

# DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP MODELS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL CULTURE AND TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

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## Abstract

Distributed leadership has emerged as a transformative paradigm in educational administration, shifting the focus from heroic, hierarchical models to collective, interactive processes that stretch leadership practice across formal and informal roles within schools. This study synthesizes theoretical foundations (Spillane's distributed perspective, activity theory, distributed cognition) and empirical evidence on how distributed leadership fosters collaborative school cultures and empowers teachers. Key mechanisms include shared decision-making, teacher leadership roles, professional learning communities, collective teacher efficacy, and relational trust, which collectively enhance teacher agency, job satisfaction, professional learning, and commitment. Cross-cultural studies from diverse contexts (North America, Asia, Europe, Middle East) demonstrate consistent positive associations between distributed leadership practices and improved organizational climate, instructional innovation, accountability, and student outcomes, with mediating roles played by collective efficacy and teacher professionalism. The model proves particularly effective in complex, reform-driven environments by building adaptive capacity and reducing reliance on individual leaders. Challenges such as role ambiguity, resistance to power redistribution, and implementation fidelity are acknowledged, alongside recommendations for principal support in cultivating distributed structures. Overall, distributed leadership offers a realistic and sustainable framework for cultivating empowered, collaborative school communities capable of sustained improvement.

## INTRODUCTION

The landscape of educational leadership is undergoing a profound and necessary evolution, characterized by a transition from monolithic, top-down bureaucratic structures toward more fluid, inclusive, and collaborative paradigms (Constantinides, 2021). This shift is primarily driven by the growing recognition that the traditional "heroics of leadership" paradigm what Gary Yukl famously critiqued as the "great

person" approach is fundamentally insufficient for addressing the multifaceted challenges of 21st-century schooling (Spillane & Mertz, 2015). As schools operate within increasingly complex organizational environments marked by high-stakes accountability, reform pressures, and diverse pedagogical expectations, the conceptualization of leadership has moved away from the traits of an individual actor and toward

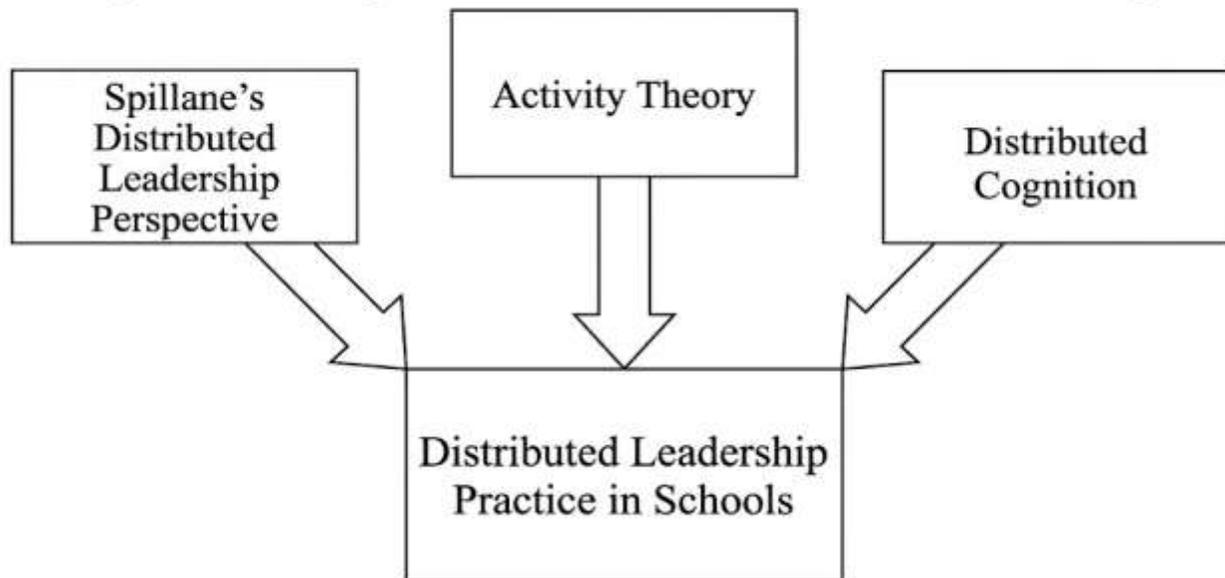
the interactions and tasks that constitute school improvement (Hariyanti et al., 2025). Distributed leadership has emerged as the preeminent framework for this transition, offering an analytical lens that views leadership as a collective property stretched across an entire organization (Nadeem, 2024).

