Article

Distributed Leadership in Irish Post-Primary Schools: Policy versus Practitioner Interpretations

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Abstract: School leaders have faced significant challenges since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Distributed leadership has become the default leadership response implemented by schools to manage increased pressure. While Irish schools have traditionally operated behind a 'closed-door', there has recently been a movement towards a shared model of leadership, and Irish school leadership policy currently endorses the adoption of a distributed leadership model. Increased interest and policy endorsement notwithstanding, distributed leadership remains an elusive concept. The aim of this study was to explore Irish post-primary school personnel's interpretations of distributed leadership and analyse these interpretations through a teacher empowerment lens with respect to Irish school leadership policy. This study reports the results of a thematic analysis of 363 survey responses provided by post-primary school personnel. Short's six dimensions of teacher empowerment were utilised to inform a framework for thematically analysing the participants' interpretations. An initial framework for enacting distributed leadership through an empowerment lens was outlined. Interpretations were found to diverge regarding (i) what is shared, (ii) who it is shared with, and (iii) how it is shared. This paper adds to the corpus of knowledge concerning how distributed leadership is understood in practice and will aid in informing future school leadership policy documents.

Keywords: distributed leadership; post-primary schools; school leadership; school policy; teacher empowerment

1. Introduction

Distributed leadership is an elusive construct [1], with little consensus on its definition evident in the literature [2]. It can be described as a form of leadership that spreads over leaders and followers with due consideration of their situation [3]. It is characterised as an emergent property and a collective practice [4]. In this model, the practice of leadership is the focus rather than the individual 'leader' [3]. This requires the stretching of leadership over an organisation, wherein greater importance is placed on the interplay between actors compared to the sum of individuals' actions [5]. Leadership exists in the shared working space of two or more organisational members [6]. Distributed leadership is not only the most popular current thinking in school leadership but has also had an impact on the way that leadership is conceived, practised, discussed, and shaped in schools [7]. Yet, Bolden [8] argues that the more we learn about leadership, "the more elusive, ambiguous and contested it seems to become" (p. 31).

Distributed leadership has been the dominant leadership theory in education since the turn of the millennium [9]. It has since made its way into educational policy globally [10], and it seems that its perceived value has been strengthened during the COVID-19 crisis [11]. School leaders have faced significant pressure since the beginning of the pandemic, and distributed leadership has become "the default leadership response" required to endure

the current challenges [11] (p. 246). Azorín [12] also suggests that as education is moving towards collaborative pedagogies, models of leadership are also moving towards this shared approach.

Notwithstanding its popularity, distributed leadership is not free from critique, particularly with respect to its relationship with power. From a Foucauldian point of view, power is said to be a fluid concept that is constantly shaping social relations in organisations. Lumby [13] (p. 7) describes this as problematic for distributed leadership and argues that, "a form of leadership that is predicated on the deliberate distribution of power to others is unrealistic". Other researchers have also vocalised their uncertainty about the suitability of distributed practices for organisations such as schools due to the nature of their structures. Hartley [14] (p. 282) echoes these concerns that the 'heterarchy' of distributed leadership does not easily cohabit with the bureaucracy of such organisations, while Crawford [15] concurs that the claim of distributed leadership might suggest the sharing of power and autonomy, "whereas the reality points to centralisation and many different forms of managerialism" [15].

Distributed leadership has been prevalent in educational discourse for quite some time, yet no universal definition has yet been reached, and this has been suggested as being unlikely to transpire [9]. Some variance in the conceptualisation of distributed leadership is unavoidable [16]. However, this variance can present a challenge to the research and practice of distributed leadership as it is sometimes used as a "catch all" term for any form of shared leadership practice implemented in schools [17]. Evans [18] highlights the importance of taking conceptual clarity seriously and suggests that it is a feature often neglected in social science research [19], resulting in methodological issues. Evans [20] (p. 420) states that "within current mainstream educational leadership scholarship there is probably no better example of the need to 'refine concepts and theories', and no better illustration of a theoretical gap that reflects the dangers of epistemic myopia, than the field's treatment of the notion of distributed leadership".

Given Irish educational policy's emphasis on the importance of distributed leadership and the need to further explore its conceptualisation, a greater understanding of how it is interpreted at the coal face is needed. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore Irish post-primary school leaders', teachers', guidance counsellors', and special needs assistants' interpretations of distributed leadership. Symbolic interaction theory and social constructivism underpin this study and were utilised to achieve this aim. The term interpretation was specifically chosen as it involves an explanation of the meaning of a concept that lacks the precision of a definition [18]. This selection was made as Evans [18] argues that participants typically rely on everyday usages of terminology more suited to the term interpretation rather than precise definitions.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

To explain the development of different interpretations of the term, 'distributed leadership,' this study was underpinned by the belief that participants' social interactions serve to mould their interpretations of distributed leadership. Given that the nature of distributed leadership is built upon interactions between individuals, the micro-theory of symbolic interactionism and a macro-theory of constructivism were used to underpin this study. Symbolic interactionism and constructivism are linked, as symbolic interactionism "applies a constructivist approach to meaning" [21] (p. 59) and holds fundamental importance in social interaction [22]. Social constructivism "emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding" [23] (p. 2), both of which are significant with respect to the distributed leadership literature.

The foundation of symbolic interactionism is based on a system of making meanings wherein symbols do not have inherent meaning; rather, such meaning is formed through interactions between people [24]. Symbolic interactionism has been critiqued for failing to consider the social context in which it occurs [24]. However, considering the variety

of interpretations of distributed leadership and the lack of consensus achieved thus far, it was deemed beneficial to explore individuals' interpretations of distributed leadership in the hope of moving towards the establishment of joint meaning. Once a symbol has a similar meaning within a large proportion of society, it is said that symbolic convergence is reached [21], and joint meaning is made.

