

Understanding Teacher Perspectives on Distributed Leadership to Optimize Engagement

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Understanding Teacher Perspectives on Distributed Leadership to Optimize Engagement

Distributed leadership has garnered substantial attention and research focus. However, there is limited research exploring teachers' perspectives on distributed leadership and their specific needs to fully engage with and take ownership of leadership activities. This qualitative case study addressed this gap by interviewing teachers and principals at two elementary schools to understand how administrative interactions impact teacher motivation and to identify optimal conditions for their participation. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 8-10 teachers per school representing diverse experience levels explored their experiences with distributed leadership. Data was coded inductively to identify themes related to administrative practices that increase or hinder teacher acceptance, engagement, and ownership. The study was grounded in distributed leadership and symbolic interactionism frameworks, emphasizing the significance of relationships and the process of creating a shared understanding between administrators and teacher leaders in leadership, with a hypothesis that certain leadership interactions can promote teacher buy-in. The findings inform strategies to improve distributed leadership engagement among teachers, potentially improving the implementation of school initiatives. This research fills an important gap in understanding teacher needs within distributed models, helping leaders optimize conditions for their involvement.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of school leadership, various styles, including transformational, instructional, and transactional leadership, offer unique approaches to guiding school communities. Transformational leadership inspires and motivates staff to exceed expectations through a shared vision and strong personal connections (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Instructional leadership emphasizes improving teaching and learning outcomes through direct involvement in curriculum and instruction (Hallinger, 2011). Transactional leadership, by contrast, is built on structured exchanges of performance and rewards, cultivating compliance through clear expectations (Northouse, 2021). These traditional models, often reliant on a single heroic leader, have gradually given way to distributed leadership, a paradigm that emphasizes shared responsibilities and collective ownership of goals (Spillane, 2006).

Over the years, educational leadership has shifted to address the increasing complexity of school environments and the diverse needs of students and staff. This transition reflects an understanding that schools thrive when they leverage the expertise and capacities of all staff, promoting a collaborative framework to achieve organizational goals.

Among the models of leadership, distributed leadership stands out as particularly effective in fostering engagement and commitment across an organization. Recent studies highlight how this approach enhances teacher collaboration, innovation, and overall job satisfaction (Harris et al., 2022; Amels et al., 2020). Unlike other styles, distributed leadership emphasizes the interplay between leaders and followers, empowering informal leaders and encouraging shared accountability (Diamond & Spillane, 2016). In K-12 education, it involves sharing responsibilities across district leaders, principals, teachers, and staff, creating

opportunities for collective ownership of goals. For instance, a school-wide instructional improvement initiative might leverage cross-functional teams to design curriculum-aligned strategies, address resource needs, and deliver professional development. By engaging diverse expertise, this collaborative approach deepens staff commitment and ensures a shared sense of purpose in achieving meaningful outcomes.

This study focused on distributed leadership as a lens to explore how leadership practices have optimized teacher engagement, motivation, and ownership of school initiatives. While other leadership models have their merits, distributed leadership's focus on encouraging collaboration and shared responsibility across all levels of staff makes it uniquely suited to building the collective ownership necessary for addressing the complex challenges schools face today. Understanding the dynamics of distributed leadership, particularly from the perspectives of teachers, offers valuable insights into how schools can create supportive and empowering environments for all staff members.

Literature on distributed leadership in the field of education largely focuses on the purpose of distributed leadership and the practices administrators commonly implement when utilizing distributed leadership techniques (e.g., Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Gronn, 2000, 2002, 2016; Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Spillane et al., 2015; Spillane, 2005, 2006; Tian et al., 2016; Woods, 2016). Although research draws associations between distributed leadership practices and school improvement (e.g., Harris, 2005), most research is focused on leading and managing distributed leadership practices to improve learning outcomes. For example, Harris et al. (2022) explained that many studies on distributed leadership focus on the "purpose, form, and nature of the distribution" (p. 441). They explained further that research emphasized how leadership was allocated and, more specifically, the role that the patterns of distribution played in

the success of distributed leadership. Leithwood et al. (2009) stressed that when purposeful or planned, leadership distribution was more likely to positively impact school development and initiate change. Supporting this perspective, some research has affirmed that successful leadership distribution results from deliberate design (Day et al., 2009).

In addition, Harris et al. (2022) identified that many studies explore the relationship between distributed leadership and other variables like trust and staff happiness. For instance, Amels et al. (2020) analyzed the relationship between the effects of distributed leadership on team innovation and teacher mentoring and feedback processes on teaching in a multicultural classroom. The findings suggest distributed leadership's clear and positive impact on teachers' collaboration, collegiality, and motivation to contribute to educational change. Sun and Xia (2018) researched the impact of distributed leadership on teachers' self-efficacy, school leadership, job satisfaction, and leadership effects. Results indicated teacher job satisfaction is specifically linked to their involvement in the decision-making process within schools and the extent of that involvement. The results of these studies show a strong relationship between distributed leadership practices and teachers' overall success and happiness.

Distributed leadership can be successfully studied at the school level. Further, focusing this type of research on teachers as the people who will be accepting and engaging in the distributed leadership work can allow for a greater understanding of their needs (OECD, 2013). Despite that, the overwhelming focus of leadership research continues to be on the actions of the formal administrative leader or heroic actor (i.e., the individual who plays a significant and proactive role in leadership in an organization). With distributed leadership being one of the most researched models of leadership (Gumas et al., 2020), it is curious that there is a gap in

research regarding the perspectives of teachers and how they view distributed leadership (Sun & Xia, 2018).

Problem Statement and Study Significance

Implementing distributed leadership practices in schools may be one strategy to meet the diverse and complex needs of educational institutions. District leaders understand the limitations of attempting to lead through single heroic efforts and instead must delegate leadership over multiple leaders throughout the system (Spillane, 2006). Interestingly, given the importance of the roles of both formal administrative leaders and informal teacher leaders in distributed leadership practices, there is a noticeable lack of research on the specific needs and challenges faced by teachers, hindering a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to effective educational leadership at all levels. However, Spillane (2006) notes, “few have investigated how leadership takes shape in the interactions among leaders, followers, and their situation” (p. 57). Harris (2013) agrees and points out there is a lack of research on the “actual practice of leadership [that] adequately captures the interrelationships and interactions between those in formal and informal leadership positions” (p. 4). More research exploring the relationship that teachers have with distributed leadership and ultimately what informal teacher leaders want and need to accept or participate in distributed leadership practices has the potential to inform future distributed leadership practices. This, in turn, can enhance the probability of successful implementation, leading to improved outcomes for students. In the end, a deeper understanding of the factors that affect teacher involvement will impact leaders’ ability to prepare an environment that will increase the likelihood that teachers will be motivated to accept, effectively engage in, and take ownership of the kinds of distributed leadership activities that will allow school districts to better meet the needs of all students.

Key Terms

The following key terms provide for a common understanding of the language utilized within this study.

Acceptance. The psychological state wherein an individual demonstrates openness and readiness to undertake a particular task or activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, a teacher who demonstrates openness and readiness to undertake the challenges and opportunities presented to them by embracing a new curriculum is demonstrating acceptance. In contrast, a teacher resisting a change in teaching methodology would not be showing acceptance.

Distributed Leadership. A leadership paradigm that emphasizes the collective and interrelated nature of leadership roles within an organization (Spillane, 2006). This approach recognizes both formal and informal leadership roles, and it is believed to enhance efficiency and productivity by leveraging the capabilities of all staff (Goksoy, 2015). For instance, a school where teachers, administrators, and support staff share responsibilities in decision-making exemplifies distributed leadership. A school where only the principal makes decisions would not be an example of distributed leadership.

Engagement. A psychological state characterized by an individual's active interaction and involvement with tasks, people, or concepts (Fredricks et al., 2004). A teacher actively participating in a professional development workshop would be an example of engagement. A teacher merely attending the workshop but not participating would not be considered engaged.

Formal Leaders. Individuals who hold officially recognized and designated positions of leadership within an organization, often requiring specific training, licensure, or credentials (Northouse, 2018). Examples of formal leaders in a school setting might include principals or

department chairs. A classroom teacher, though important, would not be considered a formal leader unless given additional responsibilities or titles.

Followers. Individuals within an organization who, while they may not hold a leadership title, contribute to the group's purpose by completing tasks assigned by leaders (Hollander, 1992). For example, a teacher on special assignment who has taken on a leadership role in planning a new school-wide literacy initiative may organize a committee of classroom teachers to provide input and execute components of the initiative. While the teacher leader spearheads the effort, the classroom teachers act as followers, offering perspectives, implementing prescribed activities in their classrooms, and reporting data and feedback. In this scenario, the classroom teachers are enacting the follower role by working collaboratively under the direction of the teacher leader to accomplish the goals of the literacy initiative. Their active participation as followers enables the distributed leadership model to function.

Identified Leaders. Individuals within an organization who have been singled out to take responsibility for the leadership of a specific project or process, regardless of their formal title (Bolden, 2011). For instance, a teacher appointed to lead a school improvement initiative would be an identified leader. A teacher not given any specific leadership role would not be an identified leader.

Informal Leaders. Informal leaders are individuals within an organization who demonstrate leadership and influence their peers without holding official authority or leadership titles. For example, a teacher who regularly models effective instructional strategies for colleagues, shares resources and expertise, and gives constructive feedback could be considered an informal leader. Similarly, a custodian who boosts morale by building relationships with students and staff and proactively addresses facility needs could exert informal leadership. The

main distinction between formal and informal leadership is that informal leaders organically earn influence through their competencies, relationships, and contributions, regardless of their position or tenure. They lead by doing, not by designation. By removing hierarchy and titles from the equation, the concept of informal leadership recognizes leadership potential within all roles.

Licensed Employees. Individuals working in a school whose positions require specific degrees and licensure from an educational or health licensing entity. For example, a school psychologist with a professional license is a licensed employee. However, a school custodian, while a valuable member of the school community, is not considered a licensed employee.

Motivate. The act of stimulating an individual's interest or enthusiasm for a task or activity, often with the goal of promoting behavior toward achieving specific objectives (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, a principal encouraging teachers to embrace a new teaching methodology is attempting to motivate. However, a principal who imposes a new methodology without explaining its benefits or offering support may fail to motivate.

Ownership. The act of assuming accountability and responsibility for a task or activity, often characterized by proactive engagement and a commitment to executing assigned tasks (Reeves, 2009). A teacher who actively modifies and improves a curriculum to better meet student needs is taking ownership. A teacher who merely delivers the curriculum as provided, without adding personal input or modifications, is not demonstrating ownership.

Positional Leaders. Leaders who derive their authority from their titles or job responsibilities within the organization (Northouse, 2018). A school superintendent, by virtue of their position, is a positional leader. A classroom teacher, without any additional responsibilities or authority, would not be a positional leader.

Principals. Licensed professionals who have been assigned the task of managing and leading a school building (Fullan, 2014). They are examples of formal, positional leaders. Typically, one leader at a school building is designated the principal, but there are many other administrative leaders (e.g., guidance counselors) who do not act in the role of principal.

Staff. Paid individuals who work in an organization, contributing to its overall function and objectives (Northouse, 2018). This could include teachers, administrators, and support staff such as school nurses. Parents, while integral to the school community, are not considered staff.

Superintendents. Licensed professionals who have been given the responsibility of overseeing and leading an entire school district (Kowalski et al., 2011). They are formal, positional leaders. A school principal, while having formal, positional leadership authority and responsibilities, is not tasked with the scope of work required of a superintendent.

Teachers. Licensed professionals tasked with delivering education to students in a specific grade or subject area (Darling-Hammond, 2006). For example, a licensed individual instructing a third-grade class or a high school math course would be considered a teacher. An instructional assistant, while instrumental in supporting students, would not be classified as a teacher under this definition.

Traditional Leaders. Leaders who predominantly set the direction, make decisions, inspire staff, and react to crises, frequently perceived in a heroic or singularly responsible role (Senge, 2002). For example, a principal who makes all the decisions and sets the course for a school is acting as a traditional leader. A principal who shares decision making with staff and encourages diverse input is not functioning as a traditional leader in this sense.

Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Framework

Spillane and Diamond (2007) explain that “distributed leadership is a conceptual framework for thinking about and studying school leadership and management” involving two aspects, the “leader plus” aspect and the “practice” aspect (p. 7). The “leader plus” aspect recognizes that leading and managing organizations requires more than just the administrative leader; it requires multiple individuals in the organization. The “practice” aspect frames the act of implementing this concept through the lens of examining the joint interactions of school leaders, followers, and their specific situations. In distributed leadership, necessary, interdependent relationships between these factors influence leadership practice and, ultimately, organizational outcomes. In addition, optimal distributed leadership practices require an in-depth understanding of the systems and relationships between individuals who are collectively leading. Analyzing these connections provides a comprehensive insight into how individuals in the system engage with each other, their perspectives on these interactions, and how these interactions impact their willingness to participate in distributed leadership approaches.

Symbolic Interactionism

The symbolic interaction perspective, also known as symbolic interactionism, revolves around the symbolic meaning individuals create and employ in their social interactions. This perspective guided the focus of this research. The theory focuses on the meanings that people place on interactions with others and concludes that people’s behavior is influenced by interactions with each other and that people make conscious decisions about how they will act based on the situations they are in (Blumer, 1969).

Herbert Blumer developed three premises of the theory:

1. Individuals engage with things based on the meanings that they already have for them, including physical objects, categories of human beings, institutions, guiding ideals, and situations they encounter in everyday life.
2. The meaning of such things comes from one's social interaction with them.
3. The meanings are addressed and modified through an interpretive process used by the individual when dealing with the things they encounter (Blumer, 1969).

Applying these premises, the symbolic interaction theory allows researchers to analyze society by assessing the subjective meanings that people impose on objects, events, and behaviors.

These subjective meanings are important because they affect how people behave based on *what they perceive to be true* not just on *what they know to be objectively true*. As a result, the theory reasons that society is socially constructed through human interpretations of interactions (Crossman, 2018). Within the context of distributed leadership, symbolic interaction theory can help researchers better understand how teachers perceive and make sense of their roles, responsibilities, and interactions as they are provided with opportunities to exert leadership within their settings. This perspective also provides a tool to reveal the dynamics between school administrators as formal leaders and teachers as informal leaders; ultimately, symbolic interactionism provides a lens to evaluate staff perspectives in order to highlight the strategies that can cater to teachers' distinct needs within the framework of distributed leadership, thus their desire to participate in, engage in, and take ownership of distributed leadership mechanisms.

Using the theoretical lenses of distributed leadership and symbolic interactionism and the case study qualitative research process, the study described how the relationships between the individuals in the distributed leadership process impact teachers' interactions and defined what

teachers need to accept, fully engage in, and take ownership of distributed leadership practices.

The study used interviews as the primary method of data collection in order to focus on the meaning that people place on interactions with others and how others' behavior is influenced by social interactions to understand:

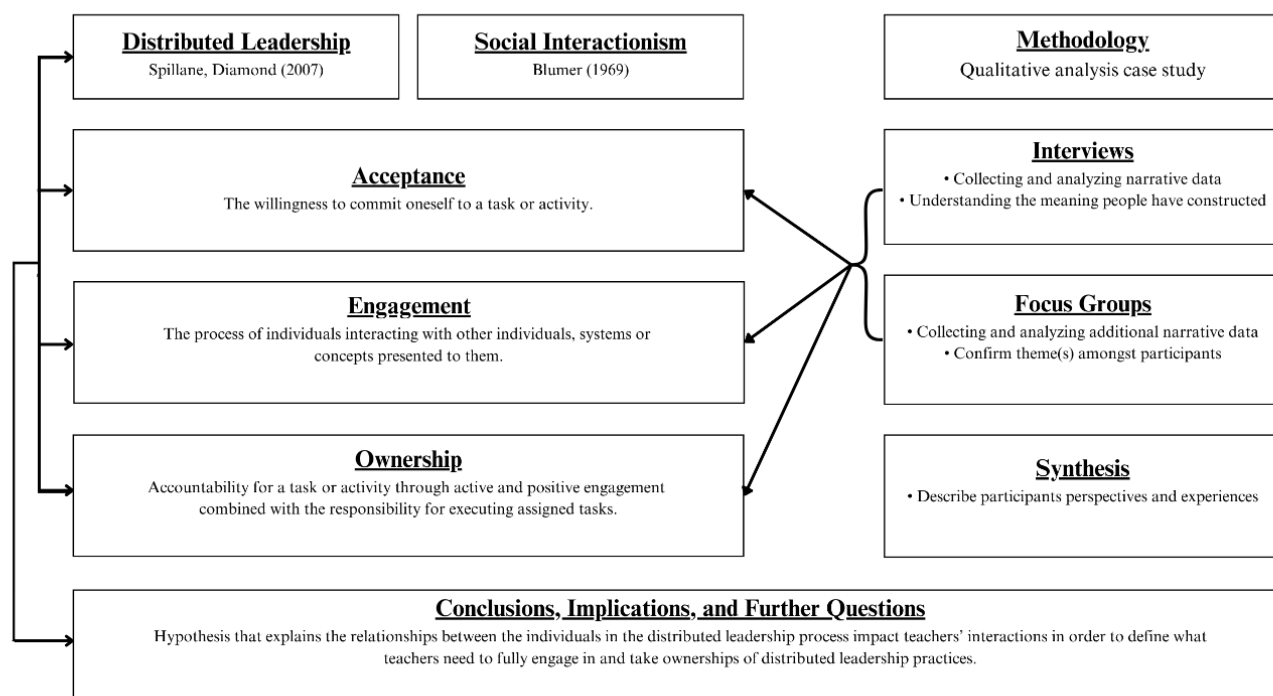
- How leaders and followers interact (administrators and teachers),
- How staff members' subjective meanings regarding district and building systems impact their desire to accept, engage in, and take ownership of distributed leadership.
- What type of interactions encourage teachers to accept, engage in, and take ownership of distributed leadership?

Research findings will inform what organizational leaders can do to implement strategies, improving the likelihood that teachers will engage in distributed leadership mechanisms. The goal is that these practices contribute to the improvement of school systems, creating a conducive environment for enhanced student learning.

Figure 2 displays the conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Purpose of the Study

Literature on distributed leadership is primarily centered on the various aspects of successfully leading and managing distributed leadership, not on how to approach the school staff who will be doing the work (Harris, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2009). There exists limited research specifically addressing the needs of informal leaders in education. Although ample evidence describes effective strategies for developing systems and nurturing relationships, building a school culture that supports the distribution of leadership to teachers in informal roles is less frequently examined. The connection to the unique needs of these individuals remains tangential, highlighting a gap in addressing their specific experiences and needs. This limitation arises as informal leaders were not the primary subjects of the research, nor were they the direct source of the information collected for most extant research. This gap in dedicated research on the needs of informal leaders impedes the establishment of a more direct and comprehensive link

between recommended distributed leadership development practices of formal leaders and the specific requirements of informal leaders within the school environment.

As a result, understanding the conditions that are fundamental to the change process (i.e., what activities people are required to accept, engage in, and take ownership of) is essential (Fullan, 2005). To that end, this case study described how the relationships between the individuals in the distributed leadership process impact teachers' interactions to define what teachers need to fully engage in and take ownership of distributed leadership practices.

Researchers can then better focus on uncovering what motivates teachers to participate in and ultimately take ownership of distributed leadership processes. With a deeper understanding of the requirements for informal leaders to fully participate in distributed leadership practices, organizations can use the data to identify prerequisite conditions and provide ongoing staff support. This, in turn, will increase their ability to carry out distributed leadership roles, implement school initiatives, and drive instructional changes to improve student learning. Ultimately, such findings can improve the understanding of what organizational leaders can proactively do to increase the likelihood that their staff will engage and take ownership in distributed leadership mechanisms.

Summary and Study Organization

Distributed leadership in the K-12 education setting requires that district and building leaders share leadership responsibility with staff members, who will then engage in and take ownership of specific organizational goals and objectives. By gaining deeper insights into the requirements for staff to actively participate in distributed leadership practices, organizations can leverage this knowledge to pinpoint areas requiring support and cater to the needs of informal teacher leaders. Consequently, this support will boost informal leadership capacity to engage in

distributed leadership roles, implement school initiatives, and drive instructional changes to improve student learning. Unfortunately, research has failed to examine what informal leaders, commonly certified teachers, need in order to accept, engage in, and take ownership of distributed leadership tasks. As a result, understanding what motivates teachers is essential for the effectiveness of distributed leadership endeavors (Fullan, 2005). With this purpose, this case study explores how the relationships between the individuals in the distributed leadership process impact teachers' interactions and defines what teachers need to accept, engage in, and take ownership of distributed leadership practices.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

Context of the Problem

The organization of a typical school building or district is not unlike other industries. There are identified leaders who hold the responsibility of providing guidance and management of the staff and organization, leadership and management, skilled workers who are hired to carry forward the purpose and mission of the organization through their daily activities, and support staff who hold critical positions of maintaining the infrastructure and assisting the skilled workers. From a traditional leadership perspective, this form of leadership can be “defined as the process of influencing a group to reach goals,” whereby the leader affects change based on the impact their intentional engagements have on a person or group” (Goksoy, 2015, p. 110). Traditional leaders set the direction, make the decisions, motivate staff, and respond to crises in what others often perceive as heroic (Senge, 2002). In today’s industries, however, given the speed with which organizations are required to change to keep up with the needs and desires of a diverse social and technological world, organizations now need a more distributed approach that enables them to shift gears quickly and stay relevant (Thorpe et al., 2011). With the ever-changing needs of students, instruction, and staff members implementing the work, education agencies must also consider sharing leadership if they are to continue to meet the needs of the students in their care.

The distributed perspective on leadership encompasses two primary components that include the *leader-plus aspect*, the idea that both formal and informal leaders should contribute to the leadership of an organization, and the *practice aspect*, whereby the people without formal leadership roles will interact between and amongst each other in a manner that allows everyone to take part in leading and meeting the outcomes set before them (Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007 & Spillane & Healey, 2010).

Analyzing research on formal and informal leadership relationships, factors influencing teacher involvement, and the impacts of distributed leadership implementation provides insights into teachers' needs. Researchers can then better focus on uncovering what motivates teachers to participate and ultimately take ownership of distributed leadership processes. With heightened awareness of the staff's requirements for active involvement in distributed leadership practices, organizations can use the data to identify prerequisite conditions and ongoing support teachers as informal leaders need. This, in turn, will increase their ability to carry out distributed leadership roles, implement school initiatives, and drive instructional changes to improve student learning. Ultimately, this study intends to collect data that can inform understanding of what organizational leaders can proactively do to increase the likelihood that all staff will engage and take ownership in distributed leadership mechanisms.

Review of the Literature

Foundations of Distributed Leadership

There are countless resources on leadership, leadership qualities, and learning how to become a leader. The different leadership styles are often peddled as the mechanism that will allow the leader to become the hero of the story. Spillane pushes back on the "heroic acts of leadership" where the adding together of the individual efforts of leaders becomes the narrative about why an individual or an organization is great and suggests instead that truly effective leadership focuses on the practice of leadership (Spillane, 2006). This shifts the conversation from "who did what" to "how was it done?" (Day et al., 2011; Harris, 2013).

Effective Leadership Practice

While distributed leadership is not a new practice, its successful implementation in the educational environment is less understood. It is essential to recognize the formal and informal

aspects of the school organization and the importance of the relationships between those formal and informal partners.

Cherkowski and Walker (2018) conducted a study that examined if distributed leadership improves collaborative culture in schools and if those relationships provide a framework for continuous learning in schools. They found that principals who embrace and develop informal teacher leaders establish an environment where staff across all roles feel empowered to initiate improvement efforts. This results in shared learning and growth amongst staff and expanding teachers' leadership capacities through these mentoring relationships resulting in overall improvement in teachers' performance. In addition, the authors identified this type of collaboration and "interdependence of agency" as factors in distributed leadership (p. 40). An emphasis on shared teaching, learning, and leading relationships amongst staff provides valuable insights into how distributed leadership can strengthen a school's initiative implementation capacity. By sharing agency and blurring hierarchical boundaries, distributed leadership allows diverse perspectives to be elevated, and a more robust and comprehensive approach to initiative implementation can take root, resulting in improved outcomes.

Denee and Thornton's (2017) research sheds light on the intricate dynamics of leadership in early childhood education. The study explores both formal and informal leaders, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of educational leadership. It highlights how the relationships between positional leaders and teachers are fundamental to creating a thriving school environment. Collaboration between leaders and teachers cultivates an atmosphere of idea exchange and decision-making. In everyday interactions, principals and teachers are expected to demonstrate leadership skills, contributing to an optimized teaching and learning environment. This fluid hierarchy fosters trust, mutual respect, and a shared sense of responsibility, leading to

improved teaching practices and better student outcomes. This flattening of the hierarchy creates a school community where leadership extends beyond titles alone. The authors emphasize the importance of striking a balance between informal leadership roles, emphasizing collaboration, adaptability, and a shared vision.

Similarly, Bouwmans et al. (2017) embarked on an insightful exploration of distributed leadership structures within the context of vocational schools. Vocational schools encompass organized educational programs that provide a sequence of courses directly linked to preparing individuals for employment in current or emerging occupations, whether paid or unpaid, which do not necessitate a baccalaureate or advanced degree (Public Law 101-392, 1990, Sec 521(41)). Their research, focusing on the actions of formal leaders and the interactions between formal and informal leaders, sheds light on the nuanced dynamics that shape leadership practices in educational settings.

