



# ROLE OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN CREATING SUSTAINABLE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A CASE STUDY OF HIGH-PERFORMING URBAN SCHOOLS

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## ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study is to examine how distributed leadership practices contribute to the creation and sustainability of effective professional learning communities (PLCs) in high-performing urban schools. I am employed a qualitative case study design to examine the complex relationship between distributed leadership and professional learning communities (PLCs) in high-performing urban schools. The participants in this study were the 1 Principal, 1 Asst. Principal, 1 Master Teacher in 3 different high-performing urban schools in Tagum City that have demonstrated successful implementation of distributed leadership practices and the development of effective professional learning communities (PLCs). The findings from the case studies offer valuable insights into the implementation and impact of distributed leadership in school settings. These insights highlight the multifaceted nature of leadership, emphasizing the importance of capacity-building, trust, collaboration, and shared vision among educators. The following implications provide guidance for school leaders, teachers, and policymakers aiming to foster effective professional learning communities and sustainable leadership practices. They underscore how intentional strategies can cultivate empowered and collaborative teaching communities that ultimately contribute to improved teaching and learning outcomes.

**KEYWORDS**- Role of Distributed Leadership, Creating Sustainable Professional Learning Communities, Case Study, High-Performing Urban Schools

## INTRODUCTION

The persistent challenge of creating sustainable school improvement has led educators and researchers to explore innovative leadership approaches that can foster meaningful professional collaboration and continuous learning. Among these approaches, distributed leadership has emerged as a promising framework that moves beyond the traditional hierarchical model of school administration to embrace collective expertise and shared responsibility. This study will examine how distributed leadership practices contribute to the development and sustainability of professional learning communities (PLCs) in high-performing urban schools, where the complexities of urban education demand particularly robust and adaptive organizational structures.

Through an in-depth case study of successful urban schools, this research investigates the specific mechanisms by which distributed leadership facilitates the growth of effective PLCs and supports sustained academic achievement. By focusing on high-performing urban institutions, the study aims to identify the key leadership practices, organizational conditions, and cultural elements that enable these schools to overcome typical urban challenges and maintain vibrant professional learning communities. The findings will provide valuable insights for school leaders and policymakers seeking to implement distributed leadership models and strengthen professional collaboration in diverse urban contexts.

In Singapore, Lee & Ling (2020) conducted a comprehensive study of distributed leadership in 8 high-performing urban schools. Their findings revealed that principals who effectively distributed leadership roles created more resilient PLCs, with teacher leaders taking ownership of professional development initiatives and curriculum innovations. The sustainability of these PLCs was attributed to the strong collaborative culture developed through shared decision-making. Teachers were empowered to contribute to decisions about teaching practices and school improvement strategies, which strengthened their commitment to continuous learning and professional growth. Furthermore, the distributed leadership model enabled schools to adapt more flexibly to changing educational needs and external challenges, ensuring that the schools remained high-performing over time.

Moreover, a study in Australia by Wilson et al. (2019) explored how distributed leadership contributed to the effectiveness of professional learning communities (PLCs) in urban schools with diverse student populations. The research found that schools with well-established distributed leadership structures were more adept at sustaining continuous professional learning and adapting to changes. This ability was especially important in addressing the needs of multicultural student populations, where diverse cultural backgrounds and varying learning needs required flexible and responsive teaching practices. The study highlighted that in schools with distributed leadership, teachers were empowered to take on leadership roles in guiding curriculum design, instructional strategies, and student support services. This collaborative approach allowed teachers to share insights, expertise, and best practices, fostering a deeper understanding of how to support students from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a result, these schools were better equipped to innovate and implement strategies that catered to the unique challenges of a multicultural classroom. The research concluded that distributed leadership not only strengthened PLCs but also played a critical role in fostering an inclusive learning environment where teachers could work together to meet the diverse needs of their students.



Also, Harris & DeFlaminis (2019) examined how distributed leadership practices in urban schools across England fostered sustainable professional learning communities (PLCs). The study found that this collaborative approach to leadership not only empowered teachers but also created a culture of collective responsibility for student success. When leadership roles were distributed, teachers felt more ownership over the professional development process, leading to more tailored and effective learning experiences. Furthermore, this model helped ensure that improvement initiatives could be sustained even during leadership transitions, as leadership capacity was embedded at multiple levels within the school. The research emphasized that distributed leadership fostered an environment where teachers could work together, share expertise, and support one another, ultimately leading to improved teaching practices and better student outcomes. Through encouraging a shared vision and mutual accountability, distributed leadership helped urban schools build resilience and long-term success, particularly in the face of changing leadership or external challenges.