1.2. Context of Research Study

This study was conducted in Ireland, where distributed leadership is embedded into national policy documents. The 'Looking at our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools' framework and, more recently, the 'Looking at our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools' framework highlighted the importance of distributing significant leadership responsibilities and empowering and encouraging staff to assume leadership roles within a school [25,26]. This is to be achieved through the "effective use of distributed leadership models" [26] (p. 42). In 2018, the 'Leadership and Management in Post-Primary Schools' circular further elaborated on the enhancement of a distributed leadership model in Irish post-primary schools. This document states that school leaders "play a key role in improving educational outcomes by creating a positive school climate and environment as well as motivating and empowering educators and learners within the school community" [27] (p. 4).

In Irish schools, the principal has overall authority and responsibility and it is their responsibility to provide leadership opportunities to teachers, staff, students, and the school community as a whole [27]. It is envisaged that they are closely supported by the deputy principal(s), with both parties required to be open and willing to distribute leadership and management responsibilities "in a manner that encourages and supports partnership" [27] (p. 6). While all teachers are perceived to play a "leadership role in the school within the school community and in relation to student learning", the term 'school leaders' refers to those holding formal leadership positions in a school [27] (p. 6). This includes the principal, deputy principal, and those with posts of responsibility (middle leaders). These posts of responsibility, relating to that of API (Assistant Principal I) and APII (Assistant Principal II), require individuals to work collaboratively in teams in areas such as curriculum and learning, student support and wellbeing, school improvement, and leadership/management and the development of staff teams [27] (p. 7). The roles and responsibilities of these post holders are selected based on the evolving needs of the school.

External to school policy, school leadership has been affected by several other events. There was a major shift in school management structures in Ireland in the 1990s, including the introduction of an in-school management structure that was intended to encourage the sharing of leadership and management responsibilities among principals and their colleagues [28]. However, this was met with a significant challenge, as the 2008 financial crisis led to a moratorium on the appointment of middle leaders in schools, with many school leaders believing that this moratorium has diminished the role and impact of middle leadership in schools [28]. This has significantly delayed the development of school leadership nationally. There has not been a tradition of collaborative planning and evaluation in the Irish education system [29]. School leadership was traditionally "based on a hierarchical system of governance, focused on authority, power and knowledge being vested in the principal at the apex of the organization" [29] (p. 244), while there is now a current 'sea change' in terms of how school leadership is envisioned and practiced regarding capacity building and distributed practices. This context creates challenges for school leaders in terms of moving from traditional leadership perspectives to leadership approaches that are expected to be collaborative in nature [29]. It is in this context that this study was undertaken.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

Currently, the literature is limited with regard to identifying how Irish school teachers, school leaders, and special needs assistants interpret distributed leadership. It is clear

that there is little consensus regarding the meaning of distributed leadership [30], which appears to be the case for theorists and indeed for teachers and school leaders [31]. Due to the definitional variances with respect to distributed leadership in the extant literature, it can be difficult to establish a "coherent conceptual base" [32] (p. 398). With this in mind, the researchers aimed to explore Irish post-primary school leaders', teachers', guidance counsellors', and special needs assistants' interpretations of distributed leadership to contribute to the provision of a more coherent conceptualisation.

2. Materials and Methods

Post-primary school personnel currently working in Ireland were invited to complete a two-part survey comprising open-ended questions and Likert-type statements. This paper reports on the first part of this survey, where participants were invited to answer the following open-ended question 'what does the term distributed leadership mean to you?' As this study is underpinned by symbolic interactionism, the researchers asked the question in this specific way. Asking what distributed leadership means to an individual rather than asking for its general definition gives value and importance to each interpretation while validating the idea that the interactions that each participant has had impacts their interpretation of the term.

2.1. Distribution of Survey

The survey was distributed electronically using qualitrics.com®. This software was chosen because it is compliant with the researchers' host institutions' GDPR policy. Students currently enrolled in leadership professional development courses in the researchers' university (n = 312) were invited to complete the survey and share it with their colleagues. These students were notified through an announcement on SULIS, the university's platform. Students did not receive credit towards their studies for the completion of this survey. In addition, an anonymous link for the survey was also shared on Twitter® and Facebook® to recruit more participants from across Ireland.

2.2. Participants

This paper reports on the responses of 363 participants who completed the first part of the survey focusing on what distributed leadership means to them. This group included principals, deputy principals, assistant principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, and special needs assistants. Teachers comprised the largest participating group.

2.3. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was granted from the researchers' host institution (approval code 2020_05_09_EHS). Participation in the study was voluntary. The collection of demographic data on participants or their schools was limited to ensure anonymity. On opening the anonymous survey link, all participants were presented with a consent form, which they were required to accept and sign prior to completing the survey.

2.4. Data Analysis

The demographic data collected were imported to SPSS, and descriptive statistics were used for their analysis. The collected data pertaining to definitional concepts were imported to NVivo, where the coding process of thematic analysis occurred. Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical framework for the definitional concepts of this study as it offers a way to systematically analyse qualitative data, "which can then be linked to broader theoretical or conceptual issues" [33] (p. 58).

A hybrid approach to thematic analysis was used to identify themes relating to interpretations of the concept. Results are presented to include both data-driven themes and those identified using the template of the six dimensions of teacher empowerment [34]. The original research strategy comprised the inductive thematic analysis of participant's responses to the survey question. However, upon initial familiarisation with the data, it be-

came evident that a framework was required to ensure coherency during analysis. During the early stages of analysis, the researchers noticed common trends between the responses and Short's framework for teacher empowerment [34]. There is a strong relationship between empowerment and distributed leadership [35], and distributed leadership has been described as "somewhat congruent to the concept of empowerment of teachers" [36] (p. 82). Therefore, this framework was chosen to aid analysis. The six dimensions of empowerment according to this framework are outlined as follows:

1. Decision making;
2. Professional growth;
3. Status;
4. Self-efficacy;
5. Autonomy;
6. Impact.

For the purpose of this code manual, the definition of each dimension was amended to relate to the wider concept of empowerment rather than an individual's sense of empowerment (see Table 1 for further details).

