

Distributed Leadership and Teacher Performance in Under-Resourced Elementary Schools: Evidence from Eastern Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Distributed leadership is widely recognized for enhancing instructional quality; however, most studies focus on urban and well-resourced schools, leaving limited understanding of how it functions in resource-constrained environments. This study examines the influence of distributed leadership on teacher performance and explores how leadership distribution emerges in an under-resourced public elementary school in Eastern Indonesia. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 19 teachers using a Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed through simple linear regression. Results show that distributed leadership has a significant positive effect on teacher performance ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 52% of the variance. The qualitative phase involved interviews, observations, and document analysis with the principal and five purposively selected teachers. Thematic analysis identified three mechanisms enabling leadership distribution: collaborative decision-making, delegated authority, and collective responsibility for instructional outcomes. The findings reveal that distributed leadership operates as a capacity-building mechanism, allowing schools with limited resources to strengthen teacher professionalism and shared accountability. This study extends distributed leadership theory to developing-country contexts and offers implications for leadership development and the implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar reform.

Keywords: AI-assisted feedback, educational leadership, local wisdom, student motivation, self-regulated learning, tertiary education.

INTRODUCTION

Recent developments in educational leadership research have underscored a paradigm shift from hierarchical, individual-centered models of leadership toward more collective and relational conceptions. Within this evolving discourse, distributed leadership (DL) has emerged as a key theoretical framework that conceptualizes leadership as a socially constructed process dispersed across individuals, roles, and organizational structures rather than vested in a single authority figure (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2014). This paradigm emphasizes collaboration, shared decision-making, and relational trust as mechanisms that enable schools to mobilize professional expertise collectively toward instructional improvement and organizational learning.

Despite its theoretical appeal and growing empirical support, the majority of DL research has been conducted in Western, urban, and well-resourced educational contexts, where institutional capacities, teacher professionalism, and governance structures are relatively strong (Leithwood et al., 2020; Tian et al., 2016). As a result, there remains a substantial contextual and epistemological gap regarding how distributed leadership is enacted, sustained, and experienced in resource-constrained environments settings often characterized by limited material resources, high workload pressures, and fragile professional cultures (Bush & Ng, 2019). These contextual specificities may significantly mediate how leadership distribution operates and influences teacher performance, thereby necessitating empirical inquiry grounded in developing-country realities.

In the Indonesian context, the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) reform agenda, introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, seeks to decentralize decision-making and promote teacher autonomy, innovation, and professional agency. The reform's underlying philosophy resonates strongly with the principles of distributed leadership, particularly in its emphasis on collaborative school governance and contextual adaptability. However, empirical understanding of how these principles translate into practice in under-resourced schools, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, remains limited. Many schools in this region face persistent challenges related to leadership capacity, inadequate professional development, and infrastructural inequity, which may hinder the effective implementation of collaborative leadership practices.

Addressing this research gap, the present study investigates the influence of distributed leadership on teacher performance and unpacks the mechanisms through which leadership distribution unfolds within a resource-limited elementary school context in Eastern Indonesia. By employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, this study not only quantifies the relationship between distributed leadership and teacher performance but also qualitatively explores the lived experiences of school leaders and teachers. In doing so, it seeks to advance theoretical understanding of DL in non-Western, developing contexts and contribute practical insights for the ongoing implementation of Indonesia's *Merdeka Belajar* reform.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Foundations of Distributed Leadership

The concept of distributed leadership (DL) represents a departure from traditional notions of leadership as the domain of a singular, formally appointed leader. Instead, it views leadership as a collective social process emerging through the interactions among multiple individuals within an organization (Spillane, 2006). This perspective aligns with sociocultural and distributed cognition theories, which posit that knowledge, decision-making, and problem-solving are co-constructed within social systems rather than located solely in individual actors (Gronn, 2002).

Spillane's (2006) framework conceptualizes leadership as comprising three interrelated elements: leaders, followers, and situations, each dynamically influencing leadership practice. Leadership is thus enacted through distributed activity rather than assigned position, and its effectiveness depends on the interdependence among these elements. Harris (2014) further emphasizes that distributed leadership functions as both a normative ideal and a descriptive reality as aspirational model that promotes empowerment and collaboration, and an empirical pattern observable in effective schools.

Distributed Leadership and School Improvement

Empirical studies consistently indicate that distributed leadership contributes positively to school effectiveness and teacher development. Leithwood et al. (2020) found that when leadership is distributed among teachers and middle leaders, schools exhibit greater adaptability, improved instructional practices, and stronger organizational learning cultures. DL enables collective efficacy, in which teachers perceive themselves as co-responsible for student success, thereby enhancing motivation and engagement (Tian et al., 2016).