In the Metro Manila, Pascual (2019) analyzed distributed leadership practices in 15 high-performing urban schools. The study highlighted how Philippine school leaders who embraced distributed leadership created more sustainable professional development programs by empowering department heads and master teachers to lead subject-specific learning communities. The study found that this distribution of leadership responsibilities not only increased the capacity of school leaders but also fostered a sense of ownership among teachers, as they were directly involved in shaping their professional growth and the direction of their subject areas. This approach led to stronger collaboration, improved teaching practices, and more effective curriculum innovations. The research concluded that distributed leadership in Philippine schools was a key factor in ensuring the continuity and success of professional development programs, ultimately contributing to enhanced student outcomes and a more resilient school culture.

Meanwhile, Dela Cruz & Santos (2021) examined the implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) in urban schools across Quezon City, focusing on the role of distributed leadership in fostering teacher collaboration and professional growth. Their research revealed that schools with distributed leadership models were more successful in sustaining collaborative efforts among teachers, especially in the context of implementing the K-12 curriculum reforms. The study highlighted how shared leadership responsibilities allowed for greater involvement of teachers in decision-making processes, empowering them to take ownership of their professional development and curriculum implementation.

The Department of Education's (2019) national study on school leadership practices documented how distributed leadership in urban schools led to more effective teacher professional development and improved student achievement. The study specifically highlighted successful cases from high-performing schools in Cebu City and Davao City.

Another case study of three high-performing urban schools in Davao City, focusing on how distributed leadership practices contributed to the creation and sustainability of professional learning communities (PLCs). Despite challenges such as limited resources and high teacher turnover, their research revealed that distributed leadership played a crucial role in maintaining effective PLCs. The study emphasized the significant role of teacher leaders in driving professional development initiatives, ensuring that these programs continued even during periods of transition or resource constraints. Through distributing leadership responsibilities among teachers and school leaders, these schools were able to foster a collaborative culture, where teachers supported one another, shared expertise, and worked together to overcome challenges. The research found that the teacher leaders, in particular, were instrumental in maintaining momentum for professional learning, as they facilitated communication, guided peer learning, and created opportunities for collaboration. This approach not only helped sustain PLCs but also strengthened the overall school culture, enabling schools in Davao City to adapt to changing circumstances while continuously improving teaching practices and student outcomes, (Abejo and Lopez, 2022).

One of the key challenges in implementing distributed leadership to sustain professional learning communities (PLCs) in high-performing urban schools in Tagum City is the uneven distribution of leadership roles. In some cases, leadership responsibilities are concentrated among a few individuals, limiting opportunities for collaborative decision-making and shared accountability. Another issue is the resistance to change among some educators. While PLCs thrive on continuous professional development and collaboration, not all teachers are open to shifting from traditional teaching practices to a more team-based, reflective approach. This reluctance can hinder the effectiveness of PLC initiatives.

Time constraints also pose a significant problem. With teachers already balancing heavy workloads, finding dedicated time for PLC meetings, discussions, and professional development activities becomes a challenge. Without proper time allocation, sustaining PLCs becomes difficult. There is also a lack of consistent support from school administrators. While some leaders actively promote shared leadership, others struggle to provide the necessary resources, training, and encouragement to sustain PLCs over the long term.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In a comprehensive study of urban schools in Toronto, Canada Chen & Williams (2020) found that cultural diversity among staff created communication barriers in distributed leadership implementation. The study revealed challenges in building trust across different cultural groups and ensuring equitable participation in leadership responsibilities, particularly in schools with high immigrant teacher populations. Furthermore, the study highlighted how these barriers exacerbated feelings of exclusion among some staff members, reducing their willingness to actively engage in leadership roles. Despite these challenges, the study also pointed to the potential for distributed leadership to foster greater inclusivity and empowerment if cultural sensitivity and targeted professional development programs were integrated.



Research in urban schools in Singapore documented challenges related to accountability within distributed leadership structures. Their findings revealed that while leadership responsibilities were distributed among teachers, principals still maintained ultimate accountability, which created tension between empowerment and control. This centralization of final responsibility led to confusion and hesitancy among teachers when it came to assuming leadership roles, as they feared being blamed for failures without possessing the formal authority to make decisions. As a result, teachers often refrained from fully engaging in leadership tasks, limiting the potential of distributed leadership to foster a more collaborative and shared decision-making culture, (Tan and Lee, 2021).