Table 1. Codes developed from Short's (1994) dimensions of teacher empowerment.

Professional Growth	
Short's (1994) definition	"As a dimension of empowerment, professional growth refers to teachers' perceptions that the school in which they work provides them with opportunities to grow and develop professionally, to learn continuously, and to expand one's own skills through the work life of the school" [34].
Modified definition	Professional growth refers to the provision of opportunities for school personnel to grow and develop professionally, to learn continuously, and to expand one's own skills through the work life of the school.
Decision making	
Short's (1994) definition	"This dimension of empowerment relates to the participation of teachers in critical decisions that directly affect their work" [34].
Modified definition	Decision making refers to the participation of school personnel in decisions that directly affect their work.
Status	
Short's (1994) definition	"Status as a dimension of empowerment refers to teacher perceptions that they have professional respect and admiration from colleagues" [34].
Modified definition	Status refers to the presence of professional respect and admiration among school personnel.
Self-efficacy	
Short's (1994) definition	"Self-efficacy refers to teachers' perceptions that they have the skills and ability to help students learn, are competent in building effective programs for students, and can effect changes in student learning" [34].
Modified definition	Efficacy refers to school personnel having the skills and abilities to help students learn, build effective programs for students, and effect changes in student learning.
Impact	
Short's (1994) definition	"Impact refers to teachers' perceptions that they have an effect and influence on school life" [34].
Modified definition	Impact refers to school personnel having an effect and influence on school life.
Autonomy	
Short's (1994) definition	"Autonomy, as a dimension of empowerment, refers to teachers' beliefs that they can control certain aspects of their work life" [34].
Modified definition	Autonomy refers to school personnel controlling certain aspects of their work life.

Data were deductively analysed according to the code book that was developed from the six dimensions of teacher empowerment [34]. However, coding was not fully confined by the template, and additional sub-themes and non-normative themes were identified. A small number of participants provided responses that could not be coded because the coders could not discern enough meaning from them. These included non-responses such as "N/A" (APII) as well as vague responses that the coders would have had to have used

some assumptions to code, e.g., "focuses on leadership practices". If the coders were unsure of what was clearly meant, no assumptions were made, and the text was not coded.

2.5. Testing Reliability of Coding

Evaluating the reliability of a coding scheme is argued to be an important factor with respect to establishing credibility in qualitative research [37]. In this study, several iterations of the code book were drafted by the two coders before a final code book was written. The coders met several times to discuss the codes and code sample text using the code book before meeting and coding 15% of the dataset by consensus. This resulted in the final reiteration of the code book.

Once both coders were comfortable with the final code book, they independently coded a further 18% of the full dataset separately while using NVivo to test the intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability "is a measure of the extent to which independent judges make the same coding decisions in evaluating the characteristics of messages" [38] (p. 587). Results were compared using Cohen's kappa, which "attempts to measure agreement between two coders accounting for their chance agreement" [37] (p. 200). This resulted in a kappa of 0.746, which is acceptable since values over 0.7 are regularly used in exploratory research [37]. Once intercoder reliability was successfully reached, one coder continued using the code book to independently code the remaining data.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The survey was completed by 363 post-primary school personnel in Ireland. Demographic questions were asked of the participants, and the corresponding data are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Demographics.

Demographics	Percentage (%)	Number of Participants (n)
Gender		
Male	25	89
Female	74	270
Did not specify	<1	4
Age		
20–30 years	14	52
31–40 years	30	108
41–50 years	39	143
51+ years	16	58
Did not specify	<1	2
Highest level of qualification		
Undergraduate degree	13	47
Postgraduate certificate	4	16
Postgraduate diploma	29	106
Masters	51	184
Doctorate	2	7
Did not specify	<1	3
Role		
Class teacher	36	131
Guidance Counsellor	2	7
Special Needs Assistant	8	30
AP I	20	74
AP II	18	65
Deputy Principal	7	27
Principal	7	27
Did not specify	<1	2

Table 2. *Cont.*

Demographics	Percentage (%)	Number of Participants (n)
Number of years working in a school		
<5 years	16	57
6–15 years	35	126
16–25 years	36	130
>25 years	13	48
Did not specify	<1	2
Worked in a previous school		
Yes	76	277
No	23	84
Did not specify	<1	2
School type		
Voluntary secondary schools	46	167
Vocational/ETB schools or colleges	32	115
Community or comprehensive schools	17	62
Other schools	5	19
School location		
Urban	44	158
Suburban	26	96
Rural	30	108
Did not specify	<1	1

