



# Exploring Distributed Leadership Models in Education

Sarah Sachar

Faculty of Education Kampala International University Uganda

[sarah.achar@studmc.kiu.ac.ug](mailto:sarah.achar@studmc.kiu.ac.ug)

## ABSTRACT

Distributed leadership in education emphasizes collective participation, shared decision-making, and collaborative efforts to improve school effectiveness. This paper examines the theoretical foundations of distributed leadership, its implementation in educational settings, and the associated challenges and best practices. Grounded in systems theory, social constructionism, and human relations theory, distributed leadership represents a shift from hierarchical leadership models to more inclusive and participatory frameworks. By exploring case studies and empirical research, this study highlights the transformative potential of distributed leadership in enhancing teacher empowerment, fostering collaboration, and improving student outcomes. However, its implementation is not without challenges, such as role ambiguity and resistance from traditional leadership structures. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research to address gaps in understanding long-term impacts and the role of technology in distributed leadership models.

**Keywords:** Distributed Leadership, Educational Leadership, Collaborative Decision-Making, School Effectiveness, Teacher Empowerment, Leadership Models.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional and administrative leadership models have shifted attention away from individual leadership to the whole group, which brings a collective mindset overseeing the conventional and orthodox mechanism wherein the responsibility to lead staff is that of the school principal. The focus is on the contributions of all. Distributed leadership is a model of leadership theory wherein decisions are not only taken by the leader but there is also some form of shared decision-making power; all staff members have a voice within the school. Education leaders, especially, are working from a platform that commits them to a mode of decision-making that is inclusive, and democratic, and considers the wisdom of the group before acting [1, 2]. Distributed leadership then moves into a matrix of higher contribution and effort and can take a form that is constantly evolving through stakeholder input and review. One of the main components of distributed leadership is not its only focus on schools but including all stakeholders and employees of the school, from cleaners to teachers, office staff, and the external community wherein schools are situated. Distributed leadership prioritizes the role of teacher, parent, and community voice so that decision-making fits the collective spirit of the group involved. It also prioritizes an active and engaged approach rather than a passive or reactive one. It also indicates the importance of strong communication and collaboration. The notion is based on recent research; the power of team-based decisions to enhance judgment has been widely accepted as a positive outcome for organizations. Additionally, school staff are primed for school leadership as a result of their knowledge of pupils and the curriculum, emotional capacity, and expertise within the learning landscapes [3, 2].

### Theoretical Frameworks and Concepts in Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership has come to the fore in educational contexts as a possible way to manage schools and ensure their long-term sustainability and success. Although the theory of distributed leadership has been imported into the school environment from business and organizational management, it has the

potential to reshape the way leadership is conceptualized in schools in powerful ways. In this chapter, we consider various theoretical conceptualizations that underpin distributed leadership. We discuss key concepts – such as shared responsibility and authority and collaborative interrelationships – that are used to theorize distributed leadership. This is important as distributed leadership is increasingly central to the school's effectiveness and school improvement conversations. We demonstrate that various theories – including systems theory, social constructionism, and human relations theory – underpin the notion that leadership can be distributed across various roles in schools. After reviewing the theoretical base for distributed leadership and its characteristics, and reviewing key constructs and assumptions, we briefly consider how these might be explored in future policy and practice work in relation to distributed leadership [4, 5]. One of the limitations of the various models is that most of them while implying an interaction between leaders and followers, tend to concentrate too much either on the teacher exercising leadership roles or on the attributes and roles that combine to make the distributed leadership system work. In addition, most literature seems to imply that distributed leadership is limited to combining certain attributes and interactions into a leadership approach. As a result, this chapter sets out a different theoretical conceptualization of the distributed leadership model. For one thing, it foregrounds the interactional dynamics between those “exercising” leadership and those who might be receiving it. But further, we conceptualize the model of distributed leadership as a concept in tension between formal positions such as headteacher or deputy, and the types of leadership practiced by ‘everyone’ in schools. Rather than a ‘thing’, we argue that distributed leadership is multiple, constructed, and contingent on the leadership actions undertaken by a wide range of individuals. The chapter is split into three sections: the first revisits the concept that is distributed leadership; the second suggests a new theoretical framework that underpins a different conceptualization of distributed leadership; and the third offers several implications for future practice, policy, and research [6, 7].

#### **Implementation and Impact of Distributed Leadership in Educational Settings**

While distributed leadership has become popular in educational literature and discussion, limited information exists on the practical implementation of the theory within educational settings. To address this, we examine a range of case studies that collectively illustrate how a diverse sample of school leaders have implemented distributed leadership models in their educational environments and the process and strategies required for successful adaptation. These case studies report a range of positive outcomes from taking a distributed approach to leadership, including increased student outcomes, benefits to teacher empowerment, and enhanced school climate. Some of the most impactful strategies from these case studies are then presented that other leaders can consider integrating into their practices to support distributed leadership [8, 9]. The exploration of case-study projects in this chapter reveals the variety of ways leaders in schools can foster distributed leadership models. Furthermore, these case-study teachers reported numerous challenges that they faced while implementing distributed leadership models. Some of the main challenges are discussed; resistance among staff is one of the most significant, and it is addressed throughout this book as it pertains to professional learning. The context influencing resistance is explored with a focus on varying levels of teacher experience and career aspirations, subjects taught, and demographics. To foster the implementation of distributed leadership models, the leadership and professional development needed to be revised. As a result, the notion of a permeating culture needs to be equally influenced by social, cognitive, and personal theories, as it is widely recognized. A common vision has been shown to contribute to a culture of trust in school settings as well [10, 11].