At its core, distributed leadership is not an activity or a simple delegation of tasks; rather, it is a procedure and an analytical approach to understanding how the work of leadership takes place among people within the context of a complex organization (Spillane, 2006). Unlike traditional models that delineate leadership based on formal roles and hierarchical authority, the distributed perspective acknowledges that leading and managing schools involve multiple individuals, including those without formal titles such as teachers, parents, and even students (Liu & Watson, 2023). This approach necessitates a careful examination of both the formal and informal structures of an organization and how these dimensions interact to influence the core work of teaching and learning (Clavero & Galligan, 2020).

The appeal of this model lies in its ability to provide a more realistic account of how schools

actually function. Research suggests that an individual, or even a small team of administrators, cannot provide the leadership capacity necessary for a school to thrive (Fullan, 2023). Consequently, the distributed leadership model foregrounds how actors engage in tasks that are distributed or "stretched" across the organization, drawing heavily from theories of distributed cognition and activity theory (Maynard-Moody, 2022). In this view, thinking and understanding are not isolated mental processes but are constituted through interactions with other people, material tools, and organizational routines. By breaking down leadership practice into manageable units of analysis tasks researchers can gain a clearer window into how school improvement is enacted (Wellman & Lipton, 2024). Distributed leadership draws upon multiple theoretical traditions that conceptualize leadership as a socially situated activity. Figure 1 illustrates the key theoretical foundations that inform the distributed leadership perspective in educational research.

Figure 1: Conceptual Foundations of Distributed Leadership



**2. Theoretical Frameworks and the Core Scholarly Triad**

The academic foundation of distributed leadership is largely attributed to the seminal work of James P. Spillane, Peter Gronn, and Alma Harris. Their contributions have provided the theoretical rigor necessary to move distributed leadership from a vague concept to a robust administrative theory (Baştea et al., 2023)

**2.1 The Spillane Framework: Leader Plus and Practice**

James P. Spillane’s conceptualization focuses on the "Leader Plus" and "Practice" aspects of

leadership. The Leader Plus aspect posits that leadership activity is distributed across many people, emphasizing the enactment of leadership tasks rather than official roles (Ho et al., 2024). This dimension challenges the narrow focus on the principal by identifying how leadership is "stretched" over leaders, followers, and the situation (O’Rourke, 2022). Within this framework, Spillane identifies three distinct configurations of leadership activity that describe how individuals interact to perform tasks (Hulsbos et al., 2025).

**Table 1. Configurations of Leadership Activity within the Spillane Framework**

Configuration	Spatial and Temporal Dynamic	Relationship Between Actions
Collaborated Distribution	Two or more leaders co-perform the activity in the same place and time.	Direct, simultaneous interaction and co-construction.
Collective Distribution	Performance of leadership actions is separate but interdependent.	The output of one actor serves as the input for another toward a shared goal.
Coordinated Distribution	Leadership activities are performed in a particular sequence.	Sequential performance where timing and order are critical for task completion.

The Practice aspect of Spillane's model suggests that leadership practice is a product of the interactions among leaders, followers, and their situation over time. This perspective moves beyond a focus on individual traits and instead examines the "interactional" nature of leadership (Shava et al., 2021). By understanding which tasks are deemed important and how they are carried out, researchers can identify the conditions that improve teaching and learning (Lyle, 2024).

**2.2 Gronn’s Distributed Properties and Concertive Action**

Peter Gronn’s contribution focuses on the "distributed properties" of leadership, viewing it as a new architecture for organizational life. Gronn distinguishes between "additive" distribution where leadership is simply the sum of individual contributions and "holistic" distribution, which he terms "concertive action" (Hariyanti et al., 2025). In concertive action, leadership emerges from the spontaneous

collaboration of individuals who pool their expertise to address specific challenges (Salmon et al., 2020).

**2.3 Harris and the Link to School Improvement**

Alma Harris has emphasized that distributed leadership is a key component of learning-centered leadership, performed collaboratively by administrators and teachers. Her work argues that this form of leadership depends heavily on the way principals select and empower teacher leaders, noting that distributed leadership cannot flourish or be sustained without the active support of those in formal positions (UNESCO & OEI, 2025). By professionalizing the role of teachers and encouraging them to share responsibility for school-wide outcomes, distributed leadership creates an environment where teacher leaders can thrive (Shal et al., 2024).

