

The Impact of Distributed Leadership on Teachers' Professional Learning in UK Primary Schools

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Abstract

This essay critically examines the impact of distributed leadership on teachers' professional learning in UK primary schools. Against a policy backdrop that increasingly emphasises collaboration and continuous professional development, distributed leadership is presented as a model that reconceptualises leadership as a shared and collective practice rather than a hierarchical function. Drawing on relevant literature and examples from UK primary schools, the essay argues that distributed leadership can enhance professional learning by fostering teacher agency, strengthening professional identity, and supporting the development of collaborative professional learning communities. These structures enable teachers to actively participate in decision-making, curriculum development, and peer learning, thereby promoting more transformative and sustained professional growth. However, the analysis also highlights that the effectiveness of distributed leadership is highly context-dependent. In some cases, it is implemented superficially, leading to tokenistic participation without genuine empowerment, and may even increase workload without adequate support. Furthermore, structural constraints such as accountability pressures, time limitations, and existing inequalities can hinder its potential benefits. Therefore, while distributed leadership holds significant promise for improving teachers' professional learning, its success relies on authentic implementation, supportive school culture, and alignment with broader institutional conditions. The essay concludes that distributed leadership should be understood not merely as a redistribution of roles, but as a deeper cultural transformation within schools.

Keywords

Distributed leadership; Professional learning; Teacher agency; Primary schools; Collaborative learning; Educational leadership.

1. Introduction

The academic performance of pupils and overall school improvement depends so much on the quality of teaching. However, to ensure that teaching is of good quality, professional learning and development must be well-established [1]. Therefore, in the modern educational system, educational leaders, policymakers, and researchers have considered the importance of professional learning and the development of teachers in policy-making. In this policy context, policymakers have debated on the crucial role of leadership in shaping effective professional learning opportunities [2]. It is further argued that the role of leadership has become very important in light of contemporary challenges such as teacher retention, the demand for innovation in pedagogy, and accountability pressures in schools [1]. It is the same leadership that was traditionally perceived as hierarchical, with decision-making concentrated in the hands of headteachers and senior leaders [3]. This perception, as Sol views it in [4], has changed because of evident shifts towards more collaborative and inclusive leadership models.

Now, today, distributed leadership is one of the leadership models that is gaining particular prominence. This leadership model is gaining prominence because of how it challenges the notion of leadership as the responsibility of a single individual. Instead, this leadership model conceptualises leadership as a collective process. In this collective process, there are multiple actors across different levels of the organisation [4]. The rationale of distributed leadership is how it strongly resonates with the contemporary emphasis on creating professional learning communities within schools. This is exactly what is happening within the primary schools in the UK. The UK is one of the developed countries often mentioned for its high-quality education system [5]. Within this very system, the push toward a distributed leadership model has been reflected in various policy initiatives.

Through these initiatives and others, the Department for Education's (DfE) has been emphasizing collaborative leadership and peer-to-peer support. This has been reflected in the 2019 Ofsted Education Inspection Framework suggested that leadership practices should foster continuous learning rather than impose top-down accountability measures. However, for the past few years, the UK has been having an evolving policy landscape. Within this evolving policy landscape, primary schools have become fertile grounds for the enactment of distributed leadership regardless of their smaller size and close-knit staff structures. Nonetheless, while distributed leadership has been widely advocated in both policy and practice, its impact on teachers' professional learning is complex and contested within UK primary schools [6]. Some argue that distributed leadership fosters a culture of shared responsibility in UK's primary schools while others claim that without careful implementation, distributed leadership can become superficial under the guise of collaboration.

Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to critically examine the impact of distributed leadership on teachers' professional learning in UK primary schools that how leadership practices can shape the professional growth of teachers within UK primary education.

2. Understanding Distributed Leadership in Schools

Camburn et al. defined distributed leadership as a leadership approach that recognises leadership as a shared, collective process and not just as the sole responsibility of a single individual [7]. That is, this leadership model involves sharing leadership responsibilities and decision-making across an organisation. Harris et al. further stated that distributed leadership implies "a model of shared, collective, and extended leadership practice where the emphasis is upon interdependent interactions" [8]. Therefore, distributed leadership is "a leadership model that emphasises collaboration, empowerment, and trust" [9]. Consequently, this leadership model can create a more inclusive and dynamic work environment where multiple voices contribute to driving the organisation forward. In the same fashion, "distributed leadership in primary schools is where leadership responsibilities are not just confined to formal leaders such as headteachers and senior managers" [5]. In primary schools that adopt distributed leadership, leadership tasks and responsibilities are distributed across various individuals within an organisation.