Compelling evidence suggests that distributed leadership practices are not determined by organizational structures but are significantly supported or constrained by the formal leader's willingness to empower and work alongside informal leaders (Bouwmans et al., 2017; Harris, 2013; Arrowsmith, 2012). This willingness transcends mere task delegation; it involves a conscious effort to recognize and nurture the leadership potential within the team, including those in non-traditional leadership roles.

In those environments where a shared vision and goal were established, informal leaders were much more likely to understand and accept their role as leaders. These findings emphasize the importance of a clear and cohesive vision that resonates with all members of the educational community. When formal leaders actively engage with informal leaders, creating a space for open dialogue and collaboration helps to build a sense of ownership and alignment with the

institution's goals. The research highlights the delicate balance required in distributed leadership. Formal leaders must be adept at providing guidance without stifling innovation, creating a culture of trust without losing sight of accountability, and fostering collaboration without diluting responsibility.

The success of distributed leadership in vocational schools, as observed by Bouwmans et al. (2017), hinges on the ability of formal leaders to navigate these complexities with empathy, clarity, and strategic insight. The implications of this research extend beyond vocational schools, offering valuable lessons for educational leaders across various contexts. It underscores the importance of a human-centered approach to leadership, where empowerment, collaboration, and shared vision are not mere buzzwords but integral components of a thriving educational environment. The insights provided by Bouwmans et al. (2017) contribute to a richer understanding of how to cultivate a leadership culture that is both inclusive and transformative, resonating with the core values of equity and inclusion essential in contemporary education.

To implement distributed leadership after the leader-plus aspect is integrated into the environment, leaders must focus on how their actions and engagements support distributed leadership practices (Harris, 2013). Research suggests that if positional leaders are to delegate leadership responsibilities, both formal and informal leaders must understand that formal leaders are not relinquishing positional power (Denree & Thornton, 2017; Bouwmans et al., 2017). Instead, they allow the members of their education community to enact leadership. Such enactment includes participating in various levels of involvement in decision-making, but only within the mission and contexts set before them. Understanding there are boundaries to the informal leaders' decision-making powers will allow the formal leader to feel more comfortable

about giving over some control and, at the same time, help the informal leader understand how and to what extent they can own the leadership of a specific activity.

Each of these studies' goals was to understand better the role of the relationship between formal and informal leaders in implementing distributed leadership. In doing so, the researchers uncovered important relational aspects between formal and informal leaders that allow the practice of distributed leadership to be implemented. Using interview and focus group formats, leadership practices that improved the implementation of distributed leadership emerged. Dennee and Thornton's (2017) findings included a need for mentoring and coaching. The provision of resources and professional expertise were identified as essential for the successful implementation of a distributive leadership model (Dennee & Thornton, 2017). Building confidence in others, developing trust between parties, and facilitating a shared vision were significant components. Additionally, key factors were understanding the group's goals and designing systems and roles to support informal leaders in their leadership activities.

Bouwman et al.'s (2017) findings include the same core areas of vision development, building relationships, and developing support systems for informal leaders. Additionally, the researchers found that vision development with bounded empowerment was necessary to create opportunities for informal leaders to take the lead within the context of their shared goals and outcomes while still providing boundaries on the scope of influence that informal leaders could employ. Establishing relationships also emerged as a central distributed leadership strategy, including collaborative information sharing and the ability to have constructive conflicts as essential features.

These leadership practices are an important aspect of developing a solid foundation for distributed leadership. Without them, formal and informal leaders have little basis on which to

work together seamlessly. Initially, both types of leaders must understand that their relationship with each other is no longer hierarchical but shared. Once that more equitable relationship is established, it must be supported and nurtured. Research has detailed the provisions required to build these relationships. Providing these supports in the educational environment translates to the ability for informal leaders to use their professional skills to implement initiatives and make significant decisions that impact the whole school and instructional outcomes for students.

Sources of Leadership

Hallinger and Heck (2009) believe expanding leadership roles beyond formal administrative positions is one of the most important concepts to develop in educational leadership. The idea that leadership can and should be shared within and between schools has found favor among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike (Harris, 2012) because it taps into the skills and abilities of all educational staff, therefore compounding the ability for school initiatives to be met and students to learn.

Principals. Murphy et al. (2009) investigated the role of the principal in creating leadership-dense organizations. They found that administrators must overcome cultural, structural, and professional barriers to succeed. The authors note that “at the school level, all change flows through the principal’s office,” and as such, they are in a position where they can invest and move forward a school improvement initiative or kill it through lack of skill or neglect (p. 181). Principals are integral to the success of distributed leadership because they must both give over their leadership activities and cultivate informal leaders who are capable and willing to do the work.

Murphy et al. (2009) found that principals must contend with their values about their administrative position and sharing leadership by moving away from a bureaucratic, institutional

lens to a community-anchored, organization lens. Often, this change requires new skills and performance indicators that have not traditionally been part of the role of the administrator (Murphy et al., 2009). The administrator must address this personal transformation and acceptance of the theories and practices if distributed leadership is to be implemented well in a school or district.

Organizational structures must also be shifted (Murphy et al., 2009). Essentially, principals must break down the hierarchy of decision-making roles between formal leaders and staff and rebuild them by promoting shared ownership of goals, identifying informal leaders, equipping them with the right skills, and providing time and opportunities for informal leaders to lead.

In addition, Murphy et al. (2009) discovered that principals must be aware of and address the professional norms of staff while implementing distributed leadership. Educational institutions have been operating within a hierarchical system for many years. Breaking down the professional norm that teachers teach, and administrators lead is imperative. Doing so requires the leader to topple the “us versus them” norm by developing and nurturing a shared vision, encouraging and providing professional development for informal leaders, and legitimizing teachers’ leadership roles. This reculturing of the school system calls for an astute principal who finds value in leading as a team rather than an individual, sincerely desires to support others in their new roles, and is willing to break down existing cultural, structural, and professional norms.

A study by Torrance (2013) found that while principals could see the benefits of distributed leadership, they often struggled to give up their decision-making power and truly share leadership responsibilities with their staff. Even though they believed that distributed leadership would benefit their schools, principals continued to centralize authority. They

primarily cited concerns about who remains accountable for outcomes, a stated desire for expediency and efficiency if they held on to decision-making, and the ability of their staff members to take on leadership roles. The findings from Torrance shed light on the reality surrounding distributed leadership, where principals may claim commitment without fully leaning into the mindset and practices required to be successful. Moreover, this highlights the importance of not taking distributed leadership adoption at face value but examining how it operates in practice.

Hermann (2016) tackled the issue of the principal's role in distributed leadership and revealed additional insights that further define behaviors and practices that support the implementation of distributed leadership. Similar to previous research (e.g., Murphy et al. (2009), findings indicated that creating a common vision among formal and informal leaders was important. However, Hermann (2016) extends the concept by finding that principals must incorporate a process of boiling down the vision into the "known problems" the school is experiencing that are impeding their ability to achieve success (p. 87). The principal should then begin collaborating with staff to develop steps to address those issues and build capacity around the vision. This process of developing solutions together will ideally lead to shared ownership. Ultimately, this research demonstrated that through the intentional practice of collaborating on setting the organization's direction by underscoring the needs and their solutions, the roles of the informal leader became clearer, and they were more ready to take ownership of leading the effort.

There is no disagreement in the world of distributed leadership that it is the responsibility of the formal leader to break apart hierarchical structures and to allow leaders of all kinds to make decisions within the confines of the activities in which they have taken ownership.

Remarkably, Hermann (2016) discovered that overgeneralizing the shared decision-making process can undermine the implementation of distributed leadership. For instance, the study found that teachers reported that sometimes “principals just had to make the decision,” and inviting too many people into the decision-making process frustrated teacher leaders (p. 90). As a result, the findings indicate that principals must balance giving over decision-making to a group or an individual informal leader and making the decision themselves.

The last finding surrounds the skill of communication. Although everyone regards proficient communication as a top requirement for administrators, whether they are implementing distributed leadership practices in their school or district, the study highlights the need for the principal to be an open communicator who empowers and validates staff as leaders and reminds and encourages team members of the purpose and value of the shared work. The principal can also support the institutionalization of distributed leadership structures and pathways for all staff by continuously outlining the systems that formal and informal leaders use to implement practices and make decisions (Hermann, 2016).

Teachers. Teachers are largely regarded as the informal leaders within the distributed leadership framework in an educational setting. Interestingly, much emphasis is given to how formal leaders engage, select, and support teacher leaders. Attention is not often paid to asking the teachers directly what they need to take the lead. Instead, research has typically asked teachers how well the formal leaders performed their roles. Additionally, researchers have invested time in conducting studies on the characteristics of educators that predict the likelihood that teachers will be successful at implementing shared leadership. Although there continues to be a gap in research regarding what support teachers need to engage in distributed leadership activities, some insights can be made from the research at our disposal.

Yilmaz and Beycioglu (2017) researched leadership behaviors among elementary school teachers compared to their demographics. They found that the classifications of gender, seniority, and subject area assignment played no significant role in the desire for teachers to take informal leadership positions. The researchers found, however, that there was a significant difference in the participation rates of teachers in schools with fewer than fifty teachers as opposed to those working in schools with fifty or more teachers. Teachers shared that it was easier to work collaboratively and make decisions with smaller groups of people.

Another study sought to determine if distributed leadership practices contributed to teachers' organizational commitment. Although Hulpia et al. (2010) did not specifically seek to understand teachers' desires in relation to accepting and enacting leadership, the findings indicate what they might need to take ownership of leadership tasks. As a result, their findings may help to refine future research questions on the topic. Significant findings from the study that influenced teacher commitment included teacher perceptions of the cooperation of the leadership team to the distributed leadership effort, the amount of support received by teachers and how evenly it was dispersed, and the degree to which teachers were involved in decision-making.

Throughout the research regarding principals and teachers, Spillane (2005) confirms that the external environment and how systems are designed to engage informal leaders are critical. It appears teachers want to know that they have support, that their leaders are cooperative, and that there are processes to engage them in decision-making. Spillane also shared that the extent to which leadership can be effectively distributed in a school setting is profoundly impacted by the characteristics of the people implementing the leadership distribution. This is because of the reciprocal relationship of interactions between the leaders and the followers. Because researchers have identified the needs of the formal leader's skills and discovered the general demographics

of teachers have no significant impact on implementation, it follows that researchers should examine the skills and abilities that informal leaders need if distributed leadership is to be successful.

Other Organizational Leaders. The school system comprises a rich network of potential leaders, including those who may not necessarily hold traditional educator roles or credentials but play vital parts in the educational ecosystem. This encompasses teachers in non-traditional roles like deans of students, instructional coaches, school psychologists, social workers, testing coordinators, and more. It also includes instructional support staff, secretaries, food service workers, custodians, and other staff. Though they do not directly instruct students, these individuals are integral members of the school community who can and should be called upon to engage in leadership. Spillane (2006) explains that distributed leadership theory “attempts to acknowledge and incorporate the work of all individuals who have a hand in leadership practice” (p. 13). This inclusive perspective is important when considering the leadership potential of non-classroom teacher roles. Though their positions exist outside the traditional teaching role, individuals in these roles often have specialized skills, knowledge, and perspectives that can enhance leadership practice.

School psychologists, for example, offer expertise in mental health, learning, and behavior that could inform strategic planning around social-emotional learning, school climate initiatives, or multi-tiered support systems. Their work with students gives them unique insights into student strengths, challenges, and needs.

Similarly, literacy coaches have deep knowledge of research-based instructional strategies. They are positioned to lead efforts to implement new curricula, strengthen teacher practices, or close achievement gaps in reading and writing. Their ongoing collaboration with

teachers also allows them to identify common areas of need and champion changes at the system level.

Testing coordinators manage assessment systems and analyze student data. They can use their data literacy and assessment knowledge to lead school improvement efforts, chair data inquiry teams, or provide professional development on using data to guide instruction. Their bird's-eye view of student performance trends is invaluable.

Deans of students, social workers, nurses, and other student support staff also have specialized expertise from their direct work with students. They can spearhead initiatives on topics like school climate, student wellbeing, behavior, attendance, and family engagement. Their lenses on the student experience make them essential contributors.

Additionally, staff, like instructional aids, office support staff, facilities, and maintenance teams, bring important perspectives that can inform leadership decisions and improve outcomes. Their roles put them in contact with students, teachers, families, and the community in ways that administrators often do not.

Incorporating these staff members into leadership can tap into the organization's collective knowledge and expertise (Harris, 2013). However, for distributed leadership to work, principals must intentionally create a culture where leadership transcends typical hierarchies and formal titles (Angelle, 2010). Providing professional development, building trust, and giving non-classroom teachers agency in school initiatives will allow their full leadership potential to be realized.

While acknowledging the significance of formal and informal leaders in the distributed leadership framework, research has also found that “without the support of the principal, distributed leadership is unlikely to flourish or be sustained” (Harris, 2012, p. 8). Harris (2012)

adds that principals' roles are central to this effort because they are responsible for developing the structural and cultural conditions that distributed leadership requires. The principal's responsibility lies in creating the structural and cultural conditions necessary for distributed leadership. Teachers, being primary contributors to the educational process, are integral to the implementation of distributed leadership models. However, their full engagement in this role depends on the principal's willingness to relinquish positional authority and focus on facilitating, brokering, and supporting school staff in leading improvement efforts. Therefore, the success of distributed leadership hinges on the principal's nuanced understanding of teachers' needs and developing a culture conducive to leadership across formal and informal leaders within the school system. This approach ultimately provides the necessary support and conditions for the sustained implementation of distributed leadership models in the school setting.

As a result, administrators and teachers must establish an interdependent bond to safeguard the implementation and long-term sustainability of distributed leadership. Principals play the most important role in establishing the conditions and school culture that will allow distributed leadership to flourish. This involves establishing the internal systems and structures for distributed leadership and embracing a belief that encourages shared decision-making and empowers school staff. At the end of the day, the principal must be willing to delegate some of their authority for distributed leadership to take root and support the collective efforts of the entire school staff to implement a shared goal or initiative. This willingness is a required element of distributed leadership.

Impacts of Distributed Leadership

A significant body of empirical research explains that "knowing if, how, and in what ways distributed leadership practice influences organizational outcomes" (Harris, 2012, p. 9).

Harris (2009) continues to explain that although there is not an abundance of research that directly links the use of distributed leadership to increased student academic achievement. Evidence supports that there is a “positive relationship between distributed leadership, organizational improvement, and student achievement” (Harris, 2008, p. 9).

Despite the work that remains related to the impact of distributed leadership on schools and school achievement, extant studies have reinforced the importance of distributed leadership in schools. The implementation of distributed leadership strongly correlates with improved team performance and contributes to the achievement of organizational goals (Choi et al., 2017). Choi et al. (2017) describe how distributing leadership can cultivate close relationships between formal and informal leaders, which results in shared knowledge and decision-making throughout the organization and can enable synchronous teamwork in support of mutually agreed upon organizational goals.

Chen (2018) similarly discovered that these attributes of distributed leadership also impacted an overall perceived improvement in school climate. Frequent, positive, collegial interactions between formal and informal leaders engaging in shared leadership activities contributed to increased security and feeling of autonomy among informal leaders in decision-making. This was concurrent with an increase in innovative practices, a sincere commitment to organizational change, and overall support for the formal leader’s implementation of change efforts. The researcher illustrated that her study uncovered the need for a deeper understanding of the relationships between formal and informal leaders focusing on the social ties between them, how the system can fulfill the intrinsic needs of both parties, and how the exchange of resources can support each other’s efforts, as well as those of the organization.

Sales et. al. (2017) approached their research concerning professional development with the intent to address the needs of staff to build practices conducive to distributed leadership. Their study found that school structures that allowed staff to cultivate and practice the citizenship or professional skills of listening and learning from each other and collaborative problem-solving must be in place. They also reported that when formal leaders supported informal leaders in decision-making, increased interest in innovative practices amongst leaders, a shared commitment to meeting organizational goals, and a renewed interest in consistently improving their practices emerged. The researchers concluded that these established structures were the main approaches to the acquisition of distributed leadership skills because the space, time, and cause for collaboration within a professional learning environment allowed for the growth of teachers and their skills.

Research has highlighted the significance of understanding the impact of distributed leadership practices on organizational outcomes, with a focus on contemporary empirical inquiry. Despite a limited direct link between distributed leadership and increased student academic achievement, studies research identified a clear relationship between distributed leadership, organizational improvement, and student achievement (Harris, 2009, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2009). While acknowledging the need for further exploration of the positive and negative effects of distributed leadership, these researchers collectively emphasize its importance in schools. Chen (2018) similarly discovers attributes of effective distributed leadership that contribute to an overall perceived improvement in school climate, promoting constructive interactions, autonomy, and innovation Finally, some research has focused on professional development and emphasized the role that school structures play in cultivating skills and collaborative problem solving, leading to increased interest in innovative practices and a

shared commitment to organizational goals (Sales et. al., (2017). The studies collectively underline the pivotal role of distributed leadership in enhancing organizational outcomes and stress the need for continued exploration of its effects on schools and school achievement.

Summary and Integration

Implementing distributed leadership practices in the education environment may be a viable solution to meet the diverse and complex needs of schools as an institution and the whole range of students in our care in an ever-changing District leaders know they can no longer attempt to lead through single heroic efforts and instead must delegate leadership over multiple leaders throughout the educational system (Spillane, 2006).

Currently, research in this field is primarily situated around the various aspects of implementing, leading, and managing distributed leadership. A great deal of investigation surrounds the relationship between formal and informal leaders. Interestingly, given the importance of the roles of both formal and informal leaders, the preponderance of the research addresses the leader's role in implementation, the skills they need, and the concepts they must consider when distributing leadership. More research to explore what informal leaders want and need to accept or engage in distributed leadership practices would be helpful.

While extensive evidence about how to develop systems, relationships, and a school culture that will support the distribution of leadership to informal leaders has been identified, only a tangential link to the needs of informal leaders can be formed because they were not the subject, nor the source of the information collected. Fortunately, however, prior research can assist in developing a focused study based on existing knowledge of sound, distributed leadership systems and practices, as well as a clear understanding of the principal's perspective and their role in distributed leadership.

Prior research has also shown that the process of addressing staff is complex. Fullan (2007) explains that successful change initiatives require the right combination of socially based and action-oriented strategies and supports to achieve success. In addition, understanding the conditions people require to implement an initiative is crucial to the change process (Fullan, 2007). The gap in research regarding the needs of informal leaders in distributed leadership and the complex nature of approaching individuals within the organization has led to the desire to learn more about such phenomena, which is the impetus behind my proposed study.

Research Question(s)

With the purpose of uncovering the interactions that impact teachers' motivation to participate, engage in, and take ownership of distributed leadership, the central questions that will guide this study are:

R1. What type of interactions between school administrative leadership and teachers increase or decrease the likelihood that teachers will be motivated to participate in distributed leadership?

R2. What type of interactions between school administrative leadership and teachers increases and decreases the likelihood that teachers will engage in distributed leadership?

R3. What type of interactions between school administrative leadership and teachers increase or decrease the likelihood that teachers will take ownership of distributed leadership?

CHAPTER III

METHOD

It is a widely held belief amongst administrators that to successfully implement a building or district-wide initiative, all the staff, at every level in the organization, must dedicate themselves and take ownership of the initiative's goals, outcomes, and activities (Fullan, 2007). What is less certain are the practices that encourage staff to accept the responsibilities of implementing educational initiatives and engage in activities that meet specific goals and outcomes. Implementing distributed leadership practices in public education may be one solution to meet the diverse and complex needs of the full range of students in our care. Recognizing the limitations of individual efforts, district leaders emphasize delegating leadership across multiple leaders (Spillane, 2006). Research shows favorable outcomes when involving both formal and informal leaders. However, there is a gap in understanding the specific needs of informal leaders within distributed leadership practices.

While existing research guides the development of distributed leadership systems, there is limited exploration of the needs of informal leaders like teachers, specialists, instructional assistants, and other support staff (i.e., office support and custodians). Fullan (2007) emphasizes the importance of a balanced approach for successful change initiatives. Considering the lack of research on the needs of informal leaders and the complexities of initiating change, understanding social, cultural, and environmental factors is central to the success of distributed leadership. This gap in understanding motivates the proposed study.

Positionality

Creswell and Poth (2018) highlight the role of philosophical assumptions in guiding a researcher's study. In the context of my investigation into distributed leadership, I understand the importance of aligning my beliefs and firsthand experiences with these assumptions. I recognize

that individuals interpret situations based on their personal beliefs and experiences, influencing their actions and responses. Educators bring these experiences to their interactions and contribute to a social reality within distributed leadership in their workplace. It was important for me to embrace each participant's perspective when coding, categorizing, and developing a theory on increasing teacher acceptance and engagement in distributed leadership.

When considering my assumptions about what counts as knowledge in the distributed leadership study, I placed importance on hearing or experiencing participants' descriptions of their experiences. Each person constructs their meaning by interpreting what they observe, feel, and how they behave within the framework of distributed leadership. This results in a range of perspectives and ways of understanding. Conducting one-on-one interviews before focus groups allowed me to actively listen to participants' responses, which enabled me to capture not only their words but also other aspects of the conversation, such as tone, pauses, and body language. This approach provided a richer understanding of their experiences, as it went beyond surface-level answers and delved into the nuances of their expressions. By incorporating these verbal and nonverbal cues, I gained a more comprehensive view of each participant's perspective within the context of distributed leadership. The core idea is that by incorporating narratives, nonverbal cues, and contextual information into the study, I can better understand the experiences shared by the participants.

My background in the field of education as a teacher, school administrator, and superintendent has influenced my perspective as well as my approach to this distributed leadership study. Through my previous roles at the school, district, regional, and state levels, I have gained insights into the systems that exist within the variety of staffing roles within the education context. While these experiences will assist me in better understanding the viewpoints

of educators, I am also mindful of how my past and present positions may influence this study. I will carefully consider how these contexts may impact the research.

My personal values of accountability, ownership, and the belief that it is my responsibility to engage in activities that improve students' education are central to my role as a researcher. Acknowledging the interaction of these values with the distributed leadership study allowed me to employ an objective and subjective point of view during the collection of data on the processes of engaging in distributive leadership and the analysis of the participants' values in the social and environmental, and cultural processes of distributive leadership

Sampling Plan

The sampling plan for this qualitative case study was designed to obtain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of distributed leadership within a school by utilizing a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling supported efficient data collection from schools where the researcher had established relationships. In this instance, it involved reaching out to a familiar school district and collaborating with the superintendent and principals to gain permission to conduct the study with teachers. Two kindergarten to fifth-grade elementary schools within the district were selected for the study. These schools, located just over seven miles apart, provided an opportunity to explore distributed leadership among teachers at two distinct locations with similar demographics. Both schools operate self-contained classrooms, where students receive primary instruction without moving between teachers.

Purposive sampling ensured that participants possessed characteristics most beneficial to the research questions, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. This method also helped mitigate threats to external validity by focusing on specified criteria to ensure participants met the study's objectives. The combination of convenience and purposive

sampling balances practicality and depth of insight, addressing and mitigating challenges to the study's validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Study Setting, Population, and Participants

The study was conducted between May and June 2024 in a small, rural district in the Pacific Northwest that serves under 5,000 students with two elementary and two secondary schools. Among the students, 71.6% identify as White, 1.8% as Black, and 1.9% as Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander. Hispanic/Latino students constitute 13.7% of the population, followed by 1.7% identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native and 0.5% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 8.4% of students identify with two or more races. The student body also includes a significant percentage of students receiving services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP), accounting for 17% of the population, which is higher than the national average of 15% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). Additionally, 58% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, highlighting the socioeconomic diversity within the district. Regarding school-specific data, one elementary school has 470 students and 37 licensed staff members. Similarly, the other elementary school enrolls 430 students with 31 licensed staff members.

For this study, licensed employees are defined as those who belong to the licensed collective bargaining unit and whose positions require advanced degrees and licensure from an educational licensing entity. This includes teachers on special assignment (TOSA) and licensed specialists such as literacy specialists and school psychologists. Building principals are licensed by an educational licensing entity and have been assigned the responsibility of managing and leading a school building.

The study population included licensed educators and the building principal across two schools. School A included six licensed educators and one principal, and School B included nine licensed educators and one principal for School B, totaling 15 teachers and two administrators. The participants were invited via email and asked to share their number of years of teaching experience and tenure at their current school to understand the range of backgrounds represented in the study. However, all individuals who responded were invited to participate, ensuring a comprehensive inclusion of voices that enriched the depth and quality of the study's findings.

Participants

Fifteen teachers from two schools, six from School A and nine from School B, and the principal of each school also participated in the study. A summary of the participant's gender, years of experience, and grade-level assignments or teaching roles is provided below and detailed in Table 1.

Summary of Teacher Participants in School A

School A had six teachers with varying levels of experience, ranging from 10 to 23 years. The group consisted of 83% female teachers and one male participant, all White. Their grade-level assignments included grades 1-3 and K-5, and their teaching roles were primarily focused on general education. However, two teachers also served as education specialists and/or TOSAs (Teachers on Special Assignment).

Summary of Teacher Participants in School B

School B had nine teachers with experience ranging from 2 to 21 years. This group was also predominantly female at 90%, with one male teacher, all White. The teachers have experience working across a broad spectrum of grades, including K-2, K-3, K-4, and K-8, primarily in general education roles, with two teachers also serving as specialists.

Summary of Principal Participants

One school principal was a male with 19 years of experience, overseeing a wide range of grades from K-12 throughout their career. The other school principal was a female with 13 years of experience overseeing grades K-5.

