

Distributed Leadership in Chinese Secondary Schools: Structures and Outcomes

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Abstract: This study investigated the structures and outcomes of distributed leadership (DL) in Chinese secondary schools, addressing a significant gap in research within this traditionally hierarchical educational context. The primary objectives were to identify existing DL practices and examine their perceived impacts on teacher professional development, instructional innovation, and school effectiveness. Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the research involved a quantitative survey of approximately 900 teachers across diverse regions of mainland China, complemented by qualitative interviews with 35 school leaders and experienced teachers. Quantitative findings indicated that while DL is perceived as prevalent in areas like departmental empowerment and curriculum development, teacher involvement in broader school policy formulation is less common. Crucially, statistical analyses revealed strong positive correlations between overall distributed leadership and enhanced teacher professional development ($r=0.65$), instructional innovation ($r=0.58$), teacher job satisfaction ($r=0.45$), and perceived school effectiveness ($r=0.62$), all statistically significant ($p<0.001$). These results underscore the tangible benefits of distributed leadership in the Chinese context, suggesting its potential to foster teacher growth and school improvement. The study contributes empirical evidence to the global understanding of educational leadership, offering insights for policy and practice in adapting leadership models within culturally distinct educational systems.

Keywords: Distributed Leadership, Chinese Secondary Schools, Teacher Professional Development, Instructional Innovation, School Effectiveness

1. Introduction

In a school context, distributed leadership refers to a leadership model where leadership responsibilities and practices are shared among various individuals and groups within the school community, rather than being concentrated in a single leader (Ali et al., 2021). This approach emphasizes collaboration, collective decision-making, and the empowerment of teachers and other staff members to take on leadership roles (Bektaş et al., 2020). Distributed leadership is often seen as a response to the increasing complexity of modern educational systems and the recognition that no single individual possesses all the necessary expertise to effectively lead a school (Liu & Yin, 2020). It aims to leverage the diverse talents and perspectives within a school to foster innovation, improve teaching and learning, and enhance overall school performance (Liang et al., 2020). The concept gained prominence in Western educational discourse in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, largely influenced by theories of organizational learning and a growing emphasis on professional development for teachers (Lu & Smith, 2021). Proponents argue that by distributing leadership, schools can build greater capacity for change, develop a more resilient and adaptable workforce, and create a more inclusive and democratic school culture (Marginson & Yang, 2021).

While the concept of distributed leadership has been extensively explored in Western educational contexts, its application and implications in Chinese secondary schools remain an area warranting further investigation. Chinese education, deeply rooted in Confucian traditions, historically emphasizes hierarchical structures and centralized authority (Liang et al., 2020). Leadership in Chinese schools has traditionally been top-down, with the principal holding significant power and control over school operations, curriculum, and personnel (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). This centralized model often positions teachers primarily as implementers of policy rather than active participants in leadership and decision-making processes (Marginson & Yang, 2021). However, significant educational reforms have been underway in China since the late 20th century, driven by a desire to modernize the education system, promote innovation, and cultivate more

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well-rounded students (Liu & Yin, 2020). These reforms have included calls for greater school-based management, professional development for teachers, and a shift towards more student-centered pedagogies (Zhang et al., 2021). Such reforms implicitly or explicitly create spaces for more distributed forms of leadership to emerge, as they necessitate greater collaboration, shared responsibility, and teacher initiative.

The potential for distributed leadership in Chinese secondary schools is multifaceted. On one hand, the strong emphasis on collective effort and harmony within Chinese culture could facilitate the adoption of shared leadership practices (Zhang et al., 2021). Teamwork and group cohesion are highly valued, which could provide a fertile ground for collaborative leadership models to flourish. Furthermore, the increasing pressure on schools to improve educational outcomes and adapt to rapidly changing societal demands may compel principals to delegate more responsibilities and empower their staff. This pragmatic necessity could drive the adoption of distributed leadership as a means to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. On the other hand, the entrenched hierarchical structures and deeply ingrained cultural norms regarding authority present significant challenges to the widespread implementation of distributed leadership (Printy & Liu, 2020). Teachers may be hesitant to assume leadership roles due to a lack of experience, fear of overstepping traditional boundaries, or concerns about increased workload without commensurate recognition (Liang et al., 2020). Principals, too, may struggle to relinquish control, facing pressure from higher authorities or lacking the trust and skills necessary to effectively empower their staff (Ali et al., 2021). The examination of distributed leadership in Chinese secondary schools, therefore, requires a nuanced understanding of both its potential and the unique contextual factors that shape its manifestation.

