The Principal’s Leadership Impact utilizing Distributed Leadership Practices that drive School Improvement

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The Principal’s Leadership Impact utilizing

Distributed Leadership Practices that drive School Improvement

By Holly Grubbs

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Executive Summary

The role of the principal on the campus has shifted due to the significant workload of managing the school and the increased amount of accountability for teaching and learning for the success of each child. Through a solid vision and focused mission, the school's culture and student learning can achieve success. However, for a school principal to succeed in building the capacity of the teacher and reach the high expectations for student learning, a team of leaders must be in place. Developing an organization is not about delegating the work, but rather about creating a team that is collaborative and able to work together through effective communication. While principals may struggle with the federal, state, and local accountability system, it is the success of the campus leadership team that establishes a focused mission for the day-to-day work impacting the teaching and learning for student success. For this reason, principals should look to a distributed leadership model and focus on how to lead and inspire those who cross their path.

James Spillane (2005) shares, "Distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures" (p. 144). Understanding this practice is essential because the role of the principal cannot single-handedly lead a school to success; it takes a team of people to lead and manage an effective organization. In reviewing Bolden’s (2011) synthesis of research on distributed leadership and how it can impact the leadership practice for educational leaders, I found it to be about the communication that takes place between the leaders and followers who are doing the work. The research sets a foundation for a distributed perspective for leading a school organization to success. The conversations and interactions are what make the difference in formal and informal leadership opportunities so that collective engagement in the work can reach the desired achievement.
Problem of Practice

Educational leadership is a major factor in achieving the goals of state and federal policy makers centered on raising student achievement for all students. Before, the focus was on how the principal is managing the school, and now it is about the process, procedures and structures, and systems in place that drive instructional improvement. With the increase of federal legislation, a principal's instructional leadership is measured by student academic achievement (Van Roekel, 2008). The assumption of the federal, state, and local policies is that instructional leadership is evident on the campus to improve schools. Consequently, there is a problem in American public schools due to the increased level of work and accountability put upon each school principal for the success of all children and the school, (Apple, 2001; Bolden (2011); Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; McKay, 2011). This problem has negatively impacted a principal’s performance because of the changing expectations in the federal and state system.

A possible cause of this problem is that there have not been any other responsibilities that have diminished in the role of the campus principal. Some researchers argue that, “Contemporary school administrators play a daunting array of roles. They must be educational visionaries and change agents, instructional leaders, curriculum and assessment experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators, and community builders” (See, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007, p.1). As principals try to prioritize the various responsibilities on the campus, the accountability of instructional leadership weighs heavily on their shoulders to close the growing achievement gap between expectations and performance. For this reason, principals should look at the concept of distributed leadership.
Distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures. A distributed perspective frames leadership practice in a particular way; leadership practice is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation (Spillane, 2005). This framework differs from other leadership models such as authentic leadership and transformational leadership which focus primarily on the traits, values, and behaviors of leaders. An authentic leader is consistent with their values and genuine with their leadership. George (2003) defines authentic leadership through five characteristics including passion driving purpose, behaviors influencing values, connection to relationships, consistent self-discipline, and compassion to lead with heart. Bass and Avolio, (1993) recognize transformational leadership as leadership that has a vision aligned to the values of the organization, creating an emphasis on the leader’s ability to inspire innovation and influence through a shared vision. Distributed Leadership, however, recognizes the social interactions that are happening as well as the tools and routines that shape the leadership practice. Spillane (2006) references Thompson’s (1967) view of administrative theory, where he shares there is an interdependency in how people work together: reciprocal, pooled, and sequential. Thompson’s theory is notable because Spillane’s categorization of collaborative, collective, and coordinated distributed leadership is based on the actions of people within the system rather than the structure of the organization which aligns with Thompson’s categories of interdependency. Likewise, the distributed leadership process unfolds when capacity is developed for reciprocity within team members with and without formal leadership titles.
Bolden synthesizes the research on distributed leadership by noting the different conceptual frameworks by Gronn (2001), Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006), MacBeath, Oduro, and Waterhouse, (2004), and Spillane (2006). Bolden claims that distributed leadership is rooted in theory and the frameworks explaining the process (2011). While it is a different way to look at leadership, it is not a simple how-to guide for educational leaders. Therefore, a study that investigates distributed leadership practices, utilizing a qualitative case study approach, could provide insights into how school leaders practice distributed leadership to address the increase of accountability to generate school improvement.

Central Research Question:

Distributed leadership is a practice that develops over time through the capacity building of leadership and defined situations, I am studying it to discover whether or not a principal’s implementation of distributed leadership to empower others can drive instructional improvement to move a school forward. A research study will be conducted to determine Do principals use distributed leadership practices to empower others to create collaborative, collective, and coordinated work experiences that drive school improvement?
Review of the Literature

Introduction

Distributed leadership, according to Spillane (2006), is defined as "leadership practice generated in the interactions of leaders, followers, and their situation; each element is essential for leadership practice." Since distributed leadership rests with the campus principal, it is effective or ineffective given the communication of the principal with the informal and formal leaders on the campus, (Spillane & Pareja, 2007). Additionally, Leithwood et.al. (2006) claims that behind every successful school is a principal who is an effective leader. Therefore, through concerted interactions an effective leader builds a team of people to lead and manage an effective school organization. For these reasons, the review of the literature will include the policy impact on school leadership, organizational implementation of distributed leadership, developing teacher leadership, and instructional distributed leadership.

While extensive research has been done on school leadership from a distributive leadership perspective, understanding how the principal operates from a leadership development position is a natural extension of previous research. Bolden (2011) asks what the role of the principal is in driving best instructional practices, while Diamond and Spillane (2016) ask how principals are effective in utilizing distributive leadership when they empower others to lead. Bolden (2011) synthesizes the distributed leadership research from four different frameworks by Gronn (2001), Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006), MacBeath, Oduro, and Waterhouse, (2004), and Spillane (2006) that are based on an educational school setting. Bolden’s analysis of the four frameworks centers on the principal’s leadership impact and the
value of the interactions of group members. MacBeath et al. (2004), Leithwood et al. (2006), and Spillane (2006), look at the strategic distribution of the leadership and analyze the alignment of leadership to the organization and the functions of systems and structures. Gronn (2002) and Spillane (2006) focus on the interactions, accomplishments of interdependent tasks, and implementations of leadership practices. Bolden (2011) synthesizes these four frameworks to provide the various ways that distributed leadership can be implemented. For example, a principal analyzing leadership alignment might measure the instructional effectiveness of academic learning through formal and informal observations and teacher leader influences (MacBeath, 2004). When leaders implement the interactions of the interdependent tasks derived from the leaders and the followers, they might plan for the leadership responsibilities and resources to be delegated (Leithwood, 2006).

**Policy Impact on School Leadership**

School leadership for equity. In 1965, President Johnson looked to improve the racial inequality in American education. In order to address this movement, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was adopted to improve public education so that all schools could offer equitable educational opportunities for all children. The purpose was to fund schools so that children could have a quality and equitable education. In order to close the achievement gap in America, federal dollars were allocated to state education agencies to enhance education in libraries, provide educational research, and support bilingual students and students with disabilities (Nelson 2016). The role of the school principal became more complex in 1983 as a result of the shift in education from the Federal/Civil Rights Era to the Standards-Based Reform and Test-Based Accountability Era, in response to the publication of “A Nation at Risk” under
President Reagan. The published report focused on federal, state, and local reform efforts that were needed to help the quality of America's public schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). ESEA was reauthorized in 1988 with the adjustment of states receiving funding due to a shift in accountability, requiring states to define levels of academic achievement. While the federal funding on average equals less than ten percent of school funding, ESEA influenced state policy significantly.

School leadership for accountability and improvement. The 2001 ESEA reauthorization, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, occurred under President George Bush. He used the Texas education accountability model as the basis for NCLB. The NCLB was federal legislation that emphasized test-based accountability to hold state systems accountable with a framework for student progress stating that all students would be proficient in reading and math. Federal guidelines were provided to states with struggling schools that limited local control. The expansion of accountability resulted in increased pressure for school leaders to attain higher levels of student achievement. McKay’s (2011) research recognizes that principals under NCLB are leading schools in a “complex and competitive” environment. This was the beginning of the shift in the role of a school principal from exclusively building manager to include the practice of instructional leadership focusing on curriculum (McKay 2011).

Schools that are not able to demonstrate improvement are faced with strong accountability sanctions. Therefore, school districts turn to strategies such as the utilization of school turnaround principals. These leaders are put in place for “needs improvement” schools; however, sustained change for these schools require the principal to build capacity in the staff by
examining teaching and learning, analyzing the learning environment, and utilizing data for progress monitoring (Duke 2004).

