Navigating Micro-Political Dynamics in Distributed School Leadership: An Ubuntu Perspective

Oluwasola Babatunde Sasere*[a], & Martha Matashu[b]

* Corresponding author
E-mail: 53675304@mynwu.ac.za

a. Edu-Lead Research Entity, School of Professional Studies, Faculty of Education, North West University, Mafikeng, South Africa.

b. School of Commerce and Social Studies Education, Faculty of Education, North West University, Mafikeng, South Africa.

How to cite
Sasere, O. B, & Matashu, M. (2024). Navigating Micro-Political Dynamics in Distributed School Leadership: An Ubuntu Perspective. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, *6*(2), 306-326.
https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2024.37

ABSTRACT

Distributed leadership has been widely adopted as an apolitical model, with little attention paid to its political dimension and attendant implications. Recent literature and distributed leadership practitioners' experience affirm the existence of micro-politics and its attendant challenges. Hence, this study explores the inherent dynamics of the grossly overlooked micro-politics challenges within the distributed leadership framework. Anchored in Ubuntu African philosophy, the study offers a fresh perspective on how school leaders can mitigate the negative impact of micro-politics. The study adopts Rodger's perspective on concept analysis research design to depict distributed leadership's fluid and dynamic nature, emphasising contextual variability. The findings reveal that effectively adopting Ubuntu principles mitigates micro-political challenges by fostering inclusivity, equity and collaborative decision-making within a distributed leadership structure. The study contributes to the evolving body of knowledge on the micro-political dimension of distributed leadership and how it shapes leadership.

KEYWORDS

Distributed leadership; educational leadership; micro-politics; Ubuntu perspective; school leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, the distributed leadership model has become a prominent framework among educational leadership scholars, policymakers and educational practitioners (Tsakeni et al., 2023). The model gained traction for its potential to transform traditional hierarchical structure into a decentralised form of leadership, allowing capable subordinates to take on leadership roles rather than relying solely on the principal or administrative leader (Joslyn, 2018; Potter, 2023; Spillane, 2006). Its inclusive, participatory and adaptive nature has been associated with improved school effectiveness (Bush, 2023). However, the normative advocates of the model portray it as devoid of political realities by presenting it as resistant to the complexities of micro-political dynamics (Berkovich, 2020; Harris, 2008; Lindle, 2020; Or & Berkovich, 2023). The apolitical viewpoint fails to acknowledge the intricate nature of distributed leadership, particularly within the school systems characterised by power dynamics, networks of influence and nuanced political strategies. Irrespective of the degree of distributed leadership impacts, these micro-political elements significantly influence the practice of distributed leadership within the school system (Bush, 2022; Gronn, 2000), Consequently, neglecting these political dimensions within the framework of distributed leadership has the potential to undermine its overall significance (Piot & Kelchtermans, 2016).

Previous studies affirm the existence of micro-politics in distributed leadership settings, particularly in school leadership. For instance, Piot and Kelchtermans (2016) employ a micro-political lens to examine how leadership practices are distributed among school principals within Flemish school federations. The study aimed to understand how principals' interests drive their actions and influence interschool collaborations. The findings reveal that principals' interests significantly shaped their behaviour and strategies for managing interschool relationships. The findings underscore that principals' efforts to protect or enhance these interests at the federation influence their engagement in interschool policies and practices. Such engagements involve strategies to mitigate threats to their interests or capitalise on achieved benefits. According to the results, "because one school felt the federation threatened its educational identity and mission, it almost completely withdrew from the federation" (Piot & Kelchtermans, 2016, p. 632).

Or and Berkovich (2023) investigated the micro-political dynamics (particularly in how cultural contexts influence leadership dynamics) in participative decision-making within schools across collectivist and individualist cultural settings in four Israeli public high schools. The findings reveal that in individualist cultures, principals frequently distribute control not out of collaborative intent but to mitigate the intense pressures of legal and public accountability. The study also found that this practice was in contrast with collectivist settings where school principals lack unilateral veto powers in decision-making, indicating the practice of collective responsibility over individual authority. However, despite these studies' confirmation of politics within distributed leadership structures, they do not proffer solutions to mitigate its re-occurrence and attendant consequences.

This study attempts to fill the identified gaps in previous studies by reviewing the literature on distributed leadership and its political dimensions. The study explicates Ubuntu theory principles to counteract the adverse effects of micro-politics to enhance school leadership effectiveness. The findings section presents a framework that leverages Ubuntu's philosophy to mitigate the negative impact of micro-politics within the distributed leadership model.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do micro-political dynamics manifest within distributed leadership structures in educational settings?
2. What are the implications of these micro-political influences on decision-making and leadership effectiveness within distributed leadership models?
3. How can the principles of Ubuntu philosophy be leveraged to mitigate the negative impact of micro-politics and enhance the functioning of distributed leadership structures?

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Distributed Leadership Theory: An Overview

The distributed leadership theory holds that leadership involves a collective practice that share leadership responsibilities among various stakeholders within an organisation as opposed to leadership being the sole responsibility of a positional leader (Bush, 2023b; Sasere & Makhasane, 2023; Spillane, 2006). This paradigm of leadership conceptualisation challenges the traditional notion associated with hierarchical, top-down an individualistic leadership model. Distributed leadership emphasises collaboration, interaction and shared decision-making among leaders and followers (Harris & Lambert, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2006).eses The theory has gained prominence since mid-2000s in the global discourse on educational leadership as a formidable approach to understanding and improving school leadership practices particularly in complex and dynamic contexts (Grant, 2017; Harris, 2004; Spillane et al., 2004; Teacher Magazine, 2014; Timperley, 2005).The model is also associated with inclusivity and social justice in school leadership (Grant, 2017; Naicker & Mestry, 2013). Specifically, the principles of the theory hold that leadership is a function of leaders, followers and situations (Spillane, 2006).