Table 1

Teacher and Principal Interview Participants

Name	Male/ Female	Race	Years of Experience	Grade Level Assignments	Teaching Roles
<u>School A</u>					
Teacher 1	Female	White	22 years	1-3	General Ed/Specialist/TOSA
Teacher 2	Male	White	17 years	K-12	General Ed/Specialist/TOSA
Teacher 3	Female	White	12 years	K-5	Specialist
Teacher 4	Female	White	21 years	K-5	General Ed
Teacher 5	Female	White	10 years	K-5	General Ed
Teacher 6	Female	White	23 years	K-5	General Ed
<u>School B</u>					
Teacher 7	Female	White	21 years	K-5	General Ed
Teacher 8	Female	White	10 years	K-2	General Ed
Teacher 9	Male	White	6 years	K-3	General Ed
Teacher 10	Female	White	10 years	K-8	General Ed
Teacher 11	Female	White	21 years	1-6	General Ed
Teacher 12	Female	White	18 years	1	General Ed/Specialist
Teacher 13	Female	White	7 years	K-3	General Ed
Teacher 14	Female	White	15 years	K-4	General Ed
Teacher 15	Female	White	2 years	5	General Ed
<u>Principals</u>					
Principal 1	Male	White	19 years	K-12	General Ed
Principal 2	Female	White	13 years	K-5	General Ed

Recruitment Procedures

Informed Consent was obtained following approved consent procedures (see Appendix B). No research activities commenced until permission from the University of Oregon's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained, district leadership approved, and each participant signed informed consent.

To facilitate participant recruitment, the researcher initiated contact by emailing teachers at each selected school, as outlined in Appendix A. This email outlined the study's purpose and procedures, provided guidance on expressing interest, and specified whom to contact for further inquiries. Emphasis was placed on obtaining the participants' informed consent, the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and data protection, and their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary, with the assurance that they could withdraw at any point without any negative consequences. In addition, the researcher offered a \$40.00 gift card for their participation in the interview and subsequent focus group meeting for a total of \$80.00 to participate in all research activities.

Follow-up emails were sent to teachers at each selected school to ensure that all potential participants had the time to consider their participation, ask questions as needed, and respond regarding their desire to participate. This enabled the highest likelihood of participation in the study. Follow-up emails shown in Appendix F expressed understanding of the participants' busy schedules, reiterated the voluntary nature of their participation, reminded them of the confidentiality assurances, highlighted the flexibility in scheduling, and mentioned the opportunity to receive a gift card as a token of appreciation for their involvement.

Voluntary virtual information sessions were held for each school at the beginning of the engagement process to broaden outreach and engage interested individuals. Approximately 15 to 20 teachers attended each session, which provided a platform for potential participants to gain a more in-depth understanding of the study, its objectives, and the implications of participation. These sessions addressed questions and concerns, ensuring individuals could make informed decisions about their involvement. While not all teachers who attended chose to participate in the research, with one citing time constraints and others not responding to the follow-up email, the

goal of this approach was to encourage participation without applying undue pressure on potential participants.

Research Design and Rationale

Understanding what teachers need to engage in distributed leadership depends on using a research design that facilitates in-depth information gathering from a targeted group of individuals, observing them in their real-life context. By exploring what motivates teachers in their school settings based on their collective experiences, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the practices that could support teachers in engaging with and taking ownership of distributed leadership mechanisms.

This study is anchored in a qualitative methodology designed to explore the nuances of distributed leadership in educational settings. The qualitative approach is well suited for this purpose, as it facilitates a rich, contextual examination of complex social phenomena, such as the dynamics of educational leadership and its impact on educators and school teams.

The rationale for choosing a qualitative approach is multifaceted. It enables an exploration of individual experiences and perceptions, which is important when dealing with the subjective nature of leadership and its interpretation.

This methodology facilitates exploring dynamic, interactive processes inherent in educational leadership. Through interviews and focus groups, the study's objective is to uncover the relationships, power dynamics, and collaborative efforts that characterize distributed leadership. This design is most effective when there is a need for detailed analysis and description of individuals, events, or groups, with the intent to "gain an in-depth understanding of situations and meaning for those involved" (Handcock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 10). This approach is

particularly powerful in revealing the subtleties and complexities that quantitative methods might overlook.

Additionally, the choice of this methodology is rooted in its potential to generate new insights and understandings about educational leadership. While existing literature offers extensive information on distributed leadership and its implementation, there remains a gap in understanding what specifically motivates teachers to accept, engage in, and take ownership of distributed leadership.

The case study design was chosen for its ability to provide a detailed, focused exploration of the interactions between school leaders and teachers, particularly in understanding how these interactions influence teachers' perceptions and willingness to participate in distributed leadership. Each elementary school within the district serves as an individual case, allowing for comparative analysis across the two settings to identify shared patterns and contextual differences. By examining the leadership practices embedded within these interactions across the cases, the study's goal is to offer insights into the factors that facilitate or hinder engagement in distributed leadership. Rather than presenting definitive solutions, the hope is to contribute to a broader understanding of these dynamics and to potentially inform future strategies and practices that may support more effective implementation of distributed leadership.

Validity

Several approaches were employed to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings. Data from interviews and focus groups were cross-verified using member checks, which were integrated throughout interviews and focus groups to address internal validity and ensure that interpretations accurately reflected participants' views. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that member checks are the most crucial step in increasing credibility, describing them as an "on the

spot” confirmation that the information gathered aligns with participants’ perspectives. During the interviews, the researcher frequently paraphrased and clarified responses, allowing participants to confirm or adjust the interpretation immediately. An additional overarching member check was conducted at the end of each interview to further verify that the researcher’s understanding was accurate, and these confirmations were noted in interview memos.

Triangulation was also employed to enhance credibility by corroborating information obtained from interviews with data from member checks and focus groups. According to Shenton (2004), triangulation involves using different data collection methods, supporting data sources, or a wide range of informants to compare and confirm findings. By comparing the insights from individual interviews, focus groups, and member checks, the study sought to reduce the risk of misinterpretation and reinforce its trustworthiness.

The researcher’s positionality was also documented to provide transparency of potential biases. During information sessions and interviews (see interview protocol in Appendix A), the researcher explicitly discussed their prior relationship with the community and their current educational leadership role, ensuring participants understood that no personally identifiable information would be shared outside of the study or shared with their supervisors or school district.

Regarding external validity, while the findings are contextualized to a specific study setting, care was taken to analyze and relate them explicitly to the broader context of distributed leadership in elementary-age public education settings (i.e., elementary schools). Although qualitative case studies do not typically seek to generalize findings in the same way as quantitative research, the insights gathered can provide a foundation for understanding similar dynamics in comparable educational contexts, particularly within other elementary settings or

smaller school districts. However, these findings may not translate directly to secondary programs or to larger, urban districts, where structural and demographic factors could influence leadership dynamics and teacher experiences. By grounding the analysis in detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and their contexts, the study hopes to offer potential transferable insights that could be useful in comparable situations, though not directly generalizable to all settings.

Data Collection

The study's efficiency and accuracy hinged on the precision of the data collection methods. This section describes the process of gathering data and processing information, employing meticulously designed methodologies. Data was collected primarily through two methods: interviews and focus groups. Each method was deliberately chosen to align with the research objectives.

Interviews

Interviewing is a social interaction between researcher and participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Warren & Xavia Karner, 2015). During the interview, "knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 4). As a result, case study research utilizes the interview format frequently to assess the participant's point of view and reveal meaning within their experiences to form a theory regarding the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviewing aligns well with this study because the information needed lies within the participants themselves. Through this data collection method, considerable information about the selected phenomenon was compiled by allowing participants to express their personal understanding of the concept in their own terms. In addition, this allowed the researcher to get as close as possible to the participant and the phenomenon, improving the data analysis

process and overall trustworthiness. Conducted within a 4-week period in the Spring of 2024 these interviews included member checks, an essential qualitative research practice that enhances data credibility and accuracy. Data collection began with individual interviews using an interview protocol (see Appendix A) with teachers and principal participants. These interviews were held virtually via Zoom, and participants were required to provide written consent (see Appendices C and D for a copy of the teacher and principal consent form), affirming that participation was voluntary and that they could opt out at any time without repercussions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 65 minutes, with an average interview lasting 54 minutes, and was scheduled based on participant preference. Using a semi-structured interview approach, the interview protocol provided consistency across all interviews while allowing for probing and elaboration as needed. Interviews were audio and video recorded on Zoom and transcribed verbatim using a combination of transcription software and manual editing to ensure accuracy. During this process, any identifiable information, such as names of principals or teachers, was actively removed or anonymized. The transcripts were then securely stored on a password-protected computer.

Each semi-structured interview asked participants 11 questions, provided in Appendix A's interview protocol. These questions were designed to activate participants' thinking about distributed leadership opportunities and provide examples of behaviors or conditions that affect teachers' motivation to accept, engage in, and take ownership of distributed leadership tasks. The alignment of the interview questions with the research questions is presented in Table 4, setting the foundation for the subsequent findings.

To answer the first research question, "What type of interactions between school administrative leadership and teachers increase or decrease the likelihood that teachers will be

motivated to participate in distributed leadership?” Three interview questions were developed. These questions examine aspects of leadership interactions, communication, decision-making, and support mechanisms to understand how they influence teacher motivation. By examining perceptions and past experiences, the responses will identify leadership qualities that encourage or inhibit participation in distributed leadership.

To address the second research question, “What type of interactions between school administrative leadership and teachers increase or decrease the likelihood that teachers will engage in distributed leadership?” four interview questions were developed. These questions focus on the types of support, resources, and communication that influence teachers’ willingness to take on leadership roles. Both past experiences and hypothetical scenarios are explored to understand the leadership actions that encourage or discourage engagement.

Four interview questions were selected to address the third research question, “What type of interactions between school administrative leadership and teachers increase or decrease the likelihood that teachers will take ownership of distributed leadership?” These questions delve into the support, resources, and leadership behaviors that empower or hinder teachers from taking ownership of leadership tasks. By examining both positive and challenging experiences, the responses will reveal the factors that either enable or prevent teachers from fully embracing leadership opportunities.

Table 4

Research Questions Associated with One-on-One Interviews

Research Question	Matching Interview (IQ)
R1: What type of interactions between school administrative leadership and teachers increase	IQ1: How do you see school leadership impacting the school and learning environment, and what qualities do you think are important for effective school leaders?

or decrease the likelihood that teachers will be <u>motivated</u> to participate in distributed leadership?	IQ 2: Tell me about a time you were given additional leadership responsibilities outside your classroom role. What was the opportunity? IQ3: What motivated you to accept this leadership role?
R2: What type of interactions between school administrative leadership and teachers increases and decreases the likelihood that teachers will <u>engage</u> in distributed leadership?	IQ7: What additional support from school leadership would have enabled you to accept this role? IQ 8: How could leadership have better supported you to improve your receptiveness? IQ 9: Moving forward, what specific actions could school leadership take to increase your willingness to accept additional leadership responsibilities? IQ10: Imagine you are asked to lead a new school initiative. Exactly what support, resources, and communication would you need from leadership to agree to take it on?
R3: What type of interactions between school administrative leadership and teachers increase or decrease the likelihood that teachers will take <u>ownership</u> of distributed leadership?	IQ 4: What support or resources enabled you to be successful in that role? IQ 5: What did school leadership do that empowered you to take ownership of this leadership work? IQ 6: Describe a leadership opportunity you declined or struggled to engage with fully. What held you back? IQ 11: In your view, what is the most essential thing leadership needs to provide to empower teacher leadership?

Memo Writing

Qualitative researchers use memo writing as a methodological link between the data and the development of theories. Memos are narrative records where the researcher engages in an ongoing conversation with themselves about the research data (Lempert, 2007). They help researchers develop ideas about what the data reveals and signifies and are intended to be freely created by the researcher (Glaser, 1978). Lempert (2007) highlights memo writing as an essential component of the qualitative approach, describing it as a process that transforms data into theory. It allows the researcher to “explore, explicate, and theorize” emergent patterns throughout the research process (p. 245). Memos can include code descriptions, relationships between codes, and connections to relevant literature, all of which contribute to theorizing.

In this study on distributed leadership, memo writing played a role by capturing the context in which teachers experienced distributed leadership alongside their personal needs to engage and take ownership of it. Noting these contexts helped illustrate how participants experienced the distributive leadership process and allowed for comparisons of similarities and differences among participants' experiences. Additionally, memo writing facilitated what Richardson (1994) describes as the "extraction of context," capturing pertinent personal, social, and environmental contexts and enabling the creation of a 'social reality' for each participant. By organizing and interpreting these social worlds, the memos helped conceptualize the data in narrative form (Lempert, 2007).

During each interview, the researcher took notes of significant quotes, themes, and concepts as they emerged, using keywords and phrases to identify potential codes for analysis. As the interviews progressed, the researcher applied these labels consistently across interviews, drawing connections and enhancing the depth of understanding through ongoing memo writing. When reviewing the transcripts, the researcher revisited these keywords and phrases, confirming the relevance of initial codes and adding new ones as additional patterns and insights emerged.

Member Checks

Member checking was employed during the interview phase, where the researcher paraphrased concepts shared by participants to confirm their intended meaning, especially after particularly long or complex narrative responses. This process was particularly necessary when a participant's statement was open to interpretation or ambiguous, as it required the researcher to assess and verify their understanding of what was being communicated. By seeking immediate clarification, the researcher ensured that the data accurately reflected the participants' views and minimized the risk of misinterpretation.

Focus Groups. The second data collection phase involved two focus groups with the educators who had participated in the initial interviews, grouped by their respective schools. Due to the limited number of participant principals, no focus groups for administration were held. The purpose of these focus groups was to validate and confirm the specific interactions between school administrative leadership and teachers, as identified in individual interviews, that influence teachers' motivation to participate in, engage with, and take ownership of distributed leadership. This second phase provided additional insights from educators beyond those gathered in interviews, helping to generate a shared understanding among a group of individuals (Creswell, 2015). As Kruger and Casey (2000) explain, focus groups allow researchers to confirm previously gathered information and delve deeper into the meanings behind those findings.

Like the interview format, the focus groups were conducted via Zoom, allowing participants to join from their own devices at a location of their choice, with both video and audio options available. The focus groups took place over a two-day period, with each school having its own session. School A included three participants, representing 50% of those interviewed, while School B included six participants, representing 67% of the interview group.

Using the focus group questions outlined in Appendix B, each focus group was asked to review and reflect on the core themes that emerged from the interviews. Each theme was shared one at a time, followed by each of the guiding questions, which were also placed in the chat for easy reference. The questions included:

1. Does this theme resonate with your personal experience and perspective? Why or why not?
2. What specific additions, adjustments, or changes would you suggest to better capture the essence of this theme? Can you explain why these modifications would improve its relevance?

3. Are there any additional themes or patterns that you believe should be included based on your reflections and this group discussion?
4. Is there anything else, whether related to the themes or broader leadership issues, that you think I should know to gain a deeper understanding?

During the focus groups, the participants confirmed or challenged these themes based on their own experiences while also providing additional insights. This validation process helped determine whether the themes represented generalized patterns that could apply to other schools or whether they were more specific to individual teachers' experiences. Throughout the focus groups, member checks were conducted by asking participants to confirm if the researcher's interpretation of their comments and the themes generated were accurate, ensuring the reliability of the findings.

The overarching goal of this phase was to elicit confirmation of the practices and barriers that motivated teachers to participate, engage in, and take ownership of distributed leadership and paint a picture of their combined perspectives as teachers. As the teacher(s) share their individual experiences, it allowed their colleagues to confirm that it is a generalized notion and, therefore, a theme may be replicated within a larger population. Focus groups allow the researcher to see how all the pieces fit together (Duncan & Marotz-Baden, 1999). Along with the interviews and corresponding member checks, focus groups allowed the data from both the interviews and focus groups to be triangulated more fully and increased the overall trustworthiness of the qualitative case study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis in a case study begins as soon as the researcher starts to collect data using the constant comparative method. In Phase 1, all interview data was coded, and themes were generated during the analytic process. During the second phase of analysis, called axial coding, the

categories and their descriptions were analyzed to see if and how they fit together until a dense prevailing category emerged as the core phenomenon for each employee group separately. The third stage of the coding process, selective coding, is where the researcher analyzes the model and develops a theory about the core phenomenon and how the core categories relate to and/or impact the core phenomenon. Ultimately, the last stage tells a story about how the data obtained are interrelated and culminates in a theory of the processes studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Constant Comparison

Data collection typically takes the form of interviews and observations where the data and analysis portions of the study are conducted simultaneously and iteratively. Therefore, a constant comparison method was implemented. This procedure includes taking information from data collection and analyzing it repeatedly and comparing emerging categories or themes of the participant's responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using interviews of teachers in the two sites, data was compared and analyzed across participants to develop coding categories, themes across identified codes, and ultimately a theory.

Coding. The coding process was implemented for both the interviews and focus groups and was conducted in multiple phases. The process included three primary stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, each building on the previous to develop a comprehensive understanding of distributed leadership.

The first stage, open coding, began with a thorough review of all transcripts. During this initial phase, the researcher recorded interview notes and member check notes to capture early thoughts and observations, setting the foundation for deeper analysis. As the researcher evaluated the data, they assigned initial codes based on keywords or phrases that emerged, informed by the research questions, the social interactionism conceptual framework, and factors from the

distributed leadership framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Manual coding was applied, where specific text segments were labeled to describe their meaning, and initial notes were taken for each coded segment. A preliminary codebook was developed with definitions and examples, helping to structure the analysis. The frequency of codes informed the identification of core themes as similar codes were grouped, refined, and reduced to a more manageable set of 13, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Teacher Coding

Code	Segment	Code	Segment
IV	Intrinsic Value	E	Empowered
PPL	Personal Professional Learning	COM	Communication
PLQ	Principal Leadership Qualities	IR	Implementation Resources
REL	Relationship	PS	Principal Support
PI	Personal Incentives	NB	Nuts and Bolts
T	Time	A	Acknowledgment
C	Compensation	S	Stability

Axial coding involved relating these initial codes to identify core categories and a central theme of distributed leadership practices. This stage focused on refining and organizing the codes, grouping similar codes under names that encompassed their meaning. Through careful comparison and continued analysis, supporting participant quotes were documented to strengthen the understanding of emerging concepts. The researcher used the process of relating codes to one another, ultimately identifying a central category or “core phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 85). This category represented the concept that most or all the collected codes related to, serving as the primary theory of the processes studied. The analysis also identified causal conditions, strategies, intervening conditions, and outcomes associated with the core

phenomenon, which were visually described in an axial coding paradigm to map the distributed leadership processes across employee groups.

The final stage, selective coding, aimed to discern patterns, similarities, and differences based on participants' reports, leading to the formulation of hypotheses that revealed relationships between categories. This phase facilitated the integration of refined codes into broader themes, resulting in four main themes with corresponding sub-themes that reflected significant patterns within the reported data. These themes represented:

1. Teachers reported internal motivations driving their participation in distributed leadership.
2. The attributes that teachers identified as essential for principals to support their engagement.
3. Additional motivators and supports that teachers reported as important for enhancing their leadership roles.
4. Broader implications for distributed leadership practices as perceived by participants (Table 3).

Through this iterative coding and comparative analysis, the study synthesized, condensed, and interpreted participant-reported data to address the research questions comprehensively. Each coding phase was designed to ensure that the emerging concepts and themes were grounded in participants' responses, enhancing depth while distilling the codes into a coherent set that captured the essence of the study. By systematically organizing and interpreting this participant-centered data, the study produced insights that contributed to a more nuanced understanding of distributed leadership in educational settings.

Limitations

Limitations in a research study refer to the characteristics of design or methodology that may impact or influence the research project's findings (Price & Murnan, 2005). One limitation of this study is its qualitative, non-experimental design, which inherently impacts the generalizability of the findings. As a non-experimental study, the findings are interpretive and based on participants' subjective accounts rather than objective, controlled observations. This means that the insights derived from the data are specific to the context and participants involved, limiting the ability to establish causal relationships or broader applicability across varied educational settings.

Another possible limitation is researcher bias. Since the researcher has experience in both teaching and administrative roles, personal beliefs or judgments about participants' statements may have influenced interpretations. Member checks and focus groups were employed to mitigate this limitation by providing opportunities for participants to confirm or clarify interpretations.

Additionally, the absence of external researchers in the coding process to confirm the validity of the codes presents a limitation, as consensus procedures were not implemented. This introduces the possibility of subjectivity, as an additional coder did not independently verify the researcher's interpretations. Although member checks and focus groups contributed to validation, involving external coders and consensus procedures would have further strengthened the study's reliability.

Lastly, a significant limitation of this study is the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among participants, as all were White educators. This homogeneity could impact the interpretation of the findings, particularly when considering distributed leadership, which may be experienced or enacted differently across diverse cultural backgrounds. The absence of diverse

perspectives may mean that the study's insights are less generalizable to settings with more varied demographics, where diverse cultural or social dynamics could influence leadership practices. Future research would benefit from including a more diverse participant pool to gain a broader understanding of how distributed leadership is experienced across different racial and cultural contexts.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The interview and focus group data analysis identified four central themes that capture teachers' perspectives on distributed leadership. These themes, along with their corresponding 12 sub-themes, reflect the motivations, challenges, and supports relevant to teachers' engagement in distributed leadership roles. The themes and sub-themes were identified through a rigorous process of inductive coding and constant comparison analysis, which allowed patterns, relationships, and unique insights to emerge from the data. This thematic structure ensures a comprehensive yet nuanced understanding of the factors influencing distributed leadership practices. Findings are reported by theme and sub-theme, as shown in Table 3 (below). Excerpts associated with themes and sub-themes are presented by school, with direct quotes from teachers tagged with their identification number (e.g., T1, T2) to provide clear attribution and maintain the authenticity of their voices. In addition, principal interview data are presented following the teacher data to provide complementary insights into the themes. While the findings section highlights select quotes, Appendix H provides a comprehensive overview of teacher quotes organized by theme. The themes are organized as follows: (1) Teacher Internal Motivation, (2) Principal Leadership Qualities and Stability, (3) Personal Incentives for Teachers, and (4) Supporting Teacher-Led Initiatives. Each theme provides insights into distinct aspects of teachers' experiences and views, as detailed in the sections below.

Table 3

Teacher Themes

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Teacher Internal Motivation	1.1 Future Growth/Professional Development 1.2 Impact Driven Motivation for Teachers

2. Principal Leadership Qualities and Stability	2.1 Alignment of Values and Vision 2.2 Collaborative Leadership and Relationship Building 2.3 Responsiveness and Support 2.4 Stability and Trust in Distributed Leadership
3. Personal Incentives for Teachers	3.1 Financial Rewards and Compensation 3.2 Balancing Time and Workload 3.3 Recognition of Effort
4. Supporting Teacher-Led Initiatives	4.1 Structured Planning, Clarity, and Resource Availability 4.2 Effective Communication 4.3 Empowerment and Trust

Following the thematic overview in Table 3, Table 4 presents a detailed breakdown of teacher responses to the identified themes and sub-themes across Schools A and B. This table provides an overview of the degree to which teachers from each school identified with or supported each theme and sub-theme. Responses are presented for individual teachers, school-wide totals, and combined totals for Schools A and B. The table highlights patterns in teacher engagement, alignment with distributed leadership practices, and areas of divergence or consensus among participants.

Table 4*Teacher Responses to Themes and Sub-Themes Across Schools A and B*

Theme /Sub-Theme	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6	Total School A	Teacher 7	Teacher 8	Teacher 9	Teacher 10	Teacher 11	Teacher 12	Teacher 13	Teacher 14	Teacher 15	Total School B	Total School A & B
Theme 1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6/6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	8/9	14/15
S 1.1	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	4/6	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	4/9	8/15
S 1.2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6/6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	7/9	13/15
Theme 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6/6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9/9	15/15
S 2.1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6/6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9/9	15/15
S 2.2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	5/6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	7/9	12/15
S 2.3	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	4/6	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	5/9	9/15
S 2.4	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5/6	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	6/9	11/15
Theme 3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6/6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9/9	15/15
S 3.1	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	4/6	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	6/9	10/15
S 3.2	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	5/6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	6/9	11/15
S 3.3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6/6	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	5/9	11/15
Theme 4	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6/6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9/9	15/15
S 4.1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6/6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	7/9	13/15
S 4.2	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	4/6	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	7/9	11/15
S 4.3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	4/6	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	6/9	10/15

Note: See table 3 for a list of teacher themes and sub-themes. “Yes” indicates the presence of a theme or sub-theme. “No” indicates there is no presence of a theme or sub-theme.

Theme 1: Teacher Internal Motivation

The theme of “Internal Motivation” emerged as a central concept across interviews, with 93% of participants (14/15) referencing factors related to what motivates them. Teacher Internal Motivation captures intrinsic factors such as personal and professional growth aspirations, a desire to positively influence students and their school community, and an inner drive to support others. This theme encapsulates the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate teachers to participate in distributed leadership, enhancing their commitment to leadership roles within educational settings. Within this overarching theme, two sub-themes emerged: Future Growth/Professional Development, with 53% (8/5) of teachers identifying this as a key motivator, and Impact-Driven Motivation for Teachers, cited by 87% (13/15) of participants.

Sub-theme 1.1: Future Growth/Professional Development

This sub-theme reflects teachers’ intrinsic motivation to pursue opportunities for self-improvement and professional skill enhancement. It encompasses their desire for career advancement within and beyond their current roles. Future growth and professional development emerge naturally from the overarching theme of Teacher Internal Motivation because these aspirations are rooted in teachers’ internal drive to grow personally and professionally. Teachers demonstrate how intrinsic motivation fuels their engagement in distributed leadership roles by seeking opportunities to enhance their skills and prepare for future challenges.

