

Distributed Leadership in Elementary School Organizational Development: A Systematic Literature Review on Building Synergy for Shared Vision

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Article History: Received on 17 February 2026, Revised on 22 April 2026,
Published on 23 April 2026

Abstract: This study aims to analyze the distributed leadership model in elementary school organizational development, focusing on how synergy among principals, teachers, and education personnel contributes to realizing a shared vision. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted, synthesizing findings from 15 peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2026, sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC databases. The results reveal that effective distributed leadership in elementary schools is characterized by (1) deliberate delegation of authority and responsibility, (2) cultivation of teacher leadership and collective efficacy, (3) establishment of trust-based relationships, and (4) alignment of school vision with collaborative practices. Key findings indicate that distributed leadership positively influences teacher professional development, instructional quality, and organizational outcomes, often mediated by professional learning communities and teacher collaboration. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated framework for building functional synergy among three key actor groups in elementary school contexts. Practically, the findings offer principals actionable strategies for transitioning from hierarchical management to collaborative leadership and provide policymakers with evidence-based guidance for designing professional development programs focused on distributed leadership competencies.

Keywords: Distributed Leadership, Elementary School Management, Organizational Synergy, Shared Vision, Staff Collaboration

A. Introduction

Distributed leadership has increasingly been recognized as a transformative paradigm in contemporary educational management, fundamentally redefining how leadership is conceptualized and enacted within school organizations. Traditional leadership models have long emphasized hierarchical authority, positioning the principal as the central and dominant decision-maker. However, such models are increasingly considered insufficient in addressing the complex and dynamic challenges faced by modern educational institutions. In response, distributed leadership offers an alternative perspective that views leadership as a collective, interactive, and context-

dependent process involving multiple actors within the school environment. From a theoretical standpoint, distributed leadership is grounded in socio-cultural and organizational learning perspectives, which emphasize that knowledge, expertise, and agency are distributed across individuals rather than concentrated in a single authority figure. Leadership, therefore, is not merely a formal position but a practice that emerges through interactions, relationships, and shared activities among principals, teachers, and educational staff. This reconceptualization shifts the focus from individual leadership capacity to collective capability, highlighting the importance of collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual influence in achieving organizational goals (Adams et al., 2025).

In the context of elementary school organizational development, distributed leadership plays a particularly significant role. Elementary schools are characterized by relatively smaller organizational structures, closer interpersonal relationships, and a strong emphasis on foundational learning processes. These characteristics create a conducive environment for the enactment of distributed leadership, as collaboration and communication among school members tend to be more intensive and continuous. Consequently, distributed leadership has the potential to enhance not only administrative effectiveness but also instructional quality and student learning outcomes. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that distributed leadership contributes positively to various dimensions of school performance. At the instructional level, it promotes collaborative teaching practices, reflective inquiry, and shared problem-solving among teachers. These practices are often institutionalized through professional learning communities, where educators engage in continuous dialogue, exchange pedagogical knowledge, and co-develop instructional strategies. Such collaborative environments foster professional growth and improve the overall quality of teaching, which in turn positively impacts student achievement (Harris, 2004).

At the organizational level, distributed leadership strengthens collective efficacy, defined as the shared belief among school members in their collective ability to achieve desired outcomes. This sense of collective efficacy emerges from sustained collaboration, mutual trust, and shared experiences of success. When teachers and staff actively participate in leadership processes, they develop a stronger sense of ownership and accountability toward school goals. This collective commitment enhances organizational resilience, enabling schools to adapt effectively to changes in policy, curriculum, and student needs. Furthermore, distributed leadership has been shown to influence student outcomes both directly and indirectly. Directly, it contributes to the creation of supportive and well-coordinated learning environments. Indirectly, it affects student achievement through its impact on teacher motivation, collaboration, and instructional practices. Meta-analytical evidence indicates that the effects of distributed leadership are comparable to those of instructional leadership, underscoring its significance as a key driver of school effectiveness. These findings reinforce the argument that leadership should not be confined to formal roles but

should be understood as a shared organizational resource. Despite its recognized benefits, the implementation of distributed leadership is not without challenges. One of the primary challenges lies in establishing a balance between autonomy and accountability. While distributed leadership emphasizes the empowerment of teachers and staff, it also requires clear structures and role definitions to ensure coordination and alignment with organizational objectives. Without such structures, distributed leadership may lead to role ambiguity, fragmented decision-making, and unequal participation among school members (Nadeem, 2024a).