3.2. Interpretations of Distributed Leadership

The interpretations of distributed leadership were examined, and their content was coded. The data were classified into the six codes based on the dimensions of teacher empowerment as outlined by Short [34] and additional non-normative responses. Some dimensions were separated further into sub-themes, which are presented in Figure 1. It is important to note that the themes are not mutually exclusive and sample texts may belong to more than one theme/subtheme.
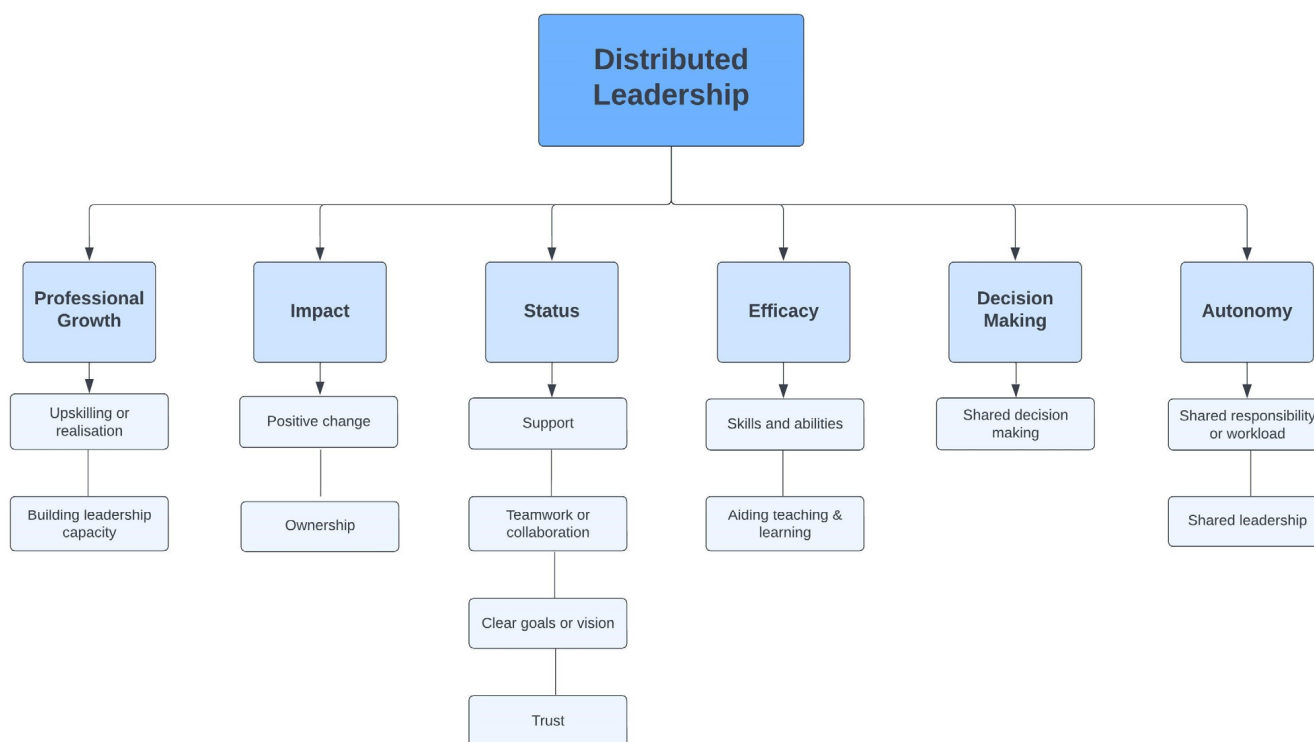

Figure 1. Themes and subthemes identified using inductive and deductive thematic analysis.

3.2.1. Professional Growth

Professional Growth refers to the provision of opportunities for school personnel to grow and develop professionally, learn continuously, and expand their own skills through the work life of the school. This emerged under the sub-theme of Building Leadership Capacity as distributed leadership was seen as "developing leadership capacity across the organisation" (principal). It also surfaced through the theme of Upskilling. Distributed leadership was interpreted as an "opportunity to learn and apply skills" (APII) or the realisation of leadership capabilities:

"Empowering others, regardless of their role, to achieve their potential as leaders" (teacher)

3.2.2. Decision Making

Decision Making is a dimension of teacher empowerment related to the sharing of decision-making responsibilities. Distributed leadership was interpreted in its entirety as "every teacher involved in decision making" (teacher) and "collaborative decision making" (API). Others believed shared decision making to be part of the broader concept of distributed leadership, e.g., "shared responsibility for decision making and shared leadership roles within the organisation" (APII).

3.2.3. Status

Status refers to the presence of professional respect and admiration among school personnel. The idea of support came to the forefront in this sub-theme, with many participants referring to support from those in traditional leadership positions.

"It is where teachers are given the support, resources and opportunities by existing leaders (dp, principal) to achieve a task" (APII)

The sub-theme of Trust was also important, with some participants interpreting distributed leadership as trust in its entirety, i.e., "trusting others" (APII). Another view represented in this sub-theme is that those in traditional leadership positions are required to believe in the abilities of other staff members for distributed leadership to occur.

"The principal will have enough trust and confidence in his staff to empower them and support them in their endeavours" (teacher)

The sub-theme of Teamwork or Collaboration played a significant role, as distributed leadership was interpreted as a team or group of people working in unison or simply as "teamwork" (API). Similarly, several participants believed distributed leadership to be a combined and cooperative method of leadership and interpreted it as "a collaborative approach to school development" (deputy principal).

The final sub-theme of Clear Goals or Vision was particularly apparent. Participants referred to distributed leadership as simply "sharing a vision" (APII). Other responses included the provision of clear expectations specifically for individuals assuming leadership duties:

"Empowering and enabling, without dumping or scapegoating. Providing proper scaffolds and supports, along with clear expectations and agreed outcomes" (principal)

3.2.4. Efficacy

The belief that school personnel have the necessary Skills and Abilities or are competent to carry out a given leadership role/duty was evident in this theme. Some participants discussed this in relation to "leadership roles being given to staff who best suit the role. They don't need to hold a post of responsibility" (APII). This indicated that school personnel are enabled to lead in their area of expertise given that they have the necessary skillset.

"Giving people the opportunity to lead in their area of expertise" (deputy principal)

The text coded here also related to the sub-theme of Aiding Teaching and Learning, which refers to the utilisation of school personnel's leadership skillsets with the result of

improving teaching and learning or learner outcomes, e.g., "everyone's ability to make decisions, lead strategies, be creative and empower others to make positive changes to the teaching and learning in their school" (APII).