**School leadership for instruction.** In 2015, ESEA (NCLB), was reauthorized under the Obama administration as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). As a result of this federal legislation, states were provided additional flexibility on accountability measures. The states followed with accountability plans continuing to include reading and math assessments for third-eighth grade students and a test in high school. These assessments must include accountability of sub-group performance including race, special programs such as bilingual and special education, economically disadvantaged and graduation rates in order to monitor closing the achievement gap.

In order to comply with ESSA, states with struggling schools must use evidence-based methods to support another expansion of the role of a principal: determine evidence-based practice rather than a specific guideline set by the federal government. ESEA provided state agencies with the decision-making authority related to funding and resources for school improvement. A consequence of ESSA is its emphasis on school performance to meet accountability requirements rather than on student performance to support individual student growth. In a corresponding study, Diamond and Spillane (2004) found that improving student learning was observed in schools with high performance whereas an obsession with the need to exit probation was the goal of low performing schools. The test-based accountability system shifted the emphasis “from student needs to student performance, and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school” (Apple, 2001 p. 413).
As a result, the test-based accountability era created “needs improvement” schools and caused instruction to become a top priority for educational leaders. The state policy for school improvement is determined by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) accountability system which resulted in the state Targeted Improvement Plan centered around the Effective School Framework and incorporates the Bambrick-Santoyo's (2010) Data-Driven Instruction research. The Effective School Framework is a campus evaluation used to examine school improvement efforts. The foundation of the framework centers on strong school leadership and planning. However, in the policy development little is provided for leadership development. Therefore, due to federal legislation and state policy, current school administrators must empower leaders in the form of leadership development within the school system to enhance the teaching and learning for students.

**Organizational Implementation of Distributed Leadership**

**Organizational balance of leadership.** Given the context of accountability in the 1990’s, education scrambled to evaluate which leadership methods drove school improvement. Early research (Rowan, 1990; Heller & Firestone, 1995; Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002) resulted in the expansion of the principal’s role to drive school improvement. As a result of the early research, Camburn, Rowan, and Taylor (2003) and MacBeath et.al. (2004) focused on studying leadership practice for school improvement with a balance between managerial and instructional practices. This eventually led Spillane, and Pareja (2007) to research how distributed leadership affects principal practice.
The accountability movement required more from school leadership and research began to assess school improvement methods. Rowan (1990) found that school leadership exhibited patterns of control as many roles were distributed in an effort to meet the mandates of standards-based reform and test-based accountability. After Rowan’s research emerged, twenty percent of American public schools utilized a similar model of school reform. Building on Rowan’s study, Heller & Firestone (1995) concluded that multiple campus roles were specifically involved with instructional leadership, where the enhancement of educational practice included a focus on management and added a focus on instruction. Smylie, Conley, and Marks (2002) identified the limitations of the reform initiatives that only centered around the principal while other formal and informal leaders were not utilized for school improvement. Initiatives that resulted from this research brought about career ladder, mentor teacher programs, and site-based management; however, these programs failed to build the necessary capacity to develop strong instructional leaders for sustained improvement.

**Organizational functions of leadership.** Due to the need for comprehensive school reform models to improve instruction in schools, Camburn, Rowan, and Taylor (2003) researched how strong principal instructional leadership is central to the success of improvement, yet is limited due to managerial tasks that do not focus on instructional improvement. Camburn et al. (2003) defined leadership "as a set of organizational functions that leaders might be expected to perform--including not only instructional leadership functions but also functions related to broader school and building management," (p. 349). The author suggested that distributed leadership can be applied to all facets of the school organization, and is dependent upon effective communication with the school staff.
Effective communication must center on positive relationships with members of the organization, an idea that has been researched heavily within corporate America. Collins and Porras, (1994) explain why visionary companies are highly effective. Collins and Porras provide examples of CEOs who spend over forty percent of their time communicating the values of the organization with others. Through this relentless communication of values, the purpose of the corporation is laid for organizational improvement, which is a parallel strategy for educational leadership. To lay a solid foundation for school improvement, the values must be clearly communicated with all stakeholders. When a principal has built positive relationships with all stakeholders, then implementing a distributed leadership model throughout the organization for instructional leadership and building management becomes centered on a foundation of communication.

Additionally, Camburn et al. (2003) and MacBeath (2004) compared the importance of instructional leadership to managerial leadership, as well as the incremental distribution of knowledge necessary for driving increased leadership responsibility. Through communication via professional learning, expectations can be set effectively for instructional leadership. Furthermore, MacBeath (2004) added to professional learning the essential need for reflection to drive the process for improvement. He stated, “Distributed leadership was potentially a condition for change and an outcome of change. Increasingly it seemed that a key way to understand distributed leadership was in terms of processes,” (p. 34). MacBeath’s (2004) research generated a framework composed of six processes: formal distribution, pragmatic distribution, strategic distribution, incremental distribution, opportunistic distribution and
cultural distribution. This framework allows the principal to navigate among all six forms of
distribution and utilize the appropriate process, dependent upon the situation.

**Organizational capacity of leadership.** Spillane et al. (2007) supported Camburn’s
claim that distributed leadership to both formal and informal leaders supports principals’
organizational functions of leading and managing a school. According to this viewpoint,
managerial activities should not dictate whether a principal is managing or leading. On the other
hand, distributed leadership allows the principal to differentiate their leadership to include
instructional leadership for overall organizational improvement.

Spillane’s categorization of distributed leadership is derived from Thompson's work on
administrative theory (1967, as cited in Spillane, 2006). Thompson’s theory studies three
interdependent forms of how people work together: reciprocal, pooled, and sequential. The
reciprocal work requires input from others, resembling Spillane’s collaborative approach. The
pooled work shares resources with the work being carried out independently, resembling
Spillane’s collective experience. The sequential work occurs in a specific order, resembling
Spillane’s coordinated approach. Spillane's research on distributed leadership is aligned to
Thompson’s (1967) study to reveal how the organizational processes unfold when leadership
capacity is developed for interdependency.

**Developing Teacher Leadership**

**Capacity for leadership.** From the realization that campus leadership should be
distributed to formal and informal leaders, research began to focus on the most effective
practices for developing teacher leaders. Gronn (2002), Camburn et al. (2003), Spillane (2012),
and DeMatthews (2014) examined instructional improvement from a distributed leadership perspective including professional learning communities in order to develop teacher leadership capacity.

Gronn (2002) suggests that a principal should view distributive leadership in three different forms. These include the interdependence of staff, coordination of activities, and concertive action towards the vision. Through the implementation of distributed leadership, the development of teacher leaders and the continued capacity development of the leadership team, school improvement is driven for student achievement. In this process, a collaborative culture emerges for staff through a shared vision.

Camburn et al. (2003) suggest that reliable associations were found between the amount of professional development received by leaders and higher levels of instructional leadership, leading to the following implications for how principals support organizational learning. Camburn et al. (2003) defines leadership “as a set of organizational functions that leaders might be expected to perform—including not only instructional leadership functions, but also functions related to broader school and building management” (p. 349). Strong principal instructional leadership is central to the success of instructional improvement but is limited due to managerial tasks that do not focus on school improvement as it relates to instruction. For this reason, an implication for leaders to improve school achievement is to recognize and analyze current systems to determine if building the capacity of teacher instructional leadership through professional development opportunities increases student learning. The authors suggest that distributed leadership focuses on school staff that typically hold leadership positions on the campus. The benefit of this research derives from the importance of the leader’s role on campus.
and performance improved through distributed leadership by positive relationships between professional learning experiences and instructional leadership. The authors share that research is limited to the process of how leadership is distributed in a school.

**Sustainable leadership.** Once researchers recognized the role of non-formal leadership positions on the campus, professional learning communities (PLC) began to emerge. In a 2006 study, Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace and Thomas found that developing professional learning communities (PLCs) look to build capacity for sustainable school improvement. Stoll et al. adds that PLCs were being utilized on several campuses through reflective practices for teachers to grow together and empower learning. The article summarizes five characteristics of PLCs, including shared values and vision, collective responsibility for student learning, reflective practice to support student needs, collaboration, and learning for the benefit of all. Furthermore, the characteristic of collaboration is essential to improve teaching practices, thus “linking collaborative activity and achievement of shared purpose,” (Stoll et al. 2006, p. 227). In addition to the five characteristics, Stoll et al. (2006) extended the connection to all staff members, including support staff, and leaders, as a means for driving a collective school community centered in trust and respect. However, some of the barriers to effective PLCs involve systemic change and experiences. As principals began to implement PLCs, challenges such as diversity, lack of organization, and high administrator turnover began to emerge as barriers that hinder effective PLCs. Stoll et al. (2006) also suggested utilizing distributed leadership to engage teacher leaders to share their knowledge and expertise in order to address these barriers.