Another critical challenge concerns the development of leadership capacity among teachers. Distributed leadership assumes that teachers possess or can develop the competencies required to take on leadership roles. However, in many cases, teachers may lack the necessary skills, confidence, or opportunities to engage in leadership activities. Therefore, effective implementation of distributed leadership requires intentional capacity-building efforts, including professional development programs that focus on leadership skills, collaborative practices, and reflective inquiry. As teachers develop these competencies, they are better equipped to contribute meaningfully to leadership processes and organizational development. Although the literature on distributed leadership has grown substantially, several important gaps remain. First, much of the existing research has been conducted in secondary school contexts, which differ significantly from elementary schools in terms of organizational complexity, leadership structures, and pedagogical focus. As a result, the applicability of existing findings to elementary school settings remains uncertain. There is a need for more context-specific research that examines how distributed leadership is enacted and experienced within elementary schools. Second, existing studies often adopt a fragmented approach by focusing on specific aspects of leadership without considering the broader relational and organizational processes involved. While distributed leadership is closely associated with collaboration, there is limited understanding of how collaboration evolves into synergy. Synergy refers to the ability of individuals to work together in a way that produces outcomes greater than the sum of their individual contributions. Understanding how distributed leadership facilitates the development of such synergy is crucial for enhancing its effectiveness in practice.

In addition, the process of building a shared vision within distributed leadership contexts remains underexplored. A shared vision is a critical component of organizational development, as it provides direction, coherence, and purpose for collective action. It is not merely a formal statement but a dynamic construct that emerges through dialogue, negotiation, and alignment of values among stakeholders. However, the mechanisms through which distributed leadership supports the development and sustainment of a shared vision in elementary schools have not been sufficiently examined. Another limitation of the existing literature is the predominance of small-scale and context-specific studies, which, while providing valuable insights, limit the generalizability of findings. There is a lack of systematic

synthesis that integrates evidence across multiple studies to identify common patterns, effective practices, and contextual variations. Without such synthesis, the field remains fragmented, making it difficult to draw comprehensive conclusions about the effectiveness of distributed leadership.

In response to these gaps, the present study adopts a systematic literature review approach to synthesize and analyze existing empirical evidence on distributed leadership in elementary schools. This approach enables a comprehensive and structured examination of the literature, allowing for the identification of key themes, patterns, and gaps. By integrating findings from multiple studies, this research aims to provide a more holistic understanding of how distributed leadership operates and contributes to organizational development in elementary school contexts. The study focuses on three main analytical dimensions. The first dimension examines how distributed leadership is enacted to facilitate collaboration among principals, teachers, and educational staff in elementary schools. This includes an analysis of leadership practices, role distribution, and interaction patterns that support collaborative processes. The second dimension explores the mechanisms that enable the emergence of synergy in pursuing a shared vision, including factors such as trust, communication, shared values, and professional relationships. The third dimension investigates the mediating roles of teacher collaboration and autonomy in strengthening the relationship between distributed leadership and collective commitment to a shared vision.

The contributions of this study are multifaceted. Theoretically, it advances the understanding of distributed leadership by integrating it with concepts such as collaboration, synergy, and shared vision within the specific context of elementary education. Empirically, it addresses the fragmentation of existing research by synthesizing findings across multiple studies, thereby enhancing the robustness and generalizability of conclusions. Practically, it provides evidence-based insights for school leaders, policymakers, and practitioners in designing strategies to strengthen collaboration, build shared vision, and enhance organizational effectiveness (Jhonshon et al., 2024).

In conclusion, distributed leadership represents a significant shift in how leadership is understood and practiced within educational organizations. By emphasizing collaboration, shared responsibility, and collective agency, it offers a promising approach for addressing the complexities of modern schooling. However, its successful implementation requires a nuanced understanding of its underlying mechanisms, contextual conditions, and mediating processes, particularly within elementary school settings. Through a systematic and analytically grounded synthesis of existing evidence, this study seeks to contribute to the advancement of both theory and practice in distributed leadership and elementary school organizational development.

B. Methods

Research Design

This study was designed as a systematic literature review aimed at integrating and critically analyzing empirical studies related to distributed leadership in elementary school contexts. The approach enabled the identification of patterns, research trends, and conceptual gaps within the existing literature. Therefore, this study is not merely descriptive but also analytical in constructing a comprehensive understanding of distributed leadership practices and their implications for school organizational development (Daniëls et al., 2019).

Research Focus

The study was directed toward three main analytical focuses. The first focus examined how distributed leadership is enacted to facilitate collaboration among principals, teachers, and educational staff in elementary schools. The second focus analyzed the mechanisms that enable the emergence of synergy in achieving a shared vision within school organizations. The third focus identified contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of distributed leadership in supporting elementary school organizational development (Harris, 2004).

