The Encouragement and Constraint of Distributed Leadership Via Education Policy Reform in Nova Scotia, Canada: A Delicate Balancing Act

Monica Williams, *St. Francis Xavier University*
David C. Young, *St. Francis Xavier University*

Abstract

This article examines how recent policy reforms in Nova Scotia, Canada, encouraged and constrained distributed leadership in the provincial public education system. The study found the language of newly enacted legislation and policies encouraged distributed leadership by endorsing collaborative team processes for school improvement and special education/inclusive education. However, distributed leadership was constrained by the elimination of elected school boards, the reduced authority of school advisory councils, the altered duties of educational leaders, and the failure to enact essential supports for distributed leadership. Overall, this analysis found that recent policy reforms strengthened the control of the provincial ministry of education at the expense of local, democratic participation in education. The need for new organizational structures and processes for citizen participation in twenty-first century education was identified.

Résumé

Cet article examine la manière dont la réforme de politiques récentes en Nouvelle-Écosse (Canada) a à la fois encouragé et restreint le leadership partagé dans le système d'éducation publique de la province. Cette étude a trouvé que le langage de nouvelles législations et politiques a motivé le leadership partagé en encourageant des proces-

SFU
SIMON FRASER
UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF
DELAWARE

PDK
PHI DELTA KAPPA *International*

sus de travail en équipe axés sur l'amélioration des écoles et sur une éducation spécialisée et inclusive. Cependant, l'étude a aussi trouvé que des contraintes ont été imposées sur le leadership partagé par l'élimination de conseils scolaires élus, l'autorité réduite des commissions consultatives scolaires, la modification des responsabilités de leaders éducationnels, et l'incapacité d'offrir des appuis essentiels pour le leadership partagé. Cette analyse a conclu que la réforme de politiques récentes a augmenté le pouvoir du ministère de l'Éducation néo-écossais aux dépens d'une participation démocratique locale en éducation. Cet article a identifié le besoin d'établir de nouveaux processus et structures organisationnels afin d'assurer une meilleure participation citoyenne en éducation au 21e siècle.

Keywords / Mots clés : distributed leadership, policy reform, school improvement / leadership partagé, réforme de politiques, amélioration des écoles

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition that educational leadership is no longer the exclusive purview of school and district leaders appointed to formal administrative positions (Bush & Glover, 2012, 2014; Supovitz, D'Auria, & Spillane, 2019). According to Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris, and David Hopkins (2017):

> Leaders, we have come to understand, are often not just the few individuals in a school holding formal administrative or leadership positions. Leadership is often widely shared or distributed with teachers, parents, and students also assuming such a role from time to time. (p. 2)

The growth of distributed leadership has fostered the establishment of collaborative school teams and shared decision-making among students, parents, teachers, and administrators. At the same time, however, policy reforms have frequently fortified the central control of education systems through heightened emphasis on performance and accountability (White, Cooper, & Anwaruddin, 2017).

Education policies reflect the clash between global trends toward increased distributed leadership and greater centralized control, and they play an important role in tipping the balance one way or the other. In their study on the influence of education policies on distributed leadership in 32 countries, Susan Printy and Yan Liu (2021) found that a country's education policies could either encourage or constrain distributed leadership.

Robert White, Karyn Cooper, and Sardar M. Anwaruddin (2017) contend that Canada's culture of liberal democracy is conceptually conducive to distributed leadership. Over time, opportunities have grown for the encouragement and promotion of this form of leadership in Canadian schools. Structural barriers in the form of hierarchical leadership arrangements and compartmentalized leadership have begun to give way to flatter hierarchies. This trend, coupled with more bottom-up initiatives, has contributed to the restructuring of educational leadership in Canadian school systems. In addition, the burgeoning size, complexity, and scope of school leaders' workloads have prompted a growing recognition that leaders cannot meet these

heightened demands on their own and benefit from the shared expertise of others. Moreover, the responsiveness of distributed leadership to varied school contexts is well-suited to an increasingly diverse Canadian society.

Despite these favourable conditions, distributed leadership remains under development in Canadian school systems because current organizational structures pose significant barriers. At the school level, barriers remain to boundary crossing and the collaborative generation and sharing of knowledge. At the system level, significant structural, cultural, and political barriers persist. In addition, the centralized development and control of education policies, practices, and processes at a distance from school sites negatively impacts distributed leadership (White et al., 2017). To investigate the extent to which supports and barriers are present in one Canadian education system, this article addresses the following research question: How do recent Nova Scotia education policy reforms encourage or constrain distributed leadership?

The significance of the analysis

This analysis is significant for several reasons. First, distributed leadership has become a dominant theory and preferred approach to educational leadership (Bush, 2020; Bush & Ng, 2019; Harris & Jones, 2021) that has been shown to positively influence student and school outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020). Second, as education policy reforms continue apace across Canada and around the world, many school systems are grappling with the competing trends toward distributed leadership and increasingly centralized control of education. Thus, the topic is pertinent to a wide audience of teachers, administrators, students, and parents. Third, global interest in and demand for distributed leadership has been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Distributed leadership became the default leadership response during the pandemic, as educational leaders at all levels of administration connected, shared, learned, and networked their way through complex issues (Harris & Jones, 2020). In the face of multiple pandemic challenges, school leadership became more connected, collaborative, creative, and responsive than ever. The challenge, therefore, is to identify ways to strengthen and adapt distributed leadership to the rapidly changing policy landscape of twenty-first-century education across Canada and around the world.