In addition, distributed leadership in primary schools' manifests through structures such as leadership teams, subject-specific leaders, and year-group coordinators. This is where other teachers would be seen to frequently lead working groups or professional learning communities [7]. These teachers are often focused on improving particular aspects of practice, such as assessment strategies. Therefore, as [10] put it, distributed leadership in primary schools is not just about assigning tasks. Instead, this leadership model is also about empowering teachers at different levels to take initiative and drive improvement. This is evident in many primary schools rated "Outstanding" by Ofsted in the UK such as Chesterton Primary School (Cambridge). These schools demonstrate a distributed leadership approach by

establishing teaching and learning committees. Other primary schools like Fox Primary School (London) are known for establishing collaborative inquiry groups and staff-led professional development teams. O'Sullivan and Mac Ruairc have demonstrated how distributed leadership can promote ownership, build capacity, and foster a sense of "collective responsibility" for school development [11].

3. The Potential of Distributed Leadership for Teachers' Professional Learning

3.1. Distributed Leadership for Transformative Professional Learning

Distributed leadership is a catalyst for transformative teachers' professional learning. According to [1], transformational leadership has progressed from the "top-down" approach to professional development, fostering collaboration, conversation, and collective inquiry. This is how distributed leadership is viewed to be a model of primary school leadership that seeks to deepen engagement with pedagogy teaching and learning in primary schools [12]. At the same time, Kennedy's Spectrum of CPD Models [13] positioned professional learning on a continuum from passive to active, constructive models. On one end, passive suggests professional development is unidirectional, driven by someone else, and focused on mere compliance. However, students, autonomy, reflection, and critical engagement are central to constructive models [14]. This is apparent in a number of UK primary schools where distributed leadership has enabled a shift toward transformative CPD. For instance, Cheriton Primary School has advanced a teacher-led research group, peer observation, and collaborative curriculum development programs. These models, as noted by O'Sullivan and Mac Ruairc, support an environment in which teachers are active participants in the development of the curriculum, which is to say, in the construction of knowledge [11]. That may help explain why Ofsted has rated Cheriton Primary School as outstanding. This suggests that primary schools in the UK that implement distributed leadership have a higher level of teacher participation in school improvement activities [7]. These primary schools also experience a heightened sense of professional identity. Hence, teachers in these primary schools show a strong willingness to persist in the profession.

However, while distributed leadership has the "potential to promote" transformative learning, Brown et al. argue that it does not automatically guarantee it [10]. In some primary schools like William Read Primary School (rated weak by Ofsted), their leadership policies are seen as co-opting terms like "collaboration" without enacting genuine structural change. In other primary schools like The Oaks Primary School (also rated weak by Ofsted), leadership may be "distributed" superficially. These primary schools seem to have a tokenistic delegation of tasks instead of developing meaningful sharing of decision-making authority. Brown et al. argued that in cases similar to that, CPD remains fundamentally transmissive [15]. Yet, these primary schools constantly used the term "collaborative" to define their leadership models. Therefore, although distributed leadership aligns conceptually with transformative professional learning, its actual impact depends significantly on how deeply leadership practices are embedded and whether genuine teacher agency is supported [14]. Bubb and Earley's Iceberg Model reveals that beneath visible structures like professional learning communities or distributed committees, hidden factors such as a culture of fear, mistrust, or resistance to change, can undermine transformative learning. In such cases, teachers may be reluctant to engage critically with their practice. Therefore, while distributed leadership can enhance transformative professional learning, its success depends on visible practices and the deeper cultural "iceberg" elements within schools.

3.2. Enhancing Teacher Agency and Professional Identity

With regard to primary education, distributed leadership has been associated with increased teacher agency and professional identity. As mentioned by Brown et al. [14], teacher agency refers “to the ability of teachers to meaningfully and purposefully act” in ways that help them shape their career development. In the case of distributed leadership models, teachers are regarded as active participants in school vision and development even at the level of strategy formulation or policy design. Brown et al. also noted that by involving teachers in decision-making within and beyond the education practices and activities of the classroom, distributed leadership improves agency [10]. In schools such as Holy Trinity Primary School, with shared leadership distribution, teachers take part in the curriculum development policy at the school. Besides, these teachers can influence student school-owned policies as well as pedagogical innovation policies. In Sunderland, “Outstanding” Ofsted-rated Grangetown Primary School has teachers who work as curriculum leaders. This enables them to develop subject-area teaching initiatives and conduct peer teaching professionally. This perspective indicates how distributed leadership can enhance teachers’ professionalism with regard to autonomy at primary schools in the UK. The same form of leadership can promote another Bandura’s self-efficacy concept by suggesting a sense of ownership over and professional efficacy within the school [10]. According to Bandura’s social learning theory, professional competence could bring about proactive behaviour, and motivation and therefore encourage action.