Despite its strengths, distributed leadership has been criticised based on ambiguous definitions, potential role confusion and the challenges of integrating formal authority with distributed leadership roles, frequently leading to micro-political issues (Lu, 2022; Lumby, 2023). More recently, the political dimension of distributed leadership has been gaining attraction among scholars (Bush, 2023a; Or & Berkovich, 2023; Piot & Kelchtermans, 2016). This critique underscores the necessity of addressing these limitations to harness the potential of distributed leadership model fully.

Ubuntu Theory

Ubuntu is a humanistic tradition derived from African cultural heritage which underscores the significance of community, empathy and regard for others (Rasweswe et al., 2024). This philosophy is succinctly captured by the maxim, "I am because we are," which means that an individual's identity is constructed through social affiliation (Chigangaidze et al., 2021; Chowdhury et al., 2021; Omodan & Diko, 2021; Paulson, 2019; Tutu, 2011). Worthy of note is the fact that Ubuntu played a pivotal role in promoting social transformation and justice in post-apartheid South Africa- a nation that had previously experienced severe political division (Tutu, 2011). Ubuntu's philosophical framework is predicated on four (4) foundational principles: interconnectedness, collective accountability, respect and dignity, conflict resolution and reconciliation.

Interconnectedness: This principle emphasises the importance of an individual's awareness of interrelation among community members. It also posits that the well-being of people is intertwined with and reflective of the community's overall health. Furthermore, the principle asserts that interconnectedness transcends interpersonal relationships, including interactions between humans and the natural environment (Boboyi, 2024; Gade, 2012; Poovan et al., 2006). Interconnectedness implies thoughts of individuals asserting their significance through their relationships with others. Consequently, it is imperative for individuals to exhibit kindness and compassion in their dealings with others.

Collective responsibility: This principle advocates shared responsibility among community members, given that Ubuntu is characterised by a profound sense of communal interconnection. The principle motivates individuals to actively pursue collective warfare of community members. This philosophical framework engenders the spirit of unity and altruism, particularly towards those who are disadvantaged or marginalised (Poovan et al., 2006; Richard, 2009).

Respect and dignity: This tenet of Ubuntu upholds the importance of respecting and dignity of individuals within the community. This principle fosters empathy, compassion and concern for others' well-being while valuing diversity, tolerance and inclusion across cultures (Paulson, 2019; Thompson, 2023).

Conflict resolution and reconciliation: Ubuntu philosophy acknowledges the inevitability of conflicts where interests are at stake. Hence, the ideology promotes open discourse forgiveness and reconciliation as mechanisms to mitigate divisions and fortify community bonds (Udo, 2020). In addition, the principle of conflict resolution and reconciliation emphasises the importance of restorative justice in preference to positive approaches for every community member (Paulson, 2019; Tutu, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts the qualitative research approach. Literature was drawn from credible databases to explore how Ubuntu principles help mitigate the micro-political dimensions of

distributed leadership. Qualitative research emphasises gaining insight into a social phenomenon through participants' lived experiences (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hammersley, 2012). This study draws its data from literature that reports participants' lived experiences as they relate to micro-politics within distributed leadership structures. In addition, a theoretical explication was also carried out to establish the potential of Ubuntu principles to manage and mitigate the negative impact of micro-politics in schools. The approach aligns with the study's goal, allowing us to explore varying perspectives on the multifaceted dimensions of distributed leadership and micro-politics in the school system.

Concept analysis research design (CARD)

This study employs a concept analysis research design (CARD) to address the deficiencies in the normative apolitical distributed leadership framework. Rodgers (1989) defines analysis as a systematic methodology to enhance the comprehension of intricate concepts within a given context, while Tofthagen and Fagerstrøm (2010) define concept analysis as the process of formulating and scrutinising concepts. CARD holds that concepts are dynamic entities that evolve over time as they reflect the progression of knowledge and practice in an area. It also promotes an in-depth understanding of concepts' interrelations.

Despite being widely regarded as a non-political leadership framework, the normative distributed leadership model is not immune to political influence. Hence, this study adopts CARD to understand the interplay between the distributed leadership model and its micro-political realities. We followed the logical induction, deduction rigorous argumentative structures outlined by Laurence and Margolis (2003).

Keywords and Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

We ensured relevant keywords were employed during the literature search; these include "distributed leadership", "micro-politics in education", "Ubuntu philosophy", "school leadership", "educational leadership frameworks", "power dynamics in leadership", and "collaborative leadership in schools". We also adopted Boolean operators such as "AND" and "OR" to combine these keywords to ensure we captured relevant topics. The inclusion and exclusion are explained below.

We adhered to the following as inclusion and exclusion criteria in the study:

Inclusion criteria

- Peer-reviewed journal articles and books
- Studies published from 2000 to 2024 to ensure current relevance, although foundational works were also considered to ensure a balance between foundational theories and recent developments in the field
- Studies that examine the intercessions of distributed leadership, micro-politics and Ubuntu theory
- Relevant qualitative and quantitative studies to enrich the analysis
- Studies written in English

Exclusion criteria

- Studies that fail to explicitly discuss distributed leadership in relation to micro-politics
- Articles not written in English

Validity and Reliability

We employed several strategies to ensure validity and reliability in the study. First, we applied *triangulation of data sources* (Carter et al., 2014), including peer-reviewed journal articles and books from reputable academic databases, such as JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar and ERIC. Notably, using various sources ensures the credibility of the findings by exploring the intercession of distributed leadership, micro-politics and Ubuntu theory (Denzin, 2017). Additionally, we *clarified researcher bias* by being reflexive and cognisant of the implications of potential biases. We also ensured that interpretations of data were framed within Ubuntu's theoretical framework, which helped maintain balance, objectivity and, ultimately, validity (Miles et al., 2014).

Consistent with the principle of *reliability* in research, we upheld the *systematic data collection approach* while adhering to the tenets of *transparency* and *replicability* using a well-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Yin, 2018). Moreover, adopting an *established analytical framework* further strengthens the reliability of the study's methodology and findings.

