

With contributions from four members of staff, this article looks at the development of distributed leadership in John the Baptist Community School in Hospital, County Limerick, and how that culture served the school positively during the pandemic.

My name is Noreen Rafferty. I am principal of John the Baptist Community School (JTBCS) in Hospital, County Limerick, which has over 1,100 students. We have an effective senior management team, mainly because there is clarity about our roles, informed by great discussion and collaboration. We identified our strengths and passions and assigned our roles accordingly. This has allowed us to be more dynamic and agile in adapting to change.

We have a vision meeting at least twice a year, at which we discuss our vision for the school and our roles. This gives us the time to plan for school-wide initiatives. We meet Dr Joe O'Connell three times a year as part of our own continuing professional development (CPD). This gives the team time and space to grow together.

We attend all conferences and workshops run by the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) and the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS). Our work with Áine O Sullivan in ACCS is invaluable. We have been mentored, encouraged, and challenged by it. This work has kept us excited about leadership, especially distributive leadership.

Our role assignment is based on the Looking at Our Schools (LAOS) document. Each of us leads in one domain and shares responsibility in others, which helps us manage our workload. For example, deputy principal Elaine O'Donnell leads in teaching and learning, and we all work with her on promoting strategies in this area. Deputy principal Ita Browne leads the homework intervention programme and liaises with the teaching and learning team. Deputy principal Rachel Hayes leads digital enhanced learning but links in with the teaching and learning team on promoting learning and teaching strategies in subject departments.

As principal I have overall responsibility for all aspects of the educational enterprise and act as

Distributive Leadership



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accounting officer. I lead this but share responsibility with Rachel Hayes on the timetable, with Elaine O'Donnell on policymaking, and with Ita Browne on supervision and substitution. Communication is central to what we do in JTBCS. Effective communication allows us to embed distributive leadership in our school. We lead by example, we give clearly defined roles with ownership and autonomy, and we hold effective meetings.

We model leadership in the school by modelling our own team. We upskill constantly, gaining master's degrees, certificates, and diplomas in education, counselling, mediation, ICT, restorative practice (RP), and more. We encourage all teachers to upskill and give them the opportunities to do courses. Teachers have followed our example and are attending courses with the support of our board of management.

Middle management have clear roles. We give responsibility, ownership, and autonomy to assistant principals (AP1s and AP2s). For example, our teaching and learning, restorative practice, policy development, special educational needs (SEN), and student voice teams are all led by AP1s and AP2s. Our teachers can come to us and say, 'I have an idea', and they speak about how effective this is for them. Mentoring is also at the core of what we do. AP1s mentor AP2s as year heads. All AP1s and AP2s have responsibility for promoting teaching and learning, restorative practice, and ICT.

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We run effective meetings. AP1s and AP2s meet the senior management team three times a year. Their roles and responsibilities are discussed and assigned at the start of the year, and we check in at Christmas. The review happens in May. At these meetings they meet a different member of the senior management team than the person responsible for their area. This allows us to distribute our leadership across senior and middle management as a unit. Everyone also gets a great kick out of sharing what's going on in their role.

All teachers meet with the senior management team twice a year. This is a great opportunity to identify their passions and affirm the great work they do. Staff also present at various workshops organised by ACCS.

I will give two examples of how distributive leadership is embedded in JTBCS. The first is staff presenting to staff. This happens at all staff meetings – it is a culture in our school and has been happening since 2010. This year, 10 teachers presented in school self-evaluation (SSE), SEN, ICT, RP, health and safety, and student voice. All presentations were interlinked and student-centred.

The second example is from six years ago, when we went to a meeting organised by the NAPD. Following an excellent session on restorative practice, our team had a vision that we would become a restorative school. Our journey to becoming one in the years since is another excellent example of how distributive leadership is embedded in our school.

It started in the classroom with the teaching and learning team, led by AP1 Mary Sheehan, and the ICT team, led by AP11 Joe O'Connor and AP1 acting up Patrick Stack. Teaching strategies such as think-pair-share, show-me

board, and success criteria created a more restorative atmosphere in our classrooms. Students were mentored on the use of the reflection arrow, giving them experience in reflective practice in the classroom.

The pastoral care, student voice, ICT, and teaching and learning teams ran surveys and focus groups for parents, teachers, and students. Feedback showed us it was a natural progression for us to embark on the road to restorative practice. As a school community we are now ready to take it out of the classroom and into real life.

