyal and Roth's (2011) research results, principals play a major role in teachers' motivation. Therefore, principals need to choose the right leadership style in leading their schools.

4.4   Challenges

Although senior leaders noted that they provide classroom teachers with plenty of opportunities to engage in distributed leadership practice, there are still some key issues that need to be considered. Senior leaders from both schools find it challenging to work with people who lack knowledge and experience.

"There are novice teachers who do not have enough knowledge and experience." (S1P1)

"There are random people, this also slows down the work." (S2P2)

According to the recent study (Plessis & Eberlein, 2018), using teachers to teach subjects for which they are not sufficiently qualified might have a deleterious effect on students' learning. Therefore, there is a need to conduct extra activities such as mentoring, induction, and continuous professional development programmes.

Besides, senior leaders pointed out that teachers refuse to show their leadership skills due to the associated workload, parental duties, and insufficient time.

"Teachers also refer to lack of time, workload, and family issues because they have their own children." (S1P1)

"Lately, the lack of time has also aggravated our work. It's a big problem due to the new curriculum and distance learning." (S2P2)

These findings affirm those of previous scholars; Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) noted that personal issues such as family responsibilities prevent teachers taking leadership roles. Having family responsibilities, in turn, leads to significant time constraints. Tahir et al. (2016) explored the idea that teachers' resistance to leadership roles is a challenge to headteachers who are implementing a distributed leadership approach. Teachers might be concerned about these issues and resist performing leadership roles and, thus, they impede senior leaders' work on distributing leadership tasks.

Since teachers consider a limited number of opportunities, a considerable number of associated challenges were identified during the interviews. Three participants from two schools stated that they have very little time.

"Due to the fact that we already have a lot of responsibilities, the workload is large, I do not show my initiative because there is no time." (S1P3)

"… this is due to the time, the laying of time can interfere with holding it in our school, maybe some planned event will be postponed for some reason there…" (S1P4)

"I lead courses on lesson studies, and for this I need to conduct training. Due to the fact that the teachers are busy, for example, we don't even have time to conduct training." (S2P5)

These findings contradict those discussed in the Literature Review Chapter. Either previous research did not find this as an issue, or it was not given sufficient attention. Based on the conversation with teachers, limited time might be the result of the workload teachers currently tend to face.

4.5   Comparison of findings between schools

Looking at the data collected from the senior leaders of the two schools, it can be understood that they have faced distributed leadership in their practice. However, the Deputy Director from School 1 perceives distributed leadership to occur among those who have formal roles, whereas the Deputy Director from School 2 considers every person to be engaged in the process. Both senior leaders consider certain approaches for adoption in order to develop distributing leadership among other individuals within their schools. According to the Deputy Director from School 1, they "determine goals and then set certain tasks" (S1P1) and by doing so they get the desired results. Before any process has started there is a demand to establish

clear aims and objectives; however, when it comes to distributing leadership it takes the position of the main component.

Based on the opinions of classroom teachers from School 1, senior leaders should support and motivate teachers. They perceive this as one of the main approaches to distributed leadership. When they are supported by the administration, they can exhibit leadership skills by themselves. Motivation from senior leaders is also seen as a driver for doing something new. Teachers from School 2 appreciate their ideas and attitudes being taken into consideration. They get a degree of freedom when senior leaders coordinate with them. It allows for the possibility of getting as much benefit as possible from people's expertise.

5.   Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Research Questions (RQ)

5.1.1 RQ1: What are the perceptions of Senior Leaders about the effectiveness of distributed leadership approaches in two secondary schools in Kazakhstan?

Senior leaders from the two schools consider the significance of practicing distributed leadership within their schools. Both senior leaders' perceptions of distributed leadership were positive, as they offered thoughtful examples of the opportunities that they provide for teachers. Participating in seminars and courses was perceived to be an essential approach to engaging teachers with leadership practice, encouraging them to take their own initiative in taking responsibility for leadership and collaborating with experienced teachers. Deputy Directors also believe that reducing teachers' workloads can give them the extra time they need to contribute to their schools' leadership practices.

Senior leaders shared distributed leadership approaches that they apply in their practice. Both emphasised the role of experienced teachers, who teach novice teachers in collaboration with experienced ones. These findings echo Harris (2004), as she considers collaboration as an essential goal of distributed leadership. Additionally, senior leaders form working groups of creative people with different skills and knowledge. This approach is the strength of distributing leadership, as supported by Bennett et al. (2003), who regarded distributed leadership as 'an emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise' (p.3). However, senior leaders consider certain challenges that prevent teachers from performing leadership tasks. They find it hard to distribute tasks to people who lack knowledge and experience. Besides, although senior leaders provide teachers with opportunities, some teachers resist taking on leadership tasks. Nevertheless, though there are minor issues in practicing distributed leadership within these two secondary schools, senior leaders perceive a distributed form of leadership to be crucial to school improvement.

5.1.2 RQ2: What are the perceptions of classroom teachers about the effectiveness of distributed leadership approaches in two secondary schools in Kazakhstan?

Classroom teachers, similar to deputy directors, regard distributed leadership as distributing roles and tasks; however, they believe that leadership tasks should be distributed not only among people who have formal positions in schools but also among those who do not. Spillane (2006) also assumes that teachers or others in the school can also contribute to school leadership even if they are not holders of formal leadership positions. By reporting above, teachers emphasise the importance of the opportunities they need to be provided since they indicated a limited number of opportunities within their schools.

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Teachers positively reflected on distributed leadership approaches that are taken by their senior leaders. They place a high value on the support and motivation that senior leaders offer them. However, the opposite side of their feedback referred to the challenges that may impede them from taking on distributed tasks. They were confronted with challenges such as limited time, increased workload, and different personal traits that prevent teachers from acquiring leadership roles. Accordingly, teachers from two schools perceive distributed leadership practice to be less effective than it should be. However, if senior leaders deal with issues within their schools and provide teachers with the required opportunities then classroom teachers are willing to make an appropriate effort.

5.1.3 RQ3: By comparing two schools, what can each learn from the other about effective distributed leadership approaches?

According to the evidence, both participant schools are practicing distributed forms of leadership. Each school focusses on different issues of distributed leadership by applying various approaches. For example, a senior leader from School 1 takes advantage of achieving consensus with classroom teachers, whereas a senior leader from School 2 perceives forming a group of people to be an effective approach to distributed leadership. With regard to classroom teachers, those from School 1 appreciate the significance of support and motivation offered by senior leaders, while those from School 2 are motivated when senior leaders consider their ideas and attitudes.

By analysing the above, staff from School 1 could try approaches adopted by their colleagues from School 2, forming a group of creative people and taking into consideration every person's ideas and attitudes. Likewise, School 2's staff need to establish agreements between senior leaders and classroom teachers and tighter bonds in terms of support and motivation.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that if these two secondary schools' senior leaders and classroom teachers assume a sense of commitment to their schools and profession and cooperate with each other, they will be able to address any issue and practice effective distributed leadership gives rise to.

5.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Exploring deputy directors' views about distributed leadership was one of the strengths of this research since there has been no previous research conducted on this matter in the Kazakhstani context. Therefore, future research could be conducted with deputy directors, principals, and teachers and, thus, allow scrutiny of the issue from three perspectives. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine the distributed form of leadership in schools with different levels of development. Academic staff of different schools may have different perceptions and experiences.

Alternative recommendations for future research arising from these conclusions is that there is a need to examine educational reforms such as seminars and courses on leadership in greater depth, and their implications for people's actions because, based on the results of this research, this can encourage school staff to engage in leadership practices. This may be of interest for further research in the field of educational leadership and management.

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