**3. Structural Mediators and the Bureaucratic Environment**

The enactment of distributed leadership is significantly influenced by the underlying organizational structure and bureaucratic environment of the school. The tension between formal hierarchy and distributive practice impacts accountability and leadership efficacy (Yang & Chang, 2024).

**3.1 Enabling versus Coercive Bureaucracies**

In an enabling structure, the authority hierarchy, rules, and procedures serve as mechanisms to support teachers and facilitate task completion. These structures are designed to empower employees and foster organizational learning. Conversely, coercive bureaucracies use rules and procedures to monitor and strictly regulate teacher behavior, primarily focusing on compliance and punishment (Printy & Liu, 2021).

**Table 2. The Impact of School Bureaucratic Structures on Leadership and Accountability**

Variable	Effect of Enabling Bureaucracy	Effect of Coercive Bureaucracy
Distributed Leadership	Significant Positive Effect	Significant Negative Effect
Accountability	Significant Positive Effect	Significant Negative Effect

(Source: Yang & Chang, 2024)

Research indicates that distributed leadership serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between school structure and accountability. Enabling structures facilitate distributed leadership, which leads to higher levels of accountability behaviors among staff. This suggests that as schools establish internal accountability, leadership naturally becomes distributed based on expertise (Orhan & Özdemir, 2024).

collaborative culture where teachers and administrators accept collective responsibility for achievement (Bonkowski, 2024).

**3.2 The Context of Legislative Pressure**

The push for distributed leadership is also a response to the increased school accountability demands created by legislation such as No Child Left behind (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Stubblefield, 2019). These legislative mandates have often resulted in professional development programs where educators are passive observers. Distributed leadership offers an alternative by fostering a

**4. Cultivating a Collaborative School Culture**

Distributed leadership is a positive predictor of the development and maintenance of teacher Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). These communities provide the structural and cultural strategy for school development (Voelkel, 2022).

**4.1 The Role of Professional Learning Communities**

Research demonstrates that the teacher PLC plays a "completely mediating role" between distributed leadership and teacher professional development (TPD). This means distributed leadership primarily functions by creating the working conditions the PLC that then enhance teaching abilities (Joo, 2020).

**Table 3. Correlation Between Distributed Leadership, PLCs, and Professional Development**

Correlation Variable	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p)
Distributed Leadership and PLC	0.536	<.001
Distributed Leadership and TPD	0.415	<.001
PLC and TPD	0.481	<.001

Horizontal leadership structures lead to more sustainable transfers of knowledge. When

principals relinquish control, teachers are more proactive in internalizing school goals and

coordinating collective dialogue, which implements and sustains the PLC (Abbaspour, 2024).

**4.2 Culture as a Root Metaphor for Leadership**

Broad anthropological perspectives conceptualize school culture as the "root metaphor" of the organization. This view suggests that culture is deeply embedded in shared values that precede and shape leadership practices. In this context, distributed leadership acts as a mediating variable between school culture and organizational justice (Nadeem, 2024). Rather than leadership directly manipulating culture, culture evolves through shared practices, which then determine how

leadership is distributed and perceived (Aypay et al., 2026).

**5. Impact on Teacher Empowerment and Agency**

The empowerment of teachers manifests through increased autonomy, professional agency, and enhanced job satisfaction. By providing shared responsibility, distributed leadership narrows the gap between leaders and followers (Alam et al., 2025). Distributed leadership influences teacher empowerment through several interconnected mechanisms. Figure 5 summarizes the pathways through which distributed leadership enhances teacher agency, professional capital, and job satisfaction.



Figure 2: Mechanisms Linking Distributed Leadership to Teacher Empowerment

**5.1 Professional Capital and Agency as Mediators**

Teacher professional capital (PC) comprising human, social, and decisional capital is significantly predicted by distributed leadership practices. In some contexts, PC scores predict 76% of the variance in distributed leadership, suggesting a mutually reinforcing relationship (Özlük et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the influence of distributed leadership on teacher professional learning is often indirect, mediated by the teacher's sense of agency. When teachers perceive they have the agency to influence school decisions, they are

more likely to engage in meaningful professional learning (Polatcan, 2024).

**5.2 Job Satisfaction and Morale**

Systematic reviews show a strong positive relation between distributive leadership and teachers' job satisfaction. Key factors include participation in decision-making, collective efficacy, and improved coordination among team members. When teachers engage in collaborative leadership activities and feel their input is valued, their enthusiasm for teaching remains high (Kaya et al., 2024).