#### **Challenges and Best Practices in Adopting Distributed Leadership Models**

However, such reforms are not without their challenges and potential obstacles. Role ambiguity can halt the progression of the adoption of distributed leadership models. This is because, for many, the notion of distributed leadership can be threatening, as many traditional leaders are 'either unknowingly placed in powerless roles or actively marginalized' as a result of the shift of power to employees. In new distributed leadership environments where traditional leadership hierarchies overlap with new forms of distributed authority, the risk of conflict between staff groups based on differing perceptions of responsibilities and loyalties is also likely. There are three main obstacles: resistance from traditional leaders, extreme diversity among schools, and lack of suitable leadership preparation programs to prepare new leaders. A more interpretative explanation is that power is not the zero-sum resource those in the traditional power sector believe, which means sharing power will generate more, not less, which, of course, 'requires an almost unimaginable show of humility... and an endless supply of courage' [12, 13]. It is clear that for distributed leadership to be successfully implemented, some essential hurdles need to be addressed: there

must be clarity as to what is expected of all participants, supported by clear communication; there must also be selected professional development for participants based on an in-depth understanding of individual and school-wide characteristics and needs; and finally, for shared leadership to reach its full potential, there must be a willingness of stakeholders to work in collaboration and a commitment to goal setting, long-term effects, and system change. Furthermore, in many of the successful case study schools, there was a feeling that for distributed leadership to be implemented successfully, all members of the educational community need to be given greater responsibility for schooling, which means that decision-making and leadership have to be devolved. The need for all members of the community to have a sense of responsibility means that action and authority must be distributed as far down the organization as is appropriate. The findings that distributed leadership is an intricate and blended concept and that it is influenced by a large number of less-than-clear, interlocking variables and sets of conditions are not particularly encouraging given the current interest of policymakers in promoting this kind of leadership for sustainability, improved conditions, and student learning. However, to personalize policy and its instruments for implementation, we need to have a deep understanding of the circumstances that facilitate the multifaceted development of distributed leadership [14, 15].

### **Future Directions and Research Opportunities in Distributed Leadership**

**Fostering and Promoting Additional Empirical Studies on the Long-Term and Student-Related Impacts:** While the above-mentioned studies revealed the positive impacts of distributed leadership, there is still a paucity of research in this area, especially beyond the school level. Even less empirical evidence is available on the long-term impacts. **Technology:** The entire field of school leadership is influenced by technology, especially since COVID-19. This is likely to make malevolent forms of distributed leadership easier. How can technology be used in a smart way to facilitate rightful leadership by more actors in the school? **Comparative Studies Based on Case Studies with Greater Diversity of Settings and Populations:** The studies published here have a focus on specific regions, which does not allow a global view of distributed leadership models or PD strategies. Diverse educational settings can also add value. **Emerging Trends:** Trends are emerging that might have an impact on distributed leadership, such as attention to inclusivity and equity. None of the papers published in this special issue focus sufficiently on these. **Evolving Nature of Leadership:** Are there new trends in teacher and principal leadership that need to be studied? Do new forms of distributed leadership also take into account the wider school and community leadership? **Cross-Disciplinary Studies:** Cross-disciplinary studies that examine how the field of distributed leadership in education can “cross-fertilize” with other fields such as organizational management should be encouraged [4, 16]. The paper generated for this special issue has mirrored much of the evolution of distributed leadership research in school communities. For the most part, the studies in the special issue show how distributed leadership models have influenced the choices leaders can make. Leadership roles have been broadened, and greater attention is given to sharing leadership tasks that positively and profoundly change the work of a school. This difference in workload distribution has consequences. For example, if a principal can now spend more than just a few minutes with a teacher in a PD dyad, the supervisory tones change. The trust between dyads is salient. So, the questions that were raised earlier have evolved to honor the evolution of distributed leadership in our field. A potential limitation of distributed leadership models is losing touch with the real job of educating juveniles. We need to have an in-depth understanding of how distributed leadership models translate to changes in teaching practices. It is unwise to assume that spreading out leadership duties is an improvement for young people. Rather, it is for adult workers. We need to research this more carefully before taking too much pride in the distributed leadership models we support [17, 18].