Data Analysis

The study adopts Rodgers's (1989) six-step approach to conceptual analysis to explicate the political dimension of the distributed leadership model and how Ubuntu could serve as a panacea to the negative impact of micro-politics. These steps include *identifying key concepts, selecting the context, data collection, data analysis, identifying exemplar cases, validation and modification*.

First, we identified concepts that respond to research objectives, such as micro-politics, distributed leadership and Ubuntu theory. We also examined their intersections in relation to school leadership. Next, we focused on educational contexts where distributed leadership is practised through policy or the leaders' choices. The diversity of sources allows a thorough exploration of the complex relationships among the study's central concepts. Considering their relevance to the study, we selectively picked studies that examined the intersections of distributed leadership, micro-politics and Ubuntu theory. The subsequent phase involves a rigorous examination of the data. At this stage, we identified attributes, antecedents and consequences of the identified concepts to deepen our understanding of their interconnectedness with school leadership. We then proceeded to identify exemplar cases. At this stage, we selected specific examples from the data that indicate how Ubuntu principles can help reduce the negative effects of micro-politics in schools' operationalising distributed leadership. These cases provide vivid examples critical for theoretical exploration and practical application, which we did via framework proposition. The final step entails validation and

modification of the proposed analytical framework. We attempted to ensure the framework is robust and applicable in schools that adopt distributed leadership models. We are cognisant of the necessity for continuous evaluation and improvement of the framework in response to emergent insights and adjustments suggested by empirical studies and relevant literature.

In summary, this methodology enabled us to attain conceptual clarity, explore alternative meanings and help clarify the nuances between Ubuntu principles and distributed leadership. It also enabled us to advance a theoretical foundation for further studies (Morse et al., 2020; Rodgers, 1989; Walker & Avant, 2019).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We present this section in a manner that responds to the research questions by presenting our findings and discussions based on extant literature and scholarly debates on the political tendencies and dimensions of distributed leadership. From a political perspective, we also explore the dimensions, implications and limitations of the prevailing normative and prescriptive distributed leadership theory. We examined the decision-making process regarding leadership effectiveness, the intricacies of balancing collaboration with authority and contextual variations.

Theme 1: The Political Dimension of Distributed Leadership

Theme 1 responds to the first research question that inquires "how micro-politics manifests within distributed leadership structures".

One of the primary debates on the political nature of distributed leadership is whether it is possible to distribute leadership without a political undertone. Some scholars contend that distributing leadership involves negotiations, power dynamics and potential conflict (Douglas, 2023; Hangartner & Svaton, 2022). They argue that different actors' interests, values and agendas influence decision-making, regardless of the structure. For instance, Maxcy and Nguyen (2006) explored the political dimension of distributed leadership and contended Spillane et.al., (2004) perspective. They argue that apolitical frameworks adopt traditional and depoliticised approaches to leadership distribution. To them, the essence of leadership distribution is political and, as such, it should entail democratic processes that actively involve stakeholders in collective and deliberative decision-making. The notion is consistent with Bush's (2023a) notion that conflict is endemic in organisations because individuals seek to promote and defend their personal and professional interests. Succinctly captured, Hangartner and Svaton (2022) note that "distributive leadership is identified as a 'pseudo-democratic' practice that seduces teachers with the idea of professional autonomy and less directive development, while in fact, it secures their commitment to managerial agendas" (p. 250). These diverging perspectives indicate the political dimension of distributed leadership, consistent with Gronn's (2000) view that asserting its apolitical nature might oversimplify its complexities and ignore its political consequences.

Theme 2: Micro-politics, Decision-making and Leadership Effectiveness

Here, we attempt to answer the second research question, "What are the implications of these micro-political influences on decision-making and leadership effectiveness within distributed leadership models?" The theme is subdivided into three sub-themes: *micro-politics influences on the decision-making process and leadership effectiveness, the difficulty balancing collaboration with authority, and contextual variability as the basis for micro-politics.*

Theme 2.1: *Micro-politics Influences on the Decision-making Process and Leadership Effectiveness*

Exploring micro-political influences on decision-making and leadership effectiveness within distributed leadership models has gained attention among scholars (Or & Berkovich, 2023). As earlier indicated, micro-politics comprises subtle forces influencing organisational behaviour and actions. It manifests through power dynamics, information control and personal agendas, particularly when leadership responsibilities are distributed among various individuals. Studies have shown links among micro-politics, decision-making and leadership effectiveness. Or and Berkovich (2023) investigated the impact of micro-political strategies in shaping decision-making and enhancing leadership within distributed models. The study examined the decision-making process in individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts. The result indicated that teacher participation in decision-making in an individualistic culture does not necessarily imply that their contributions would influence the final decision. Leithwood et al. (2007) refer to this practice as *pseudo-impact* distributed leadership. Berkovich (2020) further confirmed how micro-political dynamics influence the selection of principals' *inner circles in schools*. According to the author, the inner circles comprise trusted confidants and allies of the school principals among teachers. The study's findings show that principals single-handedly appoint teachers to middle-management roles using political manoeuvring. It was further revealed that trust, political alliances and personal career ambitions determine decisions concerning key appointments within senior management. Additionally, Ho and Ng (2016) investigated the role of micro-political tensions in the effective distribution of leadership within ICT implementation projects in a distributed leadership structure. Their findings revealed that the tension emanating from micro-political interactions disrupts power balances and negatively impacts leadership effectiveness and, by implication, the attainment of organisational goals. These practices imply protecting the interest of individuals or a group of people with the instrumentation of organisational micro-politics.

Theme 2.2: *The Difficulty in Balancing Collaboration with Authority*

Distributing leadership responsibilities to individuals with no formal/official portfolio frequently results in difficulty balancing collaboration with leadership authority. According to Spillane (2006), leadership responsibility could be conferred on staff members who demonstrate competency in a given area, even if they have no formal leadership portfolio. This situation raises questions of legitimacy in exercising authority by those conferred with such responsibility.