Theoretical framework

Distributed leadership is a diffuse or shared model of leadership in which the expertise of education partners and school staff is valued and the development of teacher leadership is encouraged (DeMatthews, 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Although principals retain authority, they benefit from the combined knowledge and skill of staff members as they work together on school improvement initiatives (DeMatthews, 2014). No one leader possesses the skills and time necessary to execute all the complex tasks that comprise contemporary school leadership (Gardner, 2013). Distributed leadership is highly dependent on positive relationships and interactions in a culture of trust, respect, and shared expertise (Heikka, Waniganayake, & Hujala, 2012; Spillane, 2017). Because it is strongly influenced by diverse organizational contexts, structures, and processes, distributed leadership does not have a "one–size–fits–all"

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

model (Bush & Glover, 2012; Heikka et al., 2012). From a distributed perspective, leadership is the influence that arises from interactions among people as they engage in various tasks within a social network. These interactions are strongly influenced by contextual conditions and social structures (Supovitz et al., 2019).

The contemporary theory of distributed leadership as an interactive web of people, places, and relationships did not emerge until the late 1990s and early 2000s (Harris, 2008). Distributed leadership theory is grounded in concepts from distributed cognition and activity theory that emphasize the integral role of social context in intelligent activity (Harris, 2008; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). This theory recognizes that many people have the potential to exercise leadership, but organizational structures may impede or enhance distributed leadership. For example, school structures can be rigid and their cultures resistant to new forms of leadership (Harris, 2008). In addition, traditional administrative hierarchies, entrenched patterns of power and influence, top-down approaches to school leadership, and the lack of protected time for team meetings and teacher collaboration constitute formidable barriers to distributed leadership (Harris, 2004). Therefore, it is incumbent on education authorities to create organizational structures, processes, and conditions conducive to distributed leadership (Harris, 2004, 2008).

At an organizational level, distributed leadership is associated with a move away from bureaucratic practices to collaborative practices, and the rearrangement of organizational structures in schools and school systems. Given its collegial, collaborative, and democratic nature, distributed leadership may clash with rigid administrative bureaucracies and hierarchies. Under these conditions, a delicate balancing act is required to safeguard distributed leadership, characterized by authentic power and authority for decision-making in an education system where participatory decision-making is constrained (du Plessis & Heystek, 2020).

Very importantly, distributed leadership is democratic in nature, characterized by shared power, and firmly rooted in the interactions between individuals and groups within and between organizations (Corrigan, 2013; Heikka et al., 2012; White et al., 2017). "Distributed leadership is mainly concerned with interactions rather than actions, with capacity building rather than control, with empowerment rather than coercion" (Azorin, Harris, & Jones, 2020, p. 121). In this article, distributed leadership serves as the lens for examining recent policy reforms in Nova Scotia and their impact on educational leadership.

Context
Canadian education
From the time of Canadian Confederation in 1867 onward, education has fallen under the exclusive jurisdiction of the 10 provinces and three territories that now comprise this country (Peters, 2017; Young, 2017). Under the *Constitution Act, 1867*, the provinces were granted exclusive rights to make laws regarding education, a right that was extended to each new province and territory as the country expanded. As each jurisdiction enacted its own legal and policy frameworks governing education, variations arose in education laws, policies, and practices across the country. However, common elements also emerged, including the creation of school boards

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

as statutory bodies governing local school systems (Peters, 2017) and the establishment of provincial and territorial ministries of education to administer education (Young, 2017). To structure and regulate the school systems under its jurisdiction, each province and territory enacted statutes called education acts or school acts as well as policies that govern all aspects of public education. Policies are also enacted at the school board and school levels (Young, 2017). While underlying tensions between localized autonomy and centralized control have always been present in Canadian education, they have featured more prominently in education governance and politics over the past four decades (Peters, 2017), including in Nova Scotia.

Nova Scotia

One of the four founding provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia is a small Maritime province situated on the east coast of the country with a population of approximately one million (Nova Scotia Premier's Office, 2021). While almost half of the population lives in the capital city of Halifax, the province also has a large rural population. The public education system, administered by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (hereafter referred to as the Department of Education), provides free universal elementary and secondary education to approximately 120,000 students in pre–primary to Grade 12 throughout the province. Since 2014, several landmark reports and associated legal and policy reforms have transformed the provincial public education system, as briefly summarized below.

Education reform

In February of 2014, the minister of education struck a review panel to consult with Nova Scotians on necessary changes to the provincial education system. Based on citizen input, the panel recommended sweeping changes to public education in areas ranging from curriculum and teaching to leadership and inclusive education (Minister's Panel on Education, 2014). In response, the Department of Education developed and implemented a comprehensive five-year action plan for renewing the public education system (Province of Nova Scotia, 2015). Organized into four pillars, the action plan targeted the creation of a modern education system, an innovative curriculum, inclusive school environments, and excellence in teaching and leadership.

In 2016 and 2017, a protracted contract dispute between the Department of Education and the provincial teachers' union culminated in the first teachers' strike in the history of the province. In February 2017, the provincial legislature passed a new statute, the *Teachers' Professional Agreement and Classroom Improvements (2017) Act*, which legislated an end to the dispute. Under the auspices of this new legislation, a year–long Commission on Inclusive Education was struck to reform the policies and practices governing the education of students with special needs. The three–member commission, which included one of the authors, Monica Williams, conducted extensive research and public consultation and released a final report in March 2018 that recommended major reforms to the delivery of inclusive education, including new programs, services, and policies (Njie, Shea, & Williams, 2018).

