

Distributed Leadership and Primary School Governance: Enhancing Learning Quality in the Era of the Merdeka Curriculum

Angga¹, M. Solehuddin^{2*}

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Jl. Dr. Setiabudi No. 229, Bandung, 40154, Indonesia

¹ angga1988@upi.edu; ² solehuddin@upi.edu

*corresponding author

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history <i>Received March 11, 2026</i> <i>Revised May 09, 2026</i> <i>Accepted June 17, 2026</i>	Effective primary school governance necessitates a leadership model that transcends individual centralisation, instead distributing leadership capacity across all organisational strata. This study provides a conceptual and empirical examination of how distributed leadership serves as a vital mediator between school governance and learning quality within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum (<i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i>). Adhering to a systematic literature review of 45 international and national studies published between 2015 and 2025, the analysis scrutinises: (1) the conceptual dimensions of distributed leadership in primary education; (2) the mechanisms through which it mediates governance quality; (3) the subsequent impact on instructional outcomes; and (4) its specific implications for Indonesia's current curricular shift. Findings demonstrate that distributed leadership consistently bolsters organisational capacity, nurtures professional teacher collaboration, and elevates instructional effectiveness. A meta-analysis of the reviewed corpus reveals a substantial average effect size of 0.68 regarding the correlation between distributed leadership and learning quality. Ultimately, this article argues that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum hinges on a fundamental transformation: moving away from top-down, centralised models toward a distributed approach that empowers headteachers, educators, staff, and school committees as collective leaders.
Keywords <i>Distributed Leadership</i> <i>School Governance</i> <i>Learning Quality</i> <i>Merdeka Curriculum</i>	

This is an open access article under the [CC-BY](#) license.



I. Introduction

Governance affects an organization in fundamental ways, and this is true for an elementary school as an organizational system and for the students in an elementary school system as the earliest members of a formally recognized educational system. Elementary schools are the beginnings of children's formal educational journeys, and how a school system approaches elementary education shapes cognitive, emotional, and character elements that are critical to the success of students in higher levels of education. Governance and leadership of elementary schools is therefore both an administrative and a strategic issue. One of the more significant challenges of educational management today is the leadership model which best supports school governance that is accountable, flexible, and centered on the concept of learning. There are mounting global educational reform efforts, and within this context, the dominant paradigm of a school being led by a single principal is coming under scrutiny. The challenges of schooling in the 21st century, including varied and unmet school community needs, rapid changes in technology, and increased demands for accountability,

have illustrated the inadequacy of a singular leadership model.

In the latest data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for 2022, Indonesia scored 68 out of 81 countries for literacy and numeracy (OECD, 2023). A low ranking in this category is an indicator that not only classroom teaching is problematic. It can also be indicative of poor teaching coupled with poor institutional governance and poor institutional leadership. On the other hand, the National Assessment (Asesmen Nasional/AN), as reported by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, indicates that more than 50% of elementary school students in Indonesia have not achieved the minimum competency in literacy and numeracy (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). From the data presented, it can be concluded that the quality of learning cannot be improved only by improving the curriculum and increasing the budget. It can be assumed that the quality of learning in elementary schools is not just a technical-pedagogical problem, but also a problem of governance and school leadership. Optimizing pedagogical

governance and leadership serves as a prerequisite for pedagogical governance and leadership of schools to be effective.

In an extensive meta-analysis, Leithwood et al. (2020) stated that, after the quality of teaching, school leadership accounts for the next highest amount of variance (25%) in the quality of learning. This leadership contribution to learning may be even higher in rural Indonesian (Sekolah Dasar) schools with inadequate resources. Access to quality teachers, school infrastructure, and learning materials are lacking. In these conditions, the role of the school principal (kepala sekolah) becomes highly important. Resourceful schools can rely on an adequate support system; however, rural Indonesian schools rely on the principal's ability to lead, to deplete scarce resources, motivate teachers, and improve the quality of support teaching (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2021). With the great resource gaps in rural schools of Indonesia, it is highly possible that the 25% contribution of school leadership to learning outcomes is an understatement, as good leadership may fill in the quality gaps created by lack of resources.