In some cases, insubordination issues arise due to role overlap or rights infringement. Leithwood et al. (2007) refer to the resultant consequence of such a situation as anarchy misalignment. The anarchy misalignment dimensions of distributed leadership are where organisational leaders reject external influences. Particularly when the newly appointed leaders, within the framework of distributed leadership, encroach on the authority of a legitimate leader. This situation often results in units operating independently while competing with one another over organisational goals and resource allocation. It also highlights the prevalence of tension between collaborative intent and exercising authority within distributed leadership frameworks. In a recent study, Hangartner and Svaton (2022) explored power relations between headteachers and teachers in Switzerland's distributed leadership context. The study reveals that New Public Management reforms, which subscribe to distributed leadership, lead to tensions between headteachers and teachers due to conflicting expectations. The authors noted that while distributed leadership encourages shared decision-making and collaborative problem-solving, traditional teacher autonomy clashes with the new leadership dynamics.

Theme 2.3: *Contextual Variability as the Basis for Micro-politics*

The apolitical perspective of distributed leadership models acknowledges the role of institutional forces in introducing a distributed leadership model into an organisation. However, it overlooks the specific effects of unique organisational contexts. Notably, the distributed leadership model drew its empirical building blocks from the Global West, with little or no recourses to acknowledge the leadership realities in other regions. Furthermore, the theory failed to take cognisance of societies where sociocultural and religious orientations hold sway for leadership. From a continental perspective, Lumby et al. (2009) compare how distributed leadership is practised in different countries and regions, such as England, South Africa, China, and Latin America. The results show that various factors influence distributed leadership, such as historical traditions, cultural norms, institutional policies and external pressures. Harris et al. (2022) state that "it is more difficult to empirically investigate distributed leadership because of the multiple sources of influence, but it is not impossible" (p. 441). Ciuk and Schedlitzki (2022) investigated how context influences an organisation's development and distribution of leadership. It was an in-depth case study of a private organisation trying to recover from a turbulent past by adopting a distributed leadership model. The findings indicate that social and political dynamics cum overarching forces significantly shape the objectives and effectiveness of distributed leadership. Hence, implementing distributed leadership in a society favouring patriarchy predisposes leaders from such backgrounds to practice micro-politics with their followers (Or & Berkovich, 2023).

In summary, the growing body of evidence substantiates the influence of micro-political dynamics on decision-making and leadership within distributed leadership models. These dynamics shape decision-making processes, team compositions and the broader power distribution within organisations. This body of research underscores the imperative of acknowledging and strategically addressing micro-political influences to ensure successful and

effective school leadership. Given the forgoing explication, the subsequent section presents a proposed framework to mitigate the negative impact of micro-politics within distributed structures.

Theme 3: *Ubuntu-informed Distributed Leadership Framework (UIDLF)*

This theme responds to the third research question, How can the principles of Ubuntu philosophy be leveraged to mitigate the negative impact of micro-politics and enhance the functioning of distributed leadership structures?

Extant literature indicates that positive results, such as improved student learning outcomes and school effectiveness, have been associated with distributed leadership models in schools. However, variations exist in the realities of its adoption, sometimes because of cultural differences and other factors, which have been noted to reveal the political dimension of the model. Hence, to complement the seminal works of the leading scholars in the niche of distributed leadership, particularly in the educational space, we propose *UIDLF* as an antidote for mitigating micro-politics within distributed leadership structures. The framework is rooted in the Afrocentric yet universally applicable principles of Ubuntu philosophy. We posit that school leaders can create a more inclusive and harmonious environment by infusing the values of interconnectedness, collective responsibility, respect and dignity, and conflict resolution and reconciliation into the distributed leadership model.

Components of UIDLF

Interconnectedness as Antidote of Micro-politics within Distributed Leadership

Ubuntu emphasises the fundamental interconnectedness of all individuals within a community (Shutte, 2001). In distributed leadership, recognising the importance and strength of interconnectedness among stakeholders fosters unity and shared purpose (Hulpia et al., 2009). This practice mitigates the fragmentation associated with power struggles (Radwan, 2019). For instance, Connolly and James (2006) assert that collaboration among various stakeholders is germane to school improvement. Taylor and Adelman (2000) allude to this by emphasising the need for schools to connect with families and communities to address violence. In a recent study, Mboyo (2019) explored the operational patterns of Ubuntu in schools. The study underscores the importance of understanding others' needs, negotiating priorities and committing to organisational goals through genuine dialogue, which are pivotal to school effectiveness. Sutton and Shouse (2016) argue that building a culture of collaboration in schools requires approaching collaboration as authentic problem-solving specific to teachers' practice and common to most teachers in a school. Given the preceding, the principle of interconnectedness encourages a collaborative ethos, where decisions are made considering their ripple effects on the entire community rather than serving narrow self-interests in the form of micro-politics.

Collective Responsibility as Antidote of Micro-politics within Distributed Leadership

This tenet of Ubuntu philosophy emphasises the need to sustain a joint sense of commitment and ownership among community members. We propose collective responsibility for school

leadership as a strategy for mitigating micro-politics in schools that operationalise the distributed leadership model. The tenet fosters a sense of shared ownership and accountability among stakeholders, including leaders, teachers, parents and learners (Kramer, 2023). Previous studies underscore the importance of collective responsibility in leadership and management, substantiating this approach. For instance, Rogers et al. (2020) explored how power, authority and influence shape the process of implementing change within some teams of healthcare professionals. The study found that gaining support across multiple levels of leadership was influential to implementation success because the influence exercised by team members engenders persuasive followers' engagement. Furthermore, Watkins et al. (2023) explored the transfer of responsibility and accountability to local ownership in a social development project. The findings show that transferring responsibility and accountability to various categories of leaders and participants—who were initially uncooperative before introducing the Putting Families First strategy—culminated in improved local participation and support. This result aligns seamlessly with the Ubuntu principle of collective responsibility, consistent with Molose et al.'s (2018) proposition that integrating Ubuntu's collective values into cultural management frameworks will enhance workplace commitment. Thus, it can be inferred that collective responsibility can counteract micro-politics and advance communal well-being within distributed leadership.