In addition, distributed leadership supports the development of professional identity through collaboration, reflection, and recognition. According to Wallace [16], primary school teachers involved in school improvement planning often gain clearer perceptions of their professional roles beyond traditional classroom duties. In the UK, primary schools that have implemented distributed leadership through “professional learning communities” (PLCs) observed greater teacher commitment and identity formation [17]. In schools like Beecroft Primary School in Leeds, this greater teacher commitment was quite evident among early-career teachers. It shows that primary schools that adopt distributed leadership often allow teachers to participate in leadership tasks like helping newer teachers see themselves not just as implementers of policy, but as contributors to the school’s vision. Furthermore, O’Sullivan and Mac Ruairc observe that in primary schools like Brindishe Green Primary School, educators are “more likely” to take initiative in leading curriculum projects [11]. In line with the distributed leadership model, Brown et al. argue that such experiences contribute positively to teachers’ self-efficacy [14]. In addition, Bandura’s social learning theory suggests that such experiences positively contribute to teachers’ ongoing commitment to professional learning.

Nonetheless, the relationship between distributed leadership and agency is not universally positive. While Wallace argues that distributed leadership aims to empower [16], in practice, Brown argued that it can sometimes place additional burdens on teachers without corresponding support [10]. Furthermore, O’Sullivan and Mac Ruairc argue that the positive impacts of distributed leadership are highly dependent on school culture and leadership interpretation [11]. This suggests why distributed leadership is sometimes viewed as tokenistic where headteachers would delegate responsibility without real authority as in the case of Wells Hall Primary School in Suffolk. Therefore, when headteachers retain ultimate control, distributed leadership risks reinforcing existing hierarchies. McBrayer et al. further argue that there are some primary schools where trust-wide accountability measures pressure senior leaders to maintain control [6]. In such environments, leadership is believed to curtail teacher-led innovation.

3.3. Building Collaborative Professional Learning Communities

Elsewhere, distributed leadership in primary schools in the UK encourages the building of “collaborative professional learning communities” (PLCs). Brown et al. defined PLCs as where

teachers collectively engage in inquiry, reflection, and shared practice [14]. In the UK's primary school system, these PLCs are often seen as vehicles for continuous professional learning and school improvement [17]. Distributed leadership in UK's primary schools supports this by diffusing leadership roles. In doing so, distributed leadership is seen to be enabling teachers to take shared responsibility for their professional growth. However, Brown et al. argue that this shared responsibility is only a theoretical promise because the success of PLCs is largely dependent on the context, its execution, and true engagement from teachers [14]. Still, there exist other instances of primary schools in the UK such as Ashmount Primary School in London which have integrated distributed leadership more effectively. In such schools, professional learning is collaborative, and professional learning is continuous. This is amazingly why Ashmount Primary School is rated "Outstanding" by Ofsted as this primary school embodies distributed leadership by turning the school into subject-specific learning hubs. In these hubs, Parker argues that teachers cross over between year groups to plan and teach lessons in teams to capture the co-observation phenomena [18]. This indicates that primary school teachers, under such a model of governance, are enabled to engage in sharing professional knowledge, develop trusting relationships, and participate in dialogue and critical reflection [19]. The outcome stands to improve their professional confidence along with enhancing their understanding of pedagogy. As such, distributed leadership can act as a stimulus and empower primary school educators in the UK to engage with and learn from one another while also reconstructing their identities as professionals.

In addition, Parker argues that collaborative PLCs support the development of a growth-oriented professional culture in primary schools in the UK [18]. When leadership is distributed in these UK schools, teachers can easily feel more accountable to each other instead of just remaining loyal to headteachers and senior managers. In the UK, there are schools that already have strong PLCs driven by this distributed leadership model [17]. An example of such a primary school is St Peter's Church of England Primary School in Farnham. Because of adopting a distributed leadership model, St Peter's Church of England Primary School has shown improved student outcomes and teacher retention rates. This means that the distributed leadership model can enhance collaborative learning processes in primary schools [20]. These collaborative learning processes like action research groups are particularly effective when teachers can lead and own the initiatives [19].