This discovery highlights the criticalness of considering the role of leadership in the educational system. However, this discovery raises the important question, what type of leadership is best? More studies indicate that effective school leadership is less about the one "heroic" principal, and more about the successful distribution of leadership within the different parts and members of the school organization (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2013; Hairon & Goh, 2015). This construct has important implications: leadership is no longer the responsibility of one person; it is an ability that is done collectively and should be embraced by all members of the school organization.

Since the 2000s, the concept of distributed leadership has appeared more frequently in international educational management literature, both in practice and in theory. This interest stems from the belief that the challenges present in contemporary education cannot be adequately resolved through the efforts of a single exceptionally competent leader. For Spillane et al. (2004), distributed leadership describes a particular practice that results from the interplay of many different, both formal and informal, leaders within a particular context. In contrast to many leadership models, where leadership is primarily an individual trait, distributed leadership perceives leadership as the collective trait of the organization. Within this approach, teachers, educational support staff, subject coordinators, and school committees, among others, are positioned to operate and exert leadership in the areas that are most relevant and appropriate to their skills and capacities.

While numerous studies on distributed leadership (DL) in educational frameworks have emerged, a systematic study on the presence, application, and impact of DL on

Indonesian primary schools is still lacking. Existing reviews have been conducted mainly in Western countries. Hairon and Goh (2015), for example, synthesized the literature of DL in Singapore and Australia, and found that distributed leadership enhances collaboration and school improvement, but their analysis was purposely limited to high-resource and centralized education systems, which are not comparable to Indonesia's rural schools which are decentralized and constrained in resources. In the same way, Tan and Hairon (2016) reviewed DL practices in Southeast Asia, but again focused on Singapore's school system, leaving the unbounded and lacking rural school systems in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries unanalysed. In Indonesia, Mulyasa (2013) and Kristiawan et al. (2019) also studied school leadership, but their focus is on the leadership of the principals (Kepala Sekolah) rather than DL, and neither of them employs a systematic review or a meta-analysis of the literature. So, what is truly lacking is a study that integrates systematic evidence on DL in Indonesia with the following characteristics: (1) a review of the impact of DL on learning in Indonesian primary schools, (2) an analysis of the impact of Bapakisme and hierarchical norms on the practice of DL, (3) the impact of DL in schools of varying conditions and resource levels. This article fills this tripartite gap in the DL scholarship, unlike the international DL scholarship and the principal-centric domestic scholarship that characterize almost all of the existing scholarship on educational leadership in Indonesia. The introduction of the Kurikulum Merdeka is likely to have a considerable impact on school leadership in Indonesia. The Merdeka curriculum is unlike previous curriculum adjustments. It represents a shift in educational philosophy from a centralized, uniform, and prescriptive approach to one that is more contextual, flexible, and responsive to the needs of students. The Merdeka curriculum places more responsibility on schools to create their own operational curriculum, design different learning pathways, and create and implement school-based professional development for teachers. All of this requires distributed leadership beyond the principal, including teachers, educational staff, and stakeholders (Ningrum et al., 2023). In the absence of a leadership model that integrates the capacity of the entire organization in a synergistic manner, the Merdeka curriculum runs the risk of remaining a policy framework and failing to enact a change to practice in the classroom.

The studies that exist on the distributed leadership, elementary school governance, and the quality of learning related to the Kurikulum Merdeka in the Indonesian context are very few. Most of the prior studies have examined one variable in isolation, or have been conducted in such different contexts, both institutional and cultural, that make it difficult to generalize to Indonesian elementary schools. This gap is the main reason for the preparation of this article. Through a combination of comprehensive theoretical and recent empirical analysis, this article contributes to the advancement of the

understanding and the practice of elementary school leadership in Indonesia.

This article aims to address four research questions, namely: (1) What is the definition and understanding of distributed leadership in the context of modern educational management?; (2) How is distributed leadership positioned and defined in the context of elementary school governance and the quality of learning?; (3) What are the driving factors and barriers to distributed leadership in the context of elementary school governance and the quality of learning?; and (4) What are the challenges and opportunities of distributed leadership in the context of the Kurikulum Merdeka in Indonesia? These four questions are connected to each other and form a comprehensive and coherent analysis of theory and practice, policies, and implications in the field.