Figure 1.

Ubuntu-informed Distributed Leadership Framework (Authors' Conceptualisation)
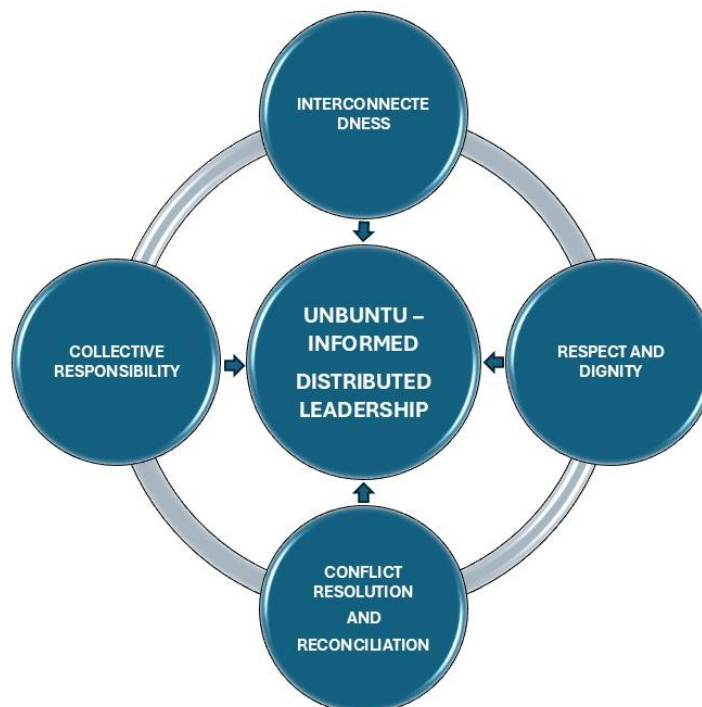
Respect and Dignity as Antidote of Micro-politics within Distributed Leadership

Respect for each individual's inherent worth and dignity is the cornerstone of Ubuntu (Shutte, 2001). In distributed leadership, this principle offers a powerful antidote to the dismissive or manipulative behaviour frequently associated with micro-politics. Leaders guided by Ubuntu approach interactions with respect and consideration for the perspectives of others, valuing diverse viewpoints (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). Respect and dignity for stakeholders mitigate school power struggles by creating a sense of value and inclusion (Mkhasibe, 2023) because stakeholders become collaborative and supportive when accorded recognition and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes (Callejo, 2009; Smith, 2020). For instance, Mkhasibe (2023) explored the role of stakeholders in rural school administration and their influence on learners' academic advancement. The findings show that stakeholders who perceive themselves as being accorded respect and dignity become more supportive towards attaining school goals. Hence, school leaders can mitigate micro-politics and bolster school effectiveness by giving stakeholders respect and dignity.

Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation as Antidote of Micro-politics within Distributed Leadership

Conflict resolution and reconciliation is a constructive approach to addressing tensions and disputes within a community. Leaders who exemplify Ubuntu principles work towards resolution and healing, which prevents conflicts from festering and escalating into detrimental micro-politics (Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017). Tiky (2018) emphasises that promoting Ubuntu-based democratic institutions contributes to sustained peace in divided African societies. The view resonates with that of Omodan (2022), who proposes Ubuntu politics as an alternative framework for managing organisational conflict within university systems. This approach emphasises the importance of stakeholder solidarity, sharing, compassion and positive-mindedness. Haider (2021) explored the scalability of transitional justice and reconciliation interventions, highlighting the pivotal role of reconciliation activities in transforming conflict identities and fostering peace constituencies. Although these studies focus on diverse contexts, they affirm that embracing Ubuntu principles in leadership is an effective approach to mitigate micro-politics within distributed leadership models.

UIDLF Implications for Global Educational Leadership Practices

It is pertinent to state that the UIDLF transcends cultural and geographical boundaries; it is globally adaptable across diverse educational contexts. Regarding its global relevance, the framework promotes *inclusivity and equity, fosters collaborative decision-making, enhances cultural sensitivity and tolerance and mitigates power struggles and micro-politics, as discussed below.*

Inclusivity and equity: Integrating UIDLF within the normative distributed leadership models engenders inclusivity and equity (Msila, 2008). Inclusivity and equity in leadership transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. Leaders who adopt this principle cultivate an inclusive and equitable work environment. Such an environment fosters robust school–stakeholder

connections, particularly among staff members, parents and learners (Carrington, 2023; Davis, 2021; Pansiri et al., 2021; Setlhodi, 2018). Ethical leadership and multiculturalism are pivotal features of modern educational systems that bolster inclusivity and equity (Abonyi et al., 2022). Furthermore, inclusivity and equity mitigate gender disparity and the glass ceiling phenomenon in school leadership, reinforcing that there are no substantial disparities in instructional leadership practices between male and female school leaders. Ultimately, adopting inclusivity and equity ensures that the negative effects of micro-politics are reduced to the minimum in school leadership.

Collaborative decision-making: The UIDLF advocates collaborative decision-making involving stakeholders, such as school leaders, administrators, teachers, parents and learners (Frommelt, 2023; Nzimakwe, 2014). Such a collaboration ensures that diverse perspectives are considered to attain well-rounded and informed decisions. Leaders who embrace these tenets imbibe the culture of shared responsibility and empower others to lead. The implications of adopting this framework are profound. For instance, by applying Ubuntu principles, educational leaders cultivate belonging, trust, and cooperation among all stakeholders (Ntibagirirwa, 2012; Ramose, 2013). Additionally, it enables leaders to tap into their collective wisdom, creativity and skills. This transformative approach promises to improve decision-making and nurture a culture of continuous growth and collaboration in education.