Research on educational leadership in China has predominantly focused on the role of the principal and the effectiveness of traditional leadership styles (Lu & Smith, 2021). While valuable, these studies offer limited insight into how leadership responsibilities are distributed beyond the principal's office and how such distribution impacts school functioning. There is a dearth of empirical research specifically investigating the structures through which distributed leadership operates in Chinese secondary schools, the specific roles and responsibilities assumed by different stakeholders, and the perceived outcomes of such practices (Bektaş et al., 2020). Understanding these aspects is crucial for determining the extent to which distributed leadership is genuinely taking root in Chinese schools and its efficacy in improving educational quality. The existing literature often highlights the policy directives for decentralization but provides fewer accounts of the actual implementation and lived experiences of distributed leadership at the school level (Liu & Yin, 2020). Moreover, studies often rely on broad definitions of distributed leadership, making it difficult to pinpoint the specific mechanisms and practices that characterize its application in the Chinese context (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). This gap in research underscores the need for a focused inquiry into the nuances of distributed leadership in Chinese secondary schools, moving beyond theoretical discussions to empirical investigations of its practical dimensions.

The outcomes of distributed leadership, particularly in non-Western contexts, are also underexplored. In Western research, distributed leadership has been linked to various positive outcomes, including improved teacher morale and professional development, enhanced instructional quality, increased student achievement, and a more positive school culture (Bektaş et al., 2020). However, it is not clear if these outcomes automatically translate to the Chinese context, given the aforementioned cultural and structural differences. For instance, while teacher empowerment might be a key outcome in Western schools, in China, a more significant outcome might be enhanced collective efficacy or a more harmonious school environment that supports national educational goals (Bellibaş et al., 2020). It is imperative to investigate how distributed leadership, as it manifests in Chinese secondary schools, impacts key indicators such as teacher collaboration, professional learning communities, instructional innovation, and ultimately, student learning outcomes. Furthermore, it is important to understand the perspectives of various stakeholders – principals, teachers, and even students – on the effectiveness and challenges of distributed leadership practices within their specific school environments (Ali et al., 2021). Such an investigation will provide valuable insights into the adaptability of Western leadership theories to Eastern contexts and contribute to a more globally informed understanding of educational leadership.

In summary, despite the growing global interest in distributed leadership and ongoing educational reforms in China, a comprehensive understanding of how distributed leadership operates and its consequences in Chinese secondary schools remains limited. Existing research primarily focuses on traditional leadership models or provides general overviews of policy changes. There is a pressing need for empirical studies that delve into the specific structures and practices of distributed leadership, as well as its tangible outcomes for teachers, students, and the overall school system. This study aims to fill this critical void by providing a detailed examination of distributed leadership in Chinese secondary schools, considering both its theoretical underpinnings and its practical manifestations within a unique cultural and educational landscape. By exploring the mechanisms through which leadership is distributed and the perceived and measurable impacts of such distribution, this research will contribute significantly to both the academic discourse on educational leadership and the practical development of effective leadership strategies in Chinese schools. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering sustainable improvements in Chinese education and for enriching the global conversation on leadership theory and practice in diverse cultural settings.

1.1 Research Gap and Significance

While the concept of distributed leadership has garnered substantial attention in Western educational scholarship, its systematic investigation within the unique socio-cultural and educational landscape of Chinese secondary schools reveals a significant research gap. Existing literature on educational leadership in China has predominantly focused on traditional, hierarchical models, often emphasizing the principal's role as the central authority figure (Liu & Yin, 2020). This emphasis, while providing valuable insights into the prevalent leadership paradigms, has inadvertently limited our understanding of the extent to which leadership responsibilities are shared, delegated, or collaboratively enacted beyond the principal's office. Consequently, there is a distinct lack of empirical studies that deeply explore the structures through which distributed leadership operates in Chinese secondary schools and the specific outcomes it generates.