## 6. The Role of the Principal in a Distributed Setting

The shift to distributed leadership redefines the principal's role from a sole authority to a facilitator and team member. Principals occupy a pivotal role in the work redesign required to infuse life into distributed leadership (Nadeem, 2024).

### 6.1 Perceptual Mismatches and Their Consequences

A significant challenge is the potential mismatch between principal and teacher perceptions of shared leadership. Data from the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reveal that principals frequently report higher levels of distributed leadership than teachers do (Yang & Chang, 2024). When principals overestimate the degree of distributed leadership compared to teachers' self-reported experiences, teacher autonomy tends to decline (Makanjuola et al., 2024).

## 7. Challenges, Pathologies, and Counter-Arguments

While distributed leadership offers many benefits, role ambiguity, workload issues, and the risk of "distributed incompetence" are frequently cited concerns (Baştea et al., 2023).

### 7.1 Workload and Sustainability

Implementing distributed leadership is not a "quick fix" but a resource-intensive process requiring ongoing communication. Critics note the potential for growing teacher workloads without corresponding compensation. Heavy workloads and bureaucratic structures can frustrate the implementation of distributed models (Dandy, 2018).

### 7.2 Role Ambiguity and Power Struggles

Sharing responsibilities can lead to confusion regarding specific roles and accountabilities. Without clear guidance on who is ultimately responsible, distributed leadership can result in overlapping actions and inefficiencies (Printy & Liu, 2021). Furthermore, power struggles can arise when multiple individuals share authority.

Timperley (2005) notably argued that distributing leadership to those without requisite expertise can result in the "distribution of incompetence" (Voelkel, 2022).

## 8. International Policy Perspectives and Global Trends

International organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD view distributed leadership as a powerful lever for improving outcomes (Bonkowski, 2024).

### 8.1 UNESCO and the Latin American Context

The report "Leading for Democracy" highlights distributed leadership as an active form of civic education. Despite its advantages, there is a policy lag in Latin America, where only three countries explicitly refer to distributed leadership in their legislation (Abbaspour, 2024). Recommendations include formally recognizing the model in national policies and granting headteachers greater autonomy over financial resources (Wellman & Lipton, 2024).

### 8.2 OECD and the TALIS Insights

The OECD's TALIS report notes that while teacher collaboration is common in schools with strong leadership, approximately one in three principals does not actively encourage it (OECD, 2025). Higher-performing education systems tend to grant greater autonomy to principals, though many still lack sufficient time for instructional leadership due to routine management tasks (Clavero & Galligan, 2020).

## 9. Future Directions in Distributed Leadership (2025–2026)

Research is currently shifting toward sustainability, well-being, and digital leadership (Hulsbos et al., 2025).

### 9.1 Digital Transformation and Agility

There is a growing focus on "digital leadership" as schools navigate the integration of information technologies. In volatile contexts, leadership agility and shared responsibility are deemed essential for sustaining performance. Future studies are expected to explore adaptive strategies

for curriculum content updates (Markarian, 2025).

### 9.2 Well-being and Social Justice

Contemporary research is placing a premium on human-centered models focused on teacher wellness and student mental health. There is also a call for deeper examination of "leadership interventions" that create equitable spaces for marginalized groups, emphasizing social justice and culturally responsive practices (Hariyanti et al., 2025).

### 10. Conclusions

Distributed leadership represents a paradigm shift that more accurately reflects the reality of how leadership actually functions in complex school organizations, moving beyond individualistic "great person" myths toward a dynamic, interactive understanding of practice stretched across people, tasks, and tools. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that when leadership is distributed through intentional structures such as teacher teams, professional learning communities, and shared governance it cultivates collaborative cultures characterized by high relational trust, collective efficacy, and teacher agency. These conditions, in turn, empower educators to take ownership of instructional improvement, innovate pedagogically, and sustain commitment even under external pressures. While successful implementation requires principals to actively support rather than control distribution, and cultural and structural barriers must be navigated carefully, the model's capacity to build organizational resilience and adaptive capacity makes it especially valuable in contemporary schools facing rapid change, accountability demands, and equity imperatives. By fostering environments where leadership is a collective property rather than a positional privilege, distributed approaches hold strong promise for creating more responsive, inclusive, and high-performing educational systems that ultimately benefit students and communities.

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