3.2.5. Impact

Impact refers to school personnel having an effect and influence on school life. Positive Change in school life was found to be central to this theme. Such positive change can assume several different forms and simply means that an aspect of school life has benefitted from a school's leadership, for example, "being given responsibility outside of your normal teaching capacity. Opportunities to be part of committees and help implement positive change in school" (APII).

A sense of Ownership from school personnel with respect to various aspects of school life was an additional sub-theme. This was less commonly referred to by the participants, but the impact of increased ownership over aspects of school life was noted several times, including "sharing workload and responsibility increased teacher ownership of policy" (API). These extracts suggest that distributed leadership should result in increased ownership among school personnel to promote the success of their school or an aspect of school life.

3.2.6. Autonomy

Autonomy refers to school personnel controlling certain aspects of their work life. Shared Leadership was the most common code referred to throughout the responses. The participants believed that distributed leadership was simply "shared leadership" (API) or "leadership at all levels within an organization" (API). Some participants alluded to a similar idea by mentioning the need for multiple leaders within a school setting, i.e., "many members of the staff play active roles in leading/managing a school" (teacher). In contrast, the sub-theme of Shared Responsibility or Workload suggested that rather than sharing leadership, distributed leadership was seen as "spreading the workload" (APII) or the "sharing of duties" (teacher) rather than leadership itself.

The sub-theme Input included text that alluded to the idea that school personnel have a voice that is heard within the school community rather than leadership roles, responsibilities, or the sharing of workload.

> *"Getting many members of the school staff involved in running the school and having an input"* (APII)

The text coded here suggests that participants believe in the need for open and honest conversations among school personnel, where everyone feels listened to and believes that they can make a difference in the running of the school.

3.2.7. Non-Normative

There were several participants who expressed non-normative responses. The first type of non-normative response was that distributed leadership has very little meaning.

> *"More meaningless jargon. Schools are run by people who care about the school. Schools are and should not be treated like businesses"* (teacher)

Others explained that their understanding of distributed leadership did not reflect their experience of it.

> *"I know what it should mean! A shared voice which permeates positivity throughout the school body. Fostering supporting and nurturing from the cleaner to the principal and everyone in between creating a vibrant environment. Is that my personal experience . . . NO"* (teacher)

Some participants felt that distributed leadership is simply a method of "giving extra work to people without payment" (teacher) or "the management telling you what to do in order that they don't have to do it" (APII).

Several participants also reported having no clear understanding of the term distributed leadership. They also struggled with the described discrepancy between what distributed leadership means to them theoretically vs. their experience in practice.

"Hard to say. Theoretically it is sharing responsibility in a formal way & allowing others power & responsibility. In practice it seems a bit like delegation with bells & whistles" (deputy principal)

Others simply said that it means "nothing" (teacher/special needs assistant) to them, that they had "not come across it before" (teacher) or that they had "never heard the term" (teacher). When the participants were asked what distributed leadership means to them, one participant simply stated "it doesn't. Was hoping for a definition" (API). This undoubtedly shows their confusion with respect to the term.

3.3. Comparison of Interpretations Based on Participants' Characteristics

To gain insight into whether the participants' interpretations of distributed leadership varied based on their roles within their schools, the type of school that they were working in, and the number of years that they had been working in schools, we carried out a crosstab query on NVivo. This provided us with information regarding the proportions of each group whose interpretations were coded into a particular theme/sub-theme. It is important to note that this process was conducted for exploratory purposes, i.e., to gain insight into whether further research appears to be beneficial, and the corresponding results cannot be generalised.

Potential discrepancies were found based on the participant's characteristics. For example, principals and deputy principals appeared to refer to building leadership capacity in terms of distributed leadership more frequently than teachers, with 22.22% (n = 6, N = 27) of principals and 22.22% (n = 6, N = 27) of deputy principals referring to this subtheme in comparison to 6.1% (n = 8, N = 131) of teachers. A total of 17.74% (n = 11, N = 62) of those working in community or comprehensive schools referred to shared decision making as a component of distributed leadership in comparison to 10.17% (n = 17, N = 167) of those working in voluntary secondary schools, 10.43% (n = 12, N = 115) of those working in vocational/ETB schools or colleges, and no references from those in other schools (0%, n = 0, N = 19). A final example shows that 14.04% (n = 8, N = 57) of the participants working for fewer than 5 years did not know what the term distributed leadership meant, which can be compared to 6.35% (n = 8, N = 126) of those working in a school for 6–15 years, 2.31% (n = 3, N = 130) of those working for 16–25 years, and 4.17% (n = 2, N = 48) of those working for 26 years or over.

4. Discussion

The data evidence a degree of variance in the interpretations of distributed leadership. While there are patterns in the interpretations of distributed leadership reported by Irish post-primary school personnel, there are also several discrepancies regarding the power dynamics inherent in the interpretations, which will be explored in the following section. Specific focus will be applied to how the findings converge and diverge from recent Irish policy documents as well as implications for practice.

4.1. Discrepancy of Themes/Subthemes

Distributed leadership has been critiqued as lacking in its consideration of power relations and with respect to its described potential association with abuses of power [13]. Indeed, power emerged as a theme in our study, particularly differing uses of power in the interpretations of distributed leadership. These discrepancies include what exactly is shared, who it is shared with, and how it is shared.

4.1.1. What Is Shared

The theme of autonomy had two subthemes: shared leadership and shared responsibility/workload. These two sub-themes may appear relatively similar but suggest discrete

power dynamics. An individual who is trusted to share leadership of the school may have much greater autonomy than an individual who is trusted to share responsibility or workload by carrying out a task related to leading and managing a school. While sharing responsibilities and tasks among school personnel is a step away from the traditional individualised hero leadership approach, which has been critiqued for its inattention to leadership practices [3,39], it is clear that sharing leadership with others requires a much greater shift in power. Gronn [40] suggests that distributed leadership implies a power relationship within the school where the distinctions between followers and leaders tend to blur. If responsibilities and workload are shared rather than leadership itself, there is little blurring between the distinct roles of leaders and followers, which is not appropriate for a distributed model of leadership.