In order to overcome the barriers to effective PLCs, it is essential that the administrator recognize those who have the ability to lead PLCs that they align their values to the vision of
school improvement for the benefit of all (Leithwood et al. 2006). In their article, “Seven Strong Claims About Successful School Leadership,” Leithwood et al. (2006) recognizes distributed leadership as a greater influence for collaborative partnerships. Relevant here is their fifth “strong claim”: “School leadership has a greater influence on schools and pupils when it is widely distributed,” (p. 12). From this research, evidence was gathered where distributed leadership was utilized in schools to improve student achievement. It is further recognized that it is essential to develop a teacher's capacity through coordinated efforts and further research is recommended and distributed leadership can achieve these efforts.

Following Leithwood et al.’s recommendations, DeMatthews (2014) confirms that research is limited regarding the process of how leadership is distributed in a school. He then researched how principals could look beyond traditional practices to build teacher capacity. DeMatthews study showed that the foundation for an effective administrator should include how to distribute leadership effectively in order to support titled and untitled leaders on the campus. DeMatthews (2014) recognized four effective leadership practices: 1) principal belief in teacher leadership; 2) leader identification; 3) PLC implementation within the school that aligned with school values; and 4) principal ability to perform, to maintain, and to shift under certain conditions. He also found that principals should create opportunities weekly for collaboration among PLCs, including dialogue around data to drive interdependence. As well, principals should look at the natural barriers to PLC implementation that will arise, including lack of time and trust. When these barriers are addressed, principals are then able to align leadership opportunities to meet the school’s vision and mission of student achievement. As school leaders
continue to grow and develop, sharing the decision making with teacher leaders and the leadership team in a distributed leadership model can drive school improvement.

**Instructional Distributed Leadership**

Strong principal leadership is central to the success of instructional school improvement because the managerial tasks do not focus on school improvement as it relates to instruction, (Camburn et al. 2003). To justify this shift in a principal’s focus, Spillane’s (2006) work demonstrated that principals typically spend one-third of their time on administrative activities, one-fifth of their time on curriculum and instruction, and less than one-tenth of their time on professional growth. If principals were able to focus more on instruction instead of administrative tasks then greater efforts could be made to lead the school to excellence. In continued research, Spillane (2010) found that because principals are held accountable to a higher standard for student achievement, the practice of leadership must extend beyond the principal as it relates to leading and managing. Spillane's (2010) research on distributive practice leads one to reflect and evaluate the leadership distribution in the school organization.

Distributed leadership focuses on the leadership practice of the team that is leading improvement efforts in the school rather than placing it solely on the principal. This shift in perspective drives a change in the interactions among people and the decision-making. Supovitz, D’Auria, and Spillane (2019) state two approaches for meaningful school improvement through leadership distribution. The first method is to identify a process that recognizes the root cause impeding the process of improvement. The second method is to identify and engage those who are doing the work in the school improvement process. Supovitz et al. (2019) suggested
distributed leadership as a way to organize the people, the “human capital,” doing the continuous improvement work in order to achieve instructional school improvement. This shift to distributed leadership organizes a team that can garner multiple perspectives to both recognize the root cause and find solutions. Once the team has identified the root cause, it develops an instructional improvement action plan, creating a team of organized stakeholders who have ownership in the school improvement process. Supovitz et al. (2019) recognizes potential risks to implementing distributed leadership models in the instructional school improvement process. These risks include managing the climate and culture of people’s emotions that stem from disagreement with titled leadership in front of others and the passion of their personal work. Therefore, leaders must recognize these barriers to implementation and develop the skills needed to effectively manage emotions when creating meaningful instructional improvement action plans.

Because distributed leadership depends on the communication between all school stakeholders, how they interact with each other determines the effectiveness by which they lead a school for continuous improvement. Across research, distributed leadership that facilitates communication aligns to three key areas: collaborative, coordinated, and collective.

**Collaborative distributed leadership.** In defining new organization structures, a collaborative distributed approach can lend itself to achieving a more significant impact on the improvement of the organization. This reciprocal approach to distributed leadership is where two or more people work together to achieve the common goal of the leadership task, (Spillane 2006; Gronn 2002). While collaboration is one component of distributive leadership, it is the interaction of the group members that accomplishes the work and not what is completed that
defines this framework. Principals need to be able to identify team members who have leadership ability and a willingness to develop their leadership capacity. The systems of collaboration that are then put in place emphasize the leadership capacity development of chosen team members (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2004). These collaborative systems provide opportunity for school organizations to grow in meaningful improvement as a result of their organizational structure and the context of situations that shape practice and patterns of leadership. This type of strategic distribution capitalizes on the strengths of the team members and adds value to the instructional leadership of the principal (MacBeath 2004).

**Collective distributed leadership.** In partnership with collaborative distributed leadership, a collective distributed approach can lend itself to achieving an alignment to the organization’s work. The pragmatic distribution of the roles and responsibilities outlines the instructional improvement aligned by the administrators monitoring academic learning, leadership team members making informal observations, and teacher leaders influencing instructional practices (MacBeath 2004). Collective distributed leadership supports the value of aligning the order of procedures and structures with the degree to which these are implemented. For example, an application of collective leadership can be applied to the principal’s monitoring of instruction in the classroom and their evaluations of the teaching and learning. While the principal and assistant principal complete formal observations, the informal walkthroughs could be completed by members of the leadership team who do not have an official leadership title. Then when the leadership team comes together to discuss the implications of what was observed in the classrooms, the members comprehend the instructional practices on the campus which allows for trends and a collective understanding of instruction on the campus to emerge.
Through this process, collective distributed leadership appears (Spillane 2005). Leithwood et al. (2006) concur with Spillane that when there is no procedure or structure to the collective vision’s alignment to the mission and goals, it results in spontaneous misalignment of the organization. In support of Leithwood et al. (2006) and Spillane (2005), MacBeath (2004) claims that collective vision and goals create alignment among team members which establishes an opportunity to increase leadership responsibility and naturally achieve the organization's vision.

**Coordinated distributed leadership.** A coordinated distributed approach could also lend itself to building strong interdependence among team members that result in an effective climate and culture. According to Spillane (2005), when a team works together to accomplish a task in a particular order, interdependent of each other, it is considered to be coordinated distributed leadership. The relationships drive the work, and a strong team equals a solid foundation for the task. The value in coordinated distributed leadership lies in leaders accomplishing the task interdependent of each other. Leithwood et al. (2006) suggested that these tasks look for intentional alignment of the resources and responsibilities. MacBeath (2004) found that the formal distribution of the coordinated delegation of distributed work results in the interactions of the leaders and followers. Gronn (2002) studied the ineffective method of establishing routines and standard operating procedures on campus which limited coordinated effort. Gronn identified that spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practice formed a more effective framework for distributed leadership. Leithwood et al. (2006) found these structures of distributed leadership could be planned alignment or spontaneous alignment.
Conclusion

By starting with the principal as the primary driver of change, the distributed leadership model serves as a catalyst to the instructional school improvement process. This is driven by the collaborative, collective, and coordinated interactions of the team that distribute the necessary leadership to multiple leaders, both formal and informal (Gronn 2002, Spillane 2005, Supovitz et al., 2019). Through an examination of the literature the following themes emerge.

First, accountability to federal, state, and local agency policy hold the principal responsible for school achievement. The goal of legislation and policy was to create an incentive for change and improving education to make it equitable for all students. Many states and local agencies offer financial incentives for high-performance on state assessments or honors and recognition for a designated level. On the other hand, failure to meet policy requirements for school improvement results in required improvement plans. The consequence of a failed plan ranges from replacing administration and teachers to state takeover (Elmore & Rothman, 1999). The test-based accountability system shifted the emphasis “from student needs to student performance, and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school” (Apple, 2001 p. 413).

Second, distributed leadership serves as a way to organize the human capital for a shared commitment to the school improvement process. In addition, the commitment to the work allows for an in-depth root cause analysis resulting in a collaborative instructional improvement plan. The organizational improvement for instructional leadership allows the principal to differentiate their leadership to maintain high expectations for teacher performance.
Third, distributed leadership provides insight into leadership practice and how it unfolds in an instructional school setting. In order to meet the school’s vision and mission of student achievement, principals are able to align leadership opportunities. The principal’s sharing of the decision making with teacher leaders and the leadership team drives instructional improvement.

Therefore, a study that investigates whether the principal utilizes distributed leadership practices to serve as a catalyst for instructional school improvement would provide insight into how school leaders address increased accountability for moving a school forward. For the purpose of this study (see Figure 1), Spillane’s collaborative, collective, and coordinated distributed leadership framework will be utilized to address the question: “Do principals use distributed leadership practices to empower others to create collaborative, collective, and coordinated work experiences associated with school improvement?”