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

In 2017, the Department of Education appointed international education consultant Avis Glaze to complete a three-month review of the administrative structure of the public school system. The resultant report (Glaze, 2018) recommended a major overhaul of the administration of public education. Shortly thereafter, the provincial legislature passed a second education statute, *Education Reform (2018) Act*, an omnibus bill that included a new *Education Act* (2018) that was supported by the new *Ministerial Education Act Regulations* (2018). This comprehensive legislation implemented many of Dr. Glaze's recommendations, including the abolishment of the seven elected English language school boards in the province and the removal of school and school board administrators from the provincial teachers' union.

The enactment of two far-reaching education statutes within the span of one year necessitated significant policy reforms at all levels of the education system in order to bring provincial, regional, and school policies into alignment with the new legislation. Given the breathtaking scope and speed of legal and policy reform, key elements of the provincial education system underwent rapid, transformational change, including school advisory councils, educational leadership, school improvement planning, and special education/inclusive education.

School advisory councils

School advisory councils (SACs) are found in provincial and territorial education systems across Canada (Amendt, 2018). Known by different titles across the country, these councils are collaborative, volunteer-run bodies comprised of parents, teachers, students, administrators, and community members. SACs facilitate parent and community engagement in education, represent community diversity, and support school improvement. They help to maintain a strong local voice in education. The power vested in SACs varies from a purely advisory capacity to decision-making authority in specific areas of education, especially school improvement (Amendt, 2018). SACs have been in operation in Nova Scotia for many years.

Educational leadership

Various definitions of educational leadership abound in the literature. In this article, educational leadership is defined as:

> a moral endeavor. It combines excellent management to ensure that the organization works effectively and efficiently with creative, proactive, and transformative efforts to ensure that it is fulfilling its critical democratic goals in an equitable and socially–just fashion. Educational leadership is grounded in a strong sense of moral purpose, clear goals, and strong personal values. (Shields, 2015, p. 83)

In Nova Scotia, as in other jurisdictions, educational leaders are appointed to school, regional, and provincial leadership positions and assigned different titles, such as principal, director, and superintendent of schools. They work at all levels of an education system, including in schools, districts, and departments of education (Brien & Williams, 2009). In this article, the term *educational leader* is used in the broadest sense to encompass all educational leaders who serve at different levels of leadership in the Nova Scotia public school system.

School improvement planning

School improvement planning is a collaborative team process of developing a shared vision of student success, establishing goals for achieving the vision, implementing improvements aimed at the goals, and continuously monitoring and evaluating progress (Bernhardt, 2018). The leadership of school improvement is an influence process through which school leaders collaboratively identify a direction for the school, motivate and support staff, and co-ordinate school actions aimed at improvements in teaching and learning. Through this influence process, school leaders support the ongoing professional development of staff, which in turn facilitates school efforts to implement and sustain educational change (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). School improvement planning has been implemented in Nova Scotia public schools over the past two decades.

Special education and inclusive education

Special education refers to the specialized placements, programs, services, and facilities that are provided to students with special needs whose educational needs cannot be fully met by general education programs (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020). Special education includes separate schools and classes tailored to students with different challenges, including vision loss, hearing loss, and learning and developmental disabilities. Beginning in the 1990s, Canadian school systems moved away from separate special education schools and classes toward the inclusion of students with special needs in the grade-level classrooms of their neighbourhood schools (Towle, 2015). *Inclusive education* refers to the education of all students in the company of their peers in welcoming schools that uphold all forms of diversity and support the learning, development, and well-being of every student (Njie et al., 2018).

As special education and inclusive education policies were enacted across the country, school-based teams were struck to co-ordinate the development, implementation, and monitoring of education programs and services for students with special needs (Towle, 2015). Beginning in 1997 in Nova Scotia, school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and education specialists formed collaborative teams that co-ordinated the education of students with special needs and shared in educational decision-making.

Research method

Document analysis

The qualitative research method employed in this article was document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Cardno, 2018), an analytic procedure that entails finding, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing the data contained in documents. Document analysis involves the skimming (cursory examination), reading (in-depth examination), and interpretation of documents, which is an iterative process that combines aspects of thematic analysis and content analysis. Thematic analysis is a form of pattern recognition, whereby the focused re-reading and review of data identifies emerging themes. Content analysis is the process of organizing information into categories pertinent to the research question (Bowen, 2009). The latter process was utilized in this article, and specifically, the content analysis of education policy documents (Cardno, 2018).

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

Education policy encompasses the actions undertaken by governments in relation to educational practices, as well as the approaches they employ to support the production and delivery of education (Viennet & Pont, 2017). Education policies are informed by values; developed by public authorities at the central, regional, and local level; and implemented by education professionals. Education policies address a wide range of issues, from education funding and governance to student assessment and evaluation. As Les Bell and Howard Stevenson (2006) point out, education policy is political: "It shapes who benefits, for what purpose and who pays" (p. 9). In Canada, a wide range of education policy documents—including policies, procedures, standards, guidelines, and frameworks—are generated at the provincial/territorial, school board, and school levels.

While content analysis is the most appropriate approach for analyzing organizational policy documents (Cardno, 2018), there are no simple guidelines for data analysis because each inquiry is unique. Instead, guiding questions frame the careful scrutiny of policy text to ensure the examination of key areas. Accordingly, this article adapts Carol Cardno's (2018) guiding questions for the content analysis of education policy documents:

- Which aspects of distributed leadership are evident in the language of the policy document?
- Does the policy language refer to distributed leadership directly or indirectly?
- What is and is not specifically stated in the policy document regarding distributed leadership?
- How well does the policy document align with legal and regulatory requirements for distributed leadership?
- How well does the policy document reflect national and international trends in distributed leadership?