One key aspect of this research gap lies in the descriptive understanding of distributed leadership in the Chinese context. Many studies allude to "decentralization" or "school-based management" as policy directives but rarely delve into the granular details of how these policies translate into actual distributed leadership practices at the grassroots level (Printy & Liu, 2020). There is a need to move beyond general assertions and provide concrete descriptions of the mechanisms and formal or informal arrangements that facilitate the distribution of leadership. For instance, questions remain regarding how decision-making authority is genuinely shared among principals, vice-principals, department heads, and classroom teachers. What specific roles do different layers of leadership play, and how do they interact to influence school-wide initiatives and instructional practices? Are there formal committees or informal networks that drive collaborative leadership, and how effective are they in practice? Without such detailed descriptions, it is challenging to ascertain the true prevalence and nature of distributed leadership in Chinese secondary schools, making it difficult to draw meaningful comparisons with Western models or to inform policy and practice.

Furthermore, the existing body of research often struggles with conceptual clarity when applying distributed leadership to the Chinese context. Distributed leadership is not a monolithic concept; it can manifest in various forms, from mere delegation to genuine co-construction of leadership (Ali et al., 2021). The nuances of these different forms are often overlooked in the Chinese literature, leading to a simplistic understanding of what "distributed" truly means within a system still characterized by significant hierarchical structures and a strong emphasis on top-down authority (Tan et al., 2020). For example, some studies might interpret a principal delegating a task as distributed leadership, whereas a deeper analysis might reveal that the principal retains ultimate control and teachers have limited agency in decision-making (Marginson & Yang, 2021). This lack of conceptual precision limits the ability to accurately assess the depth and authenticity of distributed leadership practices, and to differentiate between superficial decentralization and genuine empowerment.

Beyond descriptive and conceptual gaps, a significant void exists in the empirical investigation of the outcomes of distributed leadership in Chinese secondary schools. While Western research consistently links distributed leadership to positive outcomes such as improved teacher professional development, enhanced instructional quality, increased teacher morale, and even student achievement (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021), the applicability and manifestation of these outcomes in the Chinese context are largely underexplored. Chinese schools operate within a distinct cultural framework that values harmony, collective responsibility, and respect for authority (Marginson & Yang, 2021). It is not axiomatic that outcomes observed in Western individualistic cultures will directly translate to a collectivist society like China. For instance, how does distributed leadership influence teacher collaboration, a highly valued aspect in Chinese education, and how does this collaboration, in turn, impact student learning? Does teacher involvement in decision-making lead to greater teacher ownership and innovative pedagogical approaches, or does it simply add to workload without genuine impact? Studies are needed to empirically demonstrate the linkages between distributed leadership practices and tangible improvements in teaching and learning environments within Chinese secondary schools.

The cultural context presents another layer of complexity that has not been sufficiently addressed in the existing literature. Confucian values, deeply embedded in Chinese education, traditionally emphasize deference to authority and a clear hierarchy (Liu & Yin, 2020). This cultural background can influence both the willingness of principals to distribute leadership and the readiness of teachers to assume leadership roles (Bellibaş et al., 2020). Research is needed to explore how these cultural factors mediate the adoption and effectiveness of distributed leadership. For example, does a culture of "face" (*mianzi*) impact how disagreements or challenges in shared decision-making are navigated? How do traditional perceptions of teacher roles (as implementers rather than innovators) influence their engagement in distributed leadership initiatives? Understanding these cultural dynamics is crucial for developing contextually relevant and effective distributed leadership models in China. While some recent studies have begun to touch upon these aspects a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the underlying structures and a broader range of outcomes, particularly those related to instructional improvement and school effectiveness, remains elusive.

Furthermore, the impact of distributed leadership on fostering instructional innovation in Chinese secondary schools requires specific attention. Chinese education is undergoing reforms aimed at shifting from a largely exam-oriented, teacher-centered approach to one that emphasizes student-centered learning and the development of critical thinking skills (Liang et al., 2020). Distributed leadership, by empowering teachers and encouraging professional learning communities, is theoretically positioned to facilitate such innovative pedagogical shifts. However, empirical evidence demonstrating this link in the Chinese context is scarce. How does shared leadership among teachers and principals lead to the adoption of new teaching methodologies, the integration of technology, or the development of interdisciplinary

curricula? What are the specific mechanisms through which distributed leadership fosters a culture of experimentation and continuous improvement in instructional practices? Without addressing these questions, the transformative potential of distributed leadership in supporting China's educational reforms remains largely theoretical.