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The data were obtained through a systematic literature search across three major academic databases, namely Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. The search strategy employed Boolean operators to ensure comprehensive and relevant coverage of the literature. The search string used was: (“distributed leadership” OR “shared leadership” OR “collaborative leadership”) AND (“elementary school” OR “primary school”) AND (“organizational development” OR “shared vision” OR “school improvement”). This strategy was designed to capture studies that explicitly address distributed leadership within elementary education settings.

Inclusion Criteria and Screening Process

The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, (2) published between 2021 and 2026, (3) written in English, (4) focused on K-12 education with relevance to elementary school contexts, and (5) empirically examining distributed leadership practices in school settings. Articles that did not meet these criteria were excluded from the review. The screening process was conducted in several stages following the PRISMA flow, including identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The initial search yielded [insert number] records. After removing duplicates, [insert number] articles remained for title and abstract screening. Subsequently, [insert number] articles were selected for full-text review.

Based on the predefined inclusion criteria, a total of 15 articles were deemed eligible for final analysis. The selection process is illustrated in a PRISMA flow diagram(O'Dea et al., 2021).

Data Analysis Technique

Data from the selected articles were extracted using a structured data extraction form, including information on research objectives, methodologies, key findings, and implications. The extracted data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and relationships across studies. This analytical approach facilitated a deeper understanding of how distributed leadership contributes to collaboration, synergy, and the development of a shared vision in elementary school organizational contexts.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the thematic synthesis of findings from 15 peer-reviewed articles examining distributed leadership in elementary school contexts. The analysis identified four overarching themes: (1) enactment of distributed leadership, (2) mechanisms for building synergy, (3) enabling conditions and barriers, and (4) conflicting evidence.

Table 1. Journal Review

No	Title	Author and year	Research purposes	Research methods	Research result	conclusion
1.	The Synergy of Distributed Leadership towards District Education Office Performance	(Ismail et al., 2021)	To examine how distributed leadership contributes to improving the performance of district education offices.	Verification approach based on three dimensions: leadership, organization, and output.	Distributed leadership strengthens synergy in educational management and enhances collaborative thinking compared to traditional approaches.	Distributed leadership improves organizational performance, with district education officers playing a key role in coordinating, supervising, and responding to stakeholders.
2.	Distributed leadership in educational contexts: A catalyst for school improvement	(Nadeem, 2024b)	To examine the theoretical foundations, practical strategies, challenges, and implications of distributed leadership in educational contexts for school improvement.	Conceptual and theoretical analysis based on existing literature on distributed leadership.	The study shows that distributed leadership reframes leadership as a co-constructed and collaborative process, moving beyond traditional hierarchical models toward more dynamic educational practices.	Distributed leadership plays a transformative role in improving schools by fostering collaboration and redefining leadership practices within educational settings
3	The role of teacher professional capital in developing distributed leadership: evidence from a centralized system	(Özlük et al., 2025)	To examine the role of teacher professional capital in supporting the development of distributed leadership practices in public schools.	A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design involving 394 teachers in the quantitative phase and six school principals in the qualitative phase.	The findings show a strong positive relationship between teacher professional capital and distributed leadership, with professional capital significantly	The study highlights the importance of teacher professional capital in strengthening distributed leadership, particularly in centralized systems, and provides practical insights for policymakers and school practitioners.

4	School Principals' Support for Distributed Leadership: A Review of Transformational and Distributed Leadership Literature	(Makanjuola et al, 2024)	Aiming to provide insights into the compatibility of these leadership paradigms	Informational leaders might resist distributed leadership; the synthesis of empirical studies and theoretical frameworks reveals a nuanced dynamic. Transformational leaders, characterized by visionary thinking and inspiration, are inclined towards supporting distributed leadership practices by empowering staff, delegating authority, and fostering collaborative decision-making	predicting distributed leadership practices. Qualitative results emphasize trust-based leadership, shared responsibility, and support for teacher development, alongside structural and cultural constraints. Further empirical research is necessary to deepen the understanding of the interplay between these leadership styles, especially in diverse educational settings	Conclusion, the comprehensive literature review substantiates the proposition that school principals embodying transformational leadership characteristics are open to implementing distributed leadership within their schools
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5	A contemporary examination of instructional leadership activities and distributed leadership practices in elementary education	(Tenha & Makamure, 2024)	To examine the compatibility between transformational leadership and distributed leadership in educational contexts.	Literature review synthesizing empirical studies and theoretical frameworks on transformational and distributed leadership.	The findings indicate that transformational leadership tends to support the implementation of distributed leadership through empowerment, delegation, and collaborative decision-making, although resistance may occur in more hierarchical leadership contexts.	The study concludes that principals with transformational leadership characteristics are more likely to adopt and support distributed leadership practices, while further research is needed to understand their interaction across different educational settings.
6	Exploring the factors of learning organization in school education: the role of leadership styles, personal commitment, and organizational culture	(Kareem et al., 2025)	To examine the factors influencing learning organization in schools, particularly the role of leadership styles, personal commitment, and organizational culture.	Quantitative approach using Learning Organization Profile (LOP) and OCTAPACE instruments to measure learning organization and organizational culture.	The findings show that both cultural elements and structural mechanisms play a significant role in fostering a learning organization. Intangible aspects such as values and norms, along with tangible structures like systems and workflows, contribute to a supportive learning environment.	The study concludes that leadership style, organizational culture, and personal commitment are key factors in developing learning organizations. Schools need to balance performance demands with genuine educational improvement to avoid superficial or performative practices.