To determine the extent to which recent policy reforms in Nova Scotia have encouraged and constrained distributed leadership, these guiding questions were utilized to analyze current and former policy documents. Additionally, current and former provincial education acts were analyzed to examine the legal and regulatory framework that underpins the education policy documents (Cardno, 2018).

Data collection and analysis

A scan of the education policy documents listed on the Department of Education website was completed to identify current and former education policy documents pertinent to distributed leadership. Specifically, provincial policy documents associated with school improvement planning, special education/inclusive education, and school advisory councils were examined because distributed leadership is often associated with the work of leadership teams (Bush & Glover, 2012), school improvement planning teams (Harris, 2008; Supovitz et al., 2019), and multi-disciplinary teams that work with students with special needs (Heikka et al., 2012).

The language in selected education legislation and policies was carefully analyzed from the perspective of a distributed theory lens to determine the extent to which distributed leadership was encouraged or constrained. Specifically, the policy lan-

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

guage was analyzed to identify: a) direct and indirect references to distributed leadership; b) delineations between the advisory and decision-making authority of education bodies; c) references to the accountability, performance, and centralized control of education; d) changes in the duties of educational leaders; and e) conditions that support distributed leadership, such as protected teacher collaboration time. In addition, policy alignment with provincial education acts was scrutinized.

The education legislation and policy documents that were analyzed are listed below:

1. Provincial legislation and regulations
   a. *Education Act* (1995–1996)
   b. *Education Act* (2018)
   c. *Ministerial Education Act Regulations* (2018)
2. School improvement planning frameworks
   a. A Comprehensive Framework for Continuous School Improvement (Chignecto-Central Regional Centre for Education, 2013)
   b. *Student Success Planning Framework* (Province of Nova Scotia, 2016)
3. Special education/inclusive education policies
   a. *Special Education Policy* (Province of Nova Scotia, 2008)
   b. *Inclusive Education Policy* (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020)
4. School advisory council handbooks
   a. *Nova Scotia School Advisory Council Handbook* (Province of Nova Scotia, 2011)
   b. *Nova Scotia School Advisory Council Handbook* (Province of Nova Scotia, 2019)

Findings

Provincial education acts

School boards

The *Education Act* (1995–96) provides considerable direction regarding the amalgamation and operation of elected school boards in Nova Scotia. At that time, 22 district school boards were consolidated into seven regional English school boards, and a province-wide French school board was also created. The Act afforded the elected school boards considerable authority over the provision of public education in the schools under their jurisdiction.

With the passing of the new *Education Act* in 2018, the seven English school boards were abolished and replaced with regional education centres that covered the same geographical areas. However, the elected French provincial school board was retained. Under Sections 11 to 16 of the 2018 *Act*, a Provincial Advisory Council on Education (PACE) was established, with members appointed on the recommendation of the Minister of Education. In contrast with the considerable power vested in the elected school boards as decision-making bodies, PACE was an advisory body that reported directly to the Minister of Education. Neither education act made a

provision for protected teacher collaboration time, a key condition for the successful implementation of distributed leadership.

School advisory councils

Under Sections 20 to 23 of the *Education Act* (1995–96), the establishment, composition, and duties of SACs were described in detail. Council membership included parents, students, teachers, community representatives, and the school principal as a non-voting member. The wide-ranging duties of the SACs included developing and recommending school improvement plans to the local school board, reporting annually to the Minister of Education, advising on the development of school policies, and advising school and school board leaders on multiple education topics, from school curriculum and programs to student discipline and fundraising. SACs also participated in the selection of school principals.

In Sections 21 and 22 of the *Education Act* (2018), the duties of SACs were considerably reduced and confined to assisting regional centres in ensuring that public schools met the needs of their communities, as well as performing other functions as prescribed. While the provisions for the establishment and composition of SACs described in Sections 68 to 75 of the *Ministerial Education Act Regulations* (2018) largely mirrored those of the *Education Act* (1995–96), the role of the SACs in school improvement, as described in Section 75, was significantly curtailed. Rather than developing and recommending school improvement plans to elected school boards, the SACs worked with principals in receiving information on school improvement plans and monitoring their progress. Instead of advising school principals and school boards on a wide range of education issues, the purview of the SACs was confined to school policies, practices, and communication. Moreover, the SACs no longer participated in principal selection. Thus, the language in the new ministerial regulations reduced the duties of SACs.

Duties of educational leaders

Section 38 of the *Education Act* (1995–96) described principals as educational leaders with overall responsibility for schools, including teachers and other staff. In Section 39 of the *Education Act* (2018), a change in language was observed whereby principals and vice principals were described as educational leaders under the jurisdiction of regional education centres with management responsibility for schools, including the supervision of teachers and other staff. While many of the principals' duties remained the same in the 1995–1996 and 2018 legislation, some differences were noted. For example, whereas the 1995–1996 legislation stated that it is the duty of a principal to assist SACs with the development of school improvement plans, the 2018 legislation stated that it is the principal's duty to assist in the development of school improvement plans, with no mention of SACs. Commonalities and differences were also found in the language describing the duties of regional leaders in each act.