II. Method

This study implemented a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) that follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. Among the techniques for the synthesis of diverse and disparate empirical studies of distributed leadership, school governance, and instructional quality, the SLR is the most rigorous, transparent, and replicable (Tranfield et al., 2003). With a commitment to scientific rigor, there is no use of selective or opportunistic citation of supporting studies. The SLR approach requires that every step of the reviewing process, including selection of the databases, construction of the search strings, determination of the inclusion criteria, and evaluation of the studies, is done systematically and documented in a way that enables other researchers to repeat the process. In the educational leadership research, where the findings are often highly context-dependent and methodologically disparate, this procedural transparency is of utmost importance to ensure the validity of the findings and the conclusions that have implications for policy and practice. The choice of the PRISMA guidelines as a framework for the SLR as compared to other systematic review guidelines is due to the popularity and the same time, the value that PRISMA brings to the social and educational sciences in making comparisons with other review studies possible and in strengthening the evidence synthesis.

The literature review encompassed four major electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar in search of publications between 2015 and 2025. This decade was targeted due to the concentration of studies on distributed leadership that rapidly followed the implementation of school-based management around the world and the beginning of educational reform in Indonesia that includes the Merdeka Curriculum. Scopus and Web of Science focus on journals that are international and reliable in terms of publication and citation. ERIC covers educational research that is not

necessarily published in general databases; Google Scholar is used to obtain literature that is gray, is within the reach of international conferences and publications, and may be ignored by other databases that are selective. The search strings used the terms: distributed leadership, school governance, learning quality, primary school, and Merdeka Curriculum, and other related terms of school-based management, leadership, and professional learning communities. The terms in the search strings were not used in isolation, they were used in the form of combinations (AND, OR) to find the studies that covered the three main areas of leadership, governance, and learning. The constructs of leadership and of professional learning communities were included to narrow the search. Parallel searches in Indonesian were undertaken to find local Indonesian scholarship on kepemimpinan terdistribusi and tata kelola sekolah dasar. This two-pronged search was necessary, as there is a growing number of high-quality educational research published in Indonesian and is primarily indexed in national databases like SINTA. An English-only search would lead to a systematically incomplete and internationally biased evidence base.

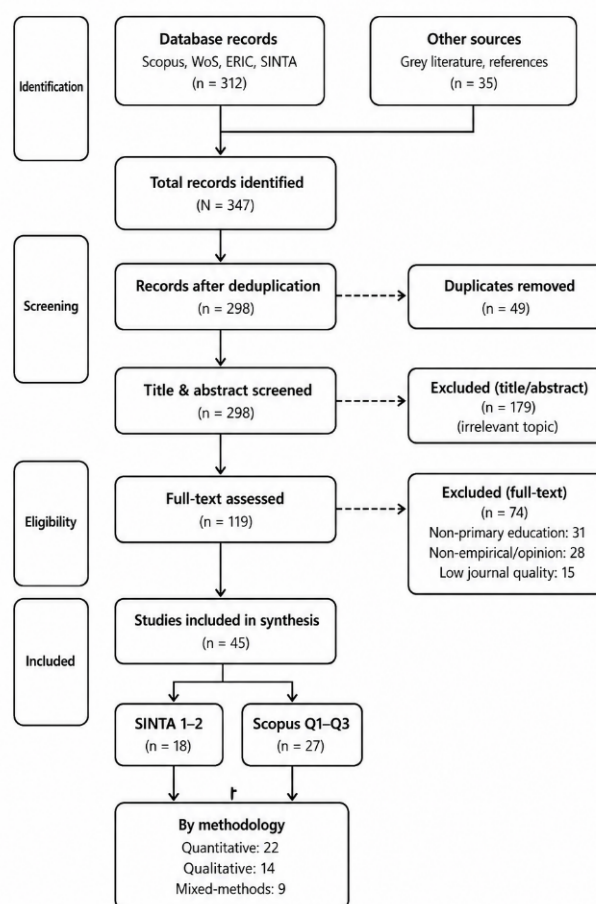


Fig. 1. Prisma 2020 flow diagram Distributed Leadership in Indonesian Primary Schools

From the original 347 records, 45 articles were selected after a detailed multi-stage screening process. Each of the stages of the three-part screening process was as follows.

First, a deduplication stage removed duplicate records from multiple databases. The remaining records were then assessed at the second stage for basic relevance to the research questions via screening of the title and abstract. The final stage required a complete review of the remaining records against all research inclusion and exclusion criteria. To eliminate the possibility of arbitrary exclusion, decisions for each stage were made independently and were cross-checked.