4.1.2. Who Leadership Is Shared with

The second discrepancy relates to the individuals among whom leadership is shared. Some participants reported that leadership was shared among those in official leadership positions, i.e., principal, deputy principal(s), APIs, and APIIs. This existence of a closed group of leaders emphasises a power imbalance in schools. Those in official leadership positions can retain power, thereby leaving those outside of the group with significantly less power. Referent power [41] can emerge, as those who are in the 'leadership circle' potentially affiliate with each other and each other's ideas closely, thereby normalising a culture of 'us and them' [42]. Bourdieu [43] suggests that those who occupy similar positions have a chance of having similar dispositions and interests and, therefore, engage in similar practices. This eventuality has the potential to result in a static environment for others in the school community.

Conversely, other participants outlined distributed leadership as the sharing of leadership with the school community, which has the potential to mitigate traditional hierarchal power differentials. This notion aligns with the idea that sharing leadership requires a departure from a typical structure and using structure "as the vehicle for empowering others" [44]. The opening of the traditional leadership team to include others within the school community might mitigate the risk of replicating behaviours and practices that Bourdieu [43] discusses in relation to referent power. The challenge in this regard is in the assumption that every staff member wants to lead [45]. However, a recent study suggests that in schools where the level of distributed leadership is perceived as above average, teachers provided higher-level evaluations of their readiness for leadership [46]. The corresponding suggestion is not that everyone in a school must be involved in leadership at all times but rather that everyone is welcomed and encouraged to do so.

4.1.3. How Leadership Is Shared

In this study, there were discrepancies in how school personnel perceived the mechanisms behind how leadership was shared amongst the school community. For example, several participants referred to the delegation of duties, i.e., "the assignment of responsibility or authority to another person (typically from a line manager to a subordinate) to carry out specific activities" [47] (p. 29). This shows some parallels with the results from Lahtero, Lång, and Alava's study conducted in Finland [48], where distributed leadership was mostly seen as the delegation of predetermined tasks. However, the literature suggests that distributed leadership is not equivalent to delegation [49]. Some participants suggested that the 'allowing' or 'giving of opportunities' constituted the way in which distributed leadership occurs, whose nomenclature still suggests the influence of a power imbalance. In contrast, a small number of participants explicitly stated that distributed leadership was not equivalent to delegation, while others noted that encouragement was a way in which leadership is distributed within a school setting. Encouragement has been noted as a way in which to foster the capacity of distributed leadership within a school [50]. However, this does not come without its challenges, as the "sponsoring of potential leaders could

intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate unequal access to leadership opportunities or career development" [50] (p. 130).

The conflicting power dynamics represented herein are reflective of one of distributed leadership's main critiques: its relationship with power. The distribution of power away from a solo leader is a central characteristic of distributed leadership, yet the concept has been found to be lacking in terms of conceptualising the power relations within this practice [13]. Contrarily, Harris [49] refers to the alternative viewpoint of Kouzes and Posner [51], suggesting that by empowering others, the power of the leader can also increase and that the maintenance of a leader's power lies in their ability to meet the needs of their followers [49]. There are a series of identity- and power-related issues that exist and warrant further exploration. However, there is likely no 'either/or' type of choice or solution when such polarity exists [52]. Perhaps these conflicting views of power give weight to the requirement for a leader to be able to hold the discomfort of a paradox and navigate these polarities to work towards creating positive change, as discussed by Emerson and Lewis [52].

The results of this study concur with the idea that there are "competing and sometimes conflicting" interpretations of distributed leadership [17] (p. 173) and extend this finding to Irish post-primary school practitioners. There is no single, universally accepted definition of distributed leadership, and we recognise that this is unlikely to eventuate due to differing knowledge positions [9,14] and that it is potentially unadvisable to seek [53]; however, the authors maintain that it would be beneficial to develop a shared understanding of distributed leadership within each specific context or at least an appreciation for the discrepant interpretations of distributed leadership. If those working within the same community have different interpretations of the term and its associated best practices, the inefficient implementation of the model or potential conflicts may occur as a result.

4.2. Implications for Policy

There are many links between the policy documents 'Leadership and Management in Post-primary Schools' and 'Looking at Our Schools 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools' and the data analysed in this study using a teacher empowerment framework. The results of this paper indicate that while these documents specifically endorse the adoption of distributed leadership in Irish post-primary schools, there are notable discrepancies in how school personnel interpret the construct, i.e., what is shared, who it is shared with, and how it is shared, which will now be explored in relation to Irish school leadership policy documents.

When considering the question of what is shared, it is stated in 'Leadership and Management in Post-Primary Schools' that "school leaders empower staff to take on and carry out leadership roles" [27] (p. 5). This most adequately aligns with the subtheme of shared leadership, whereby staff are encouraged to enact leadership roles rather than engage in specific responsibilities or duties. The areas in which assistant principals can lead are made explicit and include "curriculum and learning, student support and wellbeing, school improvement, leadership/management and development of staff teams" [27] (p. 7). However, there is no guidance regarding the types of activities that teachers, other staff members, or students can lead aside from student learning. While this may be a consideration for schools on a case-by-case basis, the explicit nature of the areas in which assistant principals can lead in comparison to other staff could contribute to the uncertainty of what is shared and between whom it is shared.