In Sections 65 and 66 of the *Education Act* (2018), many of the duties of the retitled regional directors of education remained the same as those of the superintendents of schools in the 1995–1996 legislation. However, some differences in language were observed. In Section 39(1) of the *Education Act* (1995–96), school board su-

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

perintendents of schools were described as accountable to the school board, with the overall responsibility for the efficient operation of the school board office and public schools, and employee supervision. In Sections 65 and 66 of the 2018 *Act*, regional executive directors of education were described as employees of the Department of Education who are appointed by the minister of education and accountable to the deputy minister of education and subject to the *Act*, the regulations, and the direction of the minister of education. Section 66(1) of the *Education Act* (2018) states that regional executive directors are responsible for the efficient operation of regional centre offices and public schools, employee supervision, and the educational performance of the students and schools. In addition, Section 66(2)(f) states that the directors are responsible for establishing performance standards and a process for the evaluation and supervision of staff. These changes in language reflect the increased central control of education and greater emphasis on performance.

School improvement planning frameworks

The language in both the 2013 and 2016 school improvement planning frameworks (Chignecto-Central Regional Centre for Education, 2013; Province of Nova Scotia, 2016) strongly and explicitly promotes key aspects of distributed leadership, including teacher collaboration, capacity building through professional learning, and the leadership of school improvement by collaborative learning teams. The 2013 framework promotes shared leadership as a collective responsibility whereby people engage in democratic practices that shape decision-making. Similarly, the 2016 framework states that the school improvement planning process relies on effective distributed leadership and the shared commitment of school community members. In addition, the principal plays a critical role in building learning team cultures characterized by caring, trust, and respectful relationships. Overall, the language in both frameworks aligns with the regulatory requirements for school improvement planning and reflects national and international trends in the advancement of distributed leadership.

Special education and inclusive education policies

The language in the Special Education Policy (Province of Nova Scotia, 2008), which mandated the inclusion of students with special needs in the grade-level classrooms of their neighbourhood schools, reflected key aspects of distributed leadership. A collaborative team planning process was mandated whereby parents, teachers, and administrators worked together to develop and implement programming for students with special needs. The policy emphasized the importance of teamwork and partnerships and the essential role of school leaders in fostering collaboration and communication.

Similarly, the Inclusive Education Policy (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020) recognizes parents, families, and community members as key partners in education, and advocates collaborative, student-centred team planning processes. Consistent with the tenets of distributed leadership, the policy states that school leaders empower parents as essential decision-makers regarding their child's education; work collaboratively with parents, teachers, and other staff; and ensure teacher access to essential information and professional development.

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

While neither policy explicitly references distributed leadership, they both embody key aspects of it, including parental involvement in decisions impacting their children's education, and the granting of decision-making authority to collaborative teams regarding specialized services and supports. Both policies closely aligned with the regulatory provisions for special education set forth in provincial legislation, and both policies reflected national and international trends toward distributed leadership.

School advisory council handbooks

The language in the *Nova Scotia School Advisory Council Handbook* (Province of Nova Scotia, 2011) reflects several features of distributed leadership. For example, the Guiding Principles (Province of Nova Scotia, 2011) state that education is a shared responsibility, local people have important perspectives to contribute to decision-making, partners need to use teamwork skills and strategies, and community involvement in school improvement enhances learning for all. Communication, collaboration, consensus building, and teamwork are emphasized throughout the document. The handbook closely adheres to the provisions of the *Education Act* (1995–96) in describing SAC duties, including their roles in school improvement planning, principal selection, and student discipline.

The language in the *Nova Scotia School Advisory Council Handbook* (Province of Nova Scotia, 2019) has commonalities and differences with the 2011 version. Both handbooks promote key aspects of distributed leadership, including communication, collaboration, and consensus building. However, the 2019 handbook also describes reduced duties for SACs, which no longer have roles in principal selection or student discipline. Rather than developing school improvement plans, SACs receive information about plans developed under the leadership of the principal and help to monitor progress toward the school improvement goals (Province of Nova Scotia, 2019). Interestingly, despite the diminished role of SACs in school improvement, the importance of distributed leadership is directly referenced in the 2019 handbook. "Effective school improvement planning relies on distributed leadership among teachers, as well as the shared commitment of school support staff, SACs, parents/guardians, students, and community members" (Province of Nova Scotia, 2019, p. 5). Overall, the 2019 SAC handbook closely adhered to the provisions of the *Education Act* (2018) and *Ministerial Education Act Regulations* (2018) in describing the roles and responsibilities of SACs.

Discussion

As illustrated in the findings, major legal and policy reforms in education in Nova Scotia in recent years have encouraged and constrained distributed leadership in the provincial public education system. At the school level, distributed leadership has been encouraged by collaborative team processes in areas such as special education and inclusive education and school improvement planning that facilitate teacher leadership and shared decision-making. However, at the system level, distributed leadership has been constrained by the dismantling of regional governance structures and the consolidation of power at the provincial level. In particular, the abolishment of the elected English school boards signalled a major shift from local autonomy to

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

greater centralized control by the provincial Department of Education. The trend toward more centralized control of Canadian education systems (Galway et al., 2013) runs counter to the evidence regarding the positive relationship between distributed leadership and improved student outcomes (Sheppard & Galway, 2016). In Nova Scotia, the concentration of power in the provincial Ministry of Education has hampered distributed leadership in several ways.

Distributed leadership is associated with system reconfiguration and organizational redesign, including a shift away from bureaucratic to collaborative leadership practices and the enactment of lateral decision-making processes, which foster shared leadership practices among system members (du Plessis & Heystek, 2020). However, Nova Scotia moved in the opposite direction with the enactment of the *Education Act* (2018), which strengthened provincial bureaucratic control over education by eliminating the lateral decision-making powers entrusted to elected school boards and regional educational leaders. For decades, superintendents of schools (retitled regional directors of education) were appointed by, worked with, and reported to elected school boards in various regions of the province, consistent with the collaborative school board practices found in Canada and elsewhere (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). However, under the new *Education Act*, the superintendents became employees of the Department of Education who were appointed by the minister of education and directly accountable to the deputy minister. Rather than strengthening the lateral decision-making processes essential to distributed leadership, the Act created a direct vertical chain of command between the regional directors of education and the department. This new governance model enabled direct provincial control over the education system by removing local decision-making bodies and reducing opportunities for the democratic participation of parents and other community members in public education.