Despite the success of a distributed leadership model in creating a collaborative learning process in primary schools, the success of PLCs is said to rely more on high relational trust, time allocation, and a shared vision for learning [19]. Yet, in many primary schools in the UK, the managements face high-stakes accountability pressures. According to Kennedy's Spectrum of CPD Models, these pressures suggest that CPD would retain a transmissive character [13]. In doing so, such leadership can only offer little genuine professional learning [7]. Therefore, they have limited time to participate in collaborative learning activities that are advocated for in a distributed leadership model. This means that in a distributed leadership model, school teachers are likely to perceive PLCs as additional tasks yet they are meaningful learning opportunities.

4. Challenges and Conditions for Effective Distributed Leadership

4.1. Addressing Inequalities and Differentiated Professional Learning Opportunities

The UK education system is one of the sectors characterised by inequalities even though to a smaller extent. In some cases, Parker argues that the leadership of some primary schools does not recognise the diverse expertise of all teachers [18]. As a result, the leadership of these schools barely offers differentiated pathways for professional growth and development.

Besides, while many primary school teachers are women, Wallace argues that access to leadership roles and professional learning opportunities is not always evenly distributed [16]. Nevertheless, the distributed leadership model can address these inequalities and differentiate professional learning opportunities in UK primary schools. In UK primary schools, where disparities often exist in access to leadership development, distributed leadership can democratise professional learning. Hall further argues that distributed leadership structures can allow primary school teachers in the UK to engage in leadership roles [21]. However, Wallace argues that this increased implementation has improved the representation of women as primary headteachers, bringing the number to 74% [16]. This means that distributed leadership models can shape school development initiatives in primary schools. In addition, this leadership model can allow all primary school teachers to pursue tailored professional learning pathways.

In primary schools like St. Silas Church of England Primary School in Blackburn, a distributed model empowered teaching assistants and newly qualified teachers (NQTs) to lead small-scale improvement projects and receive targeted coaching. This differentiated approach ensured that professional development was responsive to individual needs rather than imposed uniformly. In this school, the majority of the teachers reported increased confidence and motivation. In fact, an internal survey indicated a 25% rise in self-reported leadership engagement over two years. In addition, distributed leadership can promote equity by disrupting traditional hierarchies that often marginalise certain staff within the UK's primary school system. Therefore, as Parker argues, primary schools that use distributed leadership models can see more diverse leadership pipelines [18]. This diversity can further include greater participation by women and BAME educators [22]. This means that, in primary schools in the UK, distributed leadership can catalyse inclusivity. In doing so, distributed leadership can make management in these primary schools more accessible and relevant to a broader range of educators.

However, the impact of distributed leadership in addressing such inequalities appears more theoretical than practical. Rumeli et al. argue that the effectiveness of distributed leadership in addressing inequalities is inconsistent [2]. Up to today, there are primary schools in the UK that use a distributed leadership model yet women's access to leadership opportunities remains uneven. This is specifically the case with some Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) primary schools that tend to favour existing senior staff, many of whom are men. In some MATs, distributed leadership structures exist on paper. Practically, the control of leadership remains centralised among headteachers and executive leaders. In this case, there is limited advancement of women to senior leadership roles in MAT primary schools in the UK. This means that, while effective in some primary schools, distributed leadership is implemented informally [2]. As a result, the iceberg model shows that many primary schools have shown how the implementation of distributed schools lacks clear frameworks, leading to the subjective selection of "preferred" staff for leadership roles [23]. This means that, even in the presence of distributed leadership in the UK, primary schools can still reinforce existing inequalities.

4.2. Sustaining Professional Learning and Capacity Building Over Time

According to [24], sustainability and capacity building within schools have grown important. Unlike hierarchical leadership models, which often depend heavily on the charisma or skill of a few individuals, distributed leadership aims to embed leadership capacity more broadly. This type of leadership model, therefore, can make primary schools in the UK more resilient and adaptable over time. Meanwhile, Hall argues that in the UK schools, there are high rates of teacher turnover [21]. In primary schools, around 9% of teachers leave the profession each year [25]. This high turnover rate creates ongoing challenges for leadership continuity and institutional knowledge. In addition, it justifies the need for sustained professional learning

within the UK primary schools. The distributed leadership model can cultivate a wider base of leadership skills across staff [6]. This means that distributed leadership, when effectively implemented in primary schools in the UK, can mitigate these challenges.