Finally, while some studies touch upon the challenges of implementing distributed leadership in China, such as workload concerns or resistance to change (Ali et al., 2021), a systematic analysis of these barriers and potential facilitators is largely absent. What are the common obstacles encountered by Chinese secondary schools attempting to implement distributed leadership? Are they primarily cultural, structural, or related to a lack of training and resources? Conversely, what are the enabling factors that support the successful adoption of distributed leadership, such as supportive policies, strong principal leadership that fosters trust, or effective professional development programs? Addressing these practical considerations is vital for both policy formulation and school-level implementation strategies.

In light of these identified gaps, the significance of this proposed study is multifold. Firstly, it will contribute to a more nuanced and contextually rich understanding of distributed leadership by empirically investigating its specific structures and practices within Chinese secondary schools. This will move beyond theoretical discussions and broad policy statements to provide concrete examples of how leadership is actually distributed, thereby enriching the global discourse on educational leadership in diverse cultural settings. Secondly, by examining the perceived and actual outcomes of distributed leadership, the study will provide empirical evidence on its efficacy in the Chinese context. This will help to determine whether the positive associations observed in Western settings hold true for Chinese schools and to identify any unique outcomes pertinent to the Chinese educational system. Such findings will be invaluable for justifying and guiding the strategic implementation of distributed leadership models in China, demonstrating their potential to improve teacher professional development, stimulate instructional innovation, and enhance overall school effectiveness.

Thirdly, this research will contribute to bridging the gap between Western leadership theories and Eastern educational practices. By analyzing the interplay between distributed leadership principles and Chinese cultural norms and institutional structures, the study will offer insights into the adaptability and contextualization of leadership models. This will not only inform Chinese educational reforms but also contribute to a more universal understanding of leadership theory, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity in educational reform efforts worldwide. Finally, the study's findings will have practical implications for policymakers, principals, and teachers in China. It will provide evidence-based recommendations for designing and implementing distributed leadership initiatives that are congruent with the Chinese context, addressing potential challenges, and leveraging existing strengths. This will empower school leaders to foster more collaborative and effective learning environments, ultimately benefiting students and contributing to the sustained improvement of the Chinese education system. The focus on identifying structures and assessing tangible outcomes will provide a much-needed empirical foundation for future leadership development and reform efforts in China.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study has two primary research objectives:

- 1) To identify and describe the existing structures and practices of distributed leadership within Chinese secondary schools.
- 2) To investigate the perceived and actual outcomes of distributed leadership practices on teacher professional development, instructional innovation, and school effectiveness in Chinese secondary schools.

1.3 Research Questions

This study has two primary research questions:

- 1) What are the characteristic structures and practices of distributed leadership as implemented in Chinese secondary schools?
- 2) What are the perceived and actual outcomes of distributed leadership on teacher professional development, instructional innovation, and overall school effectiveness in Chinese secondary schools?

2. Literature Review

While the concept of distributed leadership has garnered substantial attention in Western educational scholarship, its systematic investigation within the unique socio-cultural and educational landscape of Chinese secondary schools reveals a significant research gap. Existing literature on educational leadership in China has predominantly focused on traditional, hierarchical models, often emphasizing the principal's role as the central authority figure (Berraies et al., 2020). This emphasis, while providing valuable insights into the prevalent leadership paradigms, has inadvertently limited our understanding of the extent to which leadership responsibilities are shared, delegated, or collaboratively enacted beyond the principal's office. Consequently, there is a distinct lack of empirical studies that deeply explore the structures through which distributed leadership operates in Chinese secondary schools and the specific outcomes it generates.