School boards reflect society's longstanding belief that education governance should reflect community values and priorities while affording parents the opportunity to express their concerns to local representatives (Galway et al., 2013). With the elimination of the English school boards, parents lost ready access to local representatives who were familiar with their communities and schools and who had legally sanctioned decision-making authority in key areas of education. Although the new Act made provision for the establishment of PACE, the terms of reference for this new body stated that: "The Provincial Advisory Council on Education will not make decisions, or provide direct advice, on the day-to-day operations of the regional centres for education or the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial" (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2019, p. 1). Thus, parents seeking an avenue for addressing issues arising in their children's education no longer had access to a local decision-making body that could act on their concerns. Additionally, because the members of PACE were appointed by the minister of education, parents lost their previously held democratic right to elect local representatives. Finally, and very importantly, parents lost the ready access to the public meetings and accessible meeting minutes provided by the school boards because the PACE meetings were held in private.

Not surprisingly, concerns regarding the education reforms were raised in the media from the outset. Included among the identified drawbacks were the loss of

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

local bodies to hold the provincial government accountable for education, the creation of new barriers to communication between parents and education officials, and the lack of community voice in public schools (Grant, 2018). Commenting on the first meeting of PACE in November of 2018, the president of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, Paul Wozney, lamented the lack of meaningful discussion of actual issues facing teachers, students, and classrooms, such as inclusive education, teacher recruitment and retention, and the shortage of substitute teachers. Instead, meeting discussion reportedly focused on the limited scope and mandate of PACE members. Wozney also objected to the fact that all future PACE meetings would be held in private on the stated grounds that PACE is a group of private citizens who provide advice. In Wozney's (2018) view: "Decisions involving public education are in the public interest and represent a considerable percentage of the provincial budget. Members of the public deserve the same or improved access to the process they once had under the governance of elected school boards, full stop" (para. 7).

Since its inaugural meeting, concerns regarding PACE and the erosion of democratic participation and transparency in public education continued to be raised. In fact, Nova Scotia's education reforms were described as cautionary tales when similar reforms were recommended for Manitoba following a review of the provincial education system. Writing in the *Winnipeg Free Press,* Molly McCracken and Pamela Rogers (2021) reported that the Nova Scotia reforms were part of a concerning Canadian trend of demanding constant improvement from education systems, in the face of fewer resources. They pointed out that the abolishment of elected school boards in Nova Scotia and their replacement with PACE had resulted in the loss of representation for historically oppressed groups because school board seats reserved for Indigenous and African Nova Scotian representatives were eliminated. Moreover, information about PACE was reportedly difficult to access, including meeting agendas, meeting minutes, and member contact information, such that parents faced significant barriers to meaningful participation in education.

These negative impacts demonstrate that large-scale education reforms do not always advance distributed leadership and may, in fact, hinder it. Even when education reviews recommend distributed leadership at different levels of education systems, they do not always produce the desired results because provincial governments may reject the recommendations and/or fail to enact the necessary supports for distributed leadership to thrive. For example, Glaze (2018) recommended the enhancement of local voice in education through the creation of vibrant SACs for all schools in the province, with enhanced influence. However, the influence of SACs was lessened when provincial legislation reduced their duties. Glaze's report also recommended the creation of an independent provincial College of Educators and an independent Student Progress Assessment Office. Both arms-length bodies would have distributed leadership by assuming roles and responsibilities performed by the Department of Education, but these recommendations were rejected.

The findings of this study present significant implications for policymakers, educational leaders, and researchers. First, the language used in education legislation and policy matters generally is encouraging and constraining distributed leadership. As illustrated by successive education acts, subtle changes in language may signifi-

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

cantly impact the duties of educational leaders and the roles and responsibilities of school teams. Moreover, the use of explicit language that directly references distributed leadership and its key tenets strengthens the support for this form of leadership, as exemplified by the school improvement planning frameworks. To encourage distributed leadership, explicit language that clearly reflects and upholds this form of leadership is essential in policy reform.

Second, the designation of education teams and councils as advisory or decision-making bodies significantly influences the extent to which leadership is distributed in schools. This important distinction was exemplified by the changes made to SACs, which went from having direct involvement in school improvement planning, principal selection, and student discipline to peripheral involvement in school improvement. In contrast, the school teams struck to oversee special education and inclusive education were granted decision-making status that empowered students, teachers, parents, and administrators to share leadership.

Third, the policy reforms enacted in Nova Scotia illustrate the importance and challenge of balancing central authority and local autonomy while enabling democratic oversight and meaningful citizen participation in education. In this regard, the abolishment of the elected English school boards significantly tipped the balance in favour of the central authority of the Department of Education and diminished citizen access to meaningful, local participation in education. Without question, significant school board reform was needed in Nova Scotia. In addition to low voter turnout for school board elections and limited member turnover, the repeated dysfunction of the regional school boards and their periodic takeover by the Department of Education seriously eroded public confidence in the boards (Glaze, 2018). However, the school boards were not replaced with a viable alternative for local citizen participation in education such that the opportunities for the democratic participation in education that is a hallmark of distributed leadership were reduced.