7	Teacher leadership and virtual communities: Unpacking teacher agency and distributed leadership	(Shal et al., 2024)	Simultaneously, distributed leadership empowers teachers to assume leadership roles within the cop, irrespective of their formal positions or seniority, involving activities such as guiding discussions	Employing a phenomenological research design with semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, participants were drawn from a single cop	Distributed leadership fosters a collaborative and inclusive environment within cops, where teacher leadership thrive	Virtual communities of practice (CoP) play an important role in nurturing teacher leadership skills through dynamic interaction between teacher agency and distributed leadership
8	Exploring Effective Leadership in Early Childhood Education	("Exploring Effective Leadership in Early Childhood Education," 2024)	Education (ECE), emphasizing how effective leadership enhances pedagogical outcomes and molds educational practices	Despite its prominence, the detailed dynamics, and wider implications of these leadership styles within ECE settings remain inadequately explored. This essay conducts a critical analysis of effective leadership, emphasizing the significance of pedagogical leadership	Underscores their crucial role and the challenges they encounter within the frameworks of distributed and pedagogical leadership	This paper reviews distributed and instructional leadership in early childhood education (ECE), highlighting their role in enhancing quality. Distributed leadership leverages team diversity, while instructional leadership improves teaching through professional development. Contextual factors like globalization impact practices. Recommendations include bolstering leadership training, incorporating educator insights in policy, and learning from international successes
9	Distributed Leadership: School Principals'	(Galdames-Calderón, 2023)	(a) to analyze school principals'	The methods were based on an examination of	The findings imply that school principals	Principals and teacher leaders must have the competencies necessary to

	Practices to Promote Teachers' Professional Development for School Improvement		practices aimed at creating professional development opportunities to promote teacher leadership for school improvement and (b) to relate the perceptions of teacher leaders regarding the professional development opportunities granted by principals	21 interviews, including individual semi-structured interviews with school principals and group interviews with teacher leaders at six public schools in Chile, as well as a documentary analysis of institutional educational projects using thematic analysis and NVivo 12 software	should regularly fulfill their responsibilities and pay attention to teachers' professional development to improve their schools	know how to use the available materiality, which grants the organizational conditions to carry out leadership in a course that motivates action towards school improvement. If competencies are linked to people, which are the second and third constitutive elements of distributed leadership, the third element is the materiality offered by the situation. The fifth element is meaning, as shown in Figure
10	The application of distributed leadership in middle school classroom	(Ling et al., 2023)	This mini-review explores the conceptual framework of distributed leadership and its application in middle school classrooms	Through a critical analysis of the existing literature	Highlighting the need to build effective communication channels, teamwork, and trust in distributed leadership. Further, the article acknowledges the limited empirical research on the effectiveness of distributed leadership in high school classrooms	This mini-review has explored the benefits of implementing Distributed leadership in high school classrooms. In The current educational environment, traditional teacher leadership the approach may not fully meet the diverse needs of students. The Distributed leadership approach, with an emphasis on collaboration and supporting each other, can overcome teacher shortages leadership and has many advantages