Cultural sensitivity and tolerance: Cultural sensitivity and tolerance in an organisation comprising people from diverse cultural backgrounds are practices that resonate globally. Given the rich tapestry of diversity characterising today's interconnected world, this framework prompts educational leaders to cultivate cultural sensitivity and open-mindedness. Furthermore, an emphasis on cultural sensitivity and tolerance extends beyond mere acknowledgement of differences; it involves actively seeking to understand and learn from diverse cultural experiences (Mugumbate et al., 2023; Waghid, 2023; Xiang & Leung, 2023). Educational leaders operating within the UIDLF engage in meaningful dialogues that bridge cultural gaps and foster mutual respect (Udo, 2020). This proactive approach enriches the educational experience and prepares learners to thrive in an increasingly globalised society. In essence, the UIDLF equips leaders with the capacity to navigate the complexities of cultural diversity and harness its transformative potential for improving education on a global scale (Goldman et al., 2019).

Power struggles and micro-politics: Given that micro-politics is an inherent characteristic of an organisation, adopting UIDLF helps school leaders mitigate power struggles and micro-politics in the system. Practising UIDLF enables leaders to identify, proactively address and diffuse indications of micro-politics by promoting a sense of commonality, togetherness and unity (Mboyo, 2019; Omodan, 2022).

This approach benefits leaders and sets a positive example for students and the wider school community. Hence, adopting the UIDLF helps leaders prioritise conflict resolution and reconciliation, paving the way for a more cooperative and productive educational environment.

The UIDLF offers a holistic framework that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. It equips educational leaders with the tools to create inclusive, collaborative and culturally sensitive learning environments. By mitigating the negative impact of micro-politics, leaders can focus on the well-being of the school community and promote sustainable educational practices. This framework can empower educational leaders worldwide, enhancing the quality and impact of education globally.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the intersections of distributed leadership theory, micro-politics and the mediating potential of Ubuntu theory. It unpacks the prevailing notion of distributed leadership as devoid of politics. Our study addressed the research questions by demonstrating how micro-political dynamics manifest within distributed leadership structures. The implications of micro-politics on decision-making and leadership effectiveness were also examined. The findings underscore the potential of the UIDLF to foster a more inclusive, equitable and collaborative leadership environment. The framework is based on interconnectedness, collective responsibility and ethical leadership principles.

Suggestions for Further Study

This study should serve as a catalyst for change and ignite a movement towards inclusive, ethical and effective school leadership. The study conceptualises how to mitigate the micro-political dimension of distributed leadership. It serves as a pathway for further studies. However, empirical studies are needed to quantify the impact of Ubuntu-inspired leadership within the distributed leadership model. Also, comparative analyses across diverse contexts would yield valuable insights into the relative effectiveness of the framework. Moreover, the cross-cultural application of Ubuntu principles warrants exploration. How might they be adapted to assimilate unique cultural contexts? These questions open doors to a deeper understanding of the universal potential of Ubuntu theory in school leadership.

REFERENCES

Abonyi, U. K., Boateng, F. K., Adjei-Boateng, E., & Ansaah, E. (2024). Promoting gender equity in school leadership appointments: A comparison of male and female headteachers' instructional leadership practices in Ghana. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 52*(3), 610-628. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221090746

Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is qualitative in qualitative research. *Qualitative Sociology*, *42*(2), 139-160. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7

Berkovich, I. (2020). Micro-politics, senior management teams, and principals' inner circle: A structural exploration. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *19*(2), 290-303. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2018.1551552

Boboyi, A. (2024). Exploring Ubuntu philosophy as a foundation for holistic school social work in South Africa. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology, 9*(1), 253-264. https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2024.14

Bush, T. (2022). Reviewing fifty years of EMAL scholarship: Longitudinal perspectives on the journal and the field of educational leadership and management. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *50*(2), 187-191. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221077767

Bush, T. (2023a). Distributed leadership and micropolitics. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 51*(3), 529–532. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432231156397

Bush, T. (2023b). Distributed leadership: A normative theory for policy and practice. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 51*(4), 771–773. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432231168115

Callejo, D. M. (2009). Curriculum and transformation: Rethinking leadership and schools all over again. *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, *3*(2), 6. https://doi.org/10.3776/joci.2009.v3n2p6

Carrington, S. (2023). Leadership for equity in schools. *International Encyclopedia of Education (Fourth Edition)*, 401–409. https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-818630-5.05003-x

Carter, N., Bryant-Lukosius, D., DiCenso, A., Blythe, J., & Neville, A. J. (2014). The use of triangulation in qualitative research. *Oncology Nursing Forum, 41*(5), 545–547. https://doi.org/10.1188/14.ONF.545-547

Chigangaidze, R. K., Matanga, A. A., & Katsuro, T. R. (2021). Ubuntu philosophy as a humanistic–existential framework for the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *62*(3), 319-333. https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211044554

Chowdhury, J. S., Wahab, H. A., Mohd Saad, M. R., Roy, P. K., Hamidi, M., & Ahmad, M. M. (2021). Ubuntu philosophy: 'I am because we are' – A road to 'individualism' to global solidarity. In: *Handbook of research on the impact of COVID-19 on marginalized populations and support for the future* (pp. 361-381). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-7480-5.ch022

Ciuk, S., & Schedlitzki, D. (2022). Developing and spreading leadership across levels: The facilitating and constraining role of context. *Management Learning*, *53*(2), 249-268. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507621993470

Connolly, M., & James, C. (2006). Collaboration for school improvement. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *34*(1), 69–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143206059540

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage.

Davis, C. B. (2021). Ubuntu and educational leadership: Reflections from a cultural newcomer in Senegal. In: *Understanding Ubuntu for enhancing intercultural communications* (pp. 202-214). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-7947-3.ch016

Denzin, N. K. (2017). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. Routledge.