Moreover, distributed leadership has been shown to enhance teacher professionalism by promoting autonomy, reflective practice, and peer mentoring (Harris & Spillane, 2008). When teachers participate in decision-making processes, they internalize a sense of ownership over school goals, leading to improved performance and commitment (Ng, 2019). However, scholars caution that leadership distribution does not automatically guarantee positive outcomes; it must be intentionally structured and culturally supported to avoid superficial delegation or overburdening teachers (Bolden, 2011).

Distributed Leadership in Resource-Constrained and Developing Contexts

While much of the distributed leadership literature originates from Western contexts, its application in resource-constrained educational systems remains underexplored. Schools in developing countries often operate under structural limitations scarce material resources, insufficient professional training, and hierarchical

bureaucratic systems (Bush & Ng, 2019). In such contexts, leadership tends to be centralized, and initiatives for distributed practice may face resistance due to cultural norms that emphasize authority, seniority, and compliance (Hallinger & Hammad, 2019).

Nevertheless, emerging evidence suggests that distributed leadership can serve as a capacity-building strategy in such environments. For instance, Arar and Nasra (2020) found that in low-resource schools, leadership distribution fosters resilience and innovation by leveraging local expertise and community participation. Similarly, Dimmock and Walker (2019) argue that shared leadership structures enhance sustainability in schools where formal leadership roles are limited or unstable. Thus, DL can be viewed as an adaptive mechanism a way to maximize limited human capital through collaboration and shared accountability.

Distributed Leadership within the Indonesian Educational Landscape

In Indonesia, leadership practices are evolving in response to national education reforms, particularly the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) policy, which emphasizes autonomy, decentralization, and teacher empowerment. The reform aims to position schools as learning organizations capable of contextual adaptation rather than passive implementers of central directives. This aligns conceptually with DL, as both frameworks advocate for bottom-up innovation, professional collaboration, and contextual responsiveness.

However, the implementation of distributed leadership in Indonesia faces notable challenges. Studies (e.g., Suyatno et al., 2021) indicate that leadership practices remain predominantly hierarchical, with principals functioning as administrative managers rather than instructional leaders. In rural and under-resourced regions such as Eastern Indonesia, principals often lack formal leadership training and operate under limited supervision and resources. Consequently, opportunities for shared leadership and teacher participation are constrained by systemic, cultural, and logistical barriers.

Despite these constraints, there is growing recognition that distributed leadership could enhance the effectiveness of the *Merdeka Belajar* reform by fostering professional collaboration and reducing dependency on top-down control. When teachers are empowered to lead initiatives such as curriculum design, peer mentoring, or community engagement they not only improve their professional competencies but also contribute to sustainable school improvement (Mbuik, 2025).

Research Gap and Theoretical Contribution

The foregoing discussion highlights a persistent knowledge gap in the distributed leadership literature particularly concerning how DL operates within developing, under-resourced, and culturally diverse school systems. Existing frameworks have yet to fully capture the adaptive and contextually contingent nature of leadership distribution in such environments.

This study contributes to the global DL discourse by empirically examining both the quantitative impact of distributed leadership on teacher performance and the qualitative mechanisms through which it unfolds in a resource-limited Indonesian context. Theoretically, it extends distributed leadership theory by situating it within the sociocultural realities of developing countries, offering a contextualized understanding of how DL can function as a capacity-building and resilience-enhancing strategy under conditions of scarcity.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating quantitative and qualitative phases in two consecutive stages. The quantitative phase aimed to test the hypothesized relationship between distributed leadership (DL) and teacher performance, while the qualitative phase sought to explain and elaborate on the statistical results through contextualized narratives and lived experiences.

The rationale for adopting a mixed-methods approach lies in its complementary strengths: quantitative data provide generalizable evidence of association, whereas qualitative inquiry illuminates the mechanisms and meanings underpinning those relationships (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This design was particularly appropriate given the exploratory nature of distributed leadership in under-researched, resource-limited school contexts, where numerical patterns alone may fail to capture the social dynamics and cultural nuances of leadership distribution.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a **public elementary school located in Eastern Indonesia**, a region that typifies educational inequality and infrastructural scarcity relative to western parts of the country. The selected school

represents a low-resource setting, characterized by limited facilities, high teacher-to-student ratios, and minimal access to professional development opportunities.

For the quantitative phase, the participants included 19 teachers who completed a Likert-scale questionnaire on distributed leadership and teacher performance. This sample size, though modest, was adequate for regression analysis within small population parameters, as it encompassed the entire teaching staff of the school (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012).

In the qualitative phase, data were collected from the principal and five purposively selected teachers representing varied roles (e.g., senior teacher, subject coordinator, and classroom teacher). Purposive sampling allowed for information-rich cases that reflected different levels of leadership engagement and responsibility (Patton, 2015).