**Distributed Leadership Conceptual Framework**

![Figure 1](image)
Methods of Inquiry

Research Design & Methodology

A case study is utilized with the intent of examining distributed leadership from the principal's first-hand perspective. Robert K. Yin (2015) defines case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context” (p. 16). This study develops an in-depth description and analysis of the use of distributed leadership on three separate elementary campuses.

The philosophy for this study is grounded in the social constructivism interpretive framework, which allows the theory of distributed leadership to be understood through the lens of collaborative, collective, and coordinated leadership in the world in which principal practices affect school improvement, (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collected for this study utilized interviews with three current sitting public-school principals and two members of each campus leadership team who use a distributed leadership model in their school. The data collection method includes an interview protocol and observation form, (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Site and Participation Selection

For this study, three public school principals and two members of their leadership team in order were selected to gain information related to use of distributed leadership practices that serve as a catalyst to school improvement. A qualitative case study with a data method of interviews shaped the interpretation and meanings of the principal and leadership team's account,
(Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews conducted gained a perspective of the campus’s model of distributed leadership to drive school improvement.

I have a personal interest in this topic as I am a current public-school principal that utilizes distributed leadership to drive instructional improvement practices on my current campus. In order to avoid possible ethical issues, I have chosen other elementary schools who fall under the Texas Education Agency (TEA) school improvement criteria due to state assessments.

The participants in this study have seen an improvement in student achievement on their campus due to the school improvement work. Each principal had two members of their leadership team complete the interview protocol. All three campus principals included the assistant principal as a member of the leadership team interview. The second leadership team member was different on all three campuses including a special education teacher, an instructional specialist, and a counselor. All three building principals were women. The aggregate of those interviewed from the three campus leadership teams include two men and four women.

In selecting the sites, the primary focus was to interview the principal and two members of the leadership team of a school who met the following criteria:

1. Each principal will have a minimum of three years administrator experience.

2. Each principal will have a proven track record of increasing student achievement at their current school for a minimum of one year, as a result of school improvement efforts.
3. The school completed a targeted improvement plan resulting in school improvement by one letter grade based on the Texas accountability system.

4. The school is a high-poverty campus (defined as above seventy percent economically disadvantaged).

5. The school is an elementary or secondary campus in Texas.

I have chosen three elementary campuses who represent three different district type demographics according to the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The criterion is defined by the proximity to the urban area, as well as a diverse perspective on building leadership capacity of staff with formal and informal leadership positions. By examining leadership capacity from three different campus perspectives, the study is better positioned to develop an understanding of the practices that empower others to create experiences that drive school improvement. Through the different interviews a cross-case analysis was utilized to examine common threads to determine similarities and differences of work experiences.

Data Collection Procedures and Management

The primary source of data was interviews with the principals and leadership team members. After the approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB), principals were contacted via email to participate in the study. The interview included the principal and two members of their leadership team. The consent for participation was obtained via email. Identifying information is not utilized for participants and pseudonyms are utilized. The interviews took approximately
one hour and were completed in one interview session. Electronic data from the interviews is stored on my computer and password protected.

**Interview**

Before the interview, all principals and leadership team members were verbally asked and agreed to participate in the study. Once the principal agreed to engage in the research, the interview protocol was provided to each principal and their team. The interview protocol can be found in the appendix (see Appendix A). The interview was recorded and began with a grand tour question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The questions in the interview protocol are designed to address the problem of practice: **Do principals use distributed leadership practices to empower others to create collaborative, collective, and coordinated work experiences that drive school improvement?**

The purpose of the interview was to gain a perspective of the participants’ point of view regarding the implementation of distributed leadership on their campus and how it has contributed to school improvement. The interview protocol allowed me to recognize the common threads in the participants' perspectives regarding the complex picture of their school’s organization and align them with the problem of practice. Castillo-Montoya's interview protocol framework aligned the interview process to the problem of practice, created an inquiry-based conversation, and generated feedback from the questions in the interview protocol, (2016). Audio recordings of the interviews will be transcribed following the interview for reflection and coding.
Data Analysis & Validity

The analysis of the principal and leadership team interview were transcribed from the recording, analyzed, and coded. The qualitative research is organized and documented to reflect emergent ideas through a coding process. An open coding analysis was utilized for the interviews to see what emerges from the principal and leadership team interviews. Data analysis procedures included the following (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 187, 199): 1) Data collection, 2) Managing and organizing the data, 3) Creating and organize data files, 4) Reading and documenting emergent ideas by reading through text, making margin notes, and forming initial codes, 5) Describing and classifying codes into themes from the case and its context, 6) Developing and assessing interpretations using categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns, 7) Representing and visualizing the data by using direct interpretation and developing naturalistic generalizations of what was learned, and 8) Accounting of the findings.

The transcripts were read for accuracy and trustworthiness. The methods of triangulation used for validity are multiple data sources, member checking to verify the transcript, and generating a rich thick description (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the interviews were completed and verified, a coding system was utilized for data retrieval. After a thorough analysis, the codes emerged from the interview responses and included accountability and improvement, leadership capacity, teaching and learning, and instructional distributed leadership. Once the coding structure was identified through the themes, the data was coded and examples from the interviews were noted. The data analysis was then aligned to the study’s conceptual framework based on Spillane’s distributed leadership research: collaborative, collective, and
coordinated to establish the findings for the purpose of the study. The table (see Table 1-Table 4) authenticates the analysis across the data applied to the three themes in the conceptual framework. Each coding structure’s data and examples were then analyzed across the published knowledge base.

All data collected is maintained by the researcher. Areas from the interview that did not align were noted and documented as campus specific instructional programs. The researcher bias was considered, given that I am a current public-school principal. The reader will also need to be able to make connections that allow for transferability under the setting of the research. To ensure accurate representation and trustworthiness of the study, data validation of this work included member checks and peer debriefing (Creswell & Poth, 2018, 263).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Conceptual Framework</th>
<th>Eagle Elementary</th>
<th>Tiger Elementary</th>
<th>Lion Elementary</th>
<th>Examples of a segment of text from the study</th>
<th>Published Knowledge Base</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability and Improvement</td>
<td>Collaborative (Interaction of Group Members)</td>
<td>negative climate and culture; voice; trust; turnover in the principal's position</td>
<td>positive climate and culture; turnover in the principal's position</td>
<td>negative climate and culture; turnover in the principal's position</td>
<td>&quot;Whatever way you distribute that information, that's the same message across the campus. The staff trusted that the principal wasn't going anywhere.&quot; &quot;...collaborative efforts you have to build from the ground up, and it begins with culture, and that is a team effort...&quot;.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coordinated (Interdependent Accomplishment of a Task)</td>
<td>TEA Effective School Framework analysis completed by leadership team; data-driven instruction</td>
<td>TEA Effective School Framework analysis completed by leadership team; data-driven instruction</td>
<td>TEA Effective School Framework analysis completed by leadership team; data-driven instruction</td>
<td>TEA Effective School Framework analysis completed by leadership team; data-driven instruction</td>
<td>&quot;The previous principal had a gift for making people want to come to work, and she would tell you it was non-instructional.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective (Order and Implementation of Procedures and Structures)</td>
<td>Example: weekly leadership team meetings</td>
<td>Example: weekly leadership team meetings management vs instructional</td>
<td>Example: weekly leadership team meetings</td>
<td>Example: weekly leadership team meetings</td>
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Policy Impact on School Leadership
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative (Interaction of Group Members)</td>
<td>leadership team voice; teacher voice; communication</td>
<td>communication</td>
<td>communication</td>
<td>&quot;You cannot just say you have distributed leadership and not provide an ownership culture.&quot; &quot;...there's a voice from others, and a sense of accountability when you're taking care of things.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coordinated (Interdependent Accomplishment of a Task)</td>
<td>work load of principal; leadership capacity; ownership</td>
<td>work load of principal; leadership capacity; human capital strength; trust</td>
<td>work load of principal; leadership capacity; voice and accountability of the work; trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective (Order and Implementation of Procedures and Structures)</td>
<td>organizational improvement for support of principal role; capacity to do the work</td>
<td>organizational improvement for support of principal role; capacity to do the work</td>
<td>organizational improvement for support of principal role; instructional leadership capacity; voice</td>
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| Collaborative (Interaction of Group Members) | professional learning communities; mission of the campus; positive relationships | professional learning communities; mission of the campus | professional learning communities; mission of the campus; teacher teams support capacity development | "We decide what we want to talk about, and what's important to us.