Various interpretations of who is involved in distributed leadership emerged in the data. Within the policy document, it is noted that both students and staff are empowered to engage in leadership, but, again, it is not specified what this leadership might entail. It is stated that every teacher participates in leading the school community and student learning, but the phrase "school leaders" refers to those in formal leadership positions [27] (p. 6). Therefore, it can be surmised that while teachers are leaders of learning, they are not necessarily part of the leadership team. Lumby [54] poses the question of which activities

undertaken by teachers are seen as leadership. This was substantiated through the findings of Murphy, et al. [55] (206), who, in their study, reported that "curiously, a leadership task performed by teachers would be labelled teaching while the same task performed by administrators would be labelled leadership". This poses questions regarding what constitutes leadership, which warrants further consideration.

In the data, differences were implied regarding how leadership is shared. To compare this to the policy document, it is worth noting that phrases such as "the principal provides leadership to teachers, other staff, to students and the wider school community" [27] (p. 6) were used. It is explicitly stated that the principal has overall authority and responsibility [27]. The four domains of key leadership and management are also written with the school leader in mind, e.g., "school leaders foster teacher professional development that enriches teachers' and students' learning" [27] (p. 6). While a reference to the empowerment of staff is also included [27], this terminology largely resonates with the responses of the participants, who suggested a top-down approach to distributed leadership. Further consideration must be given to 'Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools', a document stating that "the principal prioritises and delegates responsibilities" [26] (p. 42). This resonates with the participants who described distributed leadership to be equivalent to delegation, but does not resonate with many other responses, and the broader literature that suggests that the two concepts are fundamentally different [49]. There are some assumptions evident in the policy regarding the role of delegation. This has significant implications for the way in which distributed leadership is enacted, suggesting that while the practice is shared in nature, it remains centred on the school leader. This is problematic as it contributes to the association of leadership with the individual rather than as a practice. In order to achieve a meaningful distribution of leadership, the tension between the assumptions of delegation and authentic, distributed leadership needs to be further teased out.

4.3. Implications for Practice

This study has several implications for the enactment of distributed leadership within the Irish post-primary school context. This study provides an outline of how distributed leadership is interpreted among Irish post primary school personnel and hence an inherent framework for enacting distributed leadership as an empowerment practice. This is presented as a starting point from which to aid school personnel in implementing distributed practices within a school. This framework comprises the adapted version of Short's [34] six dimensions of teacher empowerment as well as two additional overarching considerations: context and situation (see Figure 2 below).

4.3.1. Short's Dimensions

This framework includes a focus on encouraging professional growth through building the leadership capacity of those within the school community and encouraging individuals to upskill and realise their leadership potential, which is in accordance with the suggestion from Harris [4] that distributed leadership focuses on developing leadership and maximising human capacity. The framework describes the need to create the sense among school personnel that they can have an impact on school life through their leadership, including via the promotion of a sense of ownership among staff and creating positive change, although Spillane and Diamond [56] suggest that leadership is not limited to creating positive outcomes, as it can lead to outcomes that are not necessarily beneficial. However, the aim of a distributed leadership practice should entail the goal of having a positive impact. This is closely linked to the development of efficacy among school personnel, whereby such personnel believe that they have the skills and abilities required to enact change and aid the teaching and learning of their school. This aligns with the literature once again as empowering teachers to lead has been said to improve their sense of self-efficacy in relation to student learning [57,58].
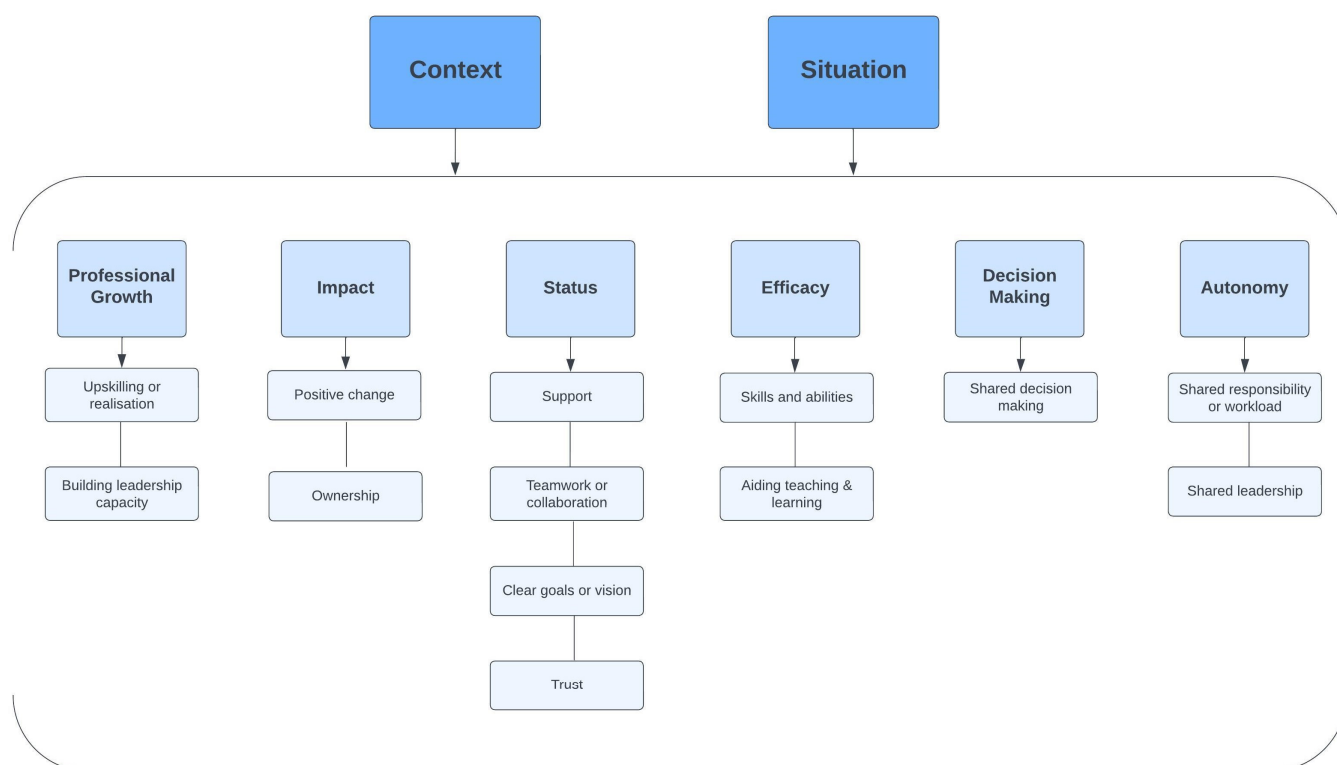
Figure 2. Framework for enacting distributed leadership as an empowerment practice.

