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Distributed Leadership in Distinct Educational Contexts: A Cross-Cultural Study of Ireland and Türkiye

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ABSTRACT



This study examines how distributed leadership (DL) is enacted by school principals in two contrasting education systems: Ireland and Türkiye. It investigates how policy environments and institutional structures shape leadership practices across these contexts. The findings indicate that principals in Türkiye experience highly centralized governance structures as constraining the enactment of DL, whereas principals in Ireland emphasize ongoing efforts to align policy intentions with school-level practices. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how DL is shaped by context-specific policy and cultural dynamics, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive leadership development and support structures across education systems.


Introduction

Distributed leadership (DL) has emerged over the past two decades as a dominant discourse in the field of educational leadership and is frequently framed as a progressive alternative to hierarchical forms of authority (Brown et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2022; Mifsud, 2024; Nadeem, 2024). DL is commonly understood as an approach that focuses on how leadership roles and responsibilities are distributed, interpreted, and enacted among multiple actors within school organizations (Gronn, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001). From an interpretive and constructivist perspective, the ways in which DL is conceptualized and put into practice remain shaped by cultural interpretations, institutional constraints, and policy contexts, rendering it a context-sensitive and contested field of inquiry (Lumby, 2016; Murphy & Brennan, 2022). In cross-cultural contexts, these tensions become particularly pronounced, raising questions about the transferability of DL across systems with divergent assumptions regarding power, authority, and agency.

Against this backdrop, this study examines how DL is understood and enacted in two education systems that differ markedly in terms of school autonomy, governance structures, and policy alignment: Ireland and Türkiye. In Ireland, DL is supported through formal policy instruments (e.g., Circular 0003/2018) and professional development infrastructure (e.g., Oide) (Murphy & Brennan, 2022), whereas in Türkiye, in the absence of enabling policy frameworks, DL tends to emerge in more fragmented and situational ways, shaped primarily by academic initiatives and individual leadership dispositions (Çakan, 2019; Turan Bora et al., 2025).

It is precisely these contextual and structural divergences that underpin the contribution of this study. By offering a nuanced and cross-cultural analysis of how distributed leadership is conceptualized, enacted, and institutionally shaped within two structurally contrasting education systems, the study makes an original contribution to the educational leadership literature. In contrast to the predominantly single-country orientation of existing research (Bush & Ng, 2019; Fan & Chu, 2025; Joslyn, 2018), this study adopts a systematic comparative approach across contexts characterized by different degrees of centralization. By foregrounding the perspectives of school principals holding doctoral degrees in educational administration, the study seeks to distinguish whether challenges in DL enactment stem

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primarily from theoretical misunderstandings or from structural constraints. In doing so, it illuminates the persistent disjuncture between policy discourse and school-level leadership practice and provides theoretically grounded and empirically rich insights into this gap. Accordingly, this study reframes distributed leadership not as a universally transferable or normatively desirable leadership model, but as a context-sensitive phenomenon that is discursively constructed within specific cultural, political, and organizational logics, drawing on practice-oriented and post-structuralist perspectives (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). In this respect, the study offers a critical contribution to the ongoing assumption of DL as a “universal model” within the literature and responds directly to calls for more critical and contextually grounded approaches to leadership (Gronn, 2002; Lumby, 2016). This study addresses the following research questions:

- How is DL conceptualized and enacted in Ireland and Türkiye?
- What policy, structural, and cultural factors facilitate or hinder its implementation?
- How do different systemic and discursive conditions produce divergent forms of distributed leadership?

Theoretical Framework

Distributed leadership (DL) is a leadership approach in which leadership is shared among multiple actors and collaboration is prioritized over positional authority (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2008), and it is mediated by context, policy, and culture (Lumby, 2016). In line with this perspective, research across diverse cultural and political contexts has shown that distributed leadership does not manifest uniformly, but is interpreted and implemented differently depending on local political traditions, organizational structures, and cultural expectations (Eryilmaz & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2023). Distributed leadership, therefore, emerges in diverse ways depending on national and institutional contexts. For instance, in Ireland, a more flexible and team-based school structure facilitates clearer manifestations of DL (Brown et al., 2021; Heenan et al., 2024; Hickey et al., 2024). In the United States, DL has been linked to improved student outcomes through strong collaboration between teachers and administrators (Fritch, 2020; Menken & Sánchez, 2019). By contrast, studies in Asian or developing country contexts reveal significant cultural and structural barriers. In Malaysia, for example, despite being encouraged by national policy, DL has often translated into task delegation rather than actual power sharing (Bush & Ng, 2019). Research from Bangladesh and Georgia similarly highlights how resistance to change and fear of authority loss limits the effectiveness of DL (Khmaladze, 2024; Mojumder et al., 2024). Within Muslim-majority contexts, DL tends to be reduced to hierarchical delegation with limited consultation, rather than genuine shared decision-making (Hilal et al., 2025).

In highly centralized systems such as Türkiye, DL often reflects top-down task assignment rather than empowerment. The model functions best in school environments that prioritize collaboration, trust, and teacher agency. Otherwise, it risks becoming a mechanism for workload distribution rather than capacity building. This is echoed in global comparative data, which places countries such as Japan, Argentina, Saudi Arabia, and Israel among those with the lowest observed levels of DL in school decision-making, due to enduring traditions of formal authority (Eryilmaz & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2023).

These global variations in enactment point to the deeper cultural logics that underpin leadership practices. In particular, the ways in which leadership is conceptualized and enacted are shaped by implicit cultural values around hierarchy, trust, and the distribution of responsibility (Bush, 2019; Hofstede, 1980). This study adopts a constructivist interpretive lens, recognizing that DL is not merely a set of practices but a socially constructed phenomenon embedded within broader policy and cultural narratives (Bennett et al., 2003). This study adopts a practice-oriented and post-structuralist viewpoint, viewing distributed leadership as a socially created discourse rather than a neutral collection of behaviors. This theoretical stance provides the conceptual lens through which the empirical data are analyzed, enabling attention to be directed not only to leadership practices but also to the power relations and institutional narratives that shape them. From this perspective, the study explores how DL is conceptualized and enacted across centralized (Türkiye) (Yıldırım, 2010) and decentralized (Ireland) (Coolahan et al., 2017) educational systems, revealing not only distinct practices but also divergent discursive constructions of leadership.