In addition, Oduro argues that distributed leadership can help primary schools in the UK to create a self-sustaining culture of professional growth [24]. However, while distributed leadership supports long-term development, Torrance argues that its success is uneven [26]. Furthermore, the success of distributed leadership often depends on deeper structural and cultural factors. However, if distributed leadership is effectively implemented, it can allow primary schools in the UK to embed professional learning into the daily life of the school. For example, at Mayflower Primary School in Tower Hamlets, distributed leadership practices have enabled a wide range of staff to lead professional learning communities and research projects [6]. This is why the school is rated “Outstanding” by Ofsted. This shows that when effectively implemented, distributed leadership does not allow leadership responsibilities to be only limited to senior staff [2]. Instead, this leadership model can allow primary school teachers to mentor peers, lead workshops, and design school improvement plans. In doing so, these primary schools can ensure that professional learning is ongoing and not sporadic. In addition, it will enable UK primary schools to build professional leadership development from within [15]. As a result, Kurawa and Gumel argue that this can allow the distributed leadership model to significantly reduce reliance on external training providers [27].

Additionally, ongoing professional development under distributed leadership helps to build internal capacity and strengthens the leadership pipeline. Hickey notes that schools with stronger models of distributed leadership were 30% more likely to have effective internal succession plans compared to other primary schools in the UK with more hierarchical structures [28]. These schools managed staff and turnover changes and shifts in leadership without major disruptions to professional development activities in these schools. Nonetheless, some pressing issues remain. In many primary schools, distributed initiatives seem to revolve around individual champions—motivated educators or senior leaders—rather than broad systemic, embedded approaches [29]. When these key people step away, professional learning systems tend to weaken or disintegrate. Hickey further argues that professional learning communities created through distributed leadership were at risk of losing momentum within two to three years without formalised structures and institutional memory [28]. Moreover, ongoing competence development requires considerable external investment in time, trust, and professional independence [23]. This is easily undermined by external pressures. Ofsted inspections and performance tables often demand accountability, which drives schools to focus on short-term results at the expense of long-term staff development investment. Furthermore, Torrance cites that 42% of primary school teachers identified time constraints and competing priorities as significant barriers to ongoing professional learning [26]. Nonetheless, when effectively implemented, distributed leadership has the potential to sustain professional learning and build leadership capacity over time in UK primary schools.

5. Conclusion

The exploration of distributed leadership’s impact on teachers’ professional learning in UK primary schools uncovers both opportunities and challenges. As noted, when there is authentic distributed leadership, professional development through collaborative inquiry, and teacher agency, the building of inclusive professional learning communities, addressing inequities, and long-term capacity building is possible. This essay demonstrates that distributed leadership can shift professional learning from predominantly passive and transmissive approaches toward more teacher-driven models. The analysis, however, argues that distributed leadership offers no crucial advantages, especially with professional learning; it largely depends on how it

is understood and implemented in the context of the school culture. It is not helpful to offer a superficial mask of shared leadership and collaboration when actual authority does not change. Such putative distributions of leadership do nothing when it comes to professional learning. Moreover, hidden inequalities and biases should be addressed because they can undermine the effectiveness of distributed leadership in creating equitable learning opportunities for all teachers.

Like system leadership and teaching policies, the United Kingdom's policies have encouraged schools to adopt some form of shared leadership to foster collaboration among teachers. However, the persistent issues of tight accountability, scarce resources, frequent staffing shifts, and other more persisting issues make meaningful maintenance of these approaches extremely challenging. Some primary schools in the UK have made shared leadership work by going beyond official frameworks and building a culture of trust, openness, and shared commitment. So in order for shared leadership to effectively facilitate professional development in primary schools, it needs to be understood as a profound cultural transformation rather than a mere redistribution of roles or an alteration of functions. Other aspects of the proposal that require attention entail perpetual commitment from school leaders on practice review documenting unanswered questions about operating beliefs, organizational dynamics, and active learning that teachers engage in within the learning environment. At the same time, education policymakers should help by promoting and funding team-based professional learning, instead of only valuing results that are easy to measure. This form of support is vital in ensuring the prolonged success of shared leadership.

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