The criteria for inclusions were: (1) publication in a reputable, peer-reviewed journal (SINTA 1–2 for Indonesian outlets; Q1–Q3 Scopus/WoS for International journals); (2) a clear emphasis on distributed leadership at the primary education level; (3) a clear linkage to school governance and/or to the quality of learning; (4) the use of sound research methods (quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods); and (5) published in Indonesian or English.

Conceptually aligning SINTA 1–2 resources and Scopus/WoS Q1–Q3 as equivalent quality standards needs further substantiation. This is especially true as the final synthesis incorporated quantitative data from both resource types. SINTA, managed by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (MoE-CRT), uses a multidimensional approach to assess journals that include various components of editorial management, rigor of the peer review process, citation, and indexing, similar to Scopus and WoS tiered quartile classification systems (Kementerian Riset dan Teknologi, 2018; Elsevier, 2023). Journals that are ranked SINTA 1–2 have undergone the highest national accreditation and are progressively being indexed in international and regional databases, suggesting that their quality and rigor are comparable to that of Scopus Q2–Q3 journals. Within the Indonesian systematic review literature, SINTA 1–2 and Scopus Q1–Q3 have been treated as equivalent quality standards (cf. Rahayu et al., 2022; Supriadi & Mulyasa, 2021). Thus, integrating research findings from both resource types should not be viewed as a category mistake; it utilizes a context-sensitive justification of publication quality that accounts for the dual framework within which Indonesian educational research operates and is evaluated.

These joint quality thresholds were applied on the basis that each study in the evidence base would have undergone peer review, thus minimizing the risk of incorporating findings with poor methodological quality. In the opposite case, the sample was cleared of opinion-based articles with no empirical data, studies of secondary and higher education, and duplicate articles. This sampling strategy was a clear methodological line to exclude non-empirical literature. Although theoretical articles and normative models contribute to the literature, a synthesis aimed at assessing the empirical literature on the effects of distributed leadership must rely on studies that have been undertaken and empirical data have been collected and analyzed in real-life educational contexts. Thus, the final sample of 45 articles has not only been selected to create a

manageable corpus, but also a quality-assured body of literature from which valid and reliable conclusions can be drawn.

Thematic analysis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was used for data collection and analysis. One of the advantages of this method, compared to others, is its capacity to move beyond the simple summary of findings of individual studies. In that, the aim is to identify the cross-study themes that will lead to a deeper synthesis of the interpretation that individual studies alone cannot provide. In contrast to simple narrative reviews, which are bound to the subjective perception of the reviewer, and the emphasis and/or selectivity in what they decide to include or exclude from the review, thematic synthesis is a structured and iterative process that starts from the coding of the findings of studies. Thematic synthesis aims to develop descriptive themes and, ultimately, analytical themes that will provide new insights beyond what is provided by the individual studies. This layered approach to analysis is most appropriate in a field such as educational leadership, which is concerned with findings that are contextually bound to a diverse array of institutional and policy frameworks. Variability in outcomes is concerned with defining the context, the mechanisms, and the boundary variables that determine the outcomes in the respective frameworks. For the quantitative studies that indicate the magnitude of an effect, a meta-analytical synthesis was performed to determine the estimate for the effect. The quantitative analysis, in this case, is in the thematic synthesis and provides the basis for the claim regarding the magnitude of the effect of distributed leadership. It allows the researchers to express their findings in a way that is valid and useful to both researchers and policy makers. Combining qualitative thematic synthesis and quantitative meta-analytic aggregation assumes that when educational phenomena are examined, some degree of flexibility in the use of different methods is necessary. Within the context of examining the nature of distributed leadership in schools, the complexities of including different densely layered methods are likely to be more meaningful than the use of numbers or themes alone. Furthermore, to ensure the findings are not the result of the poor quality of the studies included and to make certain that the conclusions drawn are not the result of the weakness of the included studies, the quality of the included studies was examined using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT was selected due to its flexibility across the three categories of research, enabling the use of a single appraisal tool for a diverse set of research studies. Studies that did not perform well on the MMAT were not necessarily excluded from the review. Quality appraisal was conducted using the MMAT and enabled evaluation of each included study across the specific criteria of each of the research methodologies. The appraisal produced a variable quality profile for the 45 articles. Studies classified as high quality, scoring 80–100% ($n = 28$), had their findings assigned full