11	Exploring the Readiness of Schools for Distributed Leadership: Perspectives of Private School Teachers in Guyana	(Phillips et al., 2024)	The study focuses on several aspects of distributed leadership, including alignment with mission and vision, leadership support, organizational culture, professional development, trust, staff competencies, and Resource allocation	Systematically collect and analyze data to evaluate Teachers' perceptions of their school's readiness for distributed leadership in the private school sector in Guyana. Data collected through surveys Assess teachers' views on eleven dimensions of distributed leadership: leadership roles, strategic planning, curriculum development, community engagement, and data-driven decision-making	His study underscores the the need for strong professional development to encourage collaborative and innovative practices, considers them essential for the successful implementation of distributed leadership and effective and inclusive schools. It provides valuable insights for Administrators and policymakers on the benefits of a collaborative approach to educational leadership in K-12 schools	His study provides valuable insights into the current state and potential for implementing distributed leadership in Guyana's private education sector. The findings suggest a balanced distribution of formal and informal leadership roles within the schools, indicative of a conducive environment for distributed leadership. Additionally, there is a significant recognition of the importance of clear and shared vision and mission statements, alignment of school goals with the mission statement, and adherence to academic standards
12	The Impact of Leadership Styles on School Performance: A Comparative Study of Educational	(Harianto et al., 2025)	Ynthesize existing literature to identify how different leadership styles transformational, transactional, and distributed affect key	Using a qualitative approach through a systematic literature review (SLR). The aim of this study was to synthesize the existing literature to identify	Provide a comprehensive understanding of how leadership styles and management models can be aligned to	This literature review concludes that transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership are crucial for school performance. Transformational leadership

	Management Models		dimensions of school performance, such as teacher motivation, school climate, and student achievement	how different leadership stylestransformational, transactional, and distributed affect key dimensions of school performance, such as teacher motivation, school climate, and student achievement	improve school performance, offering valuable insights for educators, school leaders, and policymakers. Future research is encouraged to explore these findings through empirical studies and longitudinal data	boosts teacher motivation and student outcomes. Instructional leadership, supported by data, enhances teaching quality. Distributed leadership promotes collaboration and shared decision-making, contributing to sustained school improvement.
13	Enhancing School Management Through School Heads' Conflict Resolution and Team Building Expertise	(Fajinmi & Oloyede, 2025)	Effective school management is integral to fostering an environment conducive to learning and development	Explore the role of school principals in improving school management by leveraging their conflict resolution and team-building expertise. Drawing on the mixed method, this study examines how these leadership competencies contribute to fostering collaboration, reduce disputes, and promote a positive organizational culture in Educational Institutions	By emphasizing critical relationships between leadership practices, conflict management, and team dynamics, this study offers insights to improve the overall quality of school governance and educational outcomes	Effective conflict resolution, driven by emotional intelligence and clear policies, reduces tension and fosters a positive school climate. Likewise, team building through mentorship and shared leadership boosts collaboration and morale. However, school heads face barriers like resistance to change and limited resources. To overcome this, enhancing professional development, establishing clear policies, and allocating dedicated time and technology are essential strategies

14	A Systematic Literature Review about Team Diversity and Team Performance: Future Lines of Investigation	(Patrício & Franco, 2022)	This study aims to identify the different research paths that help us understand the emerging aspects explaining how team diversity influences team performance.	<p>Type of Study: Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Data Source: Articles collected from the Web of Science (WoS) database. Inclusion Criteria: Published between 1996 and 2020, categorized under management or business, covering topics like knowledge diversity, team heterogeneity, team wisdom, cross-functional project teams, and team composition.</p>	<p>Identified different research paths to understand how team diversity influences team performance, and proposed future lines of investigation for the theme. - Systematized existing literature through a framework based on three clusters: (1) Team Knowledge Diversity, (2) Diversity Effects, (3) Desirable Outcomes of Diversity. - Enriched the systematization of academic literature on the topic by providing an original framework and a future research agenda organized by the literature clusters.</p>	<p>Despite the existence of multiple studies analyzing team diversity and its impact on team performance, this research revealed several aspects that limit the comprehension of previously identified diversity traits in order to promote a dialog that allows the integration of the existing research to achieve effective team diversity synergies, based on greater levels of communication and coordination. The current range of team diversity research works as a barrier that places potentially positive results on hold. Considering environmental pressure and increased complexity, and given the importance of Team Diversity in innovation processes and innovation strategy, it is necessary to address the ambiguity of the Team Diversity concept, creating a clear definition of the relevant diversity traits and their implications according to team typology.</p>
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15	Forms of distributed leadership – a case study of six workplaces in eldercare	(Eriksson et al., 2025)	The concept of distributed leadership has been addressed in previous research, but few studies link their analysis to current and comparative empirical	This Swedish eldercare case study examined six workplaces transitioning to trust-based, distributed leadership. Using a realistic evaluation	Analysis of program theories revealed that distributed leadership's manifestation is shaped by differing motives. Key	<p>On this basis, it will be possible to establish a Team Diversity concept to support a desirable impact on innovation outcomes and firm performance, with clear benefits to the improvement of decision-making processes. Diversity should also be used as a knowledge integrator and to support competitiveness, particularly in more complex environments. The major limitation of this study is related to the fact that the search for articles with the keywords Start-up and Spin-Off, when articulated with Knowledge Diversity, Team Heterogeneity, Team Wisdom, Team Diversity, Cross-functional Project Team, and Team Composition, did not return relevant articles for analysis.</p> <p>The study found that successful distributed leadership, regardless of approach, hinges on a relational agency built from shared vision, clear roles, and a learning-focused,</p>
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studies on processes and conditions enabling or hindering the development of distributed leadership. This specific study aims to identify and analyze mechanisms that enable or hinder the development of distributed leadership among employees in eldercare	framework, it analyzed program theories, key mechanisms, and their interaction with context. Comparative analysis then identified critical processes for realizing distributed leadership.	mechanisms for its development include formalization, participatory implementation, and both vertical and horizontal sense-making processes	dialogue-driven relationship between management and employees. Additionally, adequate resources are critical to make taking on more responsibilities attractive
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Discussion