The professional learning community facilitators have taken ownership because it is a grade level lead position to coach and grow their team.

"Serves as my way of keeping the pulse and checking temperature, which is very different from keeping a thumb. When I think about taking a pulse, the collaboration impacts what we do as leaders..." | | | | | |
| Coordinated (Interdependent Accomplishment of a Task) | feedback from teachers; constant communication of PLC grade levels | not applicable in the data | communication with leadership team members attending teacher led PLCs | | | |
| Collective (Order and Implementation of Procedures and Structures) | PLC roles and responsibilities; Grade level leads | Teacher team facilitators; implementation of Bambrick Framework for instruction | Teacher facilitated PLC; professional learning driven from teacher teams | | | |

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Syntehsis of Evidence

A research study was conducted to determine if principals use distributed leadership practices to empower others to create collaborative, collective, and coordinated work experiences that drive school improvement. A qualitative case study was utilized to examine distributed leadership from the principals’ and campus leadership teams' perspectives. Three campuses identified as needing school improvement according to state criteria participated in the qualitative case study. Each campus participated in a structured interview protocol. The principal's interview protocol can be found in Appendix A and the leadership team's interview protocol can be found in Appendix B. Each protocol's questions were designed to gain information related to distributed leadership practices that catalyze school improvement.
A descriptive profile of each campus is presented to provide the campus's perspective of distributed leadership to drive school improvement. Each campus has a proven track record of increasing student performance based on the Texas Education Agency (TEA) criteria. All three campuses were identified by the state agency as needing improvement in one or more domains including student achievement, school progress, and closing the gaps. Each campus has demonstrated growth in the past year according to the TEA criteria. The results were shared with the local education agency; however, this data is not recorded on the TEA website due to a waiver on the state accountability system as a result of the global pandemic. The principal and members of each campus' leadership team participated in the interview to provide insight into the distributed leadership practice driving school improvement efforts. A cross-case analysis was utilized to analyze the principals’ and leadership team members' responses to the interview questions. Common threads were examined across cases to determine similarities and differences.

The demographics of the three campuses (pseudonyms are utilized) are found in Table 5, which provides an overview analysis of the three campuses that participated in the study. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the district type criteria which is based on proximity to the urban area is different for all three campuses while student enrollment is similar, providing a unique perspective for leadership capacity. The principals’ campus experience ranges from 3 years to 4 years.
Case Descriptions

Eagle Elementary School #1

Eagle Elementary is a PK-5th grade campus and serves 561 students, 93.9% of which are classified as economically disadvantaged, qualifying by free or reduced lunch program. The campus demographics include 15.7% African American, 76.3% Hispanic, and 6.6% White. The campus falls under comprehensive support for school improvement based on the 2019 STAAR performance data. According to TEA, the overall campus rating is a C letter grade for acceptable performance with a continued need for improvement in student achievement with a domain letter grade of D. The instructional leadership team that was interviewed consisted of the principal, assistant principal, and instructional specialist, with all having a history of instructional success as a classroom teacher.

Tiger Elementary School #2

Tiger Elementary is a PK-5th grade campus and serves 621 students, 77.8% of which are classified as economically disadvantaged, qualifying by free or reduced lunch program. The campus demographics include 22.1% African American, 43.0% Hispanic, and 30.9% White. The campus falls under additional targeted supports for school improvement based on the 2019
STAAR performance data. According to TEA, the overall campus rating is a D letter grade for performance that needs improvement. The campus rating is based on three domains including student achievement, school progress, and closing the gaps. While the campus received a letter grade C in the school progress domain, not enough students are making adequate performance as measured by closing the achievement gaps of subgroups, resulting in a domain grade of a letter F. The domain rating for student achievement is a letter D. The instructional leadership team that was interviewed consisted of the principal, assistant principal, administrative assistant, counselor, and behavior specialist. These members were added to the leadership team based on their strengths to develop a balanced team to get the job done.

Lion Elementary #3

Lion Elementary is a Kindergarten-5th grade campus and serves 572 students, 74.1% of which are classified as economically disadvantaged, qualifying by free or reduced lunch program. The campus demographics include 2.4% African American, 74.5% Hispanic, 19.9% White, and 2.8% Two or More Races. The campus falls under school improvement for targeted supports based on the 2019 STAAR performance data. According to TEA, the overall campus rating is a D letter grade for performance that needs improvement because not enough students are making adequate academic progress. Additionally, the grade for the student achievement domain is a letter F. While the campus received a letter grade C in the school progress domain, not enough students are making adequate performance as measured by closing the achievement gaps of subgroups, resulting in a domain grade of a letter D. In the past fifteen years, the campus has had ten different principals, with the current principal completing year four. The instructional leadership team that was interviewed consisted of the principal, assistant principal, and special
education teacher. These two members balance the principal's leadership style, with the special education teacher bringing a history of the campus, joining the staff before the principal, and the assistant principal providing a bilingual background, having served previously as an instructional specialist.

**Accountability and Improvement**

Across all three campuses, accountability and improvement moved from principal leadership to distributed leadership using a campus leadership team. While the members of all three campus leadership teams varied, the principal's complex role was distributed among leadership team members as supported by the literature (Duke 2004; McKay 2011).

In two of the three campuses, new principals faced a negative culture and climate: there was limited collaboration among staff to address campus concerns and inconsistent behavior systems to support higher student achievement levels. For example, when looking at key actions taken to shift from manager to instructional leader, Principal Eagle shared, "Before you can begin to look at instructional strategies or protocols or any collaborative efforts you have to build from the ground up, and it begins with culture, and that is a team effort. As an instructional leader, there is only so much I can do culturally, but the staff plays the biggest part in the culture based on their attitude and mindset." The leadership team members for Principal Eagle recognized the voice they and the teachers were given when their new principal arrived. The leadership shift created trust among professional colleagues to share instructional concerns about the campus. The instructional specialist noted the positive trends that ensued in teaching and learning due to the principal's relationship with staff members. Principal Lion faced a similar
situation, inheriting a divided staff due to inconsistent leadership from a significant turnover in the principal’s role. The assistant principal connected the positive shift that the new principal brought by describing her leadership approach as, "Whether you're a data-driven kind of person or you're the kind of person that has a tough conversation, it comes from the heart with I care about you.” The assistant principal continued with the observation that, “Whatever way you distribute that information, that's the same message across the campus. The staff trusted that the principal wasn't going anywhere. And then there was an assistant principal who had the same mission who was on the same page. I think that has boosted, even more so, the work of increasing student achievement."

On the other hand, Principal Tiger had a healthy campus environment. Principal Tiger said, "The previous principal had a gift for making people want to come to work, and she would tell you it was non-instructional." The campus had a leadership team in name only; there was not an instructional focus. There had not been a shift from management to instructional leadership, which resulted in accountability sanctions for school improvement. Principal Tiger took the leadership team to action with a collective approach, setting up a weekly instructional meeting that resulted in challenging conversations, creating action steps to improve instruction for students.

All three campus principals stated that they completed a data analysis to review campus achievement gaps to improve the student learning focus on campus. The foundation of this needs assessment on each campus was the Effective School Framework created by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) due to a targeted improvement plan being required from accountability sanctions. The Effective School Framework centers on strong school leadership and data-driven
instruction while it is limited in its development of the capacity of leadership in others
(Bambrick-Santoyo 2010).

**Leadership Capacity**

Each principal mentioned developing leadership in others and the steps they took to build capacity within their school. This leadership capacity building ranged from titled leadership on the leadership team—such as the assistant principal, instructional specialist, and special education lead teacher—to informal leadership, such as the campus custodian who took the initiative to improve transition practices for dismissal. While the process of developing leaders on each campus varied, the common theme was aligning the work to a joint mission of school improvement with a foundation of relational trust enhanced through communication to affect principal practice positively.

All three principals observed that they did the work themselves initially in order to get the work done correctly because of the pressure of the state’s accountability system sanctions, emphasizing the importance of completing the job effectively based on state criteria for improvement. However, the principals recognized in time they could not do the work alone. With their implementation of distributed leadership, they created an opportunity to hear the voice of their team and establish a coordinated effort of progress. As Principal Eagle stated, "You cannot just say you have distributed leadership and not provide an ownership culture." Principal Lion's leadership team members attributed the most significant change on campus to the organizational implementation of distributed leadership that established a culture that allowed the leadership team to be heard. Furthermore, Principal Lion said, "You always want to make
sure that you're distributing your responsibilities so that there's balance and so that there's a voice from others, and a sense of accountability when you're taking care of things." Principal Tiger's approach was coordinated by giving a piece of responsibility based on each staff member’s strength, both for formal and informal leadership positions. By having a positive relationship with leadership team members, teachers, and support staff and knowing their strengths, the principal capitalized on this foundation of relational trust and impacted the need with someone who knew how to fill the gap resulting in a coordinated approach of leadership tasks.