The teams involved have collective ownership. Leadership on restorative practice is now distributed not only among senior and middle management but also to every teacher and student in the school.

We have learned that things take time. We wanted this six years ago, but it is really happening now. It is one thing to say it is happening, another thing to live it. The following are stories of teachers in the school who describe their own journeys through our distributive leadership model.

Rachel's story (deputy principal)

I am the product of the mentoring, modelling, and collaboration that Noreen describes, as my journey is one of developing within the distributed leadership structure of the school. From the beginning, I was offered opportunities to take on leadership roles in teams. On my very first day, I was given the chance to become a student council liaison teacher; management recognised this passion from my time as a student.

“ To be part of a team is not an exception in John the Baptist Community School – it is the norm. ”

More chances to lead emerged, first as a leader of learning in my own classroom, inviting others to observe classes, and then as subject department head, allowing relationship-building. Management consistently encouraged me. The door was always open, even to the proposal of a murder mystery that killed a deputy principal (DP), with everyone else playing detective in a cross-curricular learning event. I also had the opportunity to be involved in teams working on the musical, the library, and IT. To be part of a team is not an exception in John the Baptist Community School – it is the norm.

Ever-present mentorship helped shape me. As a class tutor and an AP, I was in the room as year heads, DPs, and the principal worked with students and parents, allowing me to model the interactions. I was nudged, sometimes pushed beyond my comfort zone, but I was never alone. If not part of a team, it was accepted that building a team was the true measure of success.

When I became a DP, the clarity on our roles allowed a focus that could have been lost in the firefighting of daily school life but presented opportunities to grow and to adjust our roles as needed. Noreen built our innovative teaching and learning team but then handed it to me – a huge act of trust, predicated on the certainty that to be able to step back is the ultimate goal of distributed leadership.

After working with this team and Mary for three years, I passed the mantle on to Elaine O'Donnell. This allowed me to delve into the rapidly

expanding area of digital learning; distributed leadership helped me to manage the workload. This also enabled our SSE and digital learning goals to merge organically, which may never have been possible without the links, relationships, and knowledge developed through our collaborative approach.

Our digital learning team is characterised by mutual respect, our message developed through collaboration and feedback within the team and from all staff. Our co-leaders Joe (AP11) and Patrick (AP1 acting up) have embraced their opportunities. Together with leadership from each teacher, we have weathered the Covid-19 storm effectively, as you will hear from Joe below.

The addition this year of subject department digital mentors expands our team again, at the same time growing our technological and leadership capacity. Our secretary, Geraldine, is now on board to reset passwords, allowing the team to concentrate on embedding technology-enhanced learning.

The excellent ACCS Middle Leadership programme, certified by the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), is symbolic of how we view management. Noreen and I were involved in its development and delivery to schools around Ireland, deepening the conversation on the role, importance, and impact of middle leadership in schools.

If the job of a leader is to grow more leaders, I am living proof that John the Baptist Community School invites you to lead at every stage of your career.

Joe's story (AP11)

My name is Joe O'Connor. I am an AP11. Before becoming a post holder, I had presented, to the whole staff, digital resources that could be used as part of our numeracy strategy in the school. These were interactive PowerPoint presentations shared on our school server. It was the first time I took a lead in a presentation to staff.

Management encouraged me to join the SSE team and then the digital learning team. The SSE team that Noreen (as deputy principal) had set up was expanding at the time. Expressions of interest were sought, and I was encouraged to come on board. In this team I was given responsibility, and it's where I feel my leadership capacity really grew.

One example was when the SSE team developed a whole-staff internal CPD day on the new Junior Cycle. We had four rotating workshops, one of which I was in charge of: the 24 statements of learning for the Junior Cycle. I had full autonomy to be as creative as I could be and had the chance to model our SSE strategies throughout the workshop. I tried to make the session as active as possible, in the same way that I would want my maths students to learn by doing. We are all learners – students and staff alike. The task set was to design a new school bag for use in JTBCS. At the end of the session, groups would identify which of the 24 statements of learning they felt they had experienced.

Blue-sky thinking was the first SSE strategy introduced to encourage groups to think big. We discussed solar charging ports, which would be

quite the feature today, given Covid-19! In addition we used success criteria (*I must, I should, I could*) in designing the bag. We introduced critical verbs like *compare* and *evaluate* when groups had to appraise another group's bag. We used reflection number lines to rate our confidence before and after, and referred to some of Mike Hughes's work on the Magenta Principles of reduce and change. To illustrate how many of the 24 statements of learning had been targeted in this activity, we used a 'dotocracy' that everyone contributed to: a visual form of voting and consensus-building using dots.