Instruments and Data Collection

Quantitative Instruments

The Distributed Leadership Scale (DLS) was adapted from prior studies (Hulpia et al., 2009; Tian et al., 2016) and contextualized for the Indonesian school environment. The instrument measured three domains:

1. Collaborative decision-making (e.g., involvement in policy and curriculum decisions)
2. Delegated authority (e.g., teacher autonomy in instructional matters)
3. Collective responsibility (e.g., shared accountability for student outcomes)

Teacher performance was assessed using an adapted Teacher Performance Index (TPI) based on the Ministry of Education's competency standards, covering planning, instruction, classroom management, and professional engagement. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Qualitative Instruments

The qualitative phase employed semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to deepen understanding of leadership distribution processes. The interview guide explored participants' perceptions of leadership collaboration, trust, and professional learning. Observations focused on staff meetings, peer mentoring, and daily instructional interactions. Relevant documents such as lesson plans, meeting minutes, and school reports were reviewed to triangulate findings.

Data were collected over a six-week period in the 2024–2025 academic year, ensuring sufficient time for engagement and contextual immersion. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, then transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using simple linear regression with the aid of SPSS Version 25. Prior to analysis, assumptions of linearity, normality, and homoscedasticity were tested and satisfied. The regression model examined the predictive relationship between distributed leadership (independent variable) and teacher performance (dependent variable). Statistical significance was determined at the 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$).

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process followed six iterative stages:

4. Familiarization with data through repeated reading
5. Generation of initial codes
6. Identification of themes
7. Reviewing and refining themes
8. Defining and naming themes
9. Producing a coherent narrative linking findings to theory

Coding was performed inductively, yet guided by the theoretical lens of distributed leadership. To ensure trustworthiness, data triangulation was achieved by comparing interview, observation, and document sources. Member checking was conducted with participants to validate interpretations, while peer debriefing with two academic colleagues enhanced analytic rigor.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Citra Bangsa. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Written informed consent was obtained, and pseudonyms were used to protect participant identity. Data were stored securely and used exclusively for research purposes.

Given the small and close-knit context of the research site, particular attention was paid to maintaining confidentiality and relational ethics balancing the dual roles of researcher and educator within the same professional community (Tracy, 2010).

Methodological Rigor

To strengthen the credibility and reliability of findings, this study employed methodological triangulation, data saturation, and contextual reflexivity. Integration between the quantitative and qualitative phases occurred during the interpretation stage, allowing the qualitative results to explain the quantitative trends in depth. This meta-inference process provided a comprehensive understanding of how distributed leadership operates and affects teacher performance within a real-world, under-resourced Indonesian school setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Result

The quantitative findings were obtained from the results of questionnaires distributed to teachers at *SD Impres Sikumana 3*. Descriptive statistical analysis indicated that the average score of distributive leadership was 4.25 (SD = 0.45) on a five-point Likert scale, showing that the implementation of distributive leadership practices is categorized as high. Meanwhile, teacher performance obtained an average score of 4.10 (SD = 0.50), which is also categorized as high.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Category
Distributive Leadership	4.25	0.45	High
Teacher Performance	4.10	0.50	High

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence of distributive leadership on teacher performance. The analysis showed that distributive leadership had a significant positive effect on teacher performance with a regression coefficient (B) = 0.65, $t = 4.21$, and $p = 0.001$. The R^2 value = 0.52 indicates that distributive leadership explains 52% of the variance in teacher performance.

Table 2. Simple Linear Regression Analysis

Predictor Variable	B	t	Sig. (p)	R ²	Interpretation
Distributive Leadership	0.65	4.21	0.001	0.52	Significant Positive Effect

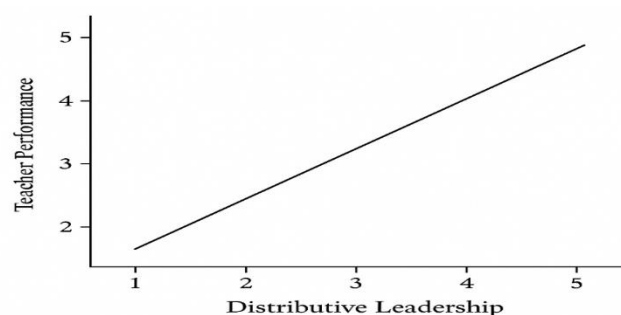


Figure 1: Relationship between Distributive Leadership and Teacher Performance

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These statistical results confirm the research hypothesis that distributive leadership positively influences teacher performance. This finding supports previous studies by Leithwood & Sun (2020) and Alhusseini (2022), who found that distributed forms of leadership improve teacher outcomes, professional collaboration, and overall school effectiveness.