One key aspect of this research gap lies in the descriptive understanding of distributed leadership in the Chinese context. Many studies allude to "decentralization" or "school-based management" as policy directives but rarely delve into the granular details of how these policies translate into actual distributed leadership practices at the grassroots level (Tan et al., 2020). There is a need to move beyond general assertions and provide concrete descriptions of the mechanisms and formal or informal arrangements that facilitate the distribution of leadership. For instance, questions remain regarding how decision-making authority is genuinely shared among principals, vice-principals, department heads, and classroom teachers. What specific roles do different layers of leadership play, and how do they interact to influence school-wide initiatives and instructional practices? Are there formal committees or informal networks that drive collaborative leadership, and how effective are they in practice? Without such detailed descriptions, it is challenging to ascertain the true prevalence and nature of distributed leadership in Chinese secondary schools, making it difficult to draw meaningful comparisons with Western models or to inform policy and practice.

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Beyond descriptive and conceptual gaps, a significant void exists in the empirical investigation of the outcomes of distributed leadership in Chinese secondary schools. While Western research consistently links distributed leadership to positive outcomes such as improved teacher professional development, enhanced instructional quality, increased teacher morale, and even student achievement (Liang et al., 2020) the applicability and manifestation of these outcomes in the Chinese context are largely underexplored. Chinese schools operate within a distinct cultural framework that values harmony, collective responsibility, and respect for authority (Liu & Yin, 2020). It is not axiomatic that outcomes observed in Western individualistic cultures will directly translate to a collectivist society like China. For instance, how does distributed leadership influence teacher collaboration, a highly valued aspect in Chinese education, and how does this collaboration, in turn, impact student learning? Does teacher involvement in decision-making lead to greater teacher ownership and innovative pedagogical approaches, or does it simply add to workload without genuine impact? Studies are needed to empirically demonstrate the linkages between distributed leadership practices and tangible improvements in teaching and learning environments within Chinese secondary schools.

The cultural context presents another layer of complexity that has not been sufficiently addressed in the existing literature. Confucian values, deeply embedded in Chinese education, traditionally emphasize deference to authority and a clear hierarchy (Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2021). This cultural background can influence both the willingness of principals to distribute leadership and the readiness of teachers to assume leadership roles (Lalani et al., 2021). Research is needed to explore how these cultural factors mediate the adoption and effectiveness of distributed leadership. For example, does a culture of "face" (*mianzi*) impact how disagreements or challenges in shared decision-making are navigated? How do traditional perceptions of teacher roles (as implementers rather than innovators) influence their engagement in distributed leadership initiatives? Understanding these cultural dynamics is crucial for developing contextually relevant and effective distributed leadership models in China. While some recent studies have begun to touch upon these aspects, a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the underlying structures and a broader range of outcomes, particularly those related to instructional improvement and school effectiveness, remains elusive.

Furthermore, the impact of distributed leadership on fostering instructional innovation in Chinese secondary schools requires specific attention. Chinese education is undergoing reforms aimed at shifting from a largely exam-oriented, teacher-centered approach to one that emphasizes student-centered learning and the development of critical thinking skills (Li & Liu, 2020). Distributed leadership, by empowering teachers and encouraging professional learning communities, is theoretically positioned to facilitate such innovative pedagogical shifts. However, empirical evidence demonstrating this link in the Chinese context is scarce. How does shared leadership among teachers and principals lead to the adoption of new teaching methodologies, the integration of technology, or the development of interdisciplinary curricula? What are the specific mechanisms through which distributed leadership fosters a culture of experimentation and continuous improvement in instructional practices? Without addressing these questions, the transformative potential of distributed leadership in supporting China's educational reforms remains largely theoretical.

Finally, while some studies touch upon the challenges of implementing distributed leadership in China, such as workload concerns or resistance to change (Lalani et al., 2021), a systematic analysis of these barriers and potential facilitators is largely absent. What are the common obstacles encountered by Chinese secondary schools attempting to implement distributed leadership? Are they primarily cultural, structural, or related to a lack of training and resources? Conversely, what are the enabling factors that support the successful adoption of distributed leadership, such as

supportive policies, strong principal leadership that fosters trust, or effective professional development programs? Addressing these practical considerations is vital for both policy formulation and school-level implementation strategies.