When asked about the structure and design of leadership across the campus, all three campus principals emphasized that the principal's job cannot be done alone. A supportive team of leaders not defined by a title, but by the ability to do the job, was essential to instructional improvement. Additionally, the incremental distribution of the leadership responsibility provided organizational improvement when implemented across each campus.

**Teaching and Learning**

Standard practices found throughout the three campuses included professional learning communities to drive instructional leadership across the campus. This focus created a concerted action toward the campus vision to improve student achievement, resulting in school improvement. Across all three campuses, professional leadership aligned to the campus vision to impact teaching and learning.

The principal and leadership team members at Lion Elementary mentioned that the professional learning on campus was teacher-driven and teacher-led. Based on classroom observations by the instructional leadership team and teacher leaders who facilitate professional
learning communities, teachers shared instructional practices that have impacted student achievement success. The campus leadership team designed a collective system of effective professional learning; this approach created ownership and teacher team development. As mentioned by the special education teacher, “It's just hearing it from other people on campus to push them just to talk about learning strategies. We decide what we want to talk about, and what's important to us.” This informal leadership role of presenting professional learning has generated collaboration among staff and a sense of community to support each other.

Similarly, in the monthly professional learning communities at Tiger Elementary the teacher team facilitators led their grade levels through instructional practices. This professional learning incorporated Bambrick-Santoyo (2010) Leverage Leadership Waterfall Framework in order to address instructional and classroom management concerns. The interviews with the leadership team generated a campus alignment connecting the structure of the Framework with instructional best practices, resulting in a collective structure that increases student achievement by increasing teacher capacity.

Eagle Elementary emphasized the positive relationships to build effective professional learning communities. The leadership team interviews attributed the success of teacher leadership within the professional learning community to strategic roles and responsibilities in the grade level. The instructional specialist noted, “The professional learning community facilitators have taken ownership because it is a grade level lead position to coach and grow their team.” It is essential to the principal of Eagle Elementary that teacher leaders accept the role and not feel like it is a compliance position by name only. Another example of a formal distributed leadership team is the collective structure of professional learning community facilitators. As
stated by the principal this collective structure, “Serves as my way of keeping the pulse and checking temperature, which is very different from keeping a thumb. When I think about taking a pulse, the collaboration impacts what we do as leaders which is really based on the feedback that we get from teachers. It is a domino effect of constant communication based on the systems that we have set up.”

The formal leaders on these campuses build teacher leaders' capacity through opportunities aligned with the school's vision and mission of student achievement. These opportunities are centered around impacting teaching and learning that drive school improvement.

**Instructional Distributed Leadership**

All campuses noted that the interactions among people and the decision-making process that engages in school improvement develop from meaningful instructional action plans. The human capital within the school who is doing the continuous improvement work determines the action plan's effectiveness. Key themes associated with instructional distributed leadership emerged throughout the interviews with each campus leadership team and the principal consistent with the literature (Supovitz, D’Auria, and Spillane 2019).

Collaborative leadership was recognized through a shared school vision aligned with the staff working together. The principals spoke of the success of coaching and feedback related to improving instruction. Through the feedback provided, the principal and leadership team can dissect, analyze, and communicate effectively the next steps needed based on varied abilities. Each school mentioned the campus leadership team meets weekly to discuss instructional needs
on the campus and how to coach to maximize instructional time. A formal system of feedback is utilized on each campus with a learning walkthrough form so that communication is aligned to the school vision. This strategic process creates value in the system established, resulting in open conversations that generate a problem-solving, solution-oriented mindset. All three principals shared that a culture had been created where members of the leadership team conducted learning walks and were in the trenches alongside the teachers, creating positive interactions that shaped an increased student achievement.

Collective leadership instructional practices were evaluated through the Effective School Framework, generating instructional focus areas. Campuses were able to identify systems and protocols that were lacking and revise or implement them to recapture instructional time. For example, at Eagle Elementary, the principal, leadership team members, and grade level teachers utilized a system of Data-Driven Instruction, a component of the Effective School Framework, in their weekly data meetings in order to focus on instructional improvement efforts. In addition, grade levels also met weekly for planning led by the professional learning community teacher facilitator and followed a specific planning protocol utilized at every grade level. These collective instructional practices result from the need for improvement due to accountability sanctions from state assessments. All three principals stated they created a coaching model on their campus. The coaching conversations provided by the principal to the leadership team members generated instructional alignment and increased leadership responsibility that naturally aligned to the campus's vision. The Lion Elementary principal described this practice as "Growing the leadership skills of your team and allowing an opportunity for reflection." The
assistant principal shared, "It pushes us to think a little harder about our leadership responsibilities."

Coordinated leadership was referenced by the principals, indicating the interdependent responsibilities of the leadership tasks on campus. In one case, the principal mentioned having learned through trial and error that when responsibilities define tasks, they need to align to the campus' vision and ensure that clarity is provided regarding the expected outcome. The other two principals shared the importance of knowing their staff’s strengths, as well as their barriers, to accomplish the work that needed to occur. Lion Elementary has established healthy professional learning communities for planning that begin each session with their norms to drive the improvement work. The accomplishment of the norms results in a useful planning session with grade-level team members focused on the work. Furthermore, Tiger Elementary utilizes a digital planning document shared with the principal and leadership team members resulting in all members accountable to the teaching and learning planned for the grade level.

Each principal was sitting in a position where they were forced to increase student achievement to drive school improvement. Due to the situation, one principal mentioned becoming very specific and role-centered about who was responsible for each task but allowing the freedom and autonomy to do their job for the campus' success. While this ownership culture reduced the principal's workload, it also required intentional collaboration and team relations.

**Summary**

The information collected from the interviews reveals that the three principals utilized distributed leadership practices to drive school improvement through aligned leadership
opportunities, resulting in shared decision making. The study supports what the literature stated regarding policy requirements documented by required improvement action plans, organization of human capital within the school setting, capacity development of teacher leadership aligned to the school's vision, and the leadership team implementing an instructional distributed leadership structure.

The Eagle Elementary principal summarized it best by stating, "Distributed leadership has freed me up to be a more effective instructional leader. I am not taking on the burden of school improvement requirements alone. I am not pretending to or even attempting to recognize that I can do everything alone; therefore, everything we do is a team effort. The strategic planning of distributed leadership is essential so that effective instructional improvement is made. Those serving in these roles must understand how valuable they are to the overall team."

The purpose of this study was to determine how the principals utilized distributed leadership practices to serve as a catalyst for instructional school improvement, and provide insight into how the school leaders implemented distributed leadership to address increased accountability measures. Therefore, drawing on research from the literature and interviews, the conceptual framework can be applied centered on the principal’s leadership impact. When the principal leads from a distributed leadership perspective the value of a collaborative, coordinated, and collective approach serves to drive school improvement. The next section will discuss recommendations for principals regarding utilizing and empowering a campus leadership team with distributed leadership practices including those in formal and informal leadership positions.
Strategic Response

The strategic response includes a summary of the study, and essential conclusions drawn from the data collected and the synthesis of evidence. It provides a recommendation and implications for a plan of action to address the problem of practice, “Do principals use distributed leadership practices to empower others to create collaborative, collective, and coordinated work experiences that drive school improvement?”

Educational leadership plays a significant role in achieving state and federal policymakers’ goals centered on raising student achievement for all students. Before the shift in policy regarding instructional accountability, the focus was on how the principal managed the school; now it is about the process, procedures, structures, and systems in place to drive instructional improvement. Chief among these is the federal legislation, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the state system, Effective Schools Framework, which have increased the focus on student achievement for educational leaders, creating an environment that is made up of multiple expectations for principals including building a competitive system of accountability (McKay, 2011). Because of the changing expectations in the federal and state system, this shift has negatively impacted principals by increasing the level of work and accountability for the success of all children. Therefore, the study investigated distributed leadership practices, utilizing a qualitative case study approach, to provide insights into how school leaders practice distributed leadership in order to address increased accountability and generate instructional school improvement. This study’s findings support campus principals’ work by providing strategies around accountability and improvement, leadership capacity, teaching and learning, and instructional distributed leadership. The study revealed that these four categories of
strategies are implemented by leaders who have made a positive difference on their campus to move it forward, resulting in school improvement.