Qualitative Results

The qualitative data were derived from interviews, field observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis produced three main themes that explain how distributive leadership practices manifest within the school environment.

Table 3. Themes of Qualitative Findings

Theme	Description	Supporting Evidence
1. Teacher Participation in Decision-Making	Teachers were actively involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating school programs, creating a culture of shared responsibility.	Interview data and meeting documentation show that teachers regularly contribute ideas to curriculum design and school activities.
2. Empowerment and Collective Responsibility	The principal delegated leadership roles through structured task distribution, allowing teachers to manage projects independently and collaboratively.	Observation notes indicate rotational leadership in committees and task-based groups.
3. Professionalism and Work Motivation	Teachers demonstrated improved performance, creativity, and discipline through innovative teaching practices and peer collaboration.	Lesson plans and classroom observations revealed increased initiative and professionalism.



Figure 2: Themes of Distributive Leadership Implementation

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Supporting data from school documents and observational records confirmed a systematic distribution of leadership responsibilities and collaborative decision-making among staff members. This aligns with the findings of Hulpia et al. (2020) and Yunita et al. (2021), who emphasize that distributive leadership strengthens teacher engagement, empowerment, and professional growth within school communities.

SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED FINDINGS

Both quantitative and qualitative data converge to show that distributive leadership has a substantial positive impact on teacher performance. Statistically, leadership practices account for more than half of the performance variance, while qualitatively, the themes of participation, empowerment, and professionalism provide contextual depth to the relationship.

The integrated analysis concludes that effective distributive leadership not only enhances performance outcomes but also cultivates a collaborative and motivated school culture, thereby supporting the achievement of institutional goals and sustainable school improvement.

DISCUSSION

This study provides evidence that distributive leadership plays a significant role in enhancing teacher performance in elementary school settings. The findings directly address the research objectives stated in the introduction, namely to examine the implementation of distributive leadership, assess teacher performance, and analyze the relationship between the two variables. The evidence shows that when principals actively share leadership responsibilities, teachers respond with higher levels of collaboration, accountability, and professionalism.

The significance of these findings lies in the shift from hierarchical to participatory leadership patterns in Indonesian schools. By fostering shared decision-making and empowering teachers, distributive leadership creates a professional culture that not only motivates teachers but also strengthens organizational capacity. This

interpretation highlights why the observed improvements in teacher performance are more than just statistical relationships they reflect meaningful changes in the way schools are managed.

The results are broadly consistent with international research, which has reported that distributed forms of leadership contribute to teacher engagement, resilience, and improved school outcomes. However, the present study also points to contextual differences. Unlike studies conducted in urban or resource-rich schools, the findings from SD Inpres Sikumana 3 demonstrate that distributive leadership can still be effective in contexts with limited resources and strong hierarchical traditions. This indicates that distributive leadership is adaptable and may serve as a viable model for schools across diverse settings.

Overall, the study suggests that distributive leadership should be regarded not only as an administrative strategy but also as a pedagogical approach that enhances the professional capacity of teachers. By interpreting the results in this way, the study underscores the practical and theoretical importance of adopting distributive leadership to improve teacher performance and align with national education reforms.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that distributive leadership implemented by the principal has a significant influence on teacher performance at SD Inpres Sikumana 3. Quantitative findings indicated that distributive leadership accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in teacher performance, while qualitative results revealed concrete practices of collaboration, empowerment, and professional strengthening. These findings are consistent with the research objectives, namely to describe the implementation of distributive leadership, measure teacher performance, and analyze their relationship.

The conclusion also reinforces the theoretical perspective that distributive leadership is a collective practice relying on dynamic interactions between principals, teachers, and organizational contexts. In this regard, the study affirms the strategic role of principals not only as administrators but also as facilitators of teacher participation, thereby fostering a collaborative school culture that supports effective teaching and learning.

The research contributes empirical evidence from an underexplored context public elementary schools in eastern Indonesia thus enriching the international literature with a unique local perspective. Methodologically, the use of a sequential explanatory mixed methods design provided deeper insights than studies relying solely on quantitative data.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges certain limitations, including the relatively small sample size, the single-school focus, and the restricted number of qualitative informants. These factors may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future studies are therefore recommended to involve larger samples, apply multilevel analysis, and examine potential mediating or moderating variables such as teacher motivation or policy support.

In conclusion, distributive leadership emerges as both a managerial strategy and a pedagogical tool to enhance teacher performance in elementary schools. Its application not only supports the objectives of the Merdeka Belajar policy but also provides practical guidance for principals, policymakers, and researchers in advancing collaborative and sustainable education practices.

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Declarations

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