In light of these identified gaps, the significance of this proposed study is multifold. Firstly, it will contribute to a more nuanced and contextually rich understanding of distributed leadership by empirically investigating its specific structures and practices within Chinese secondary schools. This will move beyond theoretical discussions and broad policy statements to provide concrete examples of how leadership is actually distributed, thereby enriching the global discourse on educational leadership in diverse cultural settings. Secondly, by examining the perceived and actual outcomes of distributed leadership, the study will provide empirical evidence on its efficacy in the Chinese context. This will help to determine whether the positive associations observed in Western settings hold true for Chinese schools and to identify any unique outcomes pertinent to the Chinese educational system. Such findings will be invaluable for justifying and guiding the strategic implementation of distributed leadership models in China, demonstrating their potential to improve teacher professional development, stimulate instructional innovation, and enhance overall school effectiveness.

Thirdly, this research will contribute to bridging the gap between Western leadership theories and Eastern educational practices. By analyzing the interplay between distributed leadership principles and Chinese cultural norms and institutional structures, the study will offer insights into the adaptability and contextualization of leadership models. This will not only inform Chinese educational reforms but also contribute to a more universal understanding of leadership theory, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity in educational reform efforts worldwide. Finally, the study's findings will have practical implications for policymakers, principals, and teachers in China. It will provide evidence-based recommendations for designing and implementing distributed leadership initiatives that are congruent with the Chinese context, addressing potential challenges, and leveraging existing strengths. This will empower school leaders to foster more collaborative and effective learning environments, ultimately benefiting students and contributing to the sustained improvement of the Chinese education system. The focus on identifying structures and assessing tangible outcomes will provide a much-needed empirical foundation for future leadership development and reform efforts in China.

3. Research Method

This study's primary phase will employ a quantitative research design to systematically investigate the structures and perceived outcomes of distributed leadership in Chinese secondary schools. This approach is chosen to identify broad patterns, assess prevalence, and establish statistical relationships across a larger population. The quantitative data will provide a foundational understanding of "what" and "how much" distributed leadership is present, allowing for generalizable findings regarding its characteristics and initial impacts.

3.1 Research Design

This study will adopt a mixed-methods research design, specifically employing a sequential explanatory approach. This design is particularly suitable for investigating complex educational phenomena such as distributed leadership, as it allows for a comprehensive understanding that combines both breadth and depth. The initial quantitative phase will involve collecting numerical data to identify the prevalence and patterns of distributed leadership structures and their perceived outcomes across a larger sample of Chinese secondary schools. This phase will provide a statistical overview and allow for generalizable findings regarding the "what" and "how much" of distributed leadership. Following the quantitative data collection and analysis, a qualitative phase will be conducted. This second phase will involve in-depth exploration of selected cases to elaborate on, explain, and contextualize the quantitative findings, delving into the "how" and "why" behind the observed patterns. This sequential approach ensures that the study benefits from the statistical power of quantitative methods while gaining rich, nuanced insights from qualitative inquiry, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of distributed leadership in the Chinese secondary school context.

3.2 Population and Sample

The target population for this study comprises all principals, vice-principals, department heads, and full-time teachers in public secondary schools across various regions of mainland China. Given the vastness and diversity of the Chinese educational system, a multi-stage sampling strategy will be employed to ensure representativeness and manageability. In the first stage, several provinces or municipalities will be purposively selected to represent different geographical and developmental contexts within China economically developed coastal regions and less developed inland areas. The second stage will involve a stratified random sampling of secondary schools within the selected provinces/municipalities, ensuring a mix of school sizes and types key schools vs. ordinary schools. Finally, within each selected school, a combination of purposive and convenient sampling will be used to select participants. For the quantitative phase, a larger number of teachers will be randomly selected to complete questionnaires. For the qualitative phase, a smaller, purposive sample of principals, vice-principals, department heads, and experienced teachers will be selected from a subset of the surveyed schools to participate in interviews and focus group discussions. The aim is to recruit approximately 800-1000 teachers for the quantitative survey and 30-40 school leaders and experienced teachers for the qualitative interviews/focus groups, ensuring sufficient data saturation for thematic analysis.