Enacted to Facilitate Collaboration Among Principals, Teachers, and Education Staff in Elementary Schools

This systematic literature review synthesized 15 peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2026. The synthesis reveals that distributed leadership in elementary school settings is not a monolithic construct but a dynamic, context-sensitive process that unfolds through intentional practices, synergistic mechanisms, enabling conditions, and contextual contingencies. A consistent finding across the reviewed studies is that effective distributed leadership moves beyond mere delegation to a deliberate cultivation of leadership capacity among all school members. Printy & Liu (2021) conducted a large-scale cross-national analysis involving 32 countries and found that teachers perceive a conducive school culture when they have genuine opportunities to lead, regardless of formal position. This suggests that enactment is not about creating new formal roles but about recognizing and leveraging expertise wherever it resides. Similarly, Tenha & Makamure (2024) examined primary schools in Zimbabwe and concluded that instructional leaders demonstrate a concerted effort to enhance school performance by delegating responsibilities to staff members, thereby creating opportunities for professional growth. Their work underscores the alignment between instructional leadership and distributed leadership, showing that when principals share instructional leadership tasks, both teacher development and student outcomes improve.

Galdames-Calderón (2023) provided a more nuanced conceptualization by identifying five constitutive elements of distributed leadership: people, materiality, meaning, competencies, and professional development. In her study of Chilean public schools, she found that principals must possess competencies to use available materiality such as time, resources, and structures to grant organizational conditions that motivate action toward school improvement. Ismail et al. (2021) reinforced this by demonstrating that the synergy of distributed leadership in district education offices surpasses traditional methods, highlighting the importance of trust-based social interaction and authority distribution. Nadeem (2024) further argued that distributed leadership transforms the traditional hierarchical model into a dynamic and collaborative process, requiring shared vision, clear role sharing, and adaptive leadership.

The enactment of distributed leadership is thus characterized by four interconnected sub-dimensions: intentional delegation of authority, investment in teacher leadership development, creation of supportive material conditions, and alignment of distributed practices with instructional goals. When these elements are present, distributed leadership becomes a vehicle for organizational development rather than merely a rhetorical commitment. Central to the literature is the concept of synergy the outcome of collaborative interactions that produce results greater than individual efforts. The

reviewed studies identify several mediating mechanisms through which distributed leadership fosters synergy.

Yang & Chang (2025) conducted a quantitative survey of 593 primary school teachers in Hebei Province, China, and found that professional learning communities (PLCs) fully mediate the relationship between perceived distributed leadership and teacher professional development. This result is pivotal because it demonstrates that distributed leadership does not directly enhance teacher development; rather, it creates the conditions for PLCs to thrive, which in turn drive professional growth. The PLC serves as a synergy-generating mechanism where teachers collaboratively plan, reflect, and learn from one another. Phillips et al. (2024) explored private schools in Guyana and found that teachers' readiness for distributed leadership was strongly associated with the presence of clear and shared vision statements, alignment of school goals with mission, and adherence to academic standards. Their study suggests that synergy depends on a cognitive anchor a shared vision that aligns individual efforts toward collective goals.

Ling et al. (2023) added that effective communication channels, teamwork, and trust are essential for distributed leadership to overcome teacher shortages and meet diverse student needs. In their review of middle school classrooms, they emphasized that distributed leadership creates a supportive environment where teachers collaborate to solve instructional challenges, thereby generating synergy. Shal et al. (2024) introduced a contemporary mechanism by examining virtual communities of practice (vCoP). Their phenomenological study revealed that distributed leadership fosters a collaborative and inclusive environment within vCoPs, where teacher leadership thrives through dynamic interaction between teacher agency and distributed leadership. This finding extends synergy mechanisms beyond physical school boundaries, showing that digital spaces can also serve as arenas for shared leadership and collective capacity building. Eriksson et al. (2025) similarly identified that distributed leadership hinges on a relational agency built from shared vision, clear roles, and a learning-focused, dialogue-driven relationship between management and employees. Their study in eldercare workplaces, while not educational, offers transferable insights into how synergy is sustained through ongoing dialogue and reciprocal accountability. Together, these mechanisms suggest that synergy is constructed through structured collaborative practices (PLCs, vCoPs), cognitive alignment (shared vision), relational foundations (trust, communication), and distributed agency.