Douglas, N. (2023). Creating a new leadership model: Cooperative leadership. *Edward Elgar Publishing EBooks*. (pp. 23–41). https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786439673.00009

Frommelt, O. C. (2023). *Value-based leadership by leading from behind: "Ubuntu: I am, because we are"*. Monaco Voice. https://monacovoice.com/en/article/value-based-leadership-by-leading-from-behind-ubuntu-i-am-because-we-are

Gade, C. B. (2012). What is ubuntu? Different interpretations among South Africans of African descent. *South African Journal of Philosophy = Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Wysbegeerte, 31*(3), 484-503. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC125037

Grant, C. (2017). Distributed leadership in South Africa: Yet another passing fad or a robust theoretical tool for investigating school leadership practice? *School Leadership & Management*, *37*(5), 457-475. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2017.1360856

Gronn, P. (2000). Distributed properties: A new architecture for leadership. *Educational Management & Administration*, *28*(3), 317-338. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263211X000283006

Haider, H. (2021). Scalability of transitional justice and reconciliation interventions: Moving toward wider socio-political change. *Opendocs.ids.ac.uk*. https://doi.org/10.19088/K4D.2021.080

Hammersley, M. (2012). *What is qualitative research?* (p. 144). Bloomsbury Academic.

Hangartner, J., & Svaton, C. J. (2022). Distributed leadership, teacher autonomy, and power relations between head-teachers and teachers under low-stakes accountability conditions. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership, 7*(2), 247-281. https://doi.org/10.30828/real.1063609

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

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

Harris, A., Jones, M., & Ismail, N. (2022). Distributed leadership: Taking a retrospective and contemporary view of the evidence base. *School Leadership & Management*, *42*(5), 438-456. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2022.2109620

Harris, A., & Lambert, L. (2003). *EBOOK: Building leadership capacity for school improvement*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Ho, J., & Ng, D. (2016). Tensions in distributed leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *53*(2), 223–254. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x16681630

Hulpia, H., Devos, G., & Van Keer, H. (2009). The influence of distributed leadership on teachers' organisational commitment: A multilevel approach. *The Journal of Educational Research, 103*(1), 40-52. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220670903231201

Joslyn, E. (2018). Distributed leadership in HE: A scaffold for cultural cloning and implications for BME academic leaders. *Management in Education, 32*(4), 185-191. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020618798670

Kramer, M. (2023). More than a principal: Ubuntu at the heart of successful school leadership in the Western Cape. *South African Journal of Education, 43*(3), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v43n3a2168

Laurence, S., & Margolis, E. (2003). Concepts and conceptual analysis. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 67*(2), 253-282. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2003.tb00290.x

Leithwood, K., & Mascall, B. (2008). Collective leadership effects on student achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 44*(4)*, 529-561. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08321221

Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2007). *Leadership and student learning outcomes*. Interim Report, DCSF, London.

Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2006). Successful school leadership: What it is and how it influences pupil learning. (Research Report 800). *Londres: Department for Education and Skills, DfES*.

Lindle, J. C. (2020). Micropolitics in school leadership. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.614

Lu, X. (2022). Distributed leadership in Chinese higher education: Conceptual understanding and barriers to its implementation. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221145408

Lumby, J. (2023). Distributed leadership: Critical perspectives. In R. J. Tierney, F. Rizvi, & K. Ercikan (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education* (4th ed., pp. 101-108). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-818630-5.05026-0

Lumby, J., Crow, G. M., & Pashiardis, P. (Eds.). (2009). *International handbook on the preparation and development of school leaders*. Routledge.

Maxcy, B. D., & Nguyen, T. S. Thi. (2006). The politics of distributing leadership. *Educational Policy, 20*(1), 163-196. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904805285375

Mboyo, J. P. (2019). Reimagining Ubuntu in schools: A perspective from two primary school leaders in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 47*(2), 206-223. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217728085

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Mkhasibe, R. G. (2023). Unleashing stakeholders in the role that they play and their impact on the improvement of rural schools. In *Contextualising rural education in South African Schools* (pp. 258-272). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004547025_016

Molose, T., Goldman, G., & Thomas, P. (2018). Towards a collective-values framework of Ubuntu: Implications for workplace commitment. *Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review, 6*(3), 193-206. https://doi.org/10.15678/eber.2018.060312

Molose, T., Thomas, P., & Goldman, G. (2019). A qualitative approach to developing measurement scales for the concept of Ubuntu. *Acta Commercii, 19*(1), 10. https://doi.org/10.4102/ac.v19i1.692

Morse, J.M., Mitcham, C., Hupcey, J.E., & Tason, M.C. (2020). *Concept analysis in nursing research: A critical appraisal*. Springer.

Msila, V. (2008). Ubuntu and school leadership. *Journal of Education, 44*(1), 67-84.

Mugumbate, J. R., Mupedziswa, R., Twikirize, J. M., Mthethwa, E., Desta, A. A., & Oyinlola, O. (2023). Understanding Ubuntu and its contribution to social work education in Africa and other regions of the world. *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 43*(4), 1123-1139. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2168638

Naicker, S. R., & Mestry, R. (2013). Teachers' reflections on distributive leadership in public primary schools in Soweto. *South African Journal of Education, 33*(2), 1-15. https://www.sajournalofeducation.co.za/index.php/saje/article/view/715/351

Ngunjiri, F. W., & Hernandez, K.A. C. (2017). Problematizing authentic leadership: A collaborative autoethnography of immigrant women of color leaders in higher education. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 19*(4), 393-406. https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422317728735

Ntibagirirwa, S. (2012). *Philosophical premises for African economic development: Sen's capability approach*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria).