My leadership capacity grew out of the autonomy I was given. I was able to facilitate staff engagement with SSE strategies in an active and (importantly) enjoyable way. There was great competition and fun between groups trying to design the best bag. None of us ever ceases learning, and I firmly believe that people learn best by doing and through experience.

The success of this day gave me the confidence as a leader to shape my next big whole-staff training: two days of active training in digital learning during Croke Park hours before the start of term. Staff would be set tasks to complete on various functions in Microsoft Teams. Again, we took an *I must, I should, I could* approach to differentiate for all levels. Staff would briefly be passive and receive some support from us, then were directed to complete tasks and use the open breakout rooms to seek help from colleagues. We had screen recordings prepared that guided staff through each process.

We wanted to encourage the 'flipped learning' approach where knowledge acquisition can occur independently at one's own pace, and live sessions (the breakout rooms) could take place afterwards to discuss in depth any issues, learnings, different ways to do the task, and so on. Much like a maths classroom, where you want collective problem-solving to occur. We wanted to instil in staff the confidence to take the initiative in their own digital learning.

Reflecting now, one year on, this approach has been a success. Staff engagement levels and expertise are rising continually, and the power of synergy is very evident with new members of staff providing new digital learning tips they have discovered themselves.

I am acutely aware of the leadership capacity that I have developed by being given opportunities, so I see it as my duty to give opportunities to other budding leaders among our staff. We have invited subject digital leaders to join our wider team. These leaders in turn have created their own resources that they have showcased at staff events or on our digital platform.

Halfway through our training days, we stopped to reflect and 'feel the pulse' of staff. We were greatly helped by senior management, who told us that some staff had found the pace too much. The LAOS document refers to 'critiquing our practice as leaders'. We adapted our CPD delivery to provide one-on-one or group training to staff in specific areas.

We are encouraged by senior management to take risks, and we are given the autonomy to do so. Learning flourishes for both the leader or administrator and the participant: 'The only real mistake is the one from which we don't learn.'

Mary's story (AP1)

My name is Mary Sheehan, and I am an AP1 and SSE coordinator in our school. My journey has been similar to Joe's, but today I will step back to reflect, from a wider perspective, on the lessons we have learned about how distributed leadership works effectively in our school.

The culture is key, cultivating the conditions by design or intent to nurture leadership at all levels. There is no blueprint for this journey. It is unique for each school, but it starts with a vision of where you would like to go. When I became an AP1, I spoke with Noreen, who was then deputy principal. We discussed our shared vision, then peeled back the layers to identify the building blocks in achieving that vision. We realised we were not ready yet.

We implemented a two-pronged approach. First, formally, by putting into action the building blocks towards realising the vision, while having the adaptability and agility to re-evaluate and reroute where necessary. This occurred many times. For example, our vision for home learning meant we had to step back and start by implementing strategies that involved effective questioning and reflection. We were also going to move to peer assessment, but student focus groups made us aware that they were not ready. So we implemented critical-vocabulary and success-criteria methodologies based on their advice. We are only now getting to focus on home learning.

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Second, informally, by elevating the dialogue on deepening student thinking and learning, and by normalising this. This changed the culture in our school, which was pivotal, but that didn't happen quickly. We needed the foresight to sit in that process as it was happening, and to plan for its unfolding and be agile enough to reroute when needed, while keeping our focus on the vision.

So how did this culture develop? Key leaders had to be identified at the start. They acted as catalysts: people whose passion and skill were recognised and who were invited to embrace their potential and to step beyond their comfort zone – to take a risk, to try something, to be open to sharing and addressing failures. Uptake of the SSE strategies worked best when presented in this way: by teachers as leaders in situations where they worked or not, where they were remodelled to suit learning situations, where it was authentic. All teachers became engaged when we shared real-life experience, student work in copies, their own written responses, and multiple teachers' uses of the strategies.

Ultimately this drove innovation among all the teachers. At the same time, Noreen gave me opportunities in mentoring and modelling, to develop skills, experiences, and competencies, to lead teams, and to present to staff and professional learning communities. So I was also developing and expanding my leadership capacity.

Another aspect was empowering leaders with the time, influence, and skills to lead. This has had a profound positive effect on developing leadership capacity in the school. In my role I was given autonomy with accountability. Senior management gave me space and stood back; it

was not a hands-off approach but one that enabled me to step into the responsibility and possibility of my leadership role.