Mechanisms Enable Synergy In Pursuing A Shared Vision

The effectiveness of distributed leadership, however, is contingent upon enabling conditions that support its implementation, as well as barriers that can undermine it. A recurring finding is that school principals' leadership style plays a critical role. The literature review on transformational and distributed leadership (Makanjuola, et al.,

2024) concluded that principals embodying transformational characteristics visionary thinking, inspiration, and empowerment are more open to implementing distributed leadership. Wilson Heenan et al. (2024) extended this by exploring primary school and system leaders in Ireland, finding that participants demonstrated a positive disposition toward transformational school leadership and recognized the need for further research into synergies between transformational and distributed approaches. This indicates that an integrative leadership approach, combining the visionary aspects of transformational leadership with the collaborative distribution of tasks, may be particularly effective. Eriksson et al. (2025) emphasized that adequate resources are critical to make taking on more responsibilities attractive to staff; without sufficient time, funding, and support, distributed leadership can become burdensome rather than empowering.

Galdames Calderón (2023) similarly highlighted that principals must possess competencies to use available materiality schedules, spaces, professional development budgets to create organizational conditions that facilitate distributed leadership. Barriers were also widely documented. Fajinmi & Oloyede (2025) identified resistance to change and limited resources as major obstacles, recommending enhanced professional development, clear policies, and dedicated time for team activities. Resistance often stems from entrenched hierarchical cultures where teachers and staff are unaccustomed to taking on leadership roles. Printy & Liu (2021) found that country context significantly shapes distributed leadership outcomes, suggesting that cultural norms regarding authority and decision-making can either enable or hinder distribution. In some contexts, hierarchical structures may create role ambiguity or accountability gaps when leadership is shared. Thus, enabling conditions include transformational leadership dispositions, adequate resources, clear role definitions, and a supportive organizational culture, while barriers include resource constraints, cultural resistance, lack of clarity in roles, and insufficient professional development.

While the majority of studies advocate for distributed leadership, a subset of literature presents conflicting evidence or critical perspectives that question its universality. Bush & Glover (2014) critiqued that in hierarchical organizational cultures common in some Asian and African countries distributed leadership can lead to role confusion and reduced accountability if not implemented with clear structures. Similarly, Hallinger (2018) argued that distributed leadership may weaken the authority of school principals and hinder the achievement of a shared vision, particularly in contexts where strong, centralized leadership is culturally valued and legally mandated. These critical perspectives align with the findings of Printy & Liu (2021), who demonstrated that country context significantly moderates the relationship between distributed leadership and school outcomes. Their cross-country analysis revealed that in some nations, teachers' reports of distributed leadership were lower, and the effects on school culture varied. This suggests that what works in one cultural context may not be directly transferable to another. The conflicting evidence

underscores that distributed leadership is not a one-size-fits-all solution; rather, its success depends on alignment with organizational culture, clarity of roles, and contextual readiness. Yang & Chang (2025) and Wilson Heenan et al. (2024) both acknowledged that the effectiveness of distributed leadership is mediated by contextual factors, and that future research should explore hybrid models that combine distributed and hierarchical elements to suit local needs.

The findings of this review can be interpreted through the lens of Spillane's (2006) distributed leadership framework, which conceptualizes leadership as stretched over people, tasks, and situations. The reviewed studies consistently confirm that leadership emerges from interactions among school actors rather than residing solely in the principal (Printy & Liu, 2021; Tenha & Makamure, 2024; Galdames-Calderón, 2023). This interactionist perspective aligns with the theme of synergy, where collaborative mechanisms such as PLCs and vCoPs serve as the "situations" in which leadership is enacted. The mediating role of professional learning communities, identified by Yang & Chang (2025), also resonates with Wenger's (1998) communities of practice theory, which posits that learning and identity formation occur through participation in social communities. PLCs function as communities of practice where teachers negotiate meaning, develop shared repertoires, and collectively advance their practice. The finding that PLCs fully mediate the relationship between distributed leadership and teacher professional development suggests that distributed leadership primarily works by strengthening these collaborative structures, rather than directly influencing individual outcomes.