Therefore, the findings point to the need for viable alternatives to traditional school boards. While research has shown that school boards make meaningful contributions to democratic participation in Canadian education (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Galway et al., 2013; Sheppard & Galway, 2016), the trends toward the consolidation and replacement of school boards continue across the country. Although school boards ideally function as effective stewards of public education that embody collaboration, accountability, and transparency (Campbell & Fullan, 2019), the reality often falls short of this ideal. Major school board imbroglios in Nova Scotia and elsewhere have prompted direct government intervention, including the dissolution of school boards (Deloitte & Touche, 2011; Galway et al., 2013; Glaze, 2018; McGregor & Lucas, 2019). The negative publicity generated by dysfunctional school boards and low voter turnout for school board elections (Galway et al., 2013; McGregor & Lucas, 2019) have eroded public confidence and highlighted the need for innovative alternatives that are responsive to the growing complexity of contemporary education systems. Therefore, creative solutions are required to ensure efficient governance, responsive leadership, and democratic participation and oversight. Distributed leadership must be carefully constructed, prudently implemented, and supported by the right conditions (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). Researchers, poli-

cymakers, educational leaders, and education stakeholders all have a role to play in building new governance structures, processes, and supports that enable distributed leadership to thrive, for the benefit of all.

References

Amendt, T. (2018). *Evaluating school community councils*. Regina, SK: Saskatchewan School Boards Association.

Azorin, C., Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2020). Taking a distributed perspective on leading professional learning networks. *School Leadership & Management, 40*(2–3), 111–127. doi: 10.1080/13632434.2019.1647418

Bell, L., & Stevenson, H. (2006). *Education policy: Process, themes and impact.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Bernhardt, V.L. (2018). *Data analysis for continuous school improvement* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Bowen, G.A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40. doi:10.3316/QRJ0902027

Brien, K., & Williams, R. (2009). Redefining educational leadership for the twenty–first century. In T.G. Ryan (Ed.), *Canadian educational leadership* (pp. 7–44). Calgary, AB: Detselig.

Bush, T. (2020). *Theories of educational leadership and management* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Bush, T., & Glover, D. (2012). Distributed leadership in action: Leading high performing leadership teams in English schools. *School Leadership & Management, 32*(1), 21–36. doi: 10.1080/13632434.2011.642354

Bush, T., & Glover, D. (2014). School leadership models: What do we know? *School Leadership & Management, 34*(5), 553–571. doi:10.1080/113632434.2014.928680

Bush, T., & Ng, Y.M. (2019). Distributed leadership and the Malaysia Education Blueprint: From prescription to partial school-based enactment in a highly centralised context. *Journal of Educational Administration, 57*(3), 279–295. doi:10.1108/JEA-11-2018-0206

Campbell, D., & Fullan, M. (2019). *The governance core: School boards, superintendents, and schools working together.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Cardno, C. (2018). Policy document analysis: A practical educational leadership tool and a qualitative research method. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice, 24*(4), 623–640. doi:10.14527//kuey.2018.016

Chignecto-Central Regional Centre for Education. (2013). *A comprehensive framework for continuous school improvement*. Truro, NS: Chignecto-Central Regional Centre for Education. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from https://ccrce.ca/sites/default/files/Documents%20and%20 Forms/Appendix%20A%20Comprehensive%20Framework%20CSI%20DEECD.pdf.

Corrigan, J. (2013). Distributed leadership: Rhetoric or reality? *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 35*(1), 66–71. doi:10.1080/1360080X.2013.748479

Deloitte & Touche. (2011). *A review of the South Shore Regional School Board prepared for the Nova Scotia Department of Education.* Halifax, NS: Deloitte & Touche LLP and affiliated entities.

DeMatthews, D.E. (2014). How to improve curriculum leadership: Integrating leadership theory and management strategies. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 87*(5), 192–196. doi:10.1080/00098655.2014.911141

du Plessis, A., & Heystek, J. (2020). Possibilities for distributed leadership in South African schools: Policy ambiguities and blind spots. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 48*(5), 840–860. doi:10.1177/1741143219846907

Education Act, SNS 1995-96, c. 1. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from https://canlii.ca/t/53j7q.

Education Act, SNS 2018, c. 1, Sch. A. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from https://canlii.ca/t/555l2.

Education Reform (2018) Act, Acts of 2018, c. 1. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from https://nslegislature.ca/legc/bills/63rd_1st/3rd_read/b072.htm.

Galway, G., Sheppard, B., Wiens, J., & Brown, J. (2013). The impact of centralization on local school district governance in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, *145*(2013), 1–34.

Gardner, J.W. (2103). The nature of leadership. In M. Grogan (Ed.), *The Jossey–Bass reader on educational leadership* (3rd ed.) (pp. 17–27). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Glaze, A. (2018). *Raise the bar: A coherent and responsive education administrative system for Nova Scotia.* Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Grant, T. (2018, September 30). How Nova Scotia's public education system has "no one holding their feet to the fire." *Toronto Star.*

Harris, A. (2004). Distributed leadership and school improvement: Leading or misleading? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 32*(1), 11–24. doi: 10.1177/1741143204039297

Harris, A. (2008). Distributed leadership: According to the evidence. *Journal of Educational Administration, 46*(2), 172–188. doi:10.1108/09578230810863253

Harris, A., & DeFlaminis, J. (2016). Distributed leadership in practice: Evidence, misconceptions and possibilities. *Management in Education, 30*(4), 141–146. doi: 10.1177/0892020616656734

Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2020). COVID 19: School leadership in disruptive times. *School Leadership & Management, 40*(4), 243–247. doi:10.1080/13632434.2020.1811479

Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2021). Exploring the leadership knowledge base: Evidence, implications, and challenges for educational leadership in Wales. *School Leadership & Management, 41*(1–2), 41–53. doi:10.1080/13632434.2020.1789856

Heck, R.H., & Hallinger, P. (2009). Assessing the contribution of distributed leadership to school improvement and growth in math achievement. *American Educational Research Journal, 46*(3), 659–689. doi:10.3102/0002831209340042

Heikka, J., Waniganayake, M., & Hujala, E. (2012). Contextualizing distributed leadership within early childhood education: Current understandings, research evidence, and future challenges. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 41*(1), 30–44. doi: 10.1177/1741143212462700

Hutchinson, N.L., & Specht, J.A. (2020). *Inclusion of learners with exceptionalities in Canadian schools: A practical handbook for teachers* (6th ed.). North York, ON: Pearson Canada.

Leithwood, K., & Louis, K.S. (2012). *Linking leadership to student learning.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey–Bass.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management, 40*(1), 5–22. doi: 10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077

McCracken, M., & Rogers, P. (2021, May 12). Cautionary tales from Nova Scotia's education review. *Winnipeg Free Press.*

McGregor, R.M., & Lucas, J. (2019). Who has school spirit? Explaining voter participation in school board elections. *Canadian Journal of Political Science, 52*, 923–936.

Ministerial Education Act Regulations, NS Reg 59/2018. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from https://canlii.ca/t/5535g.

Minister's Panel on Education. (2014). *Disrupting the status quo: Nova Scotians demand a better future for every student.* Halifax, NS: Province of Nova Scotia.

Njie, A., Shea, S., & Williams, Monica. (2018). *Students first: Inclusive education that supports teaching, learning and the success of all Nova Scotia students.* Halifax, NS: Commission on Inclusive Education.

Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2020). *Inclusive education policy*. Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2019). *Provincial Advisory Council on Education: Terms of reference and code of conduct.* Retrieved April 4, 2022, from https://www.ednet.ns.ca/docs/pace-termsofreferencecodeofconduct.pdf.

Nova Scotia Premier's Office. (2021). *Nova Scotia reaches one million population milestone*. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from https://novascotia.ca/news/release/?id=20211216003.

Peters, F. (2017). The legal and administrative framework of education in Canada. In D.C. Young (Ed.), *Education law in Canada: A guide for teachers and administrators* (pp. 19–58). Toronto, ON: Irwin Law.

IJEPL 18(1) 2022

Williams & Young

*Distributed
Leadership Via
Education Policy
Reform in Nova
Scotia*

Printy, S., & Liu, Y. (2021). Distributed leadership globally: The interactive nature of principal and teacher leadership in 32 countries. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 57*(2), 290–325. doi:10.1177/0013161X20926548

Province of Nova Scotia. (2008). *Special education policy.* Halifax, NS: Province of Nova Scotia.

Province of Nova Scotia. (2011). *Nova Scotia School Advisory Council handbook.* Halifax, NS: Province of Nova Scotia. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from http://cec.ccrce.ca/sac_handbook.pdf.

Province of Nova Scotia. (2015). *The 3Rs: Renew, refocus, rebuild — Nova Scotia's action plan for education.* Halifax, NS: Province of Nova Scotia.

Province of Nova Scotia. (2016). *Student success planning framework.* Halifax, NS: Province of Nova Scotia.

Province of Nova Scotia. (2019). *Nova Scotia School Advisory Council handbook.* Halifax, NS: Province of Nova Scotia.

Sheppard, B., & Galway, G. (2016). School boards in Canada: Outworn relics of the past or champions of local democracy. *Journal of Educational Administration and Foundations, 25*(1), 5–17.

Shields, C. (2015). What is educational leadership? In D. Griffiths & J.P. Portelli (Eds.), *Key questions for educational leaders* (p. 83). Burlington, ON: Word and Deed.

Spillane, J. (2017). Leadership and learning: Conceptualizing relations between school administrative practice and instructional practice. In K. Leithwood, J. Sun, & K. Pollock (Eds.), *How school leaders contribute to student success: The four paths framework* (pp. 49–67). Cham, CH: Springer International. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-50980-8_4

Spillane, J.P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J.B. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher*, *30*(3), 23–28.

Supovitz, J.A., D'Auria, J., & Spillane, J.P. (2019). *Meaningful & sustainable school improvement with distributed leadership* (#RR 2019–2). Philadelphia, PA: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania.

Teachers' Professional Agreement and Classroom Improvements (2017) Act. (2017). SNS 2017, c. 1. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from https://canlii.ca/t/53h11.

Towle, H. (2015). *Disability and inclusion in Canadian education: Policy, procedure, and practice*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Viennet, R., & Pont, B. (2017). *Education policy implementation: A literature review and proposed framework* [OECD Education Working Paper No. 162]. Paris, FR: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

White, R.E., Cooper, K., & Anwaruddin, S.M. (2017). Canadian contexts in educational leadership: A hermeneutic approach to distributed leadership for teachers' professional learning. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 20*(6), 682–696. doi:10.1080/13603124.2016.1210827

Wozney, P. (2018, November 9). PACE minutes lacking in detail. *The Nova Scotia Advocate.*

Young, D.C. (2017). Educator rights and duties. In D.C. Young (Ed.), *Education law in Canada: A guide for teachers and administrators* (pp. 83–111). Toronto, ON: Irwin Law.