The study adds to the body of research by sharing knowledge gained regarding common distributed leadership practices found in leaders working on an improvement-required campus due to school accountability sanctions and how their perceptions align with the distributed leadership model. For this study, Spillane’s distributed leadership theory was used as a lens to understand the principal’s leadership impact to drive school improvement through the collaborative, collective, and coordinated interactions of the team to distribute leadership (Gronn 2002, Spillane 2005, Supovitz et al., 2019). In the areas of policy impact on school leadership, organizational implementation of distributed leadership, developing teacher leadership, and instructional distributed leadership, the principals are implementing distributed leadership practices as indicated by the research to improve instruction. The study confirmed that the improvement occurred while implementing a coordinated, collective, and/or collaborative distributed leadership approach, providing insight into analyzing leadership behaviors that impact experiences that drive school improvement.
Plan of Action

In each of the distributed leadership approaches, the principal shared experiences which involved effective communication resulting in the principal leadership impact's value. While principals may struggle with the federal, state, and local accountability system, they continue to experience success moving the campus forward when they persevere while effectively communicating a clear vision and a focused mission for the day-to-day work, thereby impacting the teaching and learning for student success. The distributed leadership framework illustrates how the behaviors of the principals in the areas of collective, coordinated, and collaborative leadership impact the campus through effective communication. As a result, the actions taken by the principals in this study have a positive impact as they are influencing the future of public-school students. Therefore, individuals who may benefit from this study include teacher leaders who are aspiring administrators, principals, and supervisors of campus administrators charged with driving school improvement. The recommendations result from practices that were shared from the research data collected from participants and included distributed leadership implementation considerations. The recommendations and considerations are summarized with strategies for stakeholders to implement into practice.

Implications for supervisors of campus administrators. Within the scope of the supervisor's role, supporting the campus principal through coaching to implement a framework for distributed leadership is essential for accountability and improvement because the value of distributed leadership empowers the campus principal to focus on the priority needs of the campus. Data collected from the principals in this study found that district administration's support and coaching created the pathway for principals to design,
organize, and implement a structure for campus improvement. With the utilization of a distributed leadership framework, the principal can organize the human capital on campus to impact the teaching and learning for student success. A distributed leadership framework supported by the supervisor of the principal leverages an effective instructional focused campus administrator.

A highly effective principal realizes they cannot do the work alone. Districts can proactively address the challenge principals face by providing training and professional learning on building capacity in others, including leading oneself, leading others, leading teams, and leading schools. Camburn et al. (2003) support this recommendation with their findings that association exists between the amount of professional development received by leaders and improved instructional leadership. As leaders in the organization receive training, influential leaders' capacity continues to increase within the schools and across the district resulting in a collective leadership approach.

By providing training for principals, leadership teams, and teacher leaders, supervisors can empower them to utilize the framework of distributed leadership, which aligns with MacBeath’s (2004) findings that the formal distribution of the coordinated delegation of distributed work results in the interactions of the leaders and followers. For example, professional development for teachers creates an opportunity for them to lead a professional learning community as the facilitator and to mentor new teachers. While most teachers can communicate effectively with students, adult-to-adult interactions can bring about another set of needed skills such as conflict management, handling adult interactions, and building adults' capacity. Distributed leadership training builds the necessary leadership
skills for teachers to successfully communicate with their peers in a coordinated approach of leadership tasks.

**Implications for principals.** This study reveals how some principals utilize a distributed leadership style to drive school improvement on their campus. Since legislation has mandated school improvement policies for public schools, this study highlighted that distributed leadership empowered each campus to meet the accountability and improvement goals for their campus, as supported by Spillane (2010). He found that the practice of leadership must extend beyond the principal as it relates to leading and managing since federal and state accountability holds them to a higher standard for student achievement. This study also found that the involvement of campus principals in building leadership capacity in staff members without a formal leadership title was an essential component of the school's improvement. Therefore, the recommendation is that principals understand how to implement a distributed leadership framework. Furthermore, specific strategies for principals implementing distributed leadership include implementing professional learning leadership practices by building capacity in others with formal and informal roles, meeting weekly with the principal’s leadership team for communication and empowering the work to drive improvement, and organizing the work so that an instructional focus can be maintained. These strategies align with Spillane et al.’s (2007) work that distributed leadership to both formal and informal leaders support principals’ organizational functions of leading and managing a school.

The principal's leadership actions are critical to the success of the campus, including the ability to identify leadership qualities in staff members that impact the teaching and
learning for student success. Identifying these strengths in others creates the opportunity to develop informal leadership capacity by building teacher leadership on the campus. For example, in the study, all of the school principals had built relationships with all staff members. They knew the personal strengths of and areas of support for every leadership team member, teacher, and support staff person. The intentional time spent with each person allowed the principal to define roles and responsibilities based on individuals’ abilities, resulting in coordinated distributed leadership throughout the campus, a practice supported by Leithwood et al.’s (2006) research that the value in coordinated distributed leadership lies in leaders accomplishing the task interdependent of each other. With the organizational implementation of distributed leadership, the principal leadership impact spreads quickly due to a clear vision and a focused mission for the work.

Within the framework for distributed leadership, the leadership development component is implemented in small moment conversations to drive leadership skill development. As principals focus on instruction, they can use these small moment conversations to hold campus leaders accountable for outcomes. This accountability occurs during weekly leadership team meetings and communication with campus leaders. Therefore, the recommendation for principals is to keep an instructional focus amid policy compliance through this collaborative approach of distributed leadership as they collect data and conduct observations in order to give instructional feedback. According to Duke, (2004) this practice would align with his research claiming lasting instructional improvement occurs from examining teaching and learning, analyzing the learning environment, and utilizing data for progress monitoring.
Implications for teacher leaders who are aspiring administrators. Teachers who are effective in the classroom with proven student performance can offer value to other teachers on campus. These teachers can lead professional learning on campus in small groups to support teaching and learning to impact student achievement, a practice in line with Stoll et al.’s (2006) findings that distributed leadership engages teacher leaders to share their knowledge and expertise. Creating an opportunity for teachers to learn from other teachers generates a positive school climate for collaboration.

Utilizing a collective distributed leadership approach, principals, leadership team members, and teacher facilitators who lead professional learning communities conduct classroom walkthroughs for the purpose of observing instructional practices throughout the school. The data collected from the study recognized the value of utilizing teacher facilitators’ walkthroughs in other teacher’s classrooms to generate feedback opportunities, which raise the level of instructional conversations during weekly professional learning community planning meetings. These teacher leaders being coached to provide feedback for instruction drives instructional improvement for all students. The research further revealed that the improvement occurred as a result of the implementation of a collaborative distributed leadership approach during the professional learning community weekly planning meetings. MacBeath’s (2004) research supports these findings regarding the value of collaboration for maximizing the strengths of the team members in order to contribute to the instructional leadership of the principal. For the teacher leaders who are an aspiring administrator, the interdependent task's coordinated value was specific to individual teacher growth, while its collective value came from generating a protocol for classroom
walkthrough feedback, followed by a collaborative approach of instructional development during the professional learning community.

**Communicating the Plan of Action**

The study investigated distributed leadership practices to provide insight into the principal’s use of distributed leadership to empower others to create collaborative, collective, and coordinated work experiences that drive school improvement. This study supports a campus principal’s work and provides strategies about accountability and improvement, leadership capacity, teaching and learning, and instructional distributed leadership. Creating awareness is often the first step in making a difference. Therefore, sharing the recommendations with district and campus administrators would provide awareness of a clear method for the mission of driving an increased focus on teaching and learning for student success.

Additionally, leadership development of others involves designing training, revising systems, intentional protocols, and providing feedback through implementing the distributive leadership framework on the campus. Often, when a distributed leadership framework is implemented, the reorganization of human capital may need to occur. The human capital reorganization is a result of the capacity developed in formal and informal leaders, including leadership team members and teachers. These leaders may need to be reallocated to leadership positions in order to move school achievement forward.

Finally, implementation of these recommendations may result in a cost to develop leaders’ and teachers' capacity through professional learning and training to become coaches, facilitators, and leaders of adults. Another financial impact could be the
compensation plan to recruit and retain teacher leaders in high demand, especially during a
time in our country when there is a shortage of teachers. For these reasons, the development
of leadership capacity in campus staff is essential to fill internal vacant leadership positions
that include the leadership team members and teacher leaders so that regression of
instructional improvement does not occur. Maintaining the instructional capacity
development is where the distributed leadership framework can generate long term success
for the school, ultimately yielding a return on investment.

**Evaluating Effectiveness of the Plan of Action**

Identifying a priority campus that needs instructional school improvement according to
state criteria and implementing the strategic plan of action would best measure the
effectiveness of the distributed leadership recommendations and considerations. The school
would need to be a high-poverty campus defined as above seventy percent economically
disadvantaged with a principal who has a minimum of three years of administrator experience.