Despite the richness of the synthesized evidence, several gaps remain. First, most studies focus on teachers as the primary recipients of distributed leadership, with little attention to education staff (administrative personnel, support staff) as co-leaders in organizational development. Phillips et al. (2024) and Ismail et al. (2021) are exceptions, but the role of non-teaching staff remains underexplored. Second, there is a lack of longitudinal research examining how distributed leadership structures evolve over time and sustain shared vision. Most studies are cross-sectional, capturing a single point in time. Eriksson et al. (2025) and Wilson Heenan et al. (2024) call for longitudinal designs to understand how distributed leadership develops and how its effects persist. Third, the conflicting evidence regarding hierarchical versus distributed approaches highlights the need for research that examines contextual moderators such as cultural values, school size, and resource availability more systematically. Future studies should adopt mixed-methods designs to capture both the "what" and the "how" of distributed leadership across diverse settings.

Building on the thematic synthesis and theoretical integration, this study proposes an Integrated Distributed Leadership Model for Elementary Schools. The model conceptualizes distributed leadership as a dynamic system comprising four interconnected components: (1) Leadership Enactment – intentional practices of delegation, teacher leadership cultivation, and alignment with instructional goals

(Tenha & Makamure, 2024; Galdames-Calderón, 2023; Nadeem, 2024); (2) Mediating Mechanisms – professional learning communities, collaborative routines, trust-based relationships, and virtual communities of practice that transform enactment into synergy (Yang & Chang, 2025; Ling et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2024; Shal et al., 2024); (3) Enabling Conditions – shared vision, clear role articulation, adequate resources, supportive organizational culture, and transformational leadership dispositions that facilitate implementation (Eriksson et al., 2025; Mankanjuola et al., 2024; Wilson Heenan et al., 2024; Fajinmi & Oloyede, 2025); and (4) Organizational Outcomes – teacher professional development, instructional quality, school effectiveness, and sustained realization of a shared vision (Ismail et al., 2021; Harianto et al., 2025; Shal et al., 2024). This model emphasizes that distributed leadership is not a linear cause-effect process but a recursive system where enactment, mechanisms, and conditions interact to produce outcomes. It also accounts for conflicting evidence by situating distributed leadership within its broader context, acknowledging that the model's effectiveness depends on the presence of enabling conditions and the careful navigation of barriers.

In conclusion, this systematic literature review demonstrates that distributed leadership in elementary schools, when enacted intentionally and supported by enabling conditions, can generate synergy among principals, teachers, and education staff to realize a shared vision. The synthesis reveals that professional learning communities and trust-based collaboration serve as critical mechanisms linking distributed leadership to professional development and school improvement. However, the conflicting evidence cautions that distributed leadership is not universally applicable; its success depends on contextual readiness and cultural alignment. The proposed integrated model provides a framework for both research and practice, guiding future investigations into the dynamic interplay of enactment, mechanisms, conditions, and outcomes. By addressing the gaps identified particularly the role of education staff, longitudinal dynamics, and contextual moderators future research can further refine our understanding of how distributed leadership builds sustainable synergy in elementary school organizations.

D. Conclusions

This study confirms that the Distributed Leadership Model is not merely a theoretical alternative but a pragmatic necessity for organizational development in elementary schools. From this systematic literature review suggests that the Distributed Leadership Model operates less as a theoretical alternative and more as a pragmatic necessity for organizational development in elementary schools, with effective school leadership appearing to transcend the solitary efforts of the principal and thrive instead on the deliberate, systematic synergy of principals, teachers, and education personnel. By leveraging collective expertise and shared accountability, schools may be better equipped to navigate complex challenges and foster continuous improvement, translating shared vision into tangible outcomes such as enhanced

instructional quality and a more cohesive school culture. However, these findings should be interpreted within several constraints inherent to a systematic literature review, including potential publication bias, heterogeneity across study designs and operational definitions of distributed leadership, and a predominance of cross-sectional research that limits causal inference, meaning the patterns identified here should be viewed as synthesized evidence rather than definitive proof. For practice, the evidence implies that principals should shift from top-down managers to “leaders of leaders” who delegate authority and cultivate leadership capacity, while teachers and education personnel must embrace expanded roles as co-leaders with ownership over initiatives. For policy, the findings suggest that professional development should move beyond training individual leaders to instead focus on building collaborative leadership teams and systems that support distributed practices. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to examine how distributed structures evolve and correlate with long-term student outcomes, comparative studies across diverse elementary contexts to identify facilitating or hindering factors, and investigations into how digital tools can support communication and coordinated action within distributed leadership frameworks.

E. Acknowledgement

I thank the big family of SDN 018 North Bengkulu.

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