School A. Most teachers (83%) in School A reported that they view distributed leadership as an opportunity to develop and apply skills beyond their classroom roles, contributing to the broader school environment. One teacher noted, “It provides me with an ability to practice new skills in larger groups outside of my classroom and within the school community” (T2). Such experiences are seen as essential for their professional growth and

preparedness for future roles. Additionally, half of the teachers highlighted that professional development opportunities enhance their teaching effectiveness and contribute to their broader career aspirations, reflecting how distributed leadership supports their motivation to grow personally and professionally.

School B. About two-thirds (67%) of educators at School B also shared the value of professional development opportunities through distributed leadership roles, particularly in acquiring training relevant to their tasks. Findings reveal that teachers believe professional development is integral to enhancing their leadership capacity and long-term career success. The desire for growth was a recurring theme, as reflected in the statement, “I would want to do it for the experience” (T12). Results indicated that just over half (56%) of teachers also saw distributed leadership as a way to gain insight into potential future roles, such as school administration. These opportunities align with teachers’ aspirations for growth and reflect the intrinsic motivation that drives their engagement in distributed leadership, connecting directly to the Teacher Internal Motivation theme.

Across both schools, 53% of teachers (8 of 15) identified professional development and opportunities for personal growth as key motivations for engaging in distributed leadership. While four teachers (27%) specifically highlighted professional development, many emphasized that leadership responsibilities help them enhance skills, expand knowledge, and prepare for future challenges, including potential administrative roles. These findings underscore the role of intrinsic motivations, particularly growth and career advancement, in driving teacher participation in distributed leadership.

Sub-theme 1.2: Impact Driven Motivation for Teachers

This sub-theme reflects how teachers' intrinsic motivation drives them to make meaningful contributions inside and outside the classroom. Aligned with the overarching theme of Teacher Internal Motivation, it emphasizes the deep sense of purpose teachers derive from improving student outcomes, fostering a positive school environment, and supporting their broader community. Their willingness to take on leadership roles stems from an altruistic desire to help others and a commitment to initiatives that enhance the collective well-being and growth of the school community.

School A. Interviews revealed that all teachers (100%) in School A were driven by a desire to make a meaningful impact on students, colleagues, and the community. The results suggest that intrinsic motivation stems from an altruistic need to help others, which builds a strong sense of belonging and purpose. A teacher noted that they “do this because I care,” (T4).

The responses reflect that teachers who perceive their work as contributing positively to the school and community feel encouraged to take on roles beyond their primary assignments. Teachers shared that the opportunity to support students, colleagues, their school, and the greater community were a big motivator, with a teacher saying that they are motivated to “do something productive and help people,” fulfilling both personal and professional aspirations (T1). Results indicated that the desire to develop a positive environment (n=2), improve classroom outcomes (n=3), and engage with the broader community (n=2) enhances teachers' sense of purpose and reinforces their commitment to education. One teacher expressed that they would “work until seven or eight o'clock at night” for something they are passionate about, highlighting that a meaningful project and well-assigned leadership role increase the likelihood of acceptance (T2).

School B. Two-thirds (78%) of teachers at School B shared a strong motivation to improve student outcomes, contribute to a positive school culture, and engage with the

community. A teacher said, “I want to help... I love this school; I love the people that I work with,” as well as “If we have a problem, let’s address it and see what we can do,” underscoring a collective commitment to the well-being of the school community (T10).

Results suggest that teachers are also dedicated to supporting colleagues (n=3) and students (n=6) by ensuring access to essential resources. A teacher said, “I want to make sure they’re [students are] getting the help that they need. They’re getting all the resources that we have available to them” (T12). One teacher drew a direct connection between leadership activities and student outcomes, saying, “I want to see action; I want to see the lives of children improve” (T14).

Findings demonstrated that just under half (44%) of teachers named intrinsic motivation as a common theme among teachers who took on distributed leadership roles. A teacher explained, “For me, it’s all about the intrinsic. I didn’t really come into this for the money part. I enjoy this work, and I want to build capacity in myself and build capacity in others” (T9). They expanded this statement by saying that “doing something that creates joy while also affecting change and building community” is a big part of what motivates them (T9). The fulfillment gained from problem-solving and facing challenges further reinforced this motivation, as reflected by a teacher who shared, “I enjoy the puzzle of problem-solving” (T7). This proactive attitude is also evident in their desire to, as a teacher described it, to just “do something about it,” showing teachers’ commitment to improving student outcomes and contributing to the broader educational community (T10).

Theme 2: Principal Leadership Qualities and Stability

The theme of “Principal Leadership Qualities and Stability” emerged as a central concept across interviews, with all participants (100%, 15/15) highlighting the critical role of principals

in creating a supportive and effective educational environment. Teachers consistently emphasized that principals who align with the school's values and vision, respond to their needs, and build strong, collaborative relationships inspire greater engagement and commitment to distributed leadership. These leadership qualities foster trust, accountability, and shared purpose, which are essential for cultivating an environment where distributed leadership can thrive.

This theme is supported by four sub-themes: Alignment of Values and Vision, identified by all participants (100%, 15/15) as a key leadership quality; Collaborative Leadership and Relationship Building, cited by 80% of participants (12/15); Responsiveness and Support, noted by 60% (9/15); and Readiness for Distributed Leadership, referenced by 73% (11/15). Together, these sub-themes illustrate how principals can lay the structural and relational foundations necessary to empower teachers and foster shared leadership practices.

Sub-Theme 2.1: Alignment of Values and Vision

This sub-theme highlights how principals who clearly communicate and embody the school's values and vision foster a sense of shared purpose, reflecting the broader theme of Principal Leadership Qualities. Teachers who share their principal's values and see them consistently demonstrated in actions are more motivated to engage in distributed leadership roles. Trust-building qualities such as reliability, transparency, and adaptability strengthen this shared purpose, creating a culture of mutual accountability. This connection to the principal's leadership inspires teachers' commitment and motivates them to contribute actively to the school's success.

School A. Principal leadership qualities were the most widely discussed topic in the teacher interviews, with all (100%) teachers providing information. Interviews showed that teachers who felt inspired by, connected to, and aligned with the principal's mission and values

were more likely to engage in school-wide efforts. Teachers emphasized that principals should communicate clearly and be reliable and trustworthy. Principals who follow through on their commitments and create a sense of accountability reassure teachers of their investment in the school community, prompting teachers to invest in return. “I want you to be honest. I want you to be transparent,” detailing the importance of strong relationships and leadership values (T1). Educators frequently highlighted the importance of principals embodying their values and fostering a collegial atmosphere where teachers feel seen and valued. “I don’t think there’s one leadership style, part of being a leader is figuring out what style needs to happen at the time that you need it. Sometimes, it’s collaborative; sometimes, it is more authoritative or directive. You have different spaces where you have to show up” (T2). Teachers used terms like “be present,” “take ownership,” and “adapt leadership style” to describe the actions that motivate them to participate more fully.

School B. The responses from teachers in School B similarly emphasized the importance of leadership, with 100% of teachers providing comments on this topic and a majority (78%) specifically highlighting the significance of strong school leadership. “I think school leadership creates the environment, and it sets the tone for the entire building,” underscoring the significant impact of leadership on building a culture of shared ownership and commitment to outcomes (T7). Within the interviews, several teachers highlighted the importance of building trust, developing relationships, having difficult conversations, being visible, and understanding what is happening throughout the school to provide support where needed. “I definitely see our leadership as needing to be the guide of our school, the model of our school” (T8). The responses reflect that when principals embody these proven leadership characteristics, they serve as models

for teacher leaders, inspire greater participation, and instill confidence in their leadership to support teachers as they take on new roles.

Sub-theme 2.2: Collaborative Leadership and Relationship Building

The sub-theme of Collaborative Leadership and Relationship Building highlights the importance of principals fostering meaningful relationships and encouraging collaboration to create a supportive school environment. This sub-theme reflects how principals' ability to build trust, listen actively, and acknowledge individual teacher strengths inspires teachers to take on leadership roles and engage in collective decision-making processes. Teachers emphasized that principals who prioritize relationship-building foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose, which are essential for distributed leadership to thrive.

School A. In School A, collegial and genuine relationships with teachers emerged to encourage teachers to take on distributed leadership tasks. A large majority (83%) specifically highlighted recognition and meaningful connections as primary influences on their motivation. Teachers emphasized that good relationships begin with principals truly understanding who they are, what motivates them, and recognizing their strengths.

The responses reflect a belief that interactions that build relationships through listening (n=3), and acknowledgment (n=3) were also valued. Teachers noted that principals "need to take time to get to know everybody. And not just having a staff meeting at the beginning of the school year... You have to sit down and get to know them... get a sense for their style... to talk with them to learn what their strengths are" (T5). One teacher suggested that "having an idea of which of your teachers is really strong and excited about hands-on science and which teachers are really strong about early literacy, and then allowing them to have a voice or take the lead in developing programs around their strengths," would be an excellent way to build relationships and improve

ownership of leadership (T5). Teachers also emphasized the importance of openness to continued dialogue, noting that administrators who “listen to your ideas, listen to your questions,” allow opportunities for meaningful discussions about the direction of initiatives (T2).

School B. Seventy-eight percent of teachers (7/9) emphasized that collaboration and relationship-building qualities are essential traits in a principal. A little less than half of the teachers (44%) emphasized that principals who prioritize collaboration and trust enable an atmosphere where teachers feel valued and respected. “When we are working together, we are hearing each other,” one teacher explained, underscoring the importance of communication and teamwork in building a supportive environment” (T7). Some teachers shared that seeking input and genuinely listening leads to a deeper sense of trust, reinforcing that leaders are truly invested in their success. “Getting teacher input and truly listening and adjusting builds trust” (T10).

Six out of nine (67%) teachers said developing relationships with staff was a priority. “I think it is important to have a relationship with your staff” (T9). Principals who take the time to understand their teachers by asking about their needs and interests demonstrate a genuine commitment to their success. “Being able to see the value of individuals and being able to encourage people in their roles” helps to create a culture where teachers feel supported and empowered (T10).

Sub-theme 2.3: Responsiveness and Support

This sub-theme highlights how effective principals foster trust and collaboration, aligning with the broader theme of Principal Leadership Qualities. By building genuine relationships through active listening, valuing teacher input, and understanding individual strengths, principals create a supportive environment where teachers feel respected and empowered. These

collaborative efforts encourage teachers to take on leadership roles and contribute to decision-making processes, reinforcing trust and a shared sense of purpose.

School A. Two-thirds of teachers (67%) at School A explained the importance of ongoing, personalized support from principals when taking on leadership roles outside their traditional training. Teachers described how this support should be “adaptive,” and “evolving in response to the needs” of teacher leaders as their projects progress. Half of the teachers cited reassurance as a particular need, emphasizing the need for principals to acknowledge their efforts and offer encouragement during moments of uncertainty or difficulty. One teacher noted the value of empathy in leadership, saying principals should recognize that “you are human, and it may not be perfect the way they expect it to be” (T2). This perspective highlights the importance of understanding and support in building teacher confidence for new responsibilities.

A few teachers emphasized the importance of principals who provide active support, acting as calm moderators to help navigate difficult situations and resolve conflicts while actively listening to all sides. Three teachers also highlighted the value of principals conducting regular check-ins and asking simple but meaningful questions like, “What do you need? What can I do? How can I help you?” (T4). These findings suggest that such proactive conversations play an important role in helping teachers navigate the complexities of leadership tasks and feel more confident in their roles.

School B. Just over half (56%) of teachers in School B echoed many of the sentiments from School A, underscoring the need for principals to be responsive to individual needs and the broader demands of initiatives. The data shows that principals who balance empowerment with structured support were described as creating an optimal environment for teacher-leader growth. One teacher shared an experience where their principal “trusted and empowered you to take the

leadership role but had a willingness to provide structured support while still letting you lead” (T7). Data also revealed that responsiveness took the form of check-ins to assess needs, ensuring teachers felt heard and connected to necessary resources. Teachers appreciated having a “listening ear,” “follow-through” from principals, and a place to go to “identify the supports needed” to complete their tasks. Ultimately teachers shared that these attributes helped build trust and reinforced a collaborative culture where everyone felt supported.

Sub-theme 2.4: Stability and Trust in Distributed Leadership

This sub-theme highlights the importance of stability and preparedness in principal leadership for fostering distributed leadership. Aligned with Principal Leadership Qualities, it emphasizes that consistent leadership and a steady vision are critical for building the trust and confidence necessary for teachers to engage in distributed leadership. Frequent leadership changes and instability were identified as barriers to successfully distributing leadership, as they hinder teachers’ ability to trust new principals and adjust to shifting priorities.

School A. Almost all (83%) of teachers emphasized the importance of readiness and stability in leadership before distributed leadership could be successful. The results revealed that frequent turnover at the principal level creates a systemic issue, leading to uncertainty and instability within the school. Half of the teachers expressed that this lack of consistency disrupts their ability to build trust, adjust to new leadership, and fully commit to distributed leadership roles. One teacher shared, “With three principals in four years, it feels like we’re always adjusting... it makes it difficult for teachers to get comfortable or fully invest in new ideas. There’s a sense of needing a stable foundation first” (T3).

Several teachers echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that a stable foundation within the school’s leadership is a necessary precursor to distributed leadership. Frequent turnover in

principals creates systemic instability, leaving teachers uncertain about the consistency of initiatives. Teachers conveyed that without this foundation, initiatives often seem temporary or uncertain, impacting their willingness to participate. As one teacher noted, “Having three principals in four years has been rough. For distributed leadership to work, you need to trust that things won’t be upended each year... Stability is key before you can expect teachers to take on more” (T5). One teacher shared that principals must also be prepared to relinquish some control while still offering guidance to empower teachers, noting, “We immediately feel the climate a new administrator brings, and if it’s one that doesn’t allow for teacher input, it’s hard to feel valued or like our involvement will be respected in the long term” (T4).

School B. Two-thirds (67%) of teachers shared their sentiments that frequent principal turnover and excessive changes at the administrative level have significantly impacted teachers’ willingness to engage in distributed leadership. One teacher reflected, “In the past four years we’ve had three new principals, and before that, we only had two in eight years. The amount of change has really impacted the energy of how we run our school... Every year feels like we’re figuring it out again, which is frustrating and exhausting for people who’ve been here a while” (T7).

Three teachers emphasized that each principal brings a new vision or set of priorities, making it difficult for staff to invest in initiatives that may not last. One teacher noted, “This time in five years, I’m on a third principal here. Each new person brings their own ideas and concepts, and it’s like, ‘How long are you going to be here?’ It’s hard to invest when we may have to start over again next year” (T10). Another teacher reflected, “I’ve had six different administrators, and each time a new one comes in, there’s a period of adjustment. It makes it hard to invest in initiatives that might change with the next leader” (T11).

Analysis indicates that the impact of constant change has led to a sense of instability, making teachers cautious about stepping into leadership roles. One teacher observed, “We’ve had three different building principals in four years. Each has had a drastically different approach, which makes it feel like we’re constantly in change shock. Teachers are saying there’s ‘initiative fatigue,’ and it’s unsettling, especially when changes feel top-down and inconsistent” (T15). This sense of “initiative fatigue” has cultivated an environment where teachers feel unable to rely on consistent support or direction, further challenging the potential for distributed leadership to take root.

Theme 3: Personal Incentives for Teachers

The next theme identified is labeled Personal Incentives for Teachers and emphasizes the critical role of individual motivators in fostering teacher engagement and willingness to take on leadership responsibilities. Identified through analysis of interview and focus group responses, this theme emerged as a significant factor, with 100 % of participants (15 of 15) highlighting personal incentives as essential for enhancing satisfaction and commitment in distributed leadership roles.

Personal Incentives for Teachers capture various factors influencing teachers’ decisions to engage in leadership, such as financial compensation, workload balance, time management, and recognition of their efforts. Teachers emphasized that when personal incentives are effectively addressed, they feel valued and supported, which fosters a more productive and collaborative school environment. Three sub-themes were identified within this overarching theme: Financial Rewards and Compensation, highlighted by 67% of teachers (10/15); Balancing Time and Workload, noted by 73% of teachers (11/15); and Recognition of Effort, emphasized by 73% of teachers (11/15). These sub-themes will be explored in detail below.

Sub-theme 3.1: Financial Rewards and Compensation

This sub-theme emphasizes the critical role of fair and adequate financial incentives in motivating teachers to take on leadership responsibilities. Financial rewards, such as stipends, bonuses, and extra duty contracts, provide additional incentives for specific tasks or achievements, acknowledging teachers' time, expertise, and the demands placed on their personal lives. Compensation, encompassing overall payment such as base salary and contractual pay, reflects the broader remuneration system for assigned duties. Together, these financial incentives directly impact teachers' willingness to engage in distributed leadership roles. Aligned with the broader theme of Personal Incentives for Teachers, this sub-theme highlights that teachers feel valued and supported when compensation reflects the scope and effort of additional responsibilities.

School A. Two-thirds (67%) of teachers in School A discussed various forms of financial compensation they have received, such as stipends, hourly pay for professional development outside of teaching time, and extra duty contracts. They emphasized that compensation should align with the size, length, and number of hours involved in additional tasks, acknowledging the value of their expertise and the demands on their personal lives. Three teachers noted that receiving appropriate compensation improved their sense of professional respect and recognition, fostering a greater willingness to take on additional responsibilities. "If I'm going to take time away from [my children], then I need to be compensated," one teacher shared, underscoring the importance of respect for their time (T6).

Just under half of the teachers specifically noted a clear distinction between leadership tasks completed within the workday and those requiring considerable time beyond their regular hours. One teacher remarked at their previous school district, "They paid me for that extra time

for working outside of contract hours to prep those materials and supported me in providing additional humans to where I needed them” (T5). Several teachers reported that they are often expected to take on these additional responsibilities without compensation for time spent beyond their contractual obligations. They conveyed that this lack of recognition diminished their willingness to participate in distributed leadership, creating added pressure and impacting their work-life balance. These comments highlight the need for thoughtful consideration around compensation that respects both the scope of assigned projects, their professional efforts, and their commitments beyond the classroom.

School B. Two-thirds (67%) of teachers in School B noted financial incentives in their interviews. However, during the focus group, all six teachers acknowledged the difficulty of openly expressing the need for compensation due to societal criticism, which often stigmatizes teachers for seeking payment beyond their contracted duties. As one participant shared, “I do feel like being compensated financially for extra tasks that I do here for the betterment of the school district and for my principal makes me feel valued because this is my job, and I think I should get paid for the extra time. We need to stop being martyrs and recognize our worth as professionals” (T14). Teachers in the focus group stressed that while the desire for fair compensation stems from professional pride, the societal pressure to prioritize altruism over financial fairness often silences such requests. Despite this, they emphasized the importance of receiving compensation, particularly given their family obligations and the need for work-life balance. “Principals need to understand that sometimes teachers cannot say yes because they have home responsibilities. More work during the day translates to more work in the evening, which doesn’t work for that balance I am working to achieve” (T14). These insights reveal that

financial compensation is not just about monetary reward but also about recognition and respect for their professional contributions and personal boundaries.

Compensation was also linked to teachers' motivation to participate in leadership roles. "Adequate financial rewards... are essential for motivation" (T10), while another teacher remarked, "Had there been some incentives towards that in some kind of way, I think I would've been more swayed to do it," underscoring how incentives could influence their willingness to take on extra tasks (T8). "If there was some way to relieve me of duties in order to be able to take these things on, I'd be much more willing to do it" (T13). The results indicate that this balance between professional responsibilities and personal commitments underscores the need for financial rewards to align with teachers' overall well-being, ensuring they feel supported at work and home.

Sub-theme 3.2: Balancing Time and Workload

This sub-theme highlights the importance of managing time and workload effectively to support teacher engagement in leadership roles. Teachers emphasized the need for structured, proactive planning, dedicated time during the school day, and workload reduction to prevent feeling overwhelmed. Flexibility in scheduling and clear expectations about time commitments were essential for fostering balance and enabling participation. Aligned with the broader theme of Personal Incentives for Teachers, this sub-theme details how logistical support, such as redistributing tasks and providing substitutes, empowers teachers to take on leadership responsibilities while maintaining a manageable workload.

School A. All but one teacher (83%) identified time management and workload as significant challenges, emphasizing the need for proactive and structured planning for leadership tasks rather than reactive, last-minute approaches. Four teachers highlighted that the lack of

dedicated time during the school day to engage in leadership activities creates barriers to participation. As one teacher put it, “Time is always a problem,” underscoring the need for predictable and scheduled opportunities to focus on leadership tasks (T2). Another teacher noted, “It needs to be a planned event, not a one-off emergency,” reflecting the importance of structured, dedicated time to enable productive planning, collaboration, and participation in leadership initiatives (T3).

Teacher interview results indicate that half of the teachers shared that flexibility in managing when and how tasks were completed played a significant role in accepting leadership tasks would be helpful. Teachers preferred involvement in the planning process and appreciated advance notice, which allowed them to perform better and prepare adequately. “If [the principal] said, “Hey, in a month we’re going to do this,” they would be more willing to participate, illustrating the importance of having time to anticipate and prepare for leadership roles (T3). Workload reduction was also a central idea, with the need for “spaciousness” to take on additional responsibilities (T2). This meant reducing the burden of clerical and other non-teaching assignments or duties. A couple of teachers also mentioned the need for practical support, such as substitutes or additional personnel support, to allow time for leadership activities. “[My principal] said we’d like you to do this, and they gave me time to prepare those materials,” describing the importance of providing logistical support (T5).

School B. Two-thirds (67%) of the teachers in School B emphasized that time, as a precious resource, required thoughtful management by administrators to account for leadership tasks alongside their teaching responsibilities. One teacher commented, “Principals should be thinking about the extra time commitment that you will have to be giving” (T7). Another teacher reflected on the challenge of finding time amidst existing classroom duties, emphasizing the need

for “time, some release time, or some other kind of time” (T6). “There’s only so much more you can add into your day,” capturing the ongoing struggle to balance responsibilities (T10).

Flexibility in scheduling was highlighted as critical for enabling teachers to manage leadership tasks while balancing existing responsibilities. Three teachers noted that it would be helpful to get clarity about time allocations and expressed a willingness to adapt their schedules when necessary, such as staying late or working weekends, but emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance. “I would want to know how much time I’m given to work on these things,” underlining the need for clear expectations and manageable workloads (T8).

Sub-theme 3.3: Recognition of Effort

This sub-theme emphasizes the critical role of genuine and specific recognition in motivating teachers and reinforcing their commitment to leadership roles. Acknowledging teachers’ unique contributions through private gestures, public praise, or personalized feedback fosters a positive school culture where educators feel valued and appreciated. Recognition, while a form of external motivation, differs from tangible incentives by addressing teachers’ need for appreciation and belonging. Aligned with the broader theme of Personal Incentives for Teachers, this sub-theme highlights how meaningful acknowledgment creates a sense of belonging and encourages participation in distributed leadership.

School A. In School A, all teachers (100%) cited recognizing teachers’ efforts as an element of taking on distributed leadership tasks. Teachers used terms such as “valued,” “recognized,” “honored,” and “seen” to describe the importance of being acknowledged. They explained that recognition could take many forms, including compliments, positive comments, public sharing of achievements, personal emails, and quick conversations. However, recognition needs to be genuine and specific to the individual. “A thank you for X says they saw me do

something that I have value in,” emphasizing that personalized acknowledgment has a greater impact than a generic gesture (T3).

Some teachers emphasized that relationships between principals and staff are foundational to effective recognition. Principals who invest time in getting to know their staff and understand their preferences for acknowledgment foster a sense of trust and respect. This relational approach creates a genuinely positive environment where appreciation feels sincere. “Appreciation doesn’t always have to come in monetary value. Appreciation is just the willingness to be available or be present,” one teacher noted, reinforcing that recognition often involves consistent support and presence (T2). Teachers valued principals who demonstrated respect for their contributions, strengthening a school-wide culture of appreciation and increasing participation in school initiatives. “I’ll work for somebody who treats me with respect and appreciation,” a teacher explained, highlighting how meaningful relationships amplify the impact of recognition (T2).

School B. Teachers in School B echoed similar sentiments, with just over half (56%) citing the importance of specific and meaningful recognition. These teachers shared that acknowledgment should reflect teachers’ unique contributions, skills, and achievements. “Just recognition sometimes of the job that you’re doing well, putting value around the person and their skills in some kind of way would be more motivating” (T8). Several teachers also valued both private and public recognition. “It is good when it is just you and I, but also when I am doing a task that lifts the whole school, it is a public acknowledgment as well” (T10). The results suggest that this balanced approach to recognition validates individual efforts and emphasizes the collective benefits of their work. Ultimately, this contributes to staff feeling a stronger sense of belonging. Principals can create a more welcoming environment that encourages collaboration

rather than isolation in leadership roles by privately and publicly celebrating teachers' achievements.

Theme 4: Supporting Teacher-Led Initiatives

Identified through analysis of interview and focus group responses, the final theme of Supporting Teacher-Led Initiatives emerged as a vital factor, with 100% of participants (15/15) referencing the importance of support systems for enabling teachers to succeed in distributed leadership roles. This theme highlights the specific components participants identified as necessary to empower teachers to take on leadership roles successfully.

The theme of Supporting Teacher-Led Initiatives encompasses the fundamental components that teachers identified as necessary for effectively implementing leadership initiatives, such as sufficient resources, transparent communication, detailed planning, and fostering a culture of empowerment and trust. Teacher-led initiatives refer to projects or activities in which teachers take primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating efforts to improve student outcomes, school culture, or instructional practices. Participants emphasized that these supports were essential for leadership tasks rather than general job responsibilities, making them crucial for fostering teacher confidence and success in leadership roles. When these supports are present, teachers reported feeling more capable and motivated to fulfill their responsibilities, contributing to a collaborative and productive educational environment. Within this overarching theme, three key sub-themes emerged: Structured Planning, Clarity, and Resource Availability, noted by 87% of teachers (13/15); Effective Communication, highlighted by 73% (11/15); and Empowerment and Trust, emphasized by 67% (10/15).