A survey that measures the effectiveness of the previously mentioned distributed
leadership recommendations and considerations for supervisors of campus administrators,
principals, and teacher leaders who are aspiring administrators, would serve as an evaluation of
the strategic plan of action recommendations with pre-and post- measurements. Collecting the
survey data and analyzing the results would provide an evaluation of the action steps' effectiveness. Results would need to indicate that campus leaders made a positive difference
on their campus to develop leadership capacity in others and move it forward with results
driving instructional improvement. In addition, the campus would need to demonstrate
progress on local, state, and federal school accountability measures.
This study focused on schools with accountability sanctions and their principals’ practice of distributed leadership work experiences that drive school improvement. Further research could look at the role of distributed leadership in schools with high instructional achievement, analyzing its influence on principals’ leadership impact and the perceptions of district leaders regarding sustainable school improvement change.

**Conclusion**

Since distributed leadership is a practice that invests in building leadership capacity and generating work experiences, the study was conducted to determine whether or not a principal’s implementation of distributed leadership empowers others to drive instructional improvement and move a school forward.

Based on a review of the literature, the following categories emerged: policy impact on school leadership, organizational implementation of distributed leadership, developing teacher leadership, and instructional distributed leadership. Subsequently, three themes became evident. The first theme centered around principal accountability to federal, state, and local agency policy for school achievement. The second theme revealed the value of utilizing distributed leadership to organize the human capital for a shared commitment to the school improvement process. The third theme recognized the principal's sharing of the decision making with teacher leaders and the leadership team members for the purpose of driving instructional improvement.

Qualitative data was collected from interviews with the principals and campus leadership team members regarding their current practices that drive instructional improvement on the
campus. These practices resulted in a distributed leadership approach driving accountability and improvement, building leadership capacity, improving teaching and learning, and impacting instructional distributed leadership. The research indicated the principals are implementing distributed leadership practices to improve instruction on their campus, thereby recognizing the principal as the primary driver of change and the distributed leadership framework as the catalyst for the instructional school improvement process.

Recommendations and considerations were drawn from research in the literature and interview data to generate strategies for teacher leaders who are aspiring administrators, principals, and supervisors of campus administrators to implement into practice. Supervisors of campus administrators should design professional learning to build the leadership capacity in principals and teacher leaders who aspire to be administrators. By having the necessary leadership skills, school principals are able to build the leadership team and teacher leaders’ capacity to facilitate the growth of teaching and learning. By developing such an organization, the principal delegates the work and creates a collaborative, coordinated, and collective group, and can work together with leadership team members and teacher leaders to effectively communicate a focused mission.

In conclusion, the research study determined that principals who use distributed leadership practices to empower others to create collaborative, collective, and coordinated work experiences drive school improvement. Furthermore, the research study demonstrates the need for districts to build distributed leadership capacity in teacher leaders who are aspiring administrators, principals, and supervisors of campus administrators to drive school improvement, because principals cannot do the work alone. In order to make an effective
change principals must have a team of people who can collaborate with each other, coordinate the accomplishment of tasks, and collectively implement the procedures and structures that drive improvement within our schools, so that teachers feel inspired and students are successful.
References:


McKay, R. W. (2011). *The effect of no child left behind on elementary school principals as instructional leaders*


Appendix A: Principal Interview Protocol

Time:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Description of the Project: The role of the principal on the campus is one in which many struggle because of the complex workload and the amount of accountability put upon each school for the success of all children and the school. Through a solid vision and mission, the school's culture and student learning can achieve success. For a school principal to succeed in building the capacity of the teacher and reach the high expectations for student learning, a team of leaders and followers must be in place. Through developing such an organization, the principal not only delegates the work but creates a group that is collaborative and able to work together through effective communication. I am studying distributive leadership because I want to discover whether or not a principal’s implementation of distributed leadership to empower others can drive instructional improvement to move a school forward.

1. **Grand Tour Question:** Briefly, tell me about your leadership journey to your current position.
   a. Why did you become a school leader?
b. Why a principal?

c. What are some experiences that influenced your leadership?

2. Could you describe your school when you took over as principal?

a. What was the climate and culture?

b. Was there a leadership team and who was on it?

I want to dive deeper into the structure and design of leadership at your campus.

3. Are there people that you turn to for assistance to support your leadership?

a. Can you tell me who supports your leadership, the positions, and their leadership purpose?

b. Can you share your formal and informal leadership roles on campus?

4. How did you learn to develop a team and lead a leadership team?

a. What roles do the formal and informal leaders have in decision making at your school?

b. Moving beyond just your leadership team, do you share or distribute leadership opportunities with other staff? If so, who and what is their current role?

I want to transition our conversation on how you distribute leadership.

5. Talk to me about how you collaborate with your staff and how they impact your role as a principal?

a. How does this relate to building a school vision?
b. Discuss how it impacts professional development.

c. Could you share how the collaboration with staff impacts teaching and learning?

6. As school leaders we have collective instructional practices such as formal/informal observations, talk about these practices on your campus. How would you describe the collective instructional practices to attain campus learning goals?

   a. For clarification of collective instructional practices, it is the value of the order of procedures and structures and the degree to which they are implemented (example: formal observations)

   b. Discuss these collective practices from the leadership team (example: informal observations)

   c. Discuss these collective practices from the staff leaders (example: instructional influences)

7. For this next question, there are independent tasks that need to be accomplished so that the larger goals of the campus can be achieved. We will call this coordinated distribution in which people work separately to accomplish a leadership task that is arranged sequentially. For example, the steps taken to know that students are learning.

   a. What is an example of a coordinated leadership structure within your building?

   b. Are there specific protocols that you utilize as a communication tool for this work?
c. What system or organizational structures are in place to identify the execution and accomplishment of the tasks?

8. **Concluding Question:** Is there anything else you would like to add? To whom should we talk, to find out more information about the leadership structure within the building?

Thank You for participating in this interview focused on distributed leadership from the principal’s role. Remember that your name will remain confidential/protected. In the future, you may also be given another opportunity to share your thoughts on this topic.
Appendix B: Leadership Team Interview Protocol

Time:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Description of the Project: The role of the principal on the campus is one in which many struggle because of the complex workload and the amount of accountability put upon each school for the success of all children and the school. Through a solid vision and mission, the school's culture and student learning can achieve success. For a school principal to succeed in building the capacity of the teacher and reach the high expectations for student learning, a team of leaders and followers must be in place. Through developing such an organization, the principal not only delegates the work but creates a group that is collaborative and able to work together through effective communication. I am studying distributive leadership because I want to discover whether or not a principal’s implementation of distributed leadership to empower others can drive instructional improvement to move a school forward.

1. **Grand Tour Question:** Briefly, tell me about your leadership journey to your current position.

   a. How did you become a school leader?
b. What are some experiences that influenced your leadership?

2. Could you describe your school when you joined as an employee?

a. What was the climate and culture?

b. Was there a leadership team and who is on it?

I want to dive deeper into the structure and design of leadership at your campus.

3. Does your principal turn to others on campus for assistance to support their leadership?

a. Can you tell me who, the positions, and their leadership purpose?

b. Can you share the formal and informal leadership roles on campus?

c. What roles do the formal and informal leaders have in decision making at your school?

4. Moving beyond just the leadership team, talk about other leadership opportunities that have been distributed to other staff members? If so, who and what is their current role?

I want to transition our conversation on how leadership is distributed at your school.

5. Talk to me about how your principal collaborates with staff and how the interaction impacts your role?

a. How does this collaboration connect to the school’s vision?

b. Discuss how it impacts professional development.

c. Could you share how the collaboration with staff impacts teaching and learning?
6. As school leaders we have collective instructional practices such as formal/informal observations. Could you talk about these collective instructional practices on your campus to attain campus learning goals?

   a. For clarification of collective instructional practices, it is the value of the order of procedures and structures and the degree to which they are implemented (example: formal observations)

   b. Discuss these collective practices from the leadership team (example: informal observations)

   c. Discuss these collective practices from the staff leaders (example: instructional influences)

7. For this next question, there are independent tasks that need to be accomplished so that the larger goals of the campus can be achieved. We will call this coordinated distribution in which people work separately to accomplish a leadership task that is arranged sequentially. For example, the steps taken to know that students are learning.

   a. What is an example of a coordinated leadership structure within your building?

   b. What system or organizational structures are in place to communicate the execution and accomplishment of the tasks to your principal?

   c. Are there specific protocols that you utilize as a communication tool for this work?

8. Concluding Question: Is there anything else you would like to add? To whom should we talk, to find out more information about the leadership structure within the building?
Thank You for participating in this interview focused on distributed leadership from the principal’s role. Remember that your name will remain confidential/protected. In the future, you may also be given another opportunity to share your thoughts on this topic.