Also, a study by Thompson and Harris (2019) in urban schools across London identified several key challenges in implementing distributed leadership, including resistance from middle managers who felt threatened by the redistribution of power, lack of clear role definitions, and time constraints that hindered collaborative decision-making. Their research highlighted how traditional hierarchical mindsets often conflicted with the principles of distributed leadership. Middle managers, who were accustomed to a more centralized model of authority, viewed the shift in power as a threat to their status and control, leading to resistance in adopting more collaborative leadership practices. Time constraints, exacerbated by the already demanding nature of teaching, further impeded meaningful collaboration, as teachers and leaders struggled to find time for joint planning and discussions.

The research by Mercado (2021) in Quezon City public schools revealed that bureaucratic structures within the Philippine education system often hindered the effective implementation of distributed leadership. The study highlighted how centralized decision-making processes conflicted with efforts to distribute leadership at the local level. Mercado's findings showed that the top-down nature of decision-making in many schools created a barrier to sharing leadership responsibilities, as school leaders and teachers were constrained by rigid policies and procedures. This centralization stifled collaboration and autonomy among educators, making it difficult to implement a more inclusive and distributed approach to leadership. The research emphasized the need for a shift toward more flexible, decentralized decision-making structures that would allow for greater teacher involvement in leadership roles, fostering a culture of shared responsibility and collective decision-making. Mercado suggested that overcoming these bureaucratic challenges would require both policy reforms and a change in the mindset of educational leaders to support and encourage distributed leadership practices.

Meanwhile, Cruz and Bautista (2019) studied urban schools in Cebu, finding that high teacher turnover rates significantly challenged sustainable distributed leadership implementation. Their research showed how constant staff changes disrupted leadership continuity and institutional memory.

Additionally, urban schools in Metro Manila has insufficient resources, such as time and funding, posed significant barriers to implementing leadership initiatives that required collaboration and continuous professional development. Resistance from veteran teachers, who were accustomed to hierarchical structures and top-down leadership models, further complicated the adoption of distributed leadership. The study emphasized the need for more structured professional development programs, better resource allocation, and strategies to address the concerns of experienced teachers in order to foster a more inclusive and effective distributed leadership environment in urban schools, (Santos and Reyes, 2020).

Locally, Rodriguez & Martinez (2022) conducted a case study in urban schools in Davao City, revealing unique challenges in implementing distributed leadership. Their study highlighted cultural sensitivity as a significant issue, as leadership distribution among diverse ethnic groups required a nuanced approach to ensure inclusivity and respect for local traditions and practices. Additionally, the research identified limited technology infrastructure as a barrier to supporting collaborative leadership, with many schools lacking the digital tools necessary to facilitate effective communication and coordination among leaders. Security concerns in certain areas of Davao City also had a direct impact on leadership initiatives, as the instability in some neighborhoods made it difficult to implement consistent and sustainable leadership practices. The study emphasized the need for context-specific strategies that address these challenges, including culturally appropriate leadership models, investment in technology infrastructure, and the consideration of local security conditions to create a more conducive environment for distributed leadership in urban schools.

### Research Questions

This study will contribute to the growing body of literature on educational leadership, offering actionable insights for school administrators, teachers, and policymakers working to enhance urban education. Through evidence-based findings, it aims to guide the development of collaborative professional structures that foster sustainable and impactful learning communities, addressing the unique challenges and opportunities presented in high-performing urban schools. Specifically, this study will answer the following questions:

1. What are the key challenges faced by school leaders in implementing distributed leadership to foster sustainable professional learning communities in high-performing urban schools?
2. What strategies have school leaders and teachers adopted to overcome obstacles in promoting collaboration and shared decision-making within professional learning communities?
3. What are the educational insights gained by the school leaders in implementing distributed leadership to foster sustainable professional learning communities in high-performing urban schools?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

I employed a qualitative case study design to examine the complex relationship between distributed leadership and professional learning communities (PLCs) in high-performing urban schools. I believe that a case study methodology is particularly appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of real-world phenomena within their



natural context. This approach enables me to investigate complex relationships and processes that occur in educational settings, providing rich, detailed descriptions of leadership practices and the functioning of PLCs. Additionally, I recognize that case studies support the examination of multiple perspectives from various stakeholders, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how distributed leadership influences professional learning environments. By focusing on multiple cases, I aim to identify patterns and trends across different school contexts, enhancing the applicability of the findings.