Sub-Theme 4.1: Structured Planning, Role Clarity, and Resource Availability

This sub-theme focuses on the importance of structured planning and resource alignment in supporting teacher-led initiatives. It underscores the need for clear expectations, well-defined goals, and processes that establish a foundation for accountability and confidence. Proactive planning and resource availability, including materials, personnel, and financial support, are important to this theme. Additionally, aligning resources with project needs and assigning roles based on individual strengths fosters collaboration and sustained engagement.

School A. All teachers (100%) stressed the need for structured planning and resource availability to implement leadership roles. Given that teacher leaders lack the authority to allocate school-level resources, principals must proactively determine what support is necessary for implementation. Teachers communicated that they hesitated to accept leadership roles without proper resources, as inadequate support could impede success and waste valuable time. Teachers reported that the necessary resources included monetary support for the project (n=2), human assistance (n=3), and logistical aid (n=4), such as clerical help, transportation services, and personnel for event management. “Having the right personnel, having the right support financially to purchase resources and materials” was essential for implementation (T5).

Clear roles, responsibilities, and logistical support were also seen as fundamental to ensuring teachers felt prepared and supported. “Everybody’s got to know what they’re supposed to be doing” (T1), and there was frustration when projects were perceived as not thoughtfully planned: “They kind of start building the ship as it’s flying sometimes. I wish they would pause and say, what’s our big idea?” (T3). Teachers reported that logistical support from principals involved outlining project details (n=2), onboarding the staff (n=2), and clarifying expectations (n=2). “The right people to complete the effort” was necessary for implementation, indicating the importance of aligning skills with responsibilities (T3).

For structured planning to be effective, it needed to be documented yet flexible. Some teachers mentioned the importance of backward mapping the end to the beginning, identifying the checkpoints and major deliverables, and allowing flexibility to edit the plan. “It takes a lot of work and it’s a lot of stress,” but structured planning “increases the likelihood of taking it on” (T2). A well-prepared and documented process helped ensure teachers felt ready and willing to participate. “Get me on board by preparing” (T5). A couple of teachers also shared the importance of principals being “present, strategically present” throughout the implementation process to address logistical barriers and provide ongoing support, which was critical to maintaining momentum and supporting teacher leaders (T3).

School B. A majority (78%) of teachers in School B similarly highlighted the need for adequate resources and structured planning to implement distributed leadership well. Teachers stressed that having the right materials (n=2), funding (n=3), and people to support (n=4) the implementation improved the likelihood of increased engagement. “When teachers have the right materials... it leads to improved engagement” (T10). The necessity of strategically aligning personnel to tasks was also underscored across four of nine interviews, with teachers emphasizing that skills should align with the task to assist with teacher-led initiatives.

Additionally, four teachers in School B discussed the significance of meetings with the principal to establish expectations and clarify roles, desired outcomes, support mechanisms, and communication plans. “I need to know what it is that you’re asking me to do, what that outcome looks like, and what it means to do it along the way so that I can envision it” (T13). This clarity helped teachers lean into their roles confidently. They also appreciated clear benchmarks and timelines. “I like benchmarks along the way... I do really well with the timeline or benchmarks,” illustrating how structured planning contributed to a sense of accountability and progress (T11).

These teachers further emphasized the need for concrete objectives and scaffolding to enhance leadership work. “I would want what our objective is laid out. What is the plan? Where are we trying to go?” (T8). This indicates the importance of structured planning, which involves creating clear, detailed objectives, assigning roles, and outlining steps to achieve goals while maintaining flexibility to adapt as needed. Such planning promotes a sense of ownership among teachers and provides them with the guidance needed to confidently expand their roles as they gain experience.

Sub-theme 4.2: Effective Communication

This sub-theme underscores the vital role of transparent, timely, and clear communication in fostering collaboration and trust between teachers and administrators. Effective communication ensures that teachers feel supported, valued, and equipped to succeed in leadership roles. It includes providing detailed and actionable information, offering opportunities for dialogue, and creating open channels for feedback. Frequent, direct, and adaptable communication helps align expectations, minimize misunderstandings, and promote a shared sense of purpose. Aligned with the broader theme of Supporting Teacher-Led Initiatives, this sub-theme highlights how intentional communication mechanisms strengthen relationships and enhance leadership success.

School A. Data showed that about two-thirds (67%) of teachers cited effective communication as a factor in supporting teachers in leadership roles. Teachers emphasized that to be effective, communication must be “transparent,” “succinct,” “clear,” “direct,” “frequent,” and “timely.” Several teachers expressed the need for information to be delivered through multiple modalities, addressing both the entire staff and those assigned to specific leadership initiatives. Given that many teachers have new leadership responsibilities, three teachers

highlighted the need for regular communication channels with principals. These teachers stressed that without such support, they risk missteps that could lead to the principal retracting support or a failed implementation attempt.

Half of the teachers (50%) also highlighted the importance of being included early in an initiative assigned to them. “Involve them in conversations and planning from the get-go,” which leads to greater buy-in from teacher leaders (T5). Constructive and actionable feedback was also considered essential for improved participation. “Good feedback is key,” reinforcing the need for clear expectations and alignment between goals and responsibilities (T3). Effective communication is not just about providing information; it also involves listening to and addressing the needs of teachers. “I have to know that if I’m taking this on and I’m stuck that I can go to you,” emphasizing the necessity for principals to be available and responsive, ensuring teachers feel supported throughout the process (T3).

School B. A sizable proportion (78%) of teachers echoed the sentiments of School A, emphasizing that “transparent,” “timely,” and “clear” communication is a requirement for teachers who are assigned distributed leadership tasks. One teacher added, “I really think that good written and verbal communication needs to be a top-tier priority in leadership,” reflecting the shared belief in the importance of communication to create an environment conducive to distributed leadership (T8). Two teachers shared that they specifically valued having opportunities for dialogue to process information collectively. “The opportunity to talk about it more, to think about it more, to process it more” would lead to better outcomes (T10).

Half of the teachers (50%) detailed the importance of productive conversations with principals in which the principal demonstrates flexibility and a willingness to adapt. During one-on-one conversations, principals should be open to modifying their ideas: “Maybe my idea

wasn't the best idea. Let's try it this way" (T8). This willingness to adapt, based on teacher leaders' experiences, can establish a culture of collaboration and flexibility.

Additionally, two teachers stressed the importance of detailed communication to avoid ambiguity. "The more you can communicate, even if we're talking about little things... giving as much detail as possible to people is always better than not getting enough" (T13). This approach minimizes misunderstandings and helps create a cohesive environment where everyone is on the same page.

Sub-theme 4.3: Empowerment and Trust

This sub-theme emphasizes the importance of empowering teachers and fostering a culture of trust as foundational to supporting teacher-led initiatives. Empowerment involves principals demonstrating confidence in teachers' abilities, providing scaffolded support, and allowing teachers the autonomy to lead initiatives without micromanagement. Trust is built through consistent presence, active engagement, and creating a safe space where teachers feel comfortable seeking help, expressing concerns, and taking risks. Aligned with the broader theme of Supporting Teacher-Led Initiatives, this sub-theme highlights how principals' relational trust and visible support enable teachers to innovate and take ownership of their leadership roles.

School A. Several teachers from School A (67%) highlighted that implementing teacher-led initiatives requires feeling empowered to embrace their leadership roles fully. Two teachers particularly emphasized the importance of principals demonstrating interest in their work, trusting their abilities, and providing a supportive presence. "They have faith in my ability, but also they ask questions," underscoring that trust involves confidence in teachers' capabilities and active engagement (T2). Teacher responses revealed that principals who "have your back," and provide a "balance of support and trust" were valued for providing guidance and support without

micromanaging. This approach involved trusting teachers to take ownership of their initiatives while being available to help, ensuring that teachers had the “breadth and the space” to drive their work independently (T1).

The importance of relational trust was repeatedly mentioned across four of six teacher interviews, with teachers appreciating principals who create a supportive atmosphere. “That feeling of having your back... I’m on your side” is a central theme for building trust and ensuring teachers feel comfortable taking on leadership roles (T4). Reassurance involves conveying to the teacher that “if you make a mistake, that it is not the end of the world,” creating an environment where teachers are willing to take risks (T2).

School B. In School B, two-thirds of teachers (67%) highlighted empowerment and trust as central to their leadership experiences, suggesting potential areas for growth in principal-teacher relationships. Teachers noted the need for a safe and supportive environment where they feel encouraged to take initiative and express concerns. One teacher emphasized the importance of principals providing a visible presence and maintaining an open-door policy, signaling their availability and commitment to teacher needs. Another elaborated, stating, “Trusting that they know their craft and being available for them in whatever capacity that might need or might be. Whether that’s being visible in the hallway if they pop by your office and say, ‘Hey, can I chat,’ being available for that. I know they have a lot of things on their plate too, but being available in the moment for your staff is really important as well” (T8). This visible and accessible leadership was described as a cornerstone for fostering trust and empowerment, allowing teachers to feel supported as they navigate leadership roles.

Another teacher emphasized the importance of principals trusting their expertise and enabling them to explore leadership opportunities independently. Demonstrating confidence in

teachers' abilities while providing necessary guidance creates a supportive space for teachers to innovate and take risks. As one teacher explained, "We need to know that we're in a safe space and that we have somebody that will support that" (T12). This sentiment highlights the value of consistent engagement and reassurance from principals in empowering teachers at School B.

Results from Principal Interviews

The individual interviews with the Principals of Schools A and B revealed critical insights into their perceptions of teachers' needs when implementing distributed leadership. Both principals emphasized trust and relationship-building as foundational for leadership success. They noted that a consistent, reliable presence fosters a culture where teachers feel encouraged to take on additional responsibilities. As one principal explained, "You need to have a sincere respect for the skills and dispositions of the team members" (P2). This aligns directly with the Collaborative Leadership, Relationship Building, and Empowerment and Trust sub-themes in teacher responses, where mutual respect and a supportive environment were central to fostering engagement.

Leadership stability was another shared focus. Both principals highlighted the importance of consistent administrative leadership in cultivating a healthy school culture, echoing the Stability and Trust in Distributed Leadership sub-theme. One principal stated, "Stability in leadership affects the health of the school culture" (P1), mirroring teachers' concerns about frequent turnover and its impact on readiness for distributed leadership initiatives.

Both principals underscored the significance of clear expectations and structured support, which align with the Structured Planning, Clarity, and Resource Availability sub-theme. Principals noted that uncertainty and overwhelm could be minimized by providing teachers with defined frameworks, adequate time, and resources. As one principal noted, "They need a

platform to present and an opportunity to coach others to success” (P2), emphasizing the value of granting autonomy while ensuring support.

Additionally, these principals offered perspectives not explicitly mentioned by teachers. One key insight was the Fear of Failure, which principals identified as a barrier for teachers stepping into leadership roles. “Teachers fear that their efforts could impact their grade level or department...they don’t want to do something wrong” (P1). This perspective highlights principals’ understanding of the emotional challenges teachers face, which complements the trust and reassurance themes highlighted by teachers.

Another unique emphasis by principals was the role of timing and context in activating distributed leadership. Principals stressed the importance of assessing school climate and aligning leadership opportunities with teachers’ readiness. “Knowing the right time to activate them in leadership roles...aligns with where they are personally and professionally” (P2). This strategic approach reflects principals’ broader vision of distributed leadership as a balance between empowerment and readiness, ensuring leadership roles are introduced to maximize success and teacher engagement.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study explored the dynamics of distributed leadership within two elementary schools, focusing on teachers' perspectives regarding their interactions with school leaders, their motivations, and the support structures that enable or inhibit their engagement in distributed leadership roles. While distributed leadership is one of the most researched leadership models (Gumas et al., 2018), a notable gap remains in understanding teachers' specific motivations to accept, engage in, and take ownership of leadership tasks (Sun & Xia, 2018). Using a qualitative case study approach, this study provided insights into how teachers experience distributed leadership and the conditions they identify as essential for their active participation.

In interpreting the findings of this study, it was essential to address the nuanced perspectives teachers shared about the conditions necessary for them to accept, engage in, and sustain ownership of distributed leadership roles within their schools. Foundational work by Spillane (2006) highlights the importance of understanding leadership dynamics as they emerge through interactions among leaders and followers within specific contexts. Harris (2013) further emphasizes the scarcity of research that delves into the actual practice of leadership and the complex interrelationships between formal and informal leaders (p. 4). This study built on these perspectives, offering new insights into how teachers, as informal leaders, construct meaning from their leadership experiences and what they require to engage meaningfully in distributed leadership.

To organize the findings, this section was structured into three key areas that reflect the progression of teacher leadership engagement:

1. Motivation for distributed leadership, focusing on internal drivers, professional growth opportunities, and alignment with personal values.

2. Engagement in distributed leadership, addressing the conditions and principal leadership qualities that encourage active teacher participation.
3. Ownership of distributed leadership, exploring trust, recognition, and support systems that empower teachers to embrace leadership roles as expressions of their professional identities.

By examining these areas, the study offered insights to inform how leadership practices can better align with teachers' needs and priorities, providing a clearer understanding of their impact. This organization reflected a natural progression from initial motivation to sustained ownership, emphasizing the importance of trust, collaboration, and alignment with school values in fostering teacher engagement.

Motivation for Distributed Leadership

Motivation for distributed leadership emerged as a central theme, driven by opportunities for growth and meaningful contributions (as outlined in Sub-theme 1.1: Future Growth/Professional Development and Sub-theme 1.2: Impact-Driven Motivation). Teachers reported being more motivated to take on distributed leadership roles when these roles aligned with school values and provided avenues for professional and personal growth. Most teachers emphasized that leadership opportunities offering skill development and career advancement inspired greater engagement. These roles allowed teachers to gain practical experience, deepen their understanding of school operations, and meaningfully apply new skills, ultimately enhancing their readiness for broader responsibilities.

In addition to professional growth opportunities, many teachers described factors coded as intrinsic motivation, such as a desire to make meaningful contributions to students, colleagues, and the broader school community. This intrinsic motivation was particularly evident when

leadership roles aligned with teachers' personal and professional values, as these roles allowed them to act on their commitment to fostering positive change. Findings from this study indicated that teachers were more likely to engage in distributed leadership when they viewed these roles as opportunities to fulfill their intrinsic desire to make a meaningful impact on the school and its community. Similarly, research by Amels et al. (2020) and Cherkowski and Walker (2018) emphasizes that teachers' motivation increases when leadership roles are interpreted as impactful and aligned with their personal values.

The quality of communication from school leaders significantly influences teachers' willingness to engage in distributed leadership. Teachers emphasized the need for clear, transparent, and consistent principal communication (as outlined in Sub-theme 4.2: Effective Communication) to build the trust essential for distributed leadership. This study found that regular communication channels, coupled with actionable feedback from administrators, fostered an environment where teachers felt supported and confident in their roles. Leadership follow-through based on transparent communication was particularly critical for building reliable relationships where distributed leadership could thrive. These findings align with existing research, underscoring that principals who prioritize transparent communication promote staff trust. For instance, Price (2015) found that principal-teacher interactions directly affect teachers' perceptions of trust and support, influencing their engagement with students. Furthermore, active listening by school leaders enhances transparent communication, supporting intrinsic motivation and fostering a collaborative culture. Merritt (2021) notes that active listening is a precondition to trust and positive relationship building, which are central to a collaborative school culture.

The study's findings highlighted the pivotal role of principals in fostering a supportive environment that enhances teacher motivation to engage in leadership tasks. Teachers expressed

that they were more likely to participate in distributed leadership when principals established a collaborative school culture rooted in trust, shared values, and a clear vision (as outlined in Sub-theme 2.2: Collaborative Leadership and Relationship Building). This aligns with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which emphasizes that fulfilling psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness is critical to intrinsic motivation.

This study's findings indicated that most teachers experienced feelings of autonomy when trusted to make meaningful decisions about their instructional practices and leadership initiatives. Competence was fostered when principals provided opportunities for skill development and leadership tasks aligned with teachers' professional goals, allowing them to grow in confidence and capability. Relatedness was evident in the emphasis on collaboration and trust-based relationships with principals, which created a sense of connection to the broader school mission. By addressing these psychological needs, principals helped teachers view leadership roles as natural extensions of their skills and values, enhancing their intrinsic motivation to engage in distributed leadership.

The findings indicated that high-trust relationships with principals, characterized by transparency, follow-through, and active listening, significantly enhanced teachers' sense of security, value, and connection to the school's mission (as outlined in Sub-theme 4.2: Effective Communication). These relationships increased teachers' willingness to engage in distributed leadership roles. Recent research supports these findings, emphasizing that a trust-based, transparent approach fosters a positive school culture. For example, Bryk and Schneider (2003) highlight that relational trust, grounded in respect, personal regard, competence, and integrity, is essential for collaboration and school improvement. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) similarly stress that transparent, reliable, and supportive principals build trust among staff,

cultivating a collaborative school environment. Routman (2015) further underscores that active listening and transparent communication by school leaders are critical for developing trust and encouraging teachers to take on leadership roles.

Research, including findings from this study, highlighted that interactions fostering a shared vision and a trust-based environment are critical for enhancing teachers' intrinsic motivation (as outlined in Sub-theme 2.1: Alignment of Values and Vision). Teachers reported that leadership roles with a clear, community-oriented impact increased their engagement and fostered a sense of belonging within the school community. These findings align with prior research showing that empowering teachers to contribute meaningfully to leadership enhances job satisfaction and commitment, ultimately strengthening collaboration and building a cohesive school culture (Denree & Thornton, 2017; Sun & Xia, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2019).

Engagement in Distributed Leadership

Findings from this study demonstrated the principal's role in shaping teacher engagement and participation in distributed leadership. Engagement in distributed leadership was influenced by the specific qualities of a principal, resource availability, the stability of leadership within the school and district, and collaborative decision-making processes. Each factor plays a distinct role in creating an environment where teachers feel motivated and prepared to take on leadership roles.

Teachers reported that principal qualities such as adaptability, reliability, and alignment with a shared vision were key factors in encouraging their engagement in distributed leadership (as outlined in Sub-theme 2.1: Alignment of Values and Vision and Sub-theme 2.2: Collaborative Leadership and Relationship Building). For instance, principals who adapted their leadership style to address specific challenges were perceived as adaptable, fostering trust among

teachers. Reliability was demonstrated by principals who consistently followed through on commitments, reinforcing a sense of stability and dependability. Alignment with a shared vision occurred when principals communicated a clear and consistent mission for the school, inspiring teachers to contribute to broader initiatives. These findings align with research emphasizing that trust in school leadership is built on behaviors such as reliability, competence, and integrity, which are foundational for fostering teacher engagement and cultivating a collaborative school environment (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Teacher engagement in leadership roles was significantly enhanced by access to essential resources, including task-specific training, implementation support, and financial resources (as outlined in Sub-theme 4.1: Structured Planning, Role Clarity, and Resource Availability). Teachers highlighted the importance of these resources in effectively carrying out leadership initiatives. These findings align with research emphasizing that effective professional development characterized by a focus on content, collaboration, active learning, and sustained support plays a crucial role in increasing teacher engagement and fostering school improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Structured support and resource availability provide teachers with the tools and confidence needed to take on leadership responsibilities successfully.

When implemented thoughtfully, structured planning makes tasks more manageable and ensures they are aligned with teachers' duties and areas of expertise. Teachers emphasized that principals who provide clear guidelines, such as defining roles, providing consistent benchmarks for progress, and establishing reasonable timelines, helped teachers feel better prepared and more confident in their leadership responsibilities. The data also revealed that when structured planning is absent, it can lead to confusion or hesitation among teachers, diminishing their willingness to engage in leadership roles. These findings are consistent with research

emphasizing that planning, such as backward mapping to set clear objectives, assigning designated roles, and maintaining consistent benchmarks, makes distributed leadership tasks more feasible and appealing (Fabey & Allison, 2024).

This study found that the stability of school administration and the trust it fosters play a pivotal role in teachers' willingness to engage in distributed leadership (as outlined in Sub-theme 2.4: Stability and Trust in Distributed Leadership). Stability, defined as principals remaining in their positions over time and providing consistent leadership practices, was reported by teachers as a crucial factor in increasing their engagement. Teachers emphasized that stability fosters continuity in leadership vision and goals, reducing uncertainty caused by frequent leadership changes. Conversely, some teachers described "initiative fatigue" as a challenge resulting from shifting priorities and inconsistent leadership, which disrupt continuity and diminish motivation. These findings align with research indicating that consistent leadership reduces teacher reluctance to engage in initiatives, builds relational trust, and fosters a long-term commitment to distributed leadership (Finnigan & Daly, 2017; Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

The findings highlighted that a collaborative and empowering school culture emerges when principals actively engage teachers in planning and implementing school initiatives (as outlined in Sub-theme 4.3: Empowerment and Trust). Teachers reported that being included in the initial stages of leadership activities, such as defining goals, developing plans, and identifying necessary resources, made them feel valued and respected as contributors. This sense of respect was further reinforced when principals provided structured support to help teachers manage their responsibilities without feeling overwhelmed. These findings align with Leithwood et al. (2019), who emphasized that principals who create clear role definitions, offer time

management assistance, and ensure access to necessary resources enable teachers to view leadership roles as both accessible and achievable.

Ownership of Distributed Leadership

The study identified that ownership of distributed leadership was strongly influenced by interactions with school leaders that conveyed trust, validation, and consistent recognition (as outlined in Sub-theme 4.3: Empowerment and Trust and Sub-theme 3.3: Recognition of Effort). Teachers reported that principals who formally acknowledged and validated their contributions, such as recognizing achievements in leading professional development sessions or implementing new instructional strategies, enhanced their commitment to leadership roles. Many teachers emphasized the importance of personalized acknowledgment, such as publicly highlighting their role in improving student outcomes or privately commending their efforts during one-on-one meetings. This recognition, when genuine and tied to specific accomplishments, reinforced teachers' motivation to engage in leadership and fostered a sense of belonging. These findings align with research emphasizing that supportive leadership practices cultivate a positive work environment and enhance teachers' self-efficacy in leadership tasks (Sun & Xia, 2018).

Building trust and validation with principals was foundational to teachers' sense of security and willingness to take on leadership roles (as outlined in Sub-theme 4.3: Empowerment and Trust). Teachers reported that principals who foster an empowering and trusting environment create a space where leadership roles are authentic expressions of their professional identities. Study findings revealed that principals who actively share leadership responsibilities through roles aligned with teachers' strengths, interests, and classroom needs enhanced their sense of agency and accountability while deepening their connection to the school's mission. Similarly, Bouwmans et al. (2019) emphasize that principals who delegate meaningful leadership

tasks such as leading projects, creating collaborative initiatives, or mentoring colleagues foster empowerment and a sense of shared responsibility among teachers. This aligns with Lin (2022), who highlights that distributed leadership promotes teacher autonomy and professional collaboration, valuing teachers' expertise and encouraging ownership of leadership responsibilities.

Teachers' willingness to engage in distributed leadership was influenced by the availability of financial and non-financial incentives (as outlined in Sub-theme 3.2: Financial and Non-Financial Incentives). This study highlighted the importance of appropriate compensation, which teachers reported as a key factor in feeling valued in their leadership roles. These findings align with research indicating that substantial financial incentives for high-performing teachers, such as salary increases and signing bonuses, enhance retention and motivation, making leadership roles more appealing and sustainable (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015). Similarly, non-financial incentives, such as professional development opportunities and mentoring programs, were also identified as crucial in fostering teacher engagement (Kelly et al., 2008). Teachers in both schools emphasized that such incentives, combined with clear communication about expectations, contribute to making leadership roles sustainable rather than burdensome.

Principals who balance empowerment with structured support were found to be more effective in inspiring genuine ownership of leadership tasks (as outlined in Sub-theme 4.3: Empowerment and Trust). Teachers in this study shared that consistent, supportive interactions with principals reinforced the sense that their contributions were valued and enduring. While earlier discussions under Theme 1: Teacher Internal Motivation highlighted intrinsic drivers, such as professional growth and making an impact, this sub-theme emphasizes the external conditions provided by principals. Specifically, consistent leadership and structured support were

identified as key factors that enable teachers to translate their intrinsic motivations into active leadership participation.

Research shows that principals who foster trust and distribute meaningful leadership roles enhance teachers' sense of efficacy and engagement, creating a supportive environment for distributed leadership (Cai et al., 2023). Offering structured professional development opportunities and clear guidance further encourages teachers to view leadership roles as accessible and achievable, helping them feel prepared to take on new responsibilities (Bredeson, 2000). In addition, consistent and supportive leadership builds trust and confidence among teachers, motivating them to embrace additional responsibilities and succeed in leadership roles (Bayar, 2020).

Recommendations for Practice

The following section presents seven recommendations for school and district leaders to support the implementation of distributed leadership. These recommendations are organized into three sequential approaches and reflect the practical steps administrators can take to establish a solid foundation, build teacher capacity, and maintain long-term engagement:

1. Laying the groundwork: Establishing stability, shared vision, and trust to create a solid foundation for leadership.
2. Building teacher capacity and commitment: Equipping teachers with the resources, support, and autonomy needed to thrive in leadership roles.
3. Sustaining teacher engagement and ownership: Reinforcing recognition, adaptability, and continuous improvement to maintain motivation and long-term success.