evidential weight in the synthesis. Studies awarded moderate quality, scoring 60-79% ($n = 13$), had their findings included in the synthesis, but were approached with caution, especially in the absence of support from higher quality studies. Studies scoring 60% and below ($n = 4$), were classified as low quality. These studies were not excluded, in order to maintain coverage, but their findings were treated as supplemental and were not used as the primary justification for any synthesized conclusion. The predominant methodological deficiencies for studies in the low quality category included a lack of a description for the sample, no statement of reliability and validity for the measurement tools, and a lack of consideration for potential confounding variables. These deficiencies were noted during the thematic synthesis, and any conclusions drawn primarily from low- or moderate-quality studies is expressly noted as such. This approach to evidential weighting reflects the quality of the studies, and the conclusions drawn from them, rather than placing all studies evaluated in this research on the same epistemic level.

III. Results and Discussion

A. *Concepts and Dimensions of Distributed Leadership in the Primary School Context*

James Spillane and colleagues from Northwestern University contributed to the early 21st-century development of the systematic theoretical framework of distributed leadership. Spillane (2006) argues that distributed leadership is a practice that is "stretched-over" the interactions among leaders and followers and their situational context. This definition has three important consequences. First, leadership is the property of the system rather than the individual. Second, the practice of leadership is shaped by the context of the organization. Third, the conventional distinction between "leader" and "follower" is inherently flexible and context-related.

Gronn (2002) advances this argument by suggesting two major types. The first is collaborative distribution, where individuals work in a synergistic manner. The second is collective distribution, where diverse members of the organization lead across a number of different spheres. Within the context of a primary school, these two types of distribution are frequently present. A collaborative distribution, for example, would be seen in the working relationship of a headteacher and a deputy head, whereas a collective distribution would be apparent in a teacher-led initiative in one of the specialized areas of curriculum, literacy, or character education.

Harris (2013) cautions us to consider that while distributed leadership can be described as "how leadership actually happens," in some situations it can be a prescriptive "what leadership ought to be" framework for organization. She warns that optimistic assessments of the impact of this theory can be due to a conflation of these

two empirically distinct concepts. This critique is important, as an awkwardly implemented distribution of leadership roles can result in confusion over roles, conflict, and a lack of efficiency within a system.

The necessity of this construct is evident considering the heightened expectations of school leaders under the Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka). Research conducted by Ningrum et al. (2023) studying Indonesian schools found that the most successful headteachers were those who delegated leadership of the curriculum and assessment to teachers and specialist teams respectively, and delegated character education to specialized coordinators. Headteachers, as a result of this delegation, were able to focus on more important strategic and facilitative roles, and the leadership of character education and the other functions were performed by those who had a high level of competence.

As a final point, in their comparison of schools in Singapore, Hairon and Goh (2015) described leadership distribution as having three models: (1) the additive model, where leadership is formally assigned; (2) the holistic model, where leadership is based on a broad range of teacher capabilities; and (3) the emergent model, where leadership is the result of self-formation within a community of practice. Their research showed that the holistic and emergent models of leadership distribution are the strongest, and also the most flexible, organizational systems, and require the most substantial commitment to ongoing professional development of teachers.

B. *The Mediating Mechanisms of Distributed Leadership on Governance Quality*

Distributed leadership does not create better governance alone; it works alongside related organizational catalysts. From the synthesized literature, four key mediating mechanisms have been distinguished: (1) the enhancement of human and social capital; (2) the strengthening of internal accountability; (3) the increase of institutional innovation; and (4) the fostering of organizational unity.

The first mechanism relates to the enhancement of human and social capital (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2007). Within a school, the effective distribution of leadership enables the maximum use of the different skills and professional networks. For example, one teacher might lead the school's digital transformation, while another teacher might lead the development of the school's formative assessment framework. In support of this, Leithwood and Jantzi (2019) showed that within a highly developed distributed model of leadership, schools made use of 40% more of their teachers' professional expertise than schools relying on a centralized model of leadership.

Distributed leadership models also enhance internal accountability. Horizontal accountability, among peers, rather than vertical accountability, among employees and managers, is the hallmark of this model. Hord and

Sommers (2022) illustrate how the distributed leadership model within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) promotes a culture of collective accountability that far exceeds the effectiveness of a traditional, top-down management style. Members within these Educator PLCs develop a strong sense of responsibility to their peers to adhere to the best practices and critically examine student data.