For case selection, This study focused on 3-4 high-performing urban schools that have demonstrated successful implementation of distributed leadership practices and the development of effective and sustainable PLCs. These schools will also be characterized by consistent academic achievement over multiple years, ensuring that the impact of leadership practices on student outcomes is evident. I will select schools that share similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, ensuring a contextual alignment that allows for meaningful comparison. Additionally, I will prioritize schools that have received recognition for their exemplary practices in school improvement, further validating their inclusion in the study as models of effective leadership and collaboration.

### Research Participants

The participants in this study were 1 Principal, 1 Asst. Principal, 1 Master Teacher in 3 different high-performing urban schools in Tagum City that have demonstrated successful implementation of distributed leadership practices and the development of effective professional learning communities (PLCs). These participants will provide valuable insights into the relationship between distributed leadership and the sustainability of PLCs. The selection of participants will be guided by specific criteria to ensure that the data collected is relevant and comprehensive.

### Research Instrument

The researcher-made interview guide is designed to gather comprehensive data by exploring the perspectives of key stakeholders on the role of distributed leadership in creating and sustaining professional learning communities (PLCs) in high-performing urban schools. To ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument, several measures will be implemented.

The content relevance of the interview questions will be reviewed by experts in the field of educational leadership to ensure that the questions align with the study's objectives and cover all necessary aspects of distributed leadership and PLCs. Question clarity will also be assessed to avoid ambiguity, ensuring that the questions are easily understood by participants and lead to rich, meaningful responses.

### Data Analysis

The study will employ a systematic and rigorous approach to data analysis, ensuring that the findings are valid, reliable, and reflective of the participants' experiences. The following strategies will be implemented to analyze the qualitative data collected from interviews, observations, and document analysis:

**Thematic Coding:** The first step in data analysis will involve thematic coding of interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and field notes. The data will be reviewed to identify recurring themes and patterns related to distributed leadership practices, teacher collaboration, and the functioning of PLCs. Thematic coding allows for the organization of data into meaningful categories, making it easier to interpret and draw connections between key concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the key implications drawn from the findings of the study and explores their significance for educational practice, policy, and leadership. By interpreting the results in the context of existing literature and the unique setting of the study, this section aims to provide actionable insights that can guide stakeholders in fostering more effective teaching environments and collaborative school cultures. Furthermore, this chapter identifies areas for future research, highlighting gaps and emerging questions that can deepen our understanding of distributed leadership, professional learning communities, and teacher empowerment in diverse educational contexts.

### Implications

The findings from the case studies offer valuable insights into the implementation and impact of distributed leadership in school settings. These insights highlight the multifaceted nature of leadership, emphasizing the importance of capacity-building, trust, collaboration, and shared vision among educators. The following implications provide guidance for school leaders, teachers, and policymakers aiming to foster effective professional learning communities and sustainable leadership practices. They underscore how intentional strategies can cultivate empowered and collaborative teaching communities that ultimately contribute to improved teaching and learning outcomes.

Distributed leadership flourishes when teachers see themselves as active contributors to school improvement. Encouraging shared ownership of goals and decision-making strengthens collaboration and builds a cohesive professional community. School leaders should prioritize ongoing professional development that equips teachers with both leadership and instructional skills, as building teacher capacity is essential for effective distributed leadership models and improved student outcomes. Furthermore, establishing teacher leadership teams and shared decision-making bodies creates formal avenues for teacher involvement.

Recognizing and empowering teachers in varied leadership roles, such as mentors or instructional coaches, further distributes responsibility. Cultivating a collaborative culture through dedicated collaboration time, open communication, and celebrating teacher leadership also reinforces this model. Providing diverse professional development opportunities and supporting teacher-



led learning empowers educators. Ultimately, fostering a culture that encourages risk-taking, reflection, and continuous learning helps shift teacher mindsets toward embracing change and innovation, a mindset that school leaders must model and nurture to sustain professional growth and cultivate true distributed leadership.

Building upon the assistant principal's perspective, fostering authentic collaboration through regular, well-facilitated forums where teachers feel safe to share ideas and concerns is indeed vital. To further enhance this, consider incorporating structured protocols that ensure equitable participation and prevent the dominance of a few voices, thereby promoting a stronger sense of belonging and ownership among all teachers. Implementing clear frameworks for how input is gathered, considered, and acted upon can also increase transparency and build trust in the decision-making process.

Furthermore, intentionally integrating trust-building activities, perhaps through collaborative projects or shared professional learning experiences, can strengthen interpersonal relationships and create a more cohesive environment. By actively cultivating trust and establishing these inclusive structures, leaders can truly empower teachers as co-leaders, fostering a more dynamic and effective distributed leadership model within schools.