This structure, detailed in Table 5, offers a clear framework for enhancing teacher engagement and fostering ownership within distributed leadership. Each recommendation is

grounded in the study's findings and offers actionable steps tailored to meet the unique needs of teachers and school contexts.

Table 5

Phases of Implementation and Recommendations for Distributed Leadership

Phases of Implementation	Recommendation (R)
1. Laying the Groundwork	R.1 Ensuring Stability in Leadership for Long-Term Success R.2 Minimizing Initiative Fatigue through Aligned Vision R.3 Building Trust Through Transparency and Support
2. Building Teacher Capacity and Commitment	R.4 Supporting Teachers with Resources and Flexibility R.5 Empowering Teachers through Participative Decision-Making
3. Sustaining Teacher Engagement and Ownership	R.6 Sustaining Engagement through Recognition and Advancement Opportunities R.7 Promoting a Culture of Continuous Improvement

Laying the Groundwork

The first phase, Laying the Groundwork, involves creating the stability, shared vision, and trust necessary to support distributed leadership. This foundational phase ensures that administrators build an environment where teachers feel confident and prepared to take on leadership roles. The following recommendations address key elements of this foundation: ensuring stability in leadership while managing transitions, minimizing initiative fatigue, and building trust through transparency and support.

Recommendation 1: Ensuring Stability and Managing Transitions

Leadership stability is foundational to the success of distributed leadership, as it fosters trust, reduces disruptions, and creates a consistent environment where teachers feel confident

engaging in leadership roles. However, transitions are inevitable, and administrators should prioritize long-term leadership stability while proactively managing transitions to ensure continuity and trust.

Findings from this study revealed that frequent leadership turnover creates uncertainty, undermining teachers' willingness to invest in long-term initiatives. Research by Hulpia, Devos, and Rosseel (2009) supports this, emphasizing that stable and supportive leadership structures foster job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Similarly, Fink and Brayman (2006) found that poorly managed transitions hinder the continuity of school improvement efforts.

Implementing leadership continuity plans is essential to address these challenges. Administrators can integrate vision-aligned professional development programs that span multiple years, equipping teachers with leadership skills while aligning their growth to long-term school goals (Guskey, 2000). Additionally, as Hargreaves and Fink (2006) advocate, succession planning plays a critical role in ensuring a shared vision and predictable systems, providing stability and consistency for teachers.

Managing leadership transitions effectively requires structured onboarding and transparent communication. It is essential for administrators to implement comprehensive onboarding plans that ensure new leaders understand ongoing initiatives, teacher strengths, and school priorities, aligning their approach with established goals (Bush, 2018). Participants emphasized the value of listening sessions during transitions, where teachers can directly engage with new leaders to strengthen their connection to the school's mission. Research supports these practices, highlighting that transparent communication reduces anxiety and builds trust among staff (Louis et al., 2010; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

Recommendation 2: Minimizing Initiative Fatigue through Aligned Vision

Initiative fatigue occurs when frequent changes, competing priorities, and poorly aligned initiatives overwhelm teachers, leading to frustration, burnout, and disengagement. For distributed leadership to succeed, school leaders should create an environment where initiatives feel purposeful, manageable, and connected to long-term goals. This creation requires intentional planning, alignment with the school's vision, and pacing that allows for reflection and refinement.

To reduce initiative fatigue and enhance teacher engagement, school leaders should prioritize aligning new initiatives with the school's long-term vision and thoughtfully pace their implementation. Frequent changes and competing priorities can overwhelm teachers, leading to frustration, burnout, and diluted focus on leadership efforts.

Participants in this study highlighted that poorly aligned or frequently changing initiatives caused frustration and disconnection. To address this, school leaders should establish a formal review process involving teachers and administrators in evaluating initiatives to align with the school's mission. This collaborative approach fosters transparency, increases teacher commitment, and reduces resistance to change. Research by Bogler and Somech (2004) and Somech (2010) supports the importance of teacher involvement in decision-making, showing that participation increases clarity, commitment, and trust.

To support teacher well-being and long-term engagement, it is important for school leaders to schedule intentional pauses between initiatives. These pauses allow time for reflection and refinement of ongoing efforts before introducing new responsibilities. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize that thoughtful pacing enhances teacher engagement, while Reeves (2010) highlights how overwhelming workloads from back-to-back initiatives can hinder morale and

progress. For instance, after implementing a major program, school leaders might dedicate a semester to assessing its impact and refining practices to ensure alignment with broader goals.

Recommendation 3: Building Trust Through Transparency and Support

Relational trust is fundamental to distributed leadership, and administrators should prioritize building trust through approachable leadership, transparent communication, and tailored recognition of teacher contributions.

Participants emphasized that approachable and reliable leaders motivate teachers to engage in leadership roles. Informal interactions, such as classroom visits, casual conversations, and drop-in office hours, allow administrators to connect with teachers, understand their needs, and demonstrate genuine investment in their professional growth. Research supports the importance of informal engagement, showing that it fosters psychological safety and strengthens leader-teacher relationships (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Transparency plays a critical role in building trust within schools. Communicating decisions clearly, following through on commitments, and providing visibility into initiative progress are essential responsibilities for administrators. Tools such as project trackers or implementation dashboards can enhance transparency, reassuring teachers that leadership actions are deliberate and aligned with broader school goals. Research highlights that transparency strengthens teacher buy-in, fosters collaboration, and reinforces a shared sense of purpose (Louis et al., 2010).

Recognizing teachers' contributions is essential for fostering a sense of value and community. Administrators should implement school-wide recognition programs, such as teacher spotlight initiatives, to highlight meaningful contributions to school goals, which builds collective efficacy and strengthens school culture (Goddard et al., 2015). Additionally, tailoring

leadership opportunities to teachers' individual strengths, interests, and aspirations reinforces trust and motivation by aligning roles with their skills and professional goals (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012)

Building Teacher Capacity and Commitment

Once a solid foundation is established, the focus shifts to Building Teacher Capacity and Commitment. In this phase, administrators equip teachers with the tools, resources, and autonomy needed to thrive in leadership roles. This includes balancing workload demands, fostering participative decision-making, and tailoring opportunities to meet teachers' individual strengths and aspirations. The following recommendations provide strategies for building teacher leadership capacity while ensuring their long-term commitment to distributed leadership.

Recommendation 4: Supporting Teachers with Resources and Flexibility

For distributed leadership to thrive, administrators should ensure teachers are supported with the resources, flexibility, and responsive structures necessary to balance leadership responsibilities and classroom demands. Participants emphasized the importance of workload flexibility, clear planning tools, proactive resource management, and personalized support as critical factors for success. Research highlights that these tailored supports prevent burnout, enhance engagement, and enable teachers to take ownership of leadership roles (Hulpia et al., 2009; Grissom et al., 2015). The following subsections explore these strategies in detail: (a) Flexibility, (b) Planning Tools, (c) Filling Resource Gaps, and (d) Personalized Support.

Flexibility. Flexibility in scheduling emerged as a critical need for teacher leaders. Administrators might consider implementing practices like scheduling release time or reducing teaching loads to allow teachers to focus on leadership tasks without compromising their instructional responsibilities. For example, assigning fewer teaching periods to a teacher leading

a schoolwide initiative ensures they have the time and capacity needed to succeed. Research supports this approach, showing that workload adjustments prevent overextension and enable sustainable leadership engagement (Eckert, 2019).

Planning Tools. Clear planning tools, such as well-defined guidelines, benchmarks, and timelines, are essential for clarifying leadership expectations and aligning efforts with schoolwide goals. When administrators outline expectations clearly, participants report greater confidence and reduced uncertainty. The research underscores that structured frameworks empower teachers and streamline their leadership contributions (Harris, 2013).

Filling Resource Gaps. Research highlights that involving teachers in resource decisions strengthens their ownership of leadership roles and cultivates a collaborative school culture (Gumus, 2020). To support distributed leadership effectively, administrators can address resource gaps proactively by engaging teachers in identifying and allocating necessary resources. Mechanisms such as quarterly surveys or informal check-ins can help track progress, uncover ongoing needs, and foster collaboration. Demonstrating a commitment to teacher success through sufficient instructional materials or additional support staff also builds trust and reinforces shared leadership goals.

Personalized Support. Personalized teacher support is essential for fostering strong relational connections and enhancing engagement in leadership roles. Research confirms that tailoring leadership opportunities to individual teachers' strengths, interests, and career aspirations increases teacher success and ensures sustainable implementation of distributed leadership initiatives (Bogler & Somech, 2004). Administrators play a critical role in ensuring these opportunities are meaningful and aligned with teachers' professional goals, reinforcing trust and long-term commitment to leadership.

Recommendation 5: Empowering Teachers through Participative Decision-Making

Involving teachers in decision-making strengthens their sense of ownership and commitment to school initiatives. Administrators should prioritize participative approaches that align leadership efforts with teachers' strengths, values, and classroom realities. Participants in this study emphasized that this approach builds a culture of collaboration, deepens investment in school goals, and reinforces shared responsibility. Research supports these findings, highlighting that participative leadership enhances teacher motivation, promotes professional agency, and sustains engagement in distributed leadership roles (Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Bush & Glover, 2014).

Teacher-led committees and school-wide initiative roundtable forums emerged as effective strategies for participative decision-making. Committees allow teachers to lead efforts in areas such as curriculum design, professional development, and student engagement. Participants shared that having autonomy in these roles enables them to leverage their expertise, fostering a sense of pride and ownership. Similarly, regular forums, like monthly roundtables, allow teachers to present ideas, address challenges, and collaborate on school-wide efforts. These platforms amplify teacher voices, strengthen trust, and build collective efficacy, which research shows are critical for innovation and collaboration (Harris, 2012; Sebastian et al., 2019).

Providing scaffolded autonomy is essential for supporting teachers as they transition into leadership roles. Administrators can provide this support by using informal conversations and structured tools, such as readiness rubrics, to identify teachers' strengths and match leadership opportunities to their developmental needs. Research highlights that mentorship programs and targeted training focused on skills like conflict resolution and communication are effective in building confidence and leadership capacity. For example, pairing novice leaders with

experienced mentors or offering step-by-step project guidance allows teachers to gain hands-on experience while maintaining a safety net of support.

Research highlights that tailored support fosters engagement and ensures leadership roles remain meaningful and effective (Leithwood et al., 2020; Gumus et al., 2020). Experienced teacher leaders thrive when given greater autonomy to innovate and implement strategies aligned with their expertise. Administrators need to trust these leaders to apply their skills and judgment effectively to promote growth, confidence, and sustainability in leadership roles. Differentiating structured guidance for new leaders and greater autonomy for experienced leaders ensures that support remains relevant and impactful.

Sustaining Teacher Engagement and Ownership

The final phase, Sustaining Teacher Engagement and Ownership, focuses on maintaining teachers' motivation and commitment over time. By emphasizing recognition, advancement opportunities, and continuous improvement, administrators can ensure that teachers remain engaged in their leadership roles and invested in the school's success. The following recommendations outline strategies for fostering a culture of reflection, collaboration, and adaptability to sustain distributed leadership efforts long-term.

Recommendation 6: Sustaining Engagement through Recognition and Advancement

Opportunities

Recognition and advancement opportunities are essential for sustaining teacher motivation and commitment to leadership roles. Administrators should prioritize consistent and meaningful acknowledgment of teachers' contributions while providing tailored opportunities for growth. Participants emphasized that genuine recognition validates their efforts, strengthens their connection to the school's mission, and enhances relationships with colleagues and

administrators. These findings align with research by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), who highlight that recognizing teachers' contributions fosters professional capital and deepens their engagement with school initiatives.

Effective recognition begins with individualized acknowledgment of teachers' unique contributions and skills. Practices such as public recognition during staff meetings or personalized notes of appreciation can significantly boost morale and reinforce teachers' value. Administrators play a key role in fostering this culture of recognition. For instance, a principal might publicly thank a teacher for leading a professional development session or privately commend innovative classroom practices. Research highlights that these actions align teachers' contributions with broader school goals and strengthen overall morale (Sebastian et al., 2019).

Formal recognition programs can further institutionalize appreciation for teacher leadership. Initiatives such as "Teacher Spotlight" or "Teacher-Leader of the Month" create consistent opportunities to celebrate teacher achievements and connect their leadership to the broader school community. Research demonstrates that public acknowledgment enhances morale, strengthens professional networks, and fosters collective efficacy, particularly when recognition aligns with organizational goals (Andrews, 2011).

Recommendation 7: Promoting a Culture of Continuous Improvement

A growth-oriented school culture emphasizing reflection, feedback, and recognition fosters continuous improvement and collaboration among staff. Participants in this study emphasized the value of professional growth in motivating teachers to explore new ideas, reflect on their experiences, and collaborate toward achieving shared goals. Embedding these principles into distributed leadership strengthens collaboration and reinforces a commitment to continuous learning at every level. Research by Opfer and Pedder (2011) emphasizes that school cultures

rooted in ongoing learning promote adaptability and sustained engagement. This recommendation focuses on four key practices: (a) Supporting Reflective Practices, (b) Collaborative Debriefing Sessions, (c) Celebrating and Building on Successes, and (d) Aligning Leadership Opportunities with Teacher Strengths.

Supporting Reflective Practices. Fostering a reflective culture begins with leadership modeling, as principals who openly share their successes, challenges, and lessons create a safe environment for teachers to engage in reflection. Research by Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) demonstrates that collaborative reflection within professional learning communities leads to measurable instructional improvements and collective accountability. To build on this, administrators can establish collaborative reflection teams within departments or grade levels. These teams provide structured opportunities for teachers to discuss challenges, share lessons learned, and refine practices. For instance, a team analyzing the outcomes of a new instructional schoolwide strategy might identify adjustments to improve its effectiveness that could then benefit the entire school community.

Collaborative Debriefing Sessions. Research highlights that systematic debriefing promotes sustained improvement by linking reflection with actionable next steps (Borko et al., 2010). Structured debriefing sessions deepen professional learning by framing challenges as opportunities for growth. To embed this practice into the school culture, administrators can encourage teachers to reflect on significant projects or initiatives through systematic debriefing. For example, analyzing a schoolwide initiative can highlight successful strategies and uncover barriers to address in future implementations. Participants emphasized that these sessions allow teachers to celebrate successes and identify growth areas, reinforcing a continuous improvement mindset.

Celebrating and Building on Successes. Recognition and storytelling are critical for inspiring growth and fostering a positive school culture. Participants highlighted that sharing success stories in newsletters, social media posts, or staff meetings validated their efforts and motivated others to pursue similar growth. Administrators should create opportunities to showcase teacher innovations and achievements, recognizing individual contributions and highlighting the value of distributed leadership. For instance, showcasing a teacher's innovative classroom practice in a staff meeting validates their work and inspires others. Research shows that storytelling within communities of practice builds shared knowledge, strengthens professional networks, and inspires collective learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Aligning Leadership Opportunities with Teacher Strengths. Tailoring leadership opportunities to individual strengths and passions increases teacher engagement and satisfaction. Participants shared that when leadership tasks aligned with their expertise, such as leading a reading initiative for a teacher passionate about literacy, they felt more fulfilled and committed to their roles. Administrators should match leadership tasks to teachers' skills and interests, ensuring these opportunities reflect their strengths and professional aspirations. This approach aligns with research showing that such alignment increases confidence and deepens teachers' investment in leadership initiatives (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Administrative Tool: Distributed Leadership Readiness Checklist

Participants emphasized that sustaining distributed leadership is challenging due to disruptions caused by leadership transitions as well as gaps in administrators' skills and understanding of teacher needs. This highlights the need for administrators to foster engagement through strategic planning and tools that evaluate their readiness for distributed leadership. The researcher developed a distributed leadership readiness tool to address these challenges,

specifically informed by the current study's findings and recommendations. This tool aims to foster trust, clarify roles, address resource limitations, and guide administrators in using insights from teachers to create supportive environments, aligning with research on simplifying complex processes to ensure purposeful implementation (Gawande, 2009).

The Distributed Leadership Readiness Checklist (DLRC), located in Appendix I, was informed by participant feedback and contemporary research, and developed as a practical framework to assess readiness, prepare strategies, and monitor progress across three phases:

- Readiness Assessment: Evaluating trust, resource availability, and the alignment of leadership roles with school priorities.
- Strategic Preparation: Defining clear roles, identifying professional development needs, and allocating necessary resources to equip teacher leaders for success.
- Ongoing Monitoring and Refinement: Establishing feedback mechanisms to evaluate progress, document observations, and adapt practices to evolving needs.

The DLRC reflects participants' emphasis on reflective processes and feedback loops. This iterative approach ensures that leadership practices remain responsive and adaptive to schools' evolving needs. For example, periodic reviews using the checklist can help administrators identify opportunities to expand teacher leadership roles, address emerging challenges, and maintain alignment with institutional goals.

Embedding the DLRC within distributed leadership practices has the potential to bridge the gap between research and practical application. Designed to integrate structured planning with reflective adaptability, the checklist may help administrators foster trust, sustain teacher engagement, and support long-term improvements in school leadership. While this tool aligns with the study's findings indicating that distributed leadership thrives when administrators

strategically address readiness gaps and provide consistent support, it remains a conceptual framework that requires further testing to evaluate its full applicability, utility, and potential impact.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study highlight several areas requiring further exploration to build a more comprehensive understanding of distributed leadership. First, future research should address the study's limitations by examining distributed leadership in broader and more diverse contexts. Expanding participant samples to include individuals from varied cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and professional backgrounds would enrich insights into how distributed leadership practices adapt across different settings. Research across urban and suburban districts and middle and high schools could further clarify how these practices evolve based on school demographics and educational levels.

Additionally, longitudinal studies are essential to examine the sustained, effective implementation of distributed leadership over time. Such studies could answer questions about the long-term impacts on teacher engagement, school culture, and student outcomes as an extension of this study's findings related to trust, collaboration, and shared decision-making.

Building on this study's focus on teacher incentives, future research should explore intrinsic motivators, such as recognition and autonomy, and extrinsic factors, including financial rewards and workload adjustments. These investigations could help determine how to effectively sustain teacher engagement in leadership roles, addressing critical gaps identified in the literature and this study's results.

Another promising direction involves developing and testing readiness frameworks for schools and principals. These frameworks might assess key readiness indicators, such as trust

levels, openness to shared decision-making, and school culture, helping leaders prepare for distributed leadership implementation.

Finally, future research should explore the influence of tools or protocols, such as the DLRC, on staff engagement in distributed leadership. Piloting the DLRC across varied school settings would allow for usability testing, assessment of social validity, and refinement based on feedback from teachers and administrators. This process would evaluate the tool's accuracy in identifying readiness factors and its effectiveness in guiding successful distributed leadership practices.

Limitations

This study faced several limitations that should be considered when interpreting findings. First, the participant sample was entirely White, limiting the findings' generalizability to more diverse educational settings. The absence of cultural and contextual diversity may have influenced the themes identified and presented an overly narrow perspective on distributed leadership practices.

The study's scope was confined to two elementary schools in a rural district. While this setting allowed for an in-depth exploration of distributed leadership in a specific district context, the findings may not fully represent practices in urban or suburban schools or other types of schools, such as middle schools, high schools, or alternative programs. Similarly, the small sample size of two principals and 16 teachers, though providing rich qualitative insights, restricts the applicability of these findings to broader educational contexts.

The study was conducted over a six-month period, which prevented the exploration of how distributed leadership practices, and their effects evolve over time. A longitudinal approach, such as examining leadership dynamics across an academic year or multiple years, might have

provided more comprehensive insights into the development of trust, collaboration, and teacher engagement within distributed leadership frameworks. By capturing changes at various points over time, a longitudinal study could reveal patterns in leadership uptake, sustainability, and its broader impact on school culture and student outcomes.

Additionally, while steps were taken to mitigate bias through memo writing and member checks, formal reliability checks were not conducted. Due to time constraints, best practices in qualitative research, such as inter-coder reliability or peer debriefing, were not implemented. The absence of these measures reflects a limitation in the study design and may have impacted the consistency of data analysis. Efforts to maintain transparency and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, including detailed memo writing and member checks, were employed.

Lastly, the study focused exclusively on licensed educators, excluding the perspectives of non-licensed staff such as paraprofessionals, custodians, and administrative assistants. These individuals play critical roles in schools and could provide valuable insights into distributed leadership dynamics, which were not captured in this research.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on distributed leadership by illuminating the specific conditions that enhance teacher motivation, engagement, and ownership. By exploring themes of intrinsic motivation, principal leadership qualities, personal incentives, and structured support, it identifies strategies for fostering a collaborative and empowering school culture. The findings emphasize the importance of trust-building, targeted support, and resource allocation in creating an environment where teacher-led initiatives can thrive. Practical recommendations are provided for school administrators and policymakers, including developing the Distributed Leadership Readiness Checklist (DLRC), which equips

principals with actionable strategies to align administrative practices with teachers' needs and strengthen the school community. By addressing the gap in understanding the teacher experience within this leadership model, this dissertation offers valuable insights into improving interactions between teachers and administrators, resulting in greater teacher engagement and ownership of leadership roles.

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APPENDIX A

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction:

I'm thrilled to be sitting down with you today. My name is Tenneal Wetherell, and I am working on my EdD at the University of Oregon. I am in the dissertation phase and am excited to be conducting research on distributed leadership.

- If I have met them: It is nice to see you again. I hope you have been well. I am working on my EdD at the University of Oregon. I am in the dissertation phase and am excited to be conducting research on distributed leadership.

Not too long ago, I used to live in Redact, and my family has deep roots in the community. I also wore the hat of a school administrator at Redact, and redact. It is important to note that while I have worked in this education community, I was never a direct supervisor, nor did I have any authority over the employment or work of any of the employees in this district.

You may also be aware that I now work at redact. I want you to know that I am not here in any official capacity and no personal information will be shared with anyone or utilized in the context of my redact work. I will not share your information with your principal or the school district – only the results of the study as they are produced in my paper.

I want to thank you so much for meeting with me and for everything you do, day in and day out, for students.

I also want you to know that this interview isn't just a formality; it's a chance for us to dig into what you think and feel. I want to help leaders understand how best to incorporate educators in their work and this conversation will go a long way to helping me figure that out.

Consent

Before we get started, I wanted to review the informed consent document that I sent you. Did you have a chance to read it? First and foremost, your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to choose whether to participate or not. Your decision will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits that you are otherwise entitled to. Your participation is expected to last approximately two months. During this time, you will be asked to take part in a 1:1 interview lasting 45-65 minutes via Zoom, at a time convenient for you. Additionally, there will be an optional 45-65 minute focus group session with other participants from your school on another date. This session aims to review interview themes and ensure accuracy in reflecting the information collected.

Your privacy and data confidentiality are of utmost importance. Interviews and focus groups are recorded and verbatim transcription of audio recordings will be conducted manually. Measures will be taken to protect your personal information, and identifiable information (names, schools, etc.) will be removed from the transcripts before analysis. Once transcriptions are quality-checked, I will delete the recordings. All video and audio recordings and transcripts will be stored securely on password-protected computers.

Regarding risks, it's important to note that the questions asked during the interview and focus group are designed to gather your opinions and perspectives on enhancing leadership activities within the school. There are no questions of a private or sensitive nature. I will not share your information with anyone else. It is important to note that there are information risks associated with the confidentiality of data shared during focus groups. In this meeting, you will have an opportunity to confirm overarching themes of what I heard in interviews. I will not share individual statements or quotes. This will make it difficult to attribute specific statements to specific teachers, but your confirmation or dissent of themes will be heard by others in the focus group. I will review the expectation that anything shared is confidential in this meeting but will be unable to control what individual teachers do or say outside of the meeting.

If at any point you wish to discontinue participation, you have the right to do so without any penalty or loss of the gift card compensation for the completed interview and focus group. Simply notify me via email, and any collected audio, video, and transcribed notes will be promptly deleted or securely destroyed. Your decision will not impact your relationship with me or the University of Oregon.

I hope this overview provides clarity on what participating in this study entails. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to ask. Your informed consent is vital, and I appreciate your time and consideration in this matter.

If you give consent, can you please sign consent using the document I sent via DocuSign in an email?

Wait to obtain the email that it is signed before continuing.

Purpose

I am working on my dissertation on distributed leadership. Distributed leadership is a teamwork approach to school operations, where leadership responsibilities are shared among different people, like teachers, TOSAs, specialists, and staff instead of relying on just one person such as the principal. It's about everyone playing a part in making decisions and getting things done, creating a more collaborative and effective way of leading a school.

I don't think the leadership of a school can be done by one person. I think it takes all of us. When I started digging into the research, I found that most of the information out there teaches district leaders what they should do to set up distributed leadership systems in their schools. What is

interesting to me is that I didn't find a lot of research where someone asked the teachers what they want or need to accept the informal leadership role in a school, during the implementation of a schoolwide project like a new literacy initiative or a team project like organizing a new approach to parent night.

Ultimately, I want to be able to share with school administrators what makes teachers feel motivated to take on leadership roles, as well as what factors might discourage them. What teachers want and need to help them fully participate in these leadership roles, is what might help them step into the role and take ownership of the lead of the project.

If there are any questions about what I have shared or what I mean by a specific question, please feel free to ask.

Note: Principals will be asked the same questions as the teachers, however, their role will be to articulate their perspectives about what teachers might need in the context of the questions. For example:

- Teacher: What motivated you to accept this leadership role?
- Principal: What do you think motivates teachers to accept a leadership role?

Interview Questions

Getting to know the participant.

- Could you provide an overview of your teaching/principal experience, including the locations where you've taught, the duration of your roles, and the grade levels you've worked with?
- How do you see school leadership impacting the school and learning environment, and what qualities do you think are important for effective school leaders?