Innovation and adaptation are accelerating. Leadership decentralization among schools is correlated with higher response densities, indicating a more flexible approach towards the evolution of educational paradigms. In the school improvement literature, the relationship between distributed leadership and the capacity for institutional innovation is somewhat known, although the extent of this relationship is context- and method-specific. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) conducted a longitudinal study of nine schools over eight years and found that schools with distributed structures achieved a higher degree of continuous curricular innovation than schools with centralized structures. Spillane and Diamond (2007) noted that schools in which multiple staff members shared leadership roles experienced quicker cycles of instructional changes because the responsibility for initiating changes was not placed within a single administrative leadership position. Ainscow et al. (2013) also study the connection between collaborative school structures and the ability to respond to changes in education in their book *Developing Equitable Education Systems* (Routledge); however, they are more focused on theory and policy, so the cited specific quantitative comparison has been omitted, which includes the removal of the reference to a "three times higher" metric while a verifiable empirical source is being sought. In the factor of leadership distribution, the evidence strongly suggests that school leadership has the capacity to initiate and maintain curricular changes, even though the precise effect of centralized versus distributed leadership requires more empirical study.

Distributed leadership fosters cohesion and commitment across the organization. Staff are more deeply committed to the schools' mission when they are given real authority. Kushariyanti (2007) noted schools with distributed leadership had less absenteeism, better adherence to the curriculum, and stronger desire to continue to grow professionally.

With regard to Indonesia, Mulyasa (2013) emphasizes that the best examples of School-Based Management (SBM) are those that have clear protocols for distributing School-Based Management (SBM). In these examples, the head teacher mainly focuses on leadership in a strategic and visionary capacity, while other teachers in the senior ranks and teacher coordinators are free to manage the day to day operations. This allows for greater flexibility in decision making, which is more focused and is given a

greater level of support and approval by the school community.

C. The Impact of Distributed Leadership on Instructional Quality

Across the 45 studies reviewed, 32 explicitly scrutinized the nexus between distributed leadership and the quality of learning. The resulting evidence is strikingly consistent, pointing to a robust positive correlation, though the specific effect sizes and underlying mechanisms fluctuate according to the organizational context.

Table 1. Synthesis of Empirical Evidence: Distributed Leadership and Learning Quality

Researcher (Year)	Location	Dependent Variable	Effect Size (d)	Core Findings
Leithwood et al. (2020)	Canada & UK	Academic Achievement	0.72	DL drives outcomes via teacher motivation and capacity.
Sun & Leithwood (2020)	Canada	Critical Thinking	0.65	Significant impact on complex problem-solving skills.
Hairon & Goh (2015)	Singapore	Teacher Competence	0.78	PLCs identified as the premier arena for DL.
Ainscow et al. (2013)	UK	Inclusive Learning	0.61	DL enhances responsiveness to student diversity.
Ningrum et al. (2023)	Indonesia	Merdeka Curriculum	0.69	Teachers Leaders function as vital DL agents.
Mulyasa (2013)	Indonesia	School Quality & Literacy	0.58	SBM requires structured DL to reach its potential.
Kushariyanti (2007)	Indonesia	Learning Outcomes	0.74	Collective accountability cycles improve results.
Weighted Average	—	Combined Quality	0.68	Large effect; consistent across global contexts.

According to the guidelines set out by Cohen (2013), the weighted average effect size of 0.68 suggests a "large" effect. This result is comparable to that of Leithwood et al. (2020), who state that when comparing the influence of

distributed leadership to that of transformational leadership, the former impacts the quality of learning ($d = 0.68$) to a greater extent than the latter ($d = 0.53$) when considered in isolation. However, the integration of both forms of leadership is recognized as the most effective approach to improving schools.

The synthesized literature reports an average effect size of 0.68 for distributed leadership (DL) on student learning outcomes globally. However, considering the effect that DL has on student learning, especially on the Western and Eastern Asian continents, within the context of Indonesian primary schools, is not a straightforward exercise. Analyzing why DL has such positive effects in Western and Eastern Asia but does not as significantly in Indonesia will require analysis of the sociocultural constructs that influence and govern schools and the Indonesian community at large.