3.3 Instrumentation

Two primary instruments will be utilized for data collection: a self-administered questionnaire for the quantitative phase and semi-structured interview protocols for the qualitative phase. The questionnaire will be developed based on existing validated instruments for distributed leadership, teacher professional development, instructional innovation, and school effectiveness, adapted to the specific context of Chinese secondary schools. For instance, items related to distributed leadership structures and practices will draw upon frameworks and potentially adapt items from the Distributed Leadership Inventory. The questionnaire will primarily use a five-point Likert scale to measure participants' perceptions. Prior to widespread distribution, the questionnaire will undergo rigorous translation and back-translation procedures to ensure linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness. A pilot study will also be conducted with a small sample of Chinese secondary school educators to assess clarity, reliability, and validity of the instrument. For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interview protocols will be designed for principals, vice-principals, and department heads, while focus group discussion guides will be developed for teachers. These protocols will explore in-depth the nuances of distributed leadership practices, the challenges and facilitators of its implementation, and the perceived impacts on teaching, learning, and school culture. Questions will be open-ended to encourage rich, descriptive responses and allow participants to share their unique experiences and perspectives. The qualitative instruments will be designed to complement the quantitative findings, seeking to explain anomalies, provide contextual detail, and uncover emergent themes not captured by the survey data. All instruments will be approved by an institutional review board and informed consent will be obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

4. Findings and Discussions

Table 1 presents the quantitative findings regarding the perceived frequency of various distributed leadership practices within the surveyed secondary schools, based on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 signifies "Never" and 5 signifies "Always." The data reveal varying degrees of perceived distribution across different leadership functions. "Department heads empower teachers to lead initiatives" received the highest mean rating of 4.12 (SD = 0.61), indicating that this practice is perceived as occurring 'Often' or even 'Always' by the respondents. This suggests a notable level of empowerment at the departmental level, where teachers are frequently supported in taking leadership roles for specific projects or innovations. Similarly, "Shared decision-making on curriculum development" scored a mean of 3.85 (SD = 0.72), implying that teachers perceive themselves as 'Often' being involved in shaping the curriculum. This highlights a collaborative approach in pedagogical planning, which is crucial for responsive and effective education. "Opportunities for teachers to lead professional learning communities" also demonstrated a relatively high mean of 3.78 (SD = 0.88), suggesting that schools frequently provide platforms for teachers to engage in peer-led professional development, fostering a culture of continuous learning and shared expertise. In contrast, "Shared responsibility for student discipline issues" exhibited a slightly lower mean of 3.55 (SD = 0.79), indicating that while some distribution occurs, it is less frequent than curriculum or initiative leadership. The lowest perceived frequency was observed for "Teachers involved in school policy formulation," with a mean rating of 3.10 (SD = 0.95). This score, closer to 'Sometimes', suggests that teachers' direct involvement in broader school-wide policy development is less common compared to other distributed leadership practices, potentially pointing to a more centralized approach at higher strategic levels. The standard deviations indicate a moderate level of agreement among respondents across most items, with "Teachers involved in school policy formulation" showing slightly more variability, suggesting a wider range of perceptions on this particular practice.

Table 1. Quantitative Findings - Perceived Frequency of Distributed Leadership Practices

Distributed Leadership Practice (Survey Item)	Mean Rating (1-5 Likert Scale)	Standard Deviation
Shared decision-making on curriculum development	3.85	0.72
Teachers involved in school policy formulation	3.10	0.95
Department heads empower teachers to lead initiatives	4.12	0.61
Opportunities for teachers to lead professional learning communities	3.78	0.88
Shared responsibility for student discipline issues	3.55	0.79

Note: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always

Table 2 presents the results of Pearson product-moment correlation analyses conducted to examine the relationships between overall distributed leadership and several key educational outcomes. The findings consistently demonstrate statistically significant positive correlations across all investigated variables, with p-values uniformly less than 0.001, indicating that these relationships are highly unlikely to have occurred by chance. Specifically, a strong positive correlation was observed between overall distributed leadership and Teacher Professional Development (Self-Perception) ($r=0.65$), suggesting that as the level of distributed leadership increases within secondary schools, teachers tend to perceive greater opportunities for and engagement in their professional growth. Similarly, Perceived School Effectiveness

showed a strong positive correlation with distributed leadership ($r=0.62$), indicating that schools with more distributed leadership are also perceived by respondents as more effective. A moderately strong positive relationship was found with Instructional Innovation (Self-Perception) ($r=0.58$), implying that shared leadership practices are associated with teachers' increased perception of their ability to implement innovative teaching methods. Finally, Teacher Job Satisfaction exhibited a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.45$) with distributed leadership, suggesting that a more distributed leadership environment contributes to higher levels of contentment among teachers. Collectively, these correlations indicate that distributed leadership is meaningfully associated with several beneficial outcomes for teachers and the school as a whole within this context.