Experiences with Leadership:

- Tell me about a time you were given additional leadership responsibilities outside your classroom role. What was the opportunity?
- What motivated you to accept this leadership role?
- What support or resources enabled you to be successful in that role?
- What did school leadership do that empowered you to take ownership of this leadership work?

Challenges with Leadership:

- Describe a leadership opportunity you declined or struggled to engage with fully. What held you back?
- What additional support from school leadership would have enabled you to accept this role?
- How could leadership have better supported you to improve your receptiveness?

Improving Leadership Participation:

- Moving forward, what specific actions could school leadership take to increase your willingness to accept additional leadership responsibilities?
- Imagine you are asked to lead a new school initiative. Exactly what support, resources, and communication would you need from leadership to agree to take it on?
- In your view, what is the most essential thing leadership needs to provide to empower teacher leadership?

Conclusion:

Is there anything else that you would like to share? Were there any questions you thought I would ask, and I didn't?

Thank you so much for participating. I will be conducting numerous interviews with colleagues and then will get back in touch with you to host a larger meeting where I share what I learned and make sure that I documented your thoughts, experiences, and needs correctly.

Please reach out to me if you have any questions.

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction:

Welcome, and thank you for participating in this focus group discussion. It was great to meet you individually during your 1:1 interview and I am excited to get your input in this focus group session on what I learned.

My name is Tenneal Wetherell, and I am conducting research on distributed leadership in education as part of my dissertation at the University of Oregon. I greatly appreciate your willingness to share your insights and experiences with us today.

Consent

I obtained your consent to participate before your interview. I did want to take some time to see if anyone has any questions before we proceed. As a reminder, your participation in this focus group is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without facing any consequences. Your privacy and confidentiality will be strictly maintained throughout the research process. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the consent form or any aspect of this study, please feel free to raise them now. If you feel more comfortable, we can go into a breakout room to discuss as well.

As a reminder, while I have worked in this education community, I was never a direct supervisor, nor did I have any authority over the employment or work of any of the employees in this district. In addition, I am not here in any official capacity and no personal information will be shared with anyone or utilized in the context of my redact work. I will not share your information with your principal or the school district – only the results of the study as they are produced in my paper.

Your privacy and data confidentiality are of utmost importance. Interviews and focus groups are recorded and verbatim transcription of audio recordings will be conducted manually. Measures will be taken to protect your personal information, and identifiable information (names, schools, etc.) will be removed from the transcripts before analysis. Once transcriptions are quality-checked, I will delete the recordings. All video and audio recordings and transcripts will be stored securely on password-protected computers.

Confidentiality

Regarding risks, it's important to note that the questions asked during the interview and focus group are designed to gather your opinions and perspectives on enhancing leadership activities

within the school. There are no questions of a private or sensitive nature. I will not share your information with anyone else.

Given the interactive nature of our group discussion, it's important to address potential risks regarding the confidentiality of shared information. During our focus group, you'll have the opportunity to validate overarching themes gleaned from individual interviews. However, it's crucial to emphasize that individual statements or quotes will not be disclosed. This approach is intended to ensure that specific remarks cannot be attributed to particular participants. Yet, your agreement or disagreement with these themes will be noted by others present. I kindly request that all information discussed during this focus group remains confidential. Please refrain from sharing any details or insights, including the confirmation or denial of themes, specific statements, or sentiments expressed by fellow participants, with anyone outside of this session. Your cooperation in maintaining confidentiality is greatly appreciated.

If at any point you wish to discontinue participation, you have the right to do so, please send me a private message or share your wish to be removed from the study. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to ask.

Wait to determine if there are questions, if not proceed to the next section of the protocol.

Purpose of the Study

Before we begin our focus group discussion, I want to remind everyone about the focus of my dissertation research on distributed leadership in schools. Distributed leadership is a collaborative approach to school management, where responsibilities are shared among various stakeholders rather than being centralized with one individual, such as the principal. This approach involves teachers, TOSAs, specialists, and staff all contributing to decision-making and implementation processes.

My research aims to explore what motivates teachers to take on leadership roles within this framework, as well as identify any barriers or challenges they may face. While much of the existing literature focuses on how administrators can establish distributed leadership systems, I'm particularly interested in understanding the perspectives of teachers themselves.

Specifically, I want to uncover what teachers desire and require to feel empowered in assuming informal leadership roles during initiatives like new literacy programs or team projects such as revamping parent night approaches. By understanding these factors, my goal is to provide valuable insights to school administrators on how to effectively support and engage teachers in distributed leadership initiatives.

If anyone needs clarification on any aspect of my research or has questions, please don't hesitate to ask. Let's now delve into our discussion and explore these important topics together.

Focus Interview Questions

The purpose of this focus group is to delve deeper into the themes and insights gathered during the individual interviews, aiming to confirm and refine the practices that motivate teachers to participate in distributed leadership. Additionally, we seek to gain a collective understanding of educators' perspectives on this matter. Your input today will contribute significantly to a more comprehensive understanding of distributed leadership practices within educational settings. Your role in this focus group is to validate or challenge these insights based on your own experiences and perspectives. I encourage open and honest dialogue, inviting each of you to share your thoughts, observations, and any additional insights you may have regarding distributed leadership. If there are any questions about what I have shared or what I mean by a specific question, please feel free to ask.

Experiences with Leadership:

- For each theme identified from the interview questions ask the following questions:
 - Does this [theme] resonate with you, why or why not?
 - What would you add, adjust, and/or change and why?
- Are there any other themes you think I should add based on this discussion?
- Is there anything else you want me to know?

Challenges with Leadership:

- For each theme identified from the interview questions ask the following questions:
 - Does this [theme] resonate with you, why or why not?
 - What would you add, adjust, and/or change and why?
- Are there any other themes you think I should add based on this discussion?
- Is there anything else you want me to know?

Improving Leadership Participation:

- For each theme identified from the interview questions ask the following questions:
 - Does this [theme] resonate with you, why or why not?
 - What would you add, adjust, and/or change and why?
- Are there any other themes you think I should add based on this discussion?
- Is there anything else you want me to know?

Conclusion:

Is there anything else that you would like to share? If you think of something you would like to add please feel free to reach out via email or telephone.

Thank you again for being a part of this research.

APPENDIX C

TEACHER CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Title: Understanding Teacher Perspectives on Distributed Leadership to Optimize Engagement

Researcher(s): Tenneal Wetherell, University of Oregon

Researcher Contact Info: redact

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision whether or not to participate. Carefully consider this information and the more detailed information provided below the box. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide whether to participate.

Key Information for You to Consider
• Voluntary Consent. You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation. • Purpose. The study aims to explore distributed leadership practices in educational settings from the perspective of teachers, with a focus on understanding the conditions that increase the likelihood that teachers will be motivated to engage in and take ownership of leadership activities. The goal is to provide administrators with insights for establishing optimal conditions conducive to successfully distributing leadership amongst teachers. • Duration. It is expected that your participation will last two months. • Procedures and Activities. You will be asked to participate in a 1:1 interview lasting 45-65 minutes at a mutually agreeable time conducted through Zoom, followed by an optional 45-65 minute focus group session on another date at a mutually agreeable time with all participants from your school to review the interview themes and ensure that the researcher accurately reflected the information collected. For example, if you participate in the interview, you do not have to participate in the focus group. In addition, you may remove yourself from the study at any time in the process. • Risks. Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation are identified as minimal as the interview and focus group questions only seek your opinion about what conditions the school administrator can develop that would increase the likelihood of your participation in leadership activities in the school, there will not be any questions that may be considered private or sensitive. There is a potential for information risks associated with the confidentiality of data shared during focus groups. Although participants will be asked to agree to keep information, they hear confidential, ensuring compliance poses a challenge. At this stage, participants will confirm overarching themes rather than individual statements or quotes, making it difficult to attribute specific statements to specific teachers.

- **Benefits.** There is no direct benefit to your participation other than the opportunity to discuss your thoughts and feelings about the conditions to optimize teacher involvement in distributed leadership. Your responses could lay the groundwork for future research to determine whether implementing specific conditions for teachers by administrators enhances their participation and increases the likelihood of success for the initiatives being pursued.
- **Alternatives.** Participation in this research is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate.
- **Conflict of Interest.** It is important to note that the researcher has worked in the education community where the research is based. In their role, they were not the direct supervisor nor did they have any authority over the employment or work of any of the employees in the district where the research is based.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

Information collected for this research will be used to better understand the conditions that will increase the likelihood that teachers will be motivated to engage in and take ownership of leadership activities in the school environment. Your name, school, or identifiable information will not be used in any presentations or published reports. Data will be securely stored on a password-protected computer located in the researcher's home, minimizing the risk of unauthorized access. Interviews and focus groups, conducted via Zoom, are recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy in capturing responses. Verbatim transcription of audio recordings will be conducted manually. Any identifiable information (names, schools, etc.) will be removed from the transcripts before coding the research data for analysis. Once transcriptions are quality-checked, the researcher will delete the recordings.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

The researcher will take measures to protect the security of all your personal information including: Interviews and focus groups will be transcribed, and any identifying information will be removed from the transcript and stored on a password-protected computer. Despite these precautions to protect the confidentiality of your information, we can never fully guarantee the confidentiality of all study information. Individuals and organizations that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to and inspect the research records. This may include access to your responses.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

Taking part in this research study is your decision. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you can stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from continued participation at any point in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to withdraw, please notify the researcher via email. If your interview has already been conducted, any audio, video, and transcribed notes will be promptly deleted from the computer system, and if printed, they will be securely destroyed using a

shredder. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of Oregon.

If you experience harm because of the project, you can ask the State of Oregon to pay you. If you have been harmed, there are two University representatives you need to contact. Here are their addresses and phone numbers:

General Counsel/ Office of the President

1226 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-1226
(541) 346-3082

Research Compliance Services

5237 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-5237
(541) 346-2510
ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu

Will I be paid for participating in this research?

For participating in this research, you may receive compensation of up to \$80.00 in the form of a gift card. Your compensation will be distributed as follows: You will receive a \$40.00 gift card within one week after completing the individual interview, which will be delivered digitally or via mail. An additional \$40.00 gift card will be provided within one week after attending the focus group session, also sent digitally or via mail.

Who can answer my questions about this research?

If you have questions, or concerns, or have experienced a research-related injury, contact the research team at:

Tenneal Wetherell
redact
redact

An Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) is overseeing this research. An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. UO Research Compliance Services is the office that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Research Compliance Services
5237 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-5237
(541) 346-2510
ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout my participation.

I understand that by signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent or assent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to re-consent prior to my continued participation in this study. I consent to participate in this study.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

APPENDIX D

PRINCIPAL CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Title: Understanding Teacher Perspectives on Distributed Leadership to Optimize Engagement

Researcher(s): Tenneal Wetherell, University of Oregon

Researcher Contact Info: redact

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision whether or not to participate. Carefully consider this information and the more detailed information provided below the box. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide whether to participate.

Key Information for You to Consider
• Voluntary Consent. You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation. • Purpose. The study aims to explore distributed leadership practices in educational settings from the perspective of teachers, with a focus on understanding the conditions that increase the likelihood that teachers will be motivated to engage in and take ownership of leadership activities. The goal is to provide administrators with insights for establishing optimal conditions conducive to successfully distributing leadership amongst teachers. • Duration. It is expected that your participation will last two months. • Procedures and Activities. You will be asked to participate in a 1:1 interview lasting 45-65 minutes at a mutually agreeable time conducted through Zoom. You may remove yourself from the research at any time. • Risks. Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation are identified as minimal as the interview and focus group questions only seek your opinion about what conditions the school administrator can develop that would increase the likelihood of your participation in leadership activities in the school, there will not be any questions that may be considered private or sensitive. However, there is always the foreseeable risk of breach of confidentiality of your responses. We will deidentify data to reduce the risk of breach of confidentiality. • Benefits. There is no direct benefit to your participation other than the opportunity to discuss your thoughts and feelings about the conditions to optimize teacher involvement in distributed leadership. Your responses could lay the groundwork for future research to determine whether implementing specific conditions for teachers by administrators enhances their participation and increases the likelihood of success for the initiatives being pursued. • Alternatives. Participation in this research is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate.

- **Conflict of Interest.** It is important to note that the researcher has worked in the education community where the research is based. In their role, they were not the direct supervisor nor did they have any authority over the employment or work of any of the employees in the district where the research is based.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

Information collected for this research will be used to better understand the conditions that will increase the likelihood that teachers will be motivated to engage in and take ownership of leadership activities in the school environment. Your name, school, or identifiable information will not be used in any presentations or published reports. Data will be securely stored on a password-protected computer located in the researcher's home, minimizing the risk of unauthorized access. Interviews and focus groups, conducted via Zoom, are recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy in capturing responses. Verbatim transcription of audio recordings will be conducted manually. Any identifiable information (names, schools, etc.) will be removed from the transcripts before coding the research data for analysis. Once transcriptions are quality-checked, the researcher will delete the recordings.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

The researcher will take measures to protect the security of all your personal information. Interviews will be transcribed, and any identifying information will be removed from the transcript and stored on a password-protected computer.

Despite these precautions to protect the confidentiality of your information, we can never fully guarantee the confidentiality of all study information. Individuals and organizations that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to and inspect the research records. This may include access to your responses.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

Taking part in this research study is your decision. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you can stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from continued participation at any point in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to withdraw, please notify the researcher via email. If your interview has already been conducted, any audio, video, and transcribed notes will be promptly deleted from the computer system, and if printed, they will be securely destroyed using a shredder. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of Oregon.

If you experience harm because of the project, you can ask the State of Oregon to pay you. If you have been harmed, there are two University representatives you need to contact. Here are their addresses and phone numbers:

General Counsel/ Office of the President

1226 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-1226
(541) 346-3082

Research Compliance Services

5237 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-5237
(541) 346-2510
ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu

Will I be paid for participating in this research?

For participating in this research, you may receive compensation of \$40.00 in the form of a gift card. Your compensation will be distributed as follows: You will receive a \$40.00 gift card within one week after completing the individual interview, which will be delivered digitally or via mail.

Who can answer my questions about this research?

If you have questions, or concerns, or have experienced a research-related injury, contact the research team at:

Tenneal Wetherell
redact
redact

An Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) is overseeing this research. An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. UO Research Compliance Services is the office that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Research Compliance Services
5237 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-5237
(541) 346-2510
ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout my participation.

I understand that by signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent or assent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to re-consent prior to my continued participation in this study. I consent to participate in this study.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

APPENDIX E

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research Study on Distributed Leadership

Dear Educator,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Tenneal Wetherell, and I am a doctorate candidate at the University of Oregon conducting a research study on distributed leadership in education. I am reaching out to invite you to participate in a study that seeks to explore the dynamics of distributed leadership practices in educational settings, with a focus on the perspectives of teachers.

Traditional school leadership often rests solely with administrators, sidelining the potential for broader staff involvement in implementing initiatives. Distributed leadership, leveraging the expertise of all staff, is pivotal in enhancing student achievement. However, existing research predominantly spotlights administrators, overlooking valuable input from educators and other staff members. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the motivations driving teachers' engagement in leadership activities within schools. Ultimately, the objective is to furnish administrators with insights necessary for fostering optimal conditions conducive to distributed leadership among teachers.

The study will involve a 45-65 minute interview conducted through Zoom at a mutually agreeable time, followed by an optional 45-65 minute focus group session on another day at a mutually agreeable time with the teacher participants in your school to ensure the accuracy of the collected data. Your valuable insights and experiences as an educator will contribute significantly to advancing our understanding of distributed leadership in the educational context.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email sharing the number of years you have been a teacher and how long you have been a teacher at your current school by [insert deadline]. Once I receive your expression of interest, I will let you know if you have been selected for the study and provide additional details, including available time slots for the interview.

I want to assure you that all information shared during the interview and focus group will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. To protect your privacy, any identifiable information will be anonymized in the final research findings. The data collected will be securely stored, and only I, as the researcher, will have access to it. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any point without facing any negative consequences.

Prior to the interview, I will email you a detailed informed consent form, outlining the purpose, procedures, and your rights as a participant in the study. You will be provided with an opportunity to review the document before our scheduled interview. During the interview, you will have ample time to address any questions or concerns you may have regarding the document. Following the discussion, you will proceed to sign it electronically via DocuSign

before we commence. Your understanding of this process and consent are of utmost importance to me.

As a token of appreciation for your time and contribution, you may receive compensation of up to \$80.00 in the form of a gift card. Your compensation will be distributed as follows: You will receive a \$40.00 gift card within one week after completing the individual interview, which will be delivered digitally or via mail. An additional \$40.00 gift card will be provided within one week after attending the focus group session, also sent digitally or via mail.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study or your participation, please feel free to contact me at redact or redact

Thank you for considering this invitation. Your involvement is crucial to the success of this research, and I look forward to the possibility of working together.

APPENDIX F

FOLLOW-UP INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Subject: Follow-Up: Invitation to Participate in Research Study on Distributed Leadership

Dear Educator,

I hope this email finds you well amidst your busy schedule. I understand the demands of your profession and greatly appreciate your consideration of my invitation to participate in my research study on distributed leadership in education.

I want to emphasize that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I respect your autonomy in deciding whether to take part. Your insights and experiences as an educator are highly valued, and your contribution will greatly enrich our understanding of distributed leadership practices in educational settings.

As mentioned in my previous email, I want to assure you of the confidentiality of your information. All data collected during the interview and focus group will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and anonymity. Your privacy is of utmost importance, and only I, as the researcher, will have access to the collected data.

Additionally, I want to highlight the flexibility in scheduling. I understand that finding time for additional commitments can be challenging, so I am more than willing to accommodate your availability for both the interview and focus group sessions.

Furthermore, as a token of appreciation for your time and contribution, you will have the opportunity to receive compensation in the form of a gift card. You will receive a \$40.00 gift card within one week after completing the individual interview, and an additional \$40.00 gift card will be provided within one week after attending the focus group session.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email sharing the number of years you have been a teacher and how long you have been a teacher at your current school by [insert deadline]. Once I receive your expression of interest, I will provide you with additional details, including available time slots for the interview.

Prior to our scheduled interview, I will send you a detailed informed consent form outlining the purpose, procedures, and your rights as a participant. You will have ample time to review this document and address any questions or concerns you may have during our discussion. Your understanding and consent are crucial before we commence the study.

If you have any questions or concerns at any point, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at redact or redact. Your input is highly valued, and I am here to support you throughout the process.

Thank you once again for considering this invitation. I sincerely hope to have the opportunity to work together and further our understanding of distributed leadership in education.

APPENDIX G

INFORMATION SESSION

Agenda

- Welcome
- Explanation of Distributed Leadership
- Study Overview
- Participation Details
- Confidentiality
- Token of Appreciation
- Questions

APPENDIX H
TEACHER QUOTES

Theme 1: Teacher Internal Motivation	
Sub-theme 1.1: Future Growth/Professional Development.	
School A	School B
“It provides me with an ability to practice new skills in larger groups outside of my classroom and within the school community” (T2). “I want to understand how the inner workings of things happen, and I mean you can’t really complain about something if you don’t really understand how it works.” (T2) “Supporting me to improve my skills during the process.” (T2) “I’ll work for somebody who treats me with respect and appreciation.” (T2) “I think just being supportive of professional development opportunities has been really helpful.” (T5)	“I would want to do it for experience.” (T12)
1.2 Impact Driven Motivation for Teachers	
School A	School B

“If I feel like I can help someone and fill a need, I love filling needs.” (T1) “Do something productive and help people.” (T1) “I pretty internally motivated and I like to do things, and I like challenges.” (T1) “I enjoy that connection piece.” (T2) “I would work until seven eight o’clock at night and not think twice about it if it’s something that I’m really into.” (T2) “I think every child can learn and that is something that I want everyone to not just say but believe. And so, I want to be a part of convincing them.” (T3) “I do this because I care,” (T4). “Involve them in conversations and planning from the get-go.” (T5) “I feel like that can set the tone for the school and for the staff.” (T6) “I enjoy doing is watching other people teach and giving them feedback on their teaching.” (T6)	“I enjoy the puzzle of problem solving.” (T7) “How you could help hone another teacher’s craft.” (T8) “Doing something that creates joy while also affecting change and building community.” (T9) “For me, it’s all about the intrinsic. I didn’t really come into this for the money part. I enjoy this work, and I want to build capacity in myself and build capacity in others” (T9). “I want to help...I love this school. I love the people that I work with.” (T10) “If we have a problem, let’s address it and let’s see what we can do.” (T10) “I just want to do something about it.” (T10) “I want to make sure they’re getting the help that they need. They’re getting all the resources that we have available to them.” (T12) “I think for me it’s just seeing the daily struggles of our students...” (T14) I want to see action; I want to see the lives of children improve” (T14).
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Theme 2: Principal Leadership Qualities and Stability
Sub-theme 2.1 Alignment of Values and Vision

School A	School B
“I think leadership is critical. I think leadership is what creates the climate and the culture of the school.” (T1) “Lead by example... There was a principal [who would] come in cafeteria duty, Redact’d go grab a rag and Redact’d wipe down the tables. Showed every single person at that school, I’m not too good to do anything.” (T1) “Do not come and tell me what you think I want to hear. I want you to be honest. I want you to be transparent. I want you to tell me exactly what you’re thinking.” (T1) “I don’t want lip service. I don’t want you to just stand there and talk and talk and talk and try to make me feel better. I want actions.” (T1) “I don’t think there’s one leadership style. Part of being a leader is figuring out what style needs to happen at the time that you need it. Sometimes it’s collaborative, sometimes it is more authoritative or directive. You have different spaces where you have to show up.” (T2) “Sustainability, continuity of the leadership and the school is helpful, but also the relationship and how that’s built and maintained between the leader and the teacher really matters.” (T2) “I think being organized, realizing that there are systems in place that are working and being flexible to kind of acknowledge what is working.” (T3)	“It has to be somebody that knows how to build trust and how to build relationships.” (T7) “Honesty and just being real, right, and messy, I think it’s okay. I think it’s okay to have those difficult conversations.” (T7) “I think school leadership creates the environment, and it sets the tone for the entire building.” (T7) “I definitely see our leadership as needing to be the guide of our school, the model of our school.” (T8) “I think it’s really important to have a visible administration, somebody who’s not in the office dealing with paperwork.” (T8) “I think school leadership creates the environment, and it sets the tone for the entire building.” (T9) “If that person believes in that, that creates an environment that is conducive to every single person in that building feeling valued and respected.” (T9) “It has to be somebody that knows how to build trust and how to build relationships.” (T9) “I think it’s so important...that our school leaders see the value of the different perspectives of teachers.” (T11) “I think the school leadership has a lot to do with the culture of the building.” (T12)

“I do think it’s a delicate balance between finding how other people want you to communicate with ‘em and then doing it well and using information and using people who do emerge as leaders to help you.” (T3) “Knowing their school, what the culture is and what the climate is. Supporting the teachers at their school and then also being consistent with their expectations and outcomes with everybody. Also attending. Sometimes there’s so many meetings to go to, but knowing the ones that they potentially should go to.” (T3) “I think that the more experienced an administrator is, then they have the confidence to be a leader who is transparent.” (T4) “When decisions are made without input, it feels, especially when it involves change, it can be really hurtful.” (T5) “Being present and seen is important and building relationships with their staff and the students.” (T6) “I think being a listener, I think being present and seen is important and building relationships with their staff and the students.” (T6)	“I think visibility is huge. I mean, I think for myself I know I’m a better teacher when I know my principal is checking in on me.” (T13) “I feel like the leadership has a really big influence on the feel of the building...” (T14)
2.2 Collaborative Leadership and Relationship Building	
School A	School B
“Empowerment is always the biggest word that I come up with, empowerment. And some people find some personalities empowering and other people don’t.” (T1) “They have to find a true balance. I think that what you’re looking to do and what you want to do in your search of creating a collaborative approach is really important.” (T2)	“When we are working together, we are hearing each other.” (T7) “Knowing how much time I’m given to work on these things.” (T8) “I think it is important to have a relationship with your staff.” (T9)

“They have to be personable... you have to feel like you’re being heard as an individual, listen to your ideas, listen to your questions,” (T2) “The best thing is a connected teacher and child; that’s the most important indicator of student success. So, the most important indicator of adult success is probably the same thing.” (T3) “Involve them in conversations and planning from the get-go. And I think sometimes the administrators, at least what I’m seeing, is sometimes they’ll make those decisions in their core group, the administrative team, and what they think is best, but they don’t always involve the people that are going to be who have the boots on the ground and who are going to put this in motion.” (T5) “Having an idea of which of your teachers is really strong and excited about hands-on science and which teachers are really strong about early literacy and then allowing them to have a voice or take lead in developing programs around their strengths, the ask has to be genuine.” (T5) “They need to take time to get to know everybody. And not just having a staff meeting at the beginning of the school year... You have to sit down and get to know them... get a sense for their style... to talk with them to learn what their strengths are” (T5).	“Being able to see the value of individuals and being able to encourage people in their roles.” (T10) “Getting teacher input and truly listening and adjusting builds trust” (T10). “I think the accountability piece is a really good quality.” (T12) “We need to know that we’re in a safe space and that we have somebody that will support that.” (T12) “I think having leadership that... empowers us, I think, to feel like a team.” (T13) “I feel like if you feel safe in your teaching environment, everything else falls into place a lot faster...” (T14)
2.3 Responsiveness and Support	
School A	School B
“Reassurance that they understand you are human, and it may not be perfectly the way they expect it to be.” (T2) “Good feedback is key.” (T3)	“Redact trusted and empowered you to take the leadership role, but he had a willingness to provide structured support while still letting you lead.” (T7)

“Redact said, ‘What do you need? What can I do? How can I help you?’” (T4) “Meet with administration regularly to discuss things that are going on.” (T5) “For me to be motivated, I would need it to be meaningful. You feel like your voice is actually going to be heard.” (T6)	“If there was someone else to watch do that job or an opportunity to watch someone else.” (T12) “When we’re listened to and respected as professionals, I think that makes me a better teacher as well.” (T13)
2.4 Stability and Trust in Distributed Leadership	
School A	School B
“It’s challenging when there’s instability at the leadership level... Constant shifts in the principal’s role create uncertainty, making it hard for us to commit to any long-term goals or to feel like any initiatives will last.” (T2) “With three principals in four years, it feels like we’re always adjusting... it makes it difficult for teachers to get comfortable or fully invest in new ideas. There’s a sense of needing a stable foundation first.” (T3) “We immediately feel the climate a new administrator brings, and if it’s one that doesn’t allow for teacher input, it’s hard to feel valued or like our involvement will be respected in the long term.” (T4) “Having three principals in four years has been rough. For distributed leadership to work, you need to trust that things won’t be upended each year... Stability is key before you can expect teachers to take on more.” (T5) “When principals shift constantly, it’s hard to feel any consistency in leadership. The lack of continuity makes teachers	“In the past four years, we’ve had three new principals, and before that, we only had two in eight years. The amount of change has really impacted the energy of how we run our school, what meetings we have, what meetings we don’t. Every year feels like we’re figuring it out again, which is frustrating and exhausting for people who’ve been here a while.” (T7) “This time in five years, I’m on a third principal here. Each new person brings their own ideas and concepts, and it’s like, ‘How long are you going to be here?’ It’s hard to invest when we may have to start over again next year.” (T10) “I’ve had six different administrators, and each time a new one comes in, there’s a period of adjustment. It makes it hard to invest in initiatives that might change with the next leader.” (T11) “I’ve been at Redact long enough to have had six different administrators. Some have come in saying they’re going to ‘fix’ things, only to backpedal after a while. It’s hard to commit to changes when admin is constantly shifting.” (T11)

cautious about stepping up or committing to initiatives that might not stick.” (T6)	“There’s definitely ‘initiative fatigue’ you start getting used to one approach, and then someone new comes in with different expectations. It makes it harder to fully commit to any leadership roles or new tasks.” (T13) “We’ve had three different building principals in four years. Each has had a drastically different approach, which makes it feel like we’re constantly in change shock. Teachers are saying there’s ‘initiative fatigue,’ and it’s unsettling, especially when changes feel top-down and inconsistent.” (T15)
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Theme 3: Incentives for Teachers	
Sub-theme 3.1 Financial Rewards and Compensation	
School A	School B
“I didn’t realize how incredibly spoiled we were. We got paid to attend professional development.” (T1) “They paid me for that extra time for working outside of contract hours to prep those materials and supported me in providing additional humans to where I needed them.” (T5) “If I’m going to take time away from them, then I need to be compensated.” (T6) “If it’s something that’s outside of school day for me, I like my life outside of school and I want to go home. I like my house, I like my kids, I like my family. And so, if I’m going to take time away from them, then I need to be compensated for time outside of my school day or give me a sub for a day or half a day and make it something that I can do while I’m here.” (T6)	“If I’m going to take time away from them, then I need to be compensated.” (T7) “Had there been some incentives towards that in some kind of way, I think I would’ve been more swayed to do it.” (T8) “Adequate financial rewards... is essential for motivation.” (T10) “I think compensation is a huge thing for teachers.” (T12) “[Given the] responsibilities I already have on my plate, it would be hard to talk me into more unless there was some sort of pay stipend, some sort of compensation, or if things were being taken off my plate.” (T13) “If there was some way to relieve me of duties in order to be able to take these things on, I’d be much more willing to do it” (T13).