In the school, APs have a clearly defined role and take responsibility for one area. But they work with other people in many other areas to broaden their skills, competencies, and strengths, as Noreen describes above. This fosters teamwork and collective ownership as cultural norms in our school, to the point where we felt comfortable to lead our own Junior Cycle in-service, as Joe said. We knew we had developed the leadership capacity in our team and our liaising teachers to do this effectively. They did not just have the strategies presented to them, but truly engaged with them.

Understanding team dynamics has proven crucial to expanding leadership and encouraging ownership in our school. It was critical for us to understand how our teams work and what conditions led them to flourish. Central to establishing a positive team dynamic are relationships and trust, embracing flux, and the need to seek different voices and different teachers' perspectives.

We broaden teams to inject new insights. For example, we bring in teachers who have attended training by Graham Powell and Mike Hughes, or taken part in professional learning communities like ACCS Blended Learning Forum and Student Voice Forum. We learn from sharing practice with different schools, by engaging in these learning communities, in the Learning Schools Project, and in reflective practice.

Our teams focus on growth and being expansive. We have found over the years that six to eight members are the most effective, and that the teams must always be up to date on educational developments and informed by LAOS and international best practice. Integrating the teams – by having leaders occupy roles in multiple teams – has also been crucial, to ensure they are not fragmented and there are not too many disconnected innovations going on in our school.

It is about building connections and expanding our teams' influence. This is done intentionally by liaising with the various subject departments and by seeking teachers' collaboration as leaders in their own learning, for example producing and sharing videos of effective practice and lesson starters, which we are doing this week.

One voice is not the only voice. Teachers' opinions are sought on all strategies, for example in SSE, before these are implemented at whole-school level. Teachers approach these strategies at their own pace, from their position of leaders of the learning that occurs in their classroom, as opposed to being given the strategies to use. Reticent voices are deliberately sought in focus groups to inform our pathway forward. Teachers are encouraged to be engaged and are valued and respected as leaders in their classroom with expertise worth sharing. They are recognised, celebrated and seen.

Over the years, as leadership capacity has expanded in our school and innovations have been implemented and embedded in our practices, it has been vital to check in regularly with staff. Progression happens when teachers are ready. It can be destroyed by moving too fast, or staff may become unmotivated if things are not progressing quickly enough. It has

been crucial to develop the capacity to be aware of this and to be agile enough to respond to it.

This was why we decided to pause and have a consolidation year two years ago. This helped foster habits of mind in the effective embedding of the active learning strategies that were implemented in the first stages of SSE. It gave teachers the opportunity to really embed them in everyday practice. This deepened student thinking and learning.

Activating and elevating students as leaders has been at the core of distributing leadership in our school. Student opinions on the improvement of their learning are sought in forums, focus groups, group and class surveys, and year hub surveys. We are improving in this area particularly through our current participation in the ACCS Student Voice Forum. We have integrated random selection as a way to seek all voices and learners, including the reticent ones.

Students' role as co-researchers is made explicit to them, and after implementation we ask for feedback on its impact. There is space for students to voice their opinions, to influence, and to establish leadership roles in teams such as health and safety, Covid response, and student council, so they are leading in their school community. Student voices are central to deciding on active-learning strategies at the design stage. This gives students the opportunity to express their voices and lead their own learning.

We timetable meetings that place value on creating the conditions to develop leadership capacity. This gives leaders time to plan, discuss, reflect, and evaluate. It also gives time to create strong teams that are purposeful and focused – a skill that has to be acquired, repeated, and practised. Authentic change takes time, as does developing a culture of leading learning at all stages in the community. Noreen recognised this and provided the time and space for it to flourish.

It is important to establish boundaries. Respect for work-life balance, wellbeing, and the space in one's head to switch off is essential. Without these, there would be no vision, passion, or innovation.

So we are back to creating the conditions to nurture the development of this learning culture, by design or intent. Distributed leadership is not about dividing tasks and responsibilities among individuals: it is about interactions among people to seek improvement and improve students' learning. At its core are people and keeping them excited and passionate about learning.

Distributed leadership is about selecting key leaders with a passion for what they do, and building dynamic teams that are informed by national and international best practice and are rooted in everyone's collective expertise, so we are all going in the same direction together. It is about empowering them with time and influence, modelling and mentoring, and elevating the dialogue to lead to a culture of engagement, shared ownership, and belonging.