### **CONCLUSION**

Distributed leadership offers a paradigm shift in educational leadership by emphasizing collaboration, shared authority, and stakeholder engagement. The theoretical underpinnings demonstrate its capacity to foster a more democratic and inclusive school culture. Case studies reveal significant benefits, including enhanced teacher autonomy, improved school climates, and positive student outcomes. Despite these advantages, challenges such as resistance from traditional leadership, role ambiguity, and the need for tailored professional development persist. Overcoming these obstacles requires clear communication, a shared vision, and a commitment to sustained collaboration. Future research should focus on the long-term effects of distributed leadership, the role of technology, and its application in diverse educational settings. By addressing these areas, distributed leadership can continue to evolve as a dynamic and effective model for educational transformation.

## REFERENCES

1. Kilag OK, Tokong C, Enriquez B, Deiparine J, Purisima R, Zamora M. School Leaders: The Extent of Management Empowerment and Its Impact on Teacher and School Effectiveness. *Excellencia: International Multi-disciplinary Journal of Education* (2994-9521). 2023 Jul 27;1(1):127-40. [multijournals.org](https://multijournals.org)
2. Buyukgoze H, Caliskan O, Gümüř S. Linking distributed leadership with collective teacher innovativeness: The mediating roles of job satisfaction and professional collaboration. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. 2024 Nov;52(6):1388-409. [researchgate.net](https://researchgate.net)
3. Bellibař Mř, Gümüř S, Liu Y. Does school leadership matter for teachers' classroom practice? The influence of instructional leadership and distributed leadership on instructional quality. *School effectiveness and school improvement*. 2021 Jul 3;32(3):387-412. [researchgate.net](https://researchgate.net)
4. Beauchamp G, Hulme M, Clarke L, Hamilton L, Harvey JA. 'People miss people': A study of school leadership and management in the four nations of the United Kingdom in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. 2021 May;49(3):375-92. [sagepub.com](https://sagepub.com)
5. Barry G, Walsh C, Ó Gallchóir C, Mannix-McNamara P. School self-evaluation and empowering leadership in DEIS schools: an exploration of success. *Irish Educational Studies*. 2024 Oct 1;43(4):719-36. [tandfonline.com](https://tandfonline.com)
6. Leithwood K. A review of evidence about equitable school leadership. *Education Sciences*. 2021 Jul 23;11(8):377.
7. Henderikx M, Stoffers J. An exploratory literature study into digital transformation and leadership: Toward future-proof middle managers. *Sustainability*. 2022 Jan 9;14(2):687.
8. Printy S, Liu Y. Distributed leadership globally: The interactive nature of principal and teacher leadership in 32 countries. *Educational administration quarterly*. 2021 Apr;57(2):290-325.
9. Liu Y. Focusing on the practice of distributed leadership: The international evidence from the 2013 TALIS. *Educational Administration Quarterly*. 2020 Dec;56(5):779-818.
10. Brown C, Flood J, Armstrong P, MacGregor S, Chinas C. Is distributed leadership an effective approach for mobilising professional capital across professional learning networks? Exploring a case from England. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*. 2021 Jan 11;6(1):64-78. [worktribe.com](https://worktribe.com)
11. Lessy Z, Pary LK, Adamek ME. Moving from Authoritarian to Allocative or Distributed Leadership, in Yogyakarta Province, Indonesia, as Adopted by a High School Principal A Case Study. *LEADERSHIP AND POLICY IN SCHOOLS*. 2022:1-23.
12. Shin Y, Hur WM, Park K, Hwang H. How managers' job crafting reduces turnover intention: The mediating roles of role ambiguity and emotional exhaustion. *International journal of environmental research and public health*. 2020 Jun;17(11):3972. [mdpi.com](https://mdpi.com)
13. Obrenovic B, Du J, Godinic D, Tsoy D, Khan MA, Jakhongirov I. Sustaining enterprise operations and productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic: "Enterprise Effectiveness and Sustainability Model". *Sustainability*. 2020 Jul 24;12(15):5981. [mdpi.com](https://mdpi.com)
14. Lewellyn K, Muller-Kahle M. ESG leaders or laggards? A configurational analysis of ESG performance. *Business & Society*. 2024 May;63(5):1149-202.
15. Schiehl E, Lewellyn K, Yan W. A configurational perspective of boards' attention structures. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*. 2023 Sep;31(5):676-96. [wiley.com](https://wiley.com)
16. Armstrong PW, Brown C, Chapman CJ. School-to-school collaboration in England: A configurative review of the empirical evidence. *Review of education*. 2021 Feb;9(1):319-51.
17. Berjaoui RR, Karami-Akkary R. Distributed leadership as a path to organizational commitment: The case of a Lebanese school. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*. 2020 Oct 1;19(4):610-24.
18. Samancioglu M, Baglibel M, Erwin BJ. Effects of Distributed Leadership on Teachers' Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment and Organizational Citizenship. *Pedagogical research*. 2020;5(2).

**CITE AS: Sarah Sachar. (2025). Exploring Distributed Leadership Models in Education. RESEARCH INVENTION JOURNAL OF CURRENT ISSUES IN ARTS AND MANAGEMENT 4(1):23-26. <https://doi.org/10.59298/RIJCIAM/2025/412326>**