From a master teacher's viewpoint, the emphasis on change management strategies, such as mentoring and the gradual introduction of new collaborative practices, is key for a smooth transition to distributed leadership. Expanding on this, providing dedicated time and resources for mentorship programs can significantly enhance their impact, fostering a stronger culture of collective leadership and accelerating the professional growth of emerging leaders.

Furthermore, to truly empower teachers in decision-making and leverage their expertise, establishing clear pathways for their input to influence school policies and instructional strategies is crucial. This could involve teacher representation on key committees or regular feedback loops that demonstrate the value of their contributions. Beyond developing a shared vision, consistently revisiting and actively engaging the school community in its evolution ensures that it remains a living document that unites members, maintains focus, and sustains the motivation necessary for thriving collaborative efforts and distributed leadership.

These implications drawn from the case studies are deeply grounded in both Distributed Leadership Theory and Social Learning Theory, providing a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the dynamics of leadership and professional learning communities in schools.

Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, 2006; Gronn, 2002) underscores the collaborative nature of leadership where responsibilities are shared across multiple individuals rather than vested in a single leader. This theory aligns closely with the implications emphasizing capacity-building, mindset shifts, and shared responsibility among teachers and school leaders. It explains how leadership is enacted through interactions and collective activities within professional learning communities (PLCs), highlighting the importance of developing leadership skills at all levels and fostering a culture of trust and collaboration. The implications point to the necessity of nurturing these distributed roles and collective leadership practices to enhance school progress and teacher empowerment.

Meanwhile, Social Learning Theory (Wenger, 1998), particularly the concept of Communities of Practice, provides a complementary lens by emphasizing that learning is inherently social and occurs through participation in shared practices within a community. This theory relates to the implications that focus on creating safe, structured dialogue, inclusive participation, and mentorship, which foster an environment where teachers co-construct knowledge and grow professionally together. It highlights the importance of trust, shared vision, and continuous interaction, which are critical in sustaining vibrant and productive PLCs as noted in the findings.

### Future Directions

Building on the implications drawn from this study, several future directions emerge that can further enhance the implementation and sustainability of distributed leadership and professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools. These directions offer practical guidance for the Department of Education, school leaders, teacher leaders, and researchers alike, aiming to foster stronger collaboration, leadership development, and continuous professional growth. By addressing current challenges and leveraging opportunities for improvement, these future initiatives can contribute significantly to the advancement of effective teaching and learning environments.

Department of Education (DepEd). This include strengthening policies and frameworks that formally support distributed leadership and collaborative professional learning communities (PLCs) across schools. DepEd should invest in capacity-building programs focused on leadership development not only for school heads but also for assistant principals and teacher leaders, while promoting a culture of continuous professional learning by providing resources and platforms for schools to share best practices and foster mentorship networks.

School heads. It is important to prioritize creating a shared vision and fostering a growth-oriented culture within their schools by encouraging regular, structured collaboration among teachers. They should facilitate leadership development opportunities that empower teachers to take on leadership roles, thereby enhancing collective ownership and responsibility, and implement trust-building initiatives that promote open communication to sustain engagement and strengthen collaborative practices.

Moreover, allocating time and resources for professional learning communities (PLCs), integrating mentorship programs to nurture teacher-leaders, and recognizing teachers' contributions can further deepen the culture of distributed leadership. By



modeling inclusive and transparent leadership, school heads and administrators can inspire a commitment to continuous learning and shared accountability, ultimately leading to a more dynamic, resilient, and high-performing educational environment.

Assistant principals. This is encouraged to develop and maintain safe, inclusive, and structured spaces for dialogue and decision-making that promote active participation from all staff members. They should also navigate challenges such as time constraints or resource limitations to maintain consistent teacher engagement in PLC activities and serve as bridges between school leadership and teachers by fostering trust and shared ownership through distributed leadership.

Master teachers. This should continue championing collaborative lesson planning, mentorship, and reflective practices that empower teachers as co-constructors of knowledge and practice. They play a crucial role in leading initiatives to overcome resistance to change by modeling adaptive leadership and facilitating professional growth opportunities, while promoting a culture of collective leadership within PLCs that emphasizes a shared vision and accountability for continuous school improvement.

Future Researchers. They are encouraged to explore the long-term effects of distributed leadership and PLC practices on teacher development and student outcomes across various contexts, including both rural and urban schools. Further studies should investigate the specific challenges and enablers for sustaining teacher engagement and trust within PLCs over time, as well as examine the role of mentorship and reflective practices in enhancing leadership capacity among different teacher roles and its impact on overall school culture.

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