Nzimakwe, T. I. (2014). Practising Ubuntu and leadership for good governance: The South African and continental dialogue. *African Journal of Public Affairs,* 7(4), 30-41. http://hdl.handle.net/2263/58143

Omodan, B. (2022). Ubuntu politics of process: An alternative conflict management culture in Universities. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies, 9*(4), 42-54. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1277

Omodan, B. I., & Diko, N. (2021). A conceptualisation of Ubuntugogy as a decolonial pedagogy in Africa. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education, 4*(2), 95-104. https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2021.8

Or, M. H., & Berkovich, I. (2023). Participative decision making in schools in individualist and collectivist cultures: The micro-politics behind distributed leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 51*(3), 533-553. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211001364

Pansiri, N. O., Mphathiwa, L., Iloanya, J. E., Ugwu, C. I., & Tsae, B. R. (2021). Ubuntu as a sustainable philosophy for school leadership and governance: The Botswana and Nigeria conflict. In *Understanding Ubuntu for enhancing intercultural communications* (pp. 172-188). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-7947-3.ch014

Paulson, S. (2019). *"I am because we are": The African philosophy of Ubuntu*. To the Best of Our Knowledge. https://www.ttbook.org/interview/i-am-because-we-are-african-philosophy-ubuntu

Piot, L., & Kelchtermans, G. (2016). The micropolitics of distributed leadership: Four case studies of school federations. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 44*(4), 632-649. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214559224

Poovan, N., Du Toit, M. K., & Engelbrecht, A. S. (2006). The effect of the social values of ubuntu on team effectiveness. *South African Journal of Business Management, 37*(3), 17-27. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC22316

Potter, I. (2023). The intersection of system and distributed leadership. In D. Outwaithe, & C. A. Simon, *Leadership and management for education studies: Introducing key concepts of theory and practice*. Routledge.

Radwan, J. (2019). Leadership and communication in the Bhagavad Gita: Unity, duty, and equanimity. In: Dhiman, S., Amar, A.D. (eds) *Managing by the Bhagavad Gītā. Management, change, strategy and positive leadership*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99611-0_5

Ramose, M. B. (2013). The death of democracy and the resurrection of timocracy. *Journal of Moral Education: Moral Education in sub-Saharan Africa, 39*(3):291-303. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2010.497610

Rasweswe, M. M., Kgatla, N. M., Ramavhoya, I. T., & Mulaudzi, F. M. (2024). Ubuntu is a critical component in the fight against human immunodeficiency virus and tuberculosis stigma: Nursing students' perceptions. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 21*(2), 229. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21020229

Richard S. (2009). *Mandela's way: Fifteen lessons on life, love, and courage*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Rodgers, B. L. (1989). Concepts, analysis and the development of nursing knowledge: The evolutionary cycle. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *14*(4), 330-335. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.1989.tb03420.x

Rogers, L., De Brún, A., Birken, S. A., Davies, C., & McAuliffe, E. (2020). The micropolitics of implementation: A qualitative study exploring the impact of power, authority, and influence when implementing change in healthcare teams. *BMC Health Services Research*, *20*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-020-05905-z

Sasere, O. B., & Makhasane, S. D. (2023). Exploring distributed leadership practice in Nigerian secondary schools. *Journal of Educational and Social Research, 13*(2), 90. https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2023-0034

Setlhodi, I. I. (2018). Ubuntu leadership: An African panacea for improving school performance. *Africa Education Review, 16*(2), 126–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2018.1464885

Shutte, A. (2001). *Ubuntu: An ethic for a new South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

Smith, G. (2020). *Power struggles: Dignity, value, and the renewable energy frontier in Spain*. Jaume Franquesa, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2004). Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 36*(1), 3-34. https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000106726

Sutton, P. S., & Shouse, A. W. (2016). Building a culture of collaboration in schools. *Phi Delta Kappan, 97*(7), 69-73. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721716641653

Taylor, L., & Adelman, H. S. (2000). Connecting schools, families, and communities. *Professional School Counseling, 3*(5), 298-307. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ627609

Teacher Magazine. (2014). *Distributed leadership*. https://www.teachermagazine.com/au_en/articles/distributed-leadership

Thompson, A. (2023). *Understanding the meaning of Ubuntu: A proudly South African philosophy*. Culture Trip. https://theculturetrip.com/africa/south-africa/articles/understanding-the-meaning-of-ubuntu-a-proudly-south-african-philosophy

Tiky, L. (2019). Building peace through Ubuntu in the aftermath of electoral violence in divided African societies. In: A. Kulnazarova, & V. Popovski (eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of global approaches to peace.* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78905-7_14

Timperley, H. S. (2005). Distributed leadership: Developing theory from practice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 37*(4), 395-420. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270500038545

Tofthagen, R., & Fagerstrøm, L. M. (2010). Rodgers' evolutionary concept analysis - a valid method for developing knowledge in nursing science. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences, 24*(s1), 21-31. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6712.2010.00845.x

Tsakeni, M., Munje, P. N., & Jita, L. (2023). Exploring school improvement opportunities through distributed leadership practices for science and mathematics in South African schools. *Research in Educational Policy and Management, 5*(3), 20-40. https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2023.19

Tutu, D. (2011). *God has a dream: A vision of hope for our times*. Random House.

Udo, E. J. (2020). The dialogic dimension of Ubuntu for global peacebuilding. In *Handbook of Research on the Impact of Culture in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding* (pp. 302-322). IGI Global.

Waghid, Y. (2023). On the educational potential of Ubuntu. *Bandung: Journal of the Global South, 10*(1), 53–63. https://doi.org/10.1163/21983534-10010005

Walker, L.O., & Avant, K.C. (2019). *Strategies for theory construction in nursing* (6th ed.). Pearson.

Watkins, J., Muhamedjonova, N., & Holding, P. (2023). Realising distributed leadership through measurement for change. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *11*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1155692

Xiang, Y., & Leung, C. T. L. (2023). The utilisation of Ubuntu across cultures: A case study of a rural development programme in China. *International Social Work, 66*(5), 1554-1566. https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728221129364

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.