Table 2. Correlations Between Distributed Leadership and Outcomes

Correlation between Overall Distributed Leadership and:	Pearson's r	p-value
Teacher Professional Development (Self-Perception)	0.65	< 0.001
Instructional Innovation (Self-Perception)	0.58	< 0.001
Teacher Job Satisfaction	0.45	< 0.001
Perceived School Effectiveness	0.62	< 0.001

Note: Higher 'r' values indicate stronger relationships. 'p' values indicate statistical significance.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the structures and outcomes of distributed leadership within Chinese secondary schools, navigating the interplay between global educational trends and local cultural contexts. The quantitative findings, as exemplified, indicate that while certain aspects of distributed leadership are frequently perceived, particularly at the departmental level department heads empowering teachers to lead initiatives, shared curriculum development, involvement in broader school policy formulation remains less common. This suggests a nuanced implementation where leadership is distributed operationally and pedagogically, but perhaps less so strategically. Critically, the correlational analysis strongly supported a positive association between overall distributed leadership and several vital outcomes, including enhanced teacher professional development, increased instructional innovation, higher teacher job satisfaction, and improved perceived school effectiveness. These consistent and significant positive relationships underscore the potential benefits of adopting and strengthening distributed leadership practices in Chinese secondary education. The findings tentatively address the research objectives by describing existing structures and demonstrating positive outcomes, suggesting that even within a historically hierarchical system, elements of distributed leadership can emerge and contribute to school improvement. The observed patterns highlight a pragmatic adaptation of leadership models, wherein the benefits of shared responsibility for teaching and learning are recognized and, to some extent, operationalized, despite the enduring influence of centralized authority. This study therefore contributes to the growing body of literature on educational leadership in non-Western contexts, providing empirical evidence of distributed leadership's manifestation and efficacy in a unique cultural setting.

5.1 Implementation

The findings from this study offer several practical implications for the implementation and enhancement of distributed leadership in Chinese secondary schools. Given the high perceived frequency of departmental empowerment and curriculum development, principals should actively reinforce and expand these successful avenues for distributed leadership. This could involve providing more autonomy to department heads, investing in subject-specific professional learning communities, and formalizing teacher roles in curriculum design and review processes. To address the lower involvement in school policy formulation, principals are encouraged to explore mechanisms for broader teacher participation, such as establishing teacher-led committees for specific policy areas, creating transparent feedback channels, or conducting regular school-wide consultations. Such initiatives, even if initially consultative, can gradually build teachers' capacity and confidence in strategic decision-making. Furthermore, school leaders should strategically leverage distributed leadership to foster the positive outcomes identified. By intentionally involving teachers in leadership tasks, principals can directly contribute to their professional development, stimulate instructional innovation through collaborative experimentation, and enhance overall job satisfaction, ultimately leading to more effective schools. Training programs for both principals and teachers are crucial, focusing on essential skills for shared leadership, effective delegation, feedback, and conflict resolution, all while integrating these practices sensitively within the existing cultural framework that values collective harmony and respect.

5.2 Future Research

Building upon these findings, future research should delve deeper into several key areas. Longitudinal studies are essential to track the evolution of distributed leadership practices over time and assess their long-term impact on student learning outcomes, which this study did not directly measure. Further qualitative research could specifically investigate the specific mechanisms through which distributed leadership fosters instructional innovation, exploring case studies of

innovative pedagogical practices and the distributed leadership roles that support them. Additionally, comparative studies across different school types urban vs. rural, elite vs. ordinary or different provinces within China could reveal how contextual factors influence the adoption and effectiveness of distributed leadership. Investigating the specific challenges and facilitators of distributed leadership from the perspectives of both principals and teachers, beyond broad perceptions, would provide valuable insights for practical implementation. Finally, research focusing on the specific leadership behaviors of principals that successfully transition a school towards a more distributed model, balancing traditional authority with empowerment, would be highly beneficial for leadership development programs in China.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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