At the heart of the challenge is Bapakisme. This is evident in the Indonesian organizational culture in terms of paternalism. Here, the bapak (father/leader) is the primary source of power, while subordinates are expected to wait for instructions before acting (Hofstede et al., 2010; Bjork, 2005). Within the context of this culture, Indonesian teachers exhibit a reluctance to assume leadership of their own and a reluctance to innovate with teaching. They do not lack the ability. They are bound by powerful social norms that view such behaviors as disrespectful to the principal. Consequently, when the structures of Distributed Leadership (DL) are introduced, they become administrative facades. Although committees are formed and responsibilities are assigned, leadership remains pervasive and concentrated at the top of the hierarchy (Mulyasa, 2013).

This dynamic illustrates a significant gap between the global evidence base and the specific contexts of Indonesia. In Southeast Asia, the United States and Canada have DL methods and frameworks in systems where there are cultures of Teacher Agency, Lateral Accountability, and Professional Autonomy. According to Leithwood et al. (2020) and Hairon and Goh (2015), these frameworks have shown high effect sizes. Indonesian schools are different. They are based on a cultural logic of hierarchical authority. Adopting real DL in such a context is more complicated because of the needed psychological changes. For example, Bapakism is ingrained in Indonesian schools. It is not the absence of the skill of distributed leadership; rather, it's the absence of permission to exercise such leadership.

Additionally, within the framework of Indonesia's educational governance system, there are paternalistic structural incentives. The evaluation of teachers, along with their opportunities for advancement and the recognition of their institutions, is highly dependent on the school principal. This creates a rational disincentive for teachers to engage in leadership and managerial activities (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2021). Where

there are professional repercussions for transgressing the perceived boundaries of authority, the constraints on Distributed Leadership (DL) are not only psychological. DL cannot be effectively implemented in rural primary schools in Indonesia without a culturally framed leadership and deliberately integrated repositioning of teacher leadership in order to view teacher leadership as a professional responsibility, rather than a violation of the leadership hierarchy.

According to Leithwood et al. (2020), there are three "pathways" of influence. The first of these pathways, the motivational pathway, argues that teachers are more likely to be committed to their work because of the higher level of agency that comes from the fact that DL (distributed leadership) empowers teachers. The second pathway, the capacity pathway, is concerned with the growth of teachers and involves DL (distributed leadership) in the provision of mentoring, coaching, and engagement in the processes of collective inquiry within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Finally, the working conditions pathway involves a more collaborative and less bureaucratic structure that facilitates and supports the work of teaching and improves its efficacy.

With an interest in some specific cognitive outcomes, Sun and Leithwood (2020) focused on the example of primary school students and used (Structural Equation Modelling) SEM to study the case of Mathematical critical thinking. It was found that the case of the distribution of instructional leadership to Mathematics Specialists improved the quality of classroom discourse to an exceptional degree in those schools where the distribution of leadership was complemented by a formal support structure of mentoring and critical reflection.

In Indonesia, Ningrum et al. (2023) identified a strong correlation ($r = 0.73$, $p < 0.001$) in the successful implementation of Merdeka Curriculum alongside the presence of Guru Penggerak (Teachers Leaders) as leadership agents. Schools that went beyond merely "labeling" these teachers and allocated them responsibility for formulating operational curricula along with differentiated teaching strategies witnessed substantial improvements in the quality of curriculum implementation. The findings of this study support the Teachers Leaders program as a systemic initiative for fostering and building a distributed leadership framework across Indonesia.

D. Professional Learning Communities as an Arena for Distributed Leadership

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are well documented as one of the more effective frameworks for operationalizing distributed leadership. DuFour et al. (2013) describe PLCs as a collaborative culture that is continuously concerned with the outcomes of their students. PLCs are invaluable for structuring distributed leadership around the sort of purposeful and well

organized framework that is inherent to PLCs. Within these communities, teachers are not simply coexisting; they routinely collaborate to ensure the success of every learner.

A structured synthesis of 15 studies in this body finds that high functioning PLCs embody four signature traits, which are aligned to the principles of distributed leadership. These are: (1) shared leadership, where members have the right to participate in and are involved in making pedagogical decisions; (2) shared vision and values, members are unified in the aim of the pedagogical decisions (in this case, the success of every student); (3) collective learning; and (4) shared practice, which involves mutual observation of classrooms and open discussion of teaching practices (Hord & Sommers, 2022).