The need for support, teamwork, and collaboration; trust; and the sharing of goals and visions are important in creating a sense of professional respect among colleagues but also to effectively sharing leadership practices. Building trusting relationships and uniting a school through shared values have also been previously noted as components of the role of a formal leader in facilitating distributed leadership and collaboration [59]. Furthermore, support from peers and leaders has been identified as integral to the success of teachers engaging in leadership [58], thus suggesting the alignment of this theme with the previous literature. The participants also suggested that the participation of school personnel in decisions that directly affect their work was important in a distributed leadership model. Shared decision making has been outlined as being implied within distributed leadership [10], yet it does not come without its challenges, including the associated workload and frustrations created by a slower decision-making process [60]. Finally, the results outline the need for the sharing of autonomy through shared leadership practices, roles, and responsibilities to ensure that school personnel believe that they can control certain aspects of their work life, which is expected as it is the very essence of a distributed practice.

4.3.2. Consideration of Context

This study also highlights the discrepancies that exist between participants' interpretations of distributed leadership and that some school personnel reported ignorance of the term. While no single definition was drawn from this research, the findings highlight the need for a recognition that everyone's interpretation of distributed leadership will likely differ within the school setting. However, to embed distributed leadership practices within an organisation and create symbolic convergence and shared meaning, further consideration of the social constructions, contexts, and culture are needed. Such requirements are further emphasised by the negative connotations that some participants associated with distributed leadership as evidenced in the non-normative responses, which could be a significant challenge to the effective implementation of the practice. The finding that some participants described distributed leadership as meaningless is meaningful from a research perspective. This echoes the need for school leaders to understand the enactment

of distributed leadership within their own context, as suggested by Drysdale and Gurr [61], by asking the following specific questions:

- "What is being distributed (tasks, responsibilities, leadership activities, leadership practices)?
- What are the leadership expectations placed on various roles within the organisation?
- What counts as leadership practices among participants?
- Are there patterns of distribution that are more effective in certain situations?
- How do leaders support the work of other leaders?
- What are the relationships between the actors?"

[61] (p. 144)

We suggest that the whole school community should be involved in this knowledge-building process and further advocate for the addition of two more key questions due to the findings of this study:

- How are decisions made most effectively within a school?
- How do leaders involve others in leadership practices?

Through a school community asking themselves these questions, socially constructing the meaning of distributed leadership, and moving towards distributed cognition, a much more effective practice of distributed leadership can be enacted.

4.3.3. Situation

Spillane, Halverson and Diamond [5] describe distributed leadership as the interactions between leaders, followers, and situations. While the participants described distributed leadership in varying ways, the responses focused on the sharing of leadership between people, i.e., leaders and followers. There was very little consideration of the situation in which the distribution of leadership was occurring, which has been deemed critical. In this context, a situation includes tools, routines, and structures, which are essentially "the means through which people act" [3] (p.147). An example of a tool is student assessment data, examples of routines include monitoring and evaluating practices, and an example of a structure would be the scheduling of teachers' preparation time [3]. When overly focusing on the interactions between people, there is a concern that the situation might be overlooked, and this factor is integral to the successful implementation of distributed leadership. Therefore, we highlight the importance of the planning and inclusion of the tools, structures, and routines in leadership practices as well as focusing on the relevant context, for which the empowerment framework serves as a starting point for effectively implementing a distributed leadership practice.

4.4. Limitations

There are limitations associated with this study. Firstly, the participants' roles, the number of years of teaching experience, and the locations of schools were not equally represented. Secondly, no definite relationship could be drawn from the descriptive statistics presented in the results section, and the findings cannot be generalised. They simply give insight into some of the suggested similarities and differences of the responses based on the study sample. Thirdly, while it is evident in the data that the participants had varying interpretations of distributed leadership, the researchers did not know which schools these participants were currently working in. Therefore, it could not be claimed that personnel working in the same school had different interpretations of the construct. This requires further exploration. Lastly, as snowball sampling was used to gather participants for the survey, a response rate could not be calculated.

5. Conclusions

The school personnel who participated in this study have varying interpretations of distributed leadership as explored through a teacher empowerment lens. As distributed

leadership has been deemed to be necessary in these complex times, it is of utmost importance for school communities to develop a shared understanding of distributed leadership in their respective contexts. An initial framework for enacting distributed leadership based on these interpretations was presented, which may be a useful starting point for schools. Due consideration of the school context and relevant situation while utilising this framework is essential. Further suggestions were provided to work towards the development of a shared meaning of distributed leadership within a specific context, as discrepancies were reported in the participants' interpretations of which leadership activities are shared, who they are shared between, and how they are shared. Several similarities were reported between the Irish policy documents and the interpretations of distributed leadership reported by school personnel. However, there were also numerous inconsistencies observed, most notably regarding how leadership is shared. Recommendations for future research regarding the possibility of varying interpretations based on the participants' characteristics, including their roles, school types, and number of years working in a school, and the potential impact of discrepant interpretations of distributed leadership were made.

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