

Proposal Information of Contribution 1446**ID: 1446 / 26 SES 09 A: 1****26. Educational Leadership****Symposium***Alternative EERA Network:* 01. Professional Learning and Development*Keywords:* distributed leadership, leadership as practice, qualitative research, quantitative research, school improvement**Same Name, Different Meanings And Practices? Distributed Leadership Across Cultures And Methods***Chair:* **Pierre Tulowitzki** (FHNW University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland)*Discussant:* **James Spillane** (Northwestern University)

Distributed leadership has – in a relatively short time – become a popular area of research but also an instrument of leadership development, with some scholars even attributing it a “taken-for-granted status” (Lumby, 2016, p. 161) and others calling it “one of the most influential and well-discussed ideas to emerge in the field of educational leadership” (Harris et al., 2022, p. 438). Since Spillane et al (2001) popularized a shift of perspective towards focusing on leadership as a practice and encouraged the study of interactions (taking into account leaders, followers and the situation) instead of singular leaders, hundreds of thousands if not over a million scholarly works have been published on this topic in the field of educational research (Mifsud, 2023, p. 5).

Yet, despite this enormous amount of publications, there are many theoretical and empirical challenges and “blank spaces”. For example, Tian et al. (2016) in their review found that a commonly accepted definition or conceptualization of distributed leadership could not be identified. More than a decade ago, Crawford (2012) criticized that scholars and practitioners had not sufficiently explored questions of identity and power in the context of distributed leadership; a critique that still seems to apply. The impact and pathways of impact of distributed leadership practices on various inner school factors such as teaching quality or student achievement have so far – at least compared to research on instructional leadership – not quite been mapped out. For Harris et al. (2022), “the black box of distributed leadership practice remains only partially open” (p. 452). Furthermore, the influence of various cultural contexts has not yet been fully explored. Some of the questions prevalent in this context are: what are commonalities and differences in the conceptualization of distributed leadership and in the cultural practices of it across several cultures? What do we know about the cultural and structural fit of distributed leadership in various contexts (for example in societies with a stronger emphasis on low hierarchies vs. a stronger emphasis on marked hierarchies)?

This symposium will try to explore the issues mentioned above. Contributions from Europe, the US and Australia will be used as focal lenses to study different conceptualizations of distributed leadership. Each contribution will present empirical insights into practices and effects of distributed leadership with some additionally presenting insights into methodological approaches and challenges of researching distributed leadership. The selection of countries will enable comparisons focusing on similarities as well as on contrasts. For example, Ireland and Switzerland are comparable in terms of rather strong school boards, while the US and Australia have rather pronounced accountability systems, a stark contrast to Switzerland’s low-accountability approach. Each country also brings unique cultural and school system features like the strong emphasis on direct democracy (for example articulated in lay authorities) or the commitment to standardized testing (US).

The symposium will feature four presentations. In each presentation, the underlying understanding of distributed leadership as a perspective and practice will first be laid out followed by a short overview of the cultural and systemic background before delving into the respective study and results. A discussant will offer a critique of the contributions, but more importantly connect them to the wider discourses, criticisms and “blank spaces” previously mentioned. The discussant has an Irish and US background and will offer commentary from a perspective that includes European as well as (broader) international elements.

References

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Presentations of the Symposium*Papers in Symposium:* 4*National Perspectives:* 4**Making Distributed Leadership Visible – A Futile Exercise? First Results From A Multimethod Study Into Educational Leadership In Switzerland**

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National perspective: Switzerland

In the wake of changing steering mechanisms in education and public administration around the turn of the millennium, most cantons in Switzerland introduced formal school leaders (Hangartner & Svaton, 2013). Despite the empirically supported relevance of school leadership and its distribution in the context of the organization and development of schools (Arlestig et al., 2016), there is only little empirical evidence in Switzerland on how leadership is exercised and distributed in practice. Research on school leadership in Switzerland tends to be regionally limited and predominantly focusing on the position of formal leaders, although findings imply the importance of school staff beside the formal

leaders for shaping and developing schools (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Spillane et al., 2004). These research gaps are what this contribution aims to address: In a cross-cantonal research project, investigating school leadership practice as a process of interaction in mutual influence across actors. Not only the leadership practices of formal school leaders but also teachers' involvement and participation in the management and development of schools as well as the relationships between stakeholders are focal point of the study. In a first explorative phase, two schools each in the canton of Argovia and in the canton of Vaud were examined using shadowing-type observations over the period of several weeks, during which school leaders and meetings between teachers were observed. In addition, document analyses and interviews with principals and teachers were conducted. The analysis of the data is carried out in an iterative procedure according to the grounded theory principles (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), allowing a gradual construction of theories. In the present time, investigations are being carried out in additional schools in both cantons. Over the duration of the study, 12 schools are to be investigated. Preliminary findings suggest that factors such as school size, organizational structure, and the prevailing school culture may influence teachers' assumptions of responsibility for leadership-related tasks. Differences in the perception of leadership and its distribution also seem to exist due to previous professional experiences of school leaders and teachers, partly due to their experiences prior to the introduction of principals. Relationships and levels of trust between formal leaders and the teaching staff, as well as between individuals appear to play a significant role in shaping leadership processes and the involvement of stakeholders across the schools. Some markers of leadership distribution can be identified but appear to be contextually bound.

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