	“I do feel like being compensated financially for extra tasks that I do here for the betterment of the school district and for my principal makes me feel valued because this is my job, and I think I should get paid for the extra time. We need to stop being martyrs and recognize our worth as professionals.” (T14) “Principals need to understand that sometimes teachers cannot say yes because they have home responsibilities. More work during the day translates to more work in the evening, which doesn’t work for that balance I am working to achieve.” (T14)
3.2 Balancing Time and Workload	
School A	School B
“Pay isn’t the only thing that would get this off the ground.” (T1) “Time is always a problem,” underscoring the need for predictable and scheduled opportunities to focus on leadership tasks.” (T2). “I think teachers do a lot of things for free, but if we get other stuff, it’s almost like what we get.” (T3) “I think finding the time to have the meeting to say this is just a planning meeting.” (T3) “My first response is no. Whereas if they said, ‘Hey, in a month we’re going to do this, we’re going to have a staff meeting and we would like you to do this,’ a lot of information about it. Sometimes I also do better if I’m paired with somebody. And so, if it’s not just me, if they’re like, ‘Hey, can you, and so-and-so,’	“Principals should be thinking about the extra time commitment that you will have to be giving.” (T7) “I would want to know how much time I’m given to work on these things.” (T8) “There’s only so much more you can add into your day. Right, exactly. And so, if I’m doing this thing, you’re going to have to figure out how to schedule it, and sometimes I’m willing to maybe stay late, work later, do it on the weekend kind of thing, but at the same time, you want that balance.” (T10)

if I have a partner, I'm like, 'Okay, I can do this with somebody else, no problem.'" (T3) "Time usually. Usually, it's like, hey, can you do this thing right away? And so, for me, if somebody comes up to me and they're like, hey, tomorrow, can you do this thing? I'm just like, no. My first response is no. Whereas if they said, hey, in a month we're going to do this, we're going to have a staff meeting and we would like you to do this, a lot of information about it. Sometimes I also do better if I'm paired with somebody. And so, if it's not just me, if they're like, hey, can you, and so-and-So if I have a partner, I'm like, okay, I can do this with somebody else, no problem.'" (T3) "I have a little bit more flexibility in my schedule because of the role that I'm doing, but if I was a classroom teacher, it would be much more difficult." (T5) "[My principal] said we'd like you to do this, and they gave me time to prepare those materials," describing the importance of providing logistical support. (T5)	
3.3 Recognition of Effort	
School A	School B
"I trusted her with my emotions. Redact knew me and Redact knew my weaknesses but I never felt like Redact saw them." (T1) "All a person has to do is make me feel like I'm needed." (T1) "It has to be a perceived genuineness." (T1)	"[Recognition] motivates, at least for me, to want to be inspired to do something." (T7) "It's important to come from a place of positivity." (T8) "Just recognition sometimes of the job that you're doing well, putting value around the person and their skills in some kind of way would be more motivating." (T8)

“I’ll work for somebody who treats me with respect and appreciation. Appreciation is just the willingness to be available or be present in the moment. The opportunity is there when there is a question so that I can move forward and not feel like I’m stuck. Yeah, no, it’s really a giving of themselves.” (T2) “It is nice to be appreciated and valued.” (T2) “Appreciation doesn’t always have to come in monetary value. Appreciation is just the willingness to be available or be present.” (T2) “We’re asking you this because we do think that you have great ideas, and we want you to share these ideas.” (T3) “Specific feedback to your kind of too, where it’s not generic.” (T3) “A thank you for X says they saw me do something that I have value in.” (T3) “Making you feel helpful.” (T3) “It’s like they honor you and they say Redact’s volunteering her time and it’s a recognition.” (T4) “Listening to others, listening to the staff.” (T4) “The relationship that the building principal has with the teachers makes a huge difference.” (T5) “Having an idea of which of your teachers is really strong and excited about hands-on science.” (T5)	“It is good when it is just you and I, but also when I am doing a task that lifts the whole school, it is a public acknowledgment as well” (T10). “I think the main thing is to know a listening ear... someone who does follow through.” (T10) “It comes down to a rapport thing.” (T11)
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“When you really know the person, you know what they’re good at, what they like, and then you say, ‘Hey, are you interested?’” (T5) “Recognition sometimes of the job that you’re doing well.” (T8)	
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Theme 4: Teacher Support for Implementation	
Sub-theme 4.1 Structured Planning, Clarity, and Resource Availability	
School A	School B
“We had one support person out at Redact that was helping with the documentation.” (T1) “I really appreciate a principal that sees the value of professional development and good quality professional development.” (T1) “If we needed something, I’m sure we could have asked him for it. He would’ve helped us to problem-solve it. He definitely made himself available and was the only real administrator that we saw that summer. So that was great.” (T1) “We can honestly build it before we fly it. We don’t have to wait till the last minute.” (T1) “Everybody’s got to know what they’re supposed to be doing.” (T1) “If you tell somebody all the answers, they’re not going to absorb it in the same way that they’re necessarily going to absorb it if they’re able to research.” (T2)	“I would want what our objective is laid out. What is the plan? Where are we trying to go?” (T8). “When teachers have the right materials... it leads to improved engagement.” (T10) “I need to know what I’m supposed to do with it.” (T10) “Good understanding or goal or vision of what those additional responsibilities would lead to. What’s our end goal here? What was the purpose of this?” (T11) “I like benchmarks along the way... I do really well with the timeline or benchmarks.” (T11) “I need to know what it is that you’re asking me to do, what that outcome looks like, and what it means to do it along the way so that I can envision it.” (T13) “I need to have all the information and be clear on what is expected.” (T15)

“The administrator has to be able to provide me with the ability to learn myself and then provide me with times so that I’m aware to prepare to train the staff.” (T2) “It takes a lot of work and it’s a lot of stress...it increases the likelihood of taking it on” (T2). “They kind of start building the ship as it’s flying sometimes. I wish they would pause and say, what’s our big idea?” (T3) “Having the right personnel, having the right support financially to purchase resources and materials.” (T5) “Get me on board by preparing” (T5).	
4.2 Effective Communication	
School A	School B
“I know that there’s that idea that sometimes you can put too much information out there, but I don’t think that’s the case.” (T1) “I think it wasn’t necessarily communication that I wasn’t getting because I was at the meetings, but it was the communication that wasn’t being shared with the stakeholders.” (T1) “If we needed something, I’m sure we could have asked redact for it. Redact would’ve helped us to problem solve it. Redact definitely made himself available and was the only real administrator that we saw that summer. So that was great.” (T1) “Open communication. I mean a willingness to collaborate on something that might be outside my normal little bit.” (T2) “Having somebody who is willing to guide you but having an	“Maybe my idea wasn’t the best idea. Let’s try it this way” (T8). “I really think that good communication, both written and verbal, need to be a top-tier priority in leadership.” (T8) “The opportunity to talk about it more, to think about it more, to process it more.” (T10) “When teachers have the right materials... it leads to improved engagement.” (T10) “I need to know what I’m supposed to do with it.” (T10) “Willingness to engage productively in the conversation.” (T11) “Good understanding or goal or vision of what those additional responsibilities would lead to. What’s our end goal here? What was the purpose of this?” (T11)

openness and the ability to accept and have faith in your decision making.” (T2) “Administrator’s willingness to listen to your ideas, listen to your questions, and kind of work through the concept in order to get there.” (T2) “If you tell somebody all the answers, they’re not going to absorb it in the same way that they’re necessarily going to absorb it if they’re able to research.” (T2) “Good feedback is key.” (T3) I have to know that if I’m taking this on and I’m stuck that I can go to you.” (T3) “Involve them in conversations and planning from the get-go.” (T5) “Good communication skills and a willingness to sit down with teachers and talk with them.” (T5)	“I like benchmarks along the way... I do really well with the timeline or benchmarks.” (T11) “The more you can communicate, even if we’re talking about little things...” (T12) “The more you can communicate, even if we’re talking about little things... giving as much detail as possible to people is always better than not getting enough” (T13). “Redact needs to be open to listening about the issues and to solving the issue.” (T15).
4.3 Empowerment and Trust	
School A	School B
“I think teachers nowadays have forgotten how much they’re capable of because a lot has been taken away from us.” (T1) “Giving them the breadth and the space and what they need to go for it and not micromanaging it.” (T1) “Give people the grace to fulfill their responsibility.” (T1) “Faith—they have faith in my ability but also they ask questions.” (T2)	“That feeling of having your back, that feeling of supporting you, of being ‘I’m on your side.’” (T8) “Trusting that they know their craft and being available for them in whatever capacity that might need or might be. Whether that’s being visible in the hallway, if they pop by your office and say, hey, can I chat being available for that? I know they have a lot of things on their plate too, but being available in the moment for your staff is really important as well.” (T8)

“Reassurance that they understand you are human and it may not be perfectly the way they expect it to be, but the fact that you are doing it based on what you feel is the best interest of whatever it is you’re doing, the best interest of everybody, taking everybody into consideration, reassurance that if you make a mistake that it is not the end of the world.” (T2) “Reassurance and that willingness to guide them and lead them in a direction.” (T2) “That feeling of having your back, that feeling of supporting you, of being ‘I’m on your side.’” (T4)	“I need you to know that you’re there, you’re checking in with me.” (T10) “We need to know that we’re in a safe space and that we have somebody that will support that.” (T12) “I think for me; the most essential thing is the confidence that they have in me to do it.” (T13) “Being flexible as long as I am meeting the goal.” (T15)
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APPENDIX I

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP READINESS CHECKLIST

Purpose

The Distributed Leadership Readiness Checklist is designed to help principals assess, prepare for, and sustain distributed leadership within their schools. Distributed leadership empowers teachers to take on meaningful leadership tasks and strengthens their engagement and ownership of school initiatives. However, successful distributed leadership requires principals to evaluate readiness, build capacity, and provide ongoing support. This checklist provides a structured, three-stage approach that helps principals proactively assess readiness before implementation, guide effective practices during implementation, and maintain support to sustain leadership over time. The goal is to create a school environment where teachers feel respected, equipped, and supported throughout their leadership journey.

How to Use the Checklist

1. **Identify the Project or Leadership Role:** Determine the specific leadership task or project for the teacher or group of teachers, considering this role's unique challenges and goals. This step ensures that each point in the checklist is relevant to the specific leadership distribution.
2. **Reflect on Each Stage:**
 - **Stage 1: Setting the Foundation** – Focus on establishing school-wide stability, shared values, and collaborative relationships with all teachers. Use reflective and action questions to assess your readiness for distributed leadership across the staff, adjusting practices where necessary to build a solid foundation.
 - **Stage 2: Building Capacity and Commitment** – Transition to working with individual teachers selected for leadership roles. Use reflective and action questions to address each teacher's unique needs, guiding their preparation for and entry into their new leadership role.
 - **Stage 3: Sustaining Engagement and Ownership** – Support each teacher's ongoing leadership journey with tailored guidance. Use the questions in this stage to ensure continued engagement and adapt to any evolving needs or feedback from the teacher.
3. **Utilize Reflective and Action Questions:** Each section includes reflective questions to prompt deeper thinking about readiness and action questions to guide practical steps. For example, consider the reflective question, "Am I demonstrating stability in my leadership approach when promoting leadership stability?" Then, use the action questions to verify specific practices, such as consistent communication with staff and transparency in decision-making.

4. **Document Observations and Action Steps:** As you progress through each checklist point, document observations, any challenges, and next steps. The action questions serve as checkpoints to help you track and adjust your approach based on ongoing teacher feedback.
5. **Review and Adjust Regularly:** Distributed leadership is dynamic. Regularly revisit the checklist, using the action questions to reassess and adjust as teachers' needs or project demands change.

Distributed Leadership Readiness Checklist

The following checklist is organized into three stages to guide principals through establishing school-wide readiness, implementing distributed leadership with individual teachers, and maintaining ongoing support to ensure its success. Stage 1 focuses on building a solid foundation across the teaching staff by promoting stability, shared values, and collaborative relationships. Stages 2 and 3 shift to working with specific teachers, offering structured guidance tailored to their unique needs as they take on leadership roles.

Each stage includes specific focus areas, reflective questions, and action questions to help principals assess their approach, implement distributed leadership effectively, and adjust as needed. This structure supports proactive school-wide assessment, individualized guidance during implementation, and continuous reflection and support. As you move through each section, use the questions to identify readiness, address potential gaps, and provide comprehensive support for the school and each teacher's leadership journey.

Stage 1: Setting the Foundation (Before Distributing Leadership)

Ensure Stability and Consistency in Leadership

- **Promote Leadership Stability:** Foster trust and consistency in leadership practices while evaluating whether the timing and conditions are suitable for distributing leadership responsibilities.
 - **Reflective Question:** Am I demonstrating stability in my leadership approach, consistently supporting staff, and assessing whether this is the right time to introduce or expand distributed leadership initiatives?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I maintained a consistent leadership presence, with predictable and transparent practices that encourage teachers to feel they can rely on long-term stability?
 - Do I clearly communicate my commitment to distributed leadership and demonstrate stability through follow-through on past initiatives?
 - Have I evaluated whether the school environment, teacher readiness, and current priorities align with successfully implementing distributed leadership at this time?

Establish Clear Values, Vision, and Mission Alignment

- **Define a Shared Vision:** Create a vision statement that connects distributed leadership with the project's specific goals and aligns with the school's mission.
 - **Reflective Question:** Is our vision for distributed leadership clearly aligned with the school's mission, and does it resonate with the teaching staff's goals?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I collaborated with teachers to co-create or refine a shared vision of distributed leadership, ensuring it aligns with the school's mission?
 - Do I frequently communicate and reinforce this vision so that it feels relevant and motivational for all staff?
- **Build Transparency and Consistency:** Foster open communication by clearly explaining decision-making processes related to the specific project.
 - **Reflective Question:** Have I established clear, transparent decision-making processes that align with school values and build trust?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Do I consistently update teachers on how decisions are made, especially those related to distributed leadership roles?
 - Have I created regular opportunities for teachers to ask questions and provide feedback on leadership decisions, reinforcing a culture of openness?

Build Collaborative Relationships and Trust

- **Cultivate Mutual Respect:** Foster a foundation of trust by deeply understanding this teacher's unique strengths, challenges, and motivations, ensuring they feel valued and supported in their leadership role.
 - **Reflective Question:** Do I actively demonstrate respect and understanding across the teaching staff, creating a culture where every teacher feels seen, valued, and motivated?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I taken deliberate steps, such as individual conversations or surveys, to gain insights into each teacher's strengths, challenges, and leadership aspirations?
 - Do I provide equitable opportunities for all teachers, regardless of experience, to engage in distributed leadership roles and recognize their contributions meaningfully?
 - Am I building relationships that allow teachers to feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and needs, fostering a sense of mutual trust and collaboration?
- **Create Opportunities for Open Dialogue:** Set up mechanisms for this teacher to discuss project challenges and share ideas.
 - **Reflective Question:** Do I provide regular and reliable spaces for teachers to openly discuss concerns, ideas, and questions related to distributed leadership?
 - **Action Questions:**

- Have I established structured, recurring meetings or open-door sessions where teachers feel safe to share their insights on leadership initiatives?
- Am I responsive to suggestions from these forums, ensuring teachers see their input reflected in subsequent decisions and actions?

Stage 2: Building Capacity and Commitment (Preparing to Distribute Leadership)

Align Leadership Roles with Teacher Strengths and Expectations

- **Match Leadership Roles to Teacher Strengths:** Ensure the selected teacher is well-suited for the leadership role by aligning the project's tasks with their demonstrated strengths, professional goals, and areas of interest.
 - **Reflective Question:** Have I chosen this teacher for a leadership role that aligns with their unique strengths, interests, and growth potential, ensuring a good fit for both the teacher and the project?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Do I clearly understand this teacher's strengths, interests, and professional growth goals to make an informed decision about their role in this project?
- **Set Realistic Expectations for Leadership Roles:** Clearly define project-specific responsibilities that are manageable for the teacher.
 - **Reflective Question:** Am I setting realistic expectations for teachers' potential leadership roles, considering their workload and other commitments?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I engaged in discussions with the teaching staff about realistic role expectations, ensuring that leadership tasks are feasible alongside their primary duties?
 - Do I regularly evaluate teachers' feedback to adjust responsibilities as needed, preventing overburdening?
 - Have I matched this teacher's abilities and aspirations to specific project tasks or responsibilities that foster engagement and maximize their contributions?
 - Am I providing opportunities for this teacher to take ownership of aspects of the project that align with their strengths while supporting their development in new areas?

Support Professional Growth and Development

- **Offer Targeted Learning Opportunities:** Provide professional development that directly supports the teacher's specific tasks and goals in this project.
 - **Reflective Question:** What specific training or resources will empower this teacher to thrive in their role on this project?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I considered this teacher's current skill level and identified any specific training to support them in their new leadership tasks?

- Do I check in with this teacher after each training course to understand what they have learned and how they feel about applying it?
- **Provide Scaffolded Leadership Support:** Assess and address the specific supports a teacher needs for success in a leadership role, considering their experience level and the project's demands.
 - **Reflective Question:** Have I thoroughly identified this teacher's unique needs and provided the appropriate support to enable their success in this leadership role?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I clearly identified the teacher's prior leadership experience and aligned supports to meet their current developmental stage and project requirements?
 - Have I provided access to resources, tools, or individuals (e.g., peers, specialists, or administrators) who can offer guidance tailored to the project's goals?
 - How do I plan to establish ongoing communication with the teacher to adjust support based on their feedback and the project's evolving needs?

Providing Resources and Support for Success

- **Respect Work-Life Boundaries:** Address potential schedule impacts and, if possible, offer compensation or adjustments specific to the project.
 - **Reflective Question:** Have I acknowledged the additional time this project requires and considered workload flexibility or compensation to support this teacher?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I discussed with this teacher how this new role might impact their current schedule and considered any adjustments?
 - Am I offering options for flexibility or additional compensation if this teacher expresses concern about balancing this project with their other duties?

Define Roles and Responsibilities Clearly

- **Clarify Role Boundaries and Expectations:** Provide a clear scope of work for the teacher's role in this specific project, avoiding overlap or confusion.
 - **Reflective Question:** Is the scope of this teacher's responsibilities on this project clear, distinct, and manageable?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I reviewed the specific responsibilities with this teacher, confirming their clarity and feasibility?
 - Am I regularly checking in to ensure this teacher feels their role is manageable within their workload?
- **Ensure Resource Availability and Support:** Provide the necessary resources, tools, and logistical support to enable teachers to focus on leadership tasks effectively.

- **Reflective Question:** Have I ensured the teacher has access to all the necessary resources, tools, and support to succeed in their leadership role?
- **Action Questions:**
 - Have I assessed the resource needs for this project and provided access to tools, materials, or personnel required for successful implementation?
 - Have I addressed logistical barriers, such as time constraints, clerical support, or access to funding, that might hinder the teacher's ability to focus on their leadership tasks?
 - Do I have a plan to regularly evaluate and adjust resource support based on the teacher's feedback and project demands?

Stage 3: Sustaining Engagement and Ownership (After Distributing Leadership)

Encouraging Collaborative Goal Setting and Ongoing Investment

- **Engage in Collaborative Planning:** Involve the teacher in setting project goals and outcomes to ensure mutual understanding.
 - **Reflective Question:** Did the teacher have a role in planning this project, allowing them to feel ownership and clarity around their objectives?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Did I involve this teacher in setting the project goals and benchmarks, helping them feel invested?
 - Am I giving this teacher space to contribute ideas and adjust objectives as we go along?

Foster a Culture of Recognition and Positive Connections

- **Show Appreciation in Meaningful Ways:** Recognize the teacher's efforts in a way that reflects their contribution to this specific project.
 - **Reflective Question:** Have I acknowledged this teacher's unique contributions to the project in ways that are meaningful to them?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Do I understand this teacher's preferred method of recognition (public, private, verbal, written), and am I using it consistently?
 - Am I acknowledging this teacher's unique contributions in a way that makes them feel valued and appreciated?
- **Celebrate Incremental Successes:** Highlight the teacher's impact on project milestones, reinforcing their role in its success.
 - **Reflective Question:** Am I celebrating the teacher's successes at critical points, reinforcing the importance of their work on the project?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I set milestones with this teacher, and do I recognize their progress when they achieve them?
 - Am I regularly celebrating small and large accomplishments to motivate and engage this teacher?

Ensure Ongoing Communication and Follow-Through

- **Maintain Open Communication Channels:** Regularly check in to keep the teacher informed and supported on project progress.
 - **Reflective Question:** Do I regularly check in with this teacher to address project updates, emerging needs, or questions?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I established a reliable schedule for check-ins to discuss the project's progress and any new challenges?
 - Am I responsive to this teacher's questions or needs, ensuring they feel supported and informed?
- **Demonstrate Accountability and Visibility:** Actively engage in the project, reinforcing the teacher's sense of support and reliability.
 - **Reflective Question:** Am I visibly supporting this teacher's work on the project, following through on all commitments?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Do I make a point to engage actively with this teacher's work, showing my commitment to their success?
 - Am I consistent in fulfilling promises or follow-ups to ensure this teacher feels they can rely on me?

Adapt Support Based on Feedback

- **Regularly Check in on Needs:** Conduct periodic follow-ups to adjust support based on the teacher's evolving needs within the project.
 - **Reflective Question:** Have I checked in regularly to understand and adapt to this teacher's needs as the project progresses?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Do I regularly ask this teacher about any additional resources or adjustments they may need?
 - Am I open to modifying support based on their evolving needs as they progress in their leadership role?
- **Be Responsive and Flexible:** Respond to the teacher's feedback by showing a willingness to adjust project expectations or support structures.
 - **Reflective Question:** Am I responsive to the teacher's feedback and adapting support to help them succeed?
 - **Action Questions:**
 - Have I been willing to change the level or type of support based on this teacher's feedback?
 - Am I open to adjusting the project scope or expectations to accommodate this teacher's suggestions and insights?