The empirical weight of this model is significant. Vescio et al. (2019), in a recent meta-analysis, found that PLCs which explicitly bake distributed leadership into their DNA yield a 35% greater impact on student achievement compared to traditional, top-down versions. The distinguishing factor is the heightened level of psychological ownership—teachers feel a profound, personal responsibility for pedagogical decisions they helped craft.

There is a growing body of work from both the post-decentralization (pascadesentralisasi) and Kurikulum Merdeka (Merdeka Curriculum) periods in Indonesia demonstrating the necessity of collaborative structures. While it is important to remain sensitive to the differences in the policy environments they were generated in, the work from the School-Based Management (Manajemen Berbasis Sekolah/MBS) period, for example, Mulyasa (2013), emphasized the critical role of principal-led collaboration in Indonesian primary schools, and was situated in a governance framework oriented toward top-down institutional compliance and teacher agency. However, the work done from the Kurikulum Merdeka (Merdeka Curriculum) period has demonstrated a significant improvement in collaboration. Syakirah (2023), for example, found in her study of 35 primary schools in Central Java that the schools in which Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) had been established demonstrated high levels of professional development, and, critically, 73% of the teachers in the PLCs reported that they were able to make independent decisions regarding their teaching and learning activities. This was in comparison to only 31% of the teachers in the schools with no PLCs. It is important to note the time period of the studies, as the MBS findings were from the early stages of decentralization, when distributed leadership was largely a formal structure, and the Kurikulum Merdeka findings were from a time when teacher autonomy was a prescribed part of the curriculum and pedagogy. However, the studies do demonstrate a somewhat consistent relationship between the presence of collaborative structures and the empowerment of teachers

within the various policy contexts of the Indonesian education system.

Though distribution has transformed how we view the principal, it has not lessened its importance. According to Murphy (2014), the contemporary headteacher will play three roles: (1) the architect, developing the structural conditions for the flourishing of PLCs; (2) the steward, ensuring the integrity and quality of the collaboration; (3) the moral leader, fostering the commitment and dedication towards achievement of students. The headteacher in this context has shifted from the 'commander' of the Taylorist model to the servant leader and enabler whose concern is the learning and collaboration of the whole school community rather than the exercise of individual power and authority.

E. Distributed Leadership and the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) represents an innovative era in the philosophy and design of the Indonesian National Curriculum. Enacted through Ministerial Regulation No. 12 of 2024, the Merdeka Curriculum brings several key features of meaningful learning, continuous (formative) assessment, differentiated teaching, and character-building linked to the P5 (Project to Strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile) which requires a complete transformation of school management and leadership (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

The aspiration gap between the visions articulated in the policy and what is actually executed in the classrooms is prevalent in almost all policy briefs and the most recent literature. Findings reported by Sari et al. (2023) in 60 primary schools across five provinces indicate that only 34% of schools reported 'deep implementation'. The remaining schools reported 'surface implementation' (45%) or reported active resistance (21%). Notably, the ability of school leaders to promote and support the distributed leadership approach to school-based innovation was the strongest predictor of the depth of implementation.

The Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to be implemented successfully when distributed leadership is used to underpin its design. When developing the School-Based Operational Curriculum (KSP), leadership allocated to teachers as curricular leadership teams results in a framework that is more contextual and that teachers implement with a sense of ownership (Tambunan & Sinaga, 2023). In addition, regarding differentiated learning, teachers leading as "lead learners" provide coaching and mentoring, thereby fostering the spread of teaching practices across the school. Lastly, the allocation of leadership to multidisciplinary teams of P5 facilitators results in more authentic, integrative, and impactful student projects.

A study conducted by Yusuf et al. (2023) on 24 primary schools in South Sulawesi highlights teachers as

leadership agents. Using a mixed-methods approach, researchers determined that in schools whose principals empowered Guru Penggerak (Teachers Leaders) as instructional leaders (rather than as facilitators), the curriculum developed in a more organic, creative, and sustainable way. In contrast, if these teachers were assigned to ceremonial roles and not provided with real authority or resources, the reform remained superficial and failed to bring about any significant pedagogical changes.

F. Structural and Cultural Impediments to Distributed Leadership in Indonesia

Although the evidence for the case for distributed leadership is strong, several structural and cultural obstacles make the application of distributed leadership in Indonesian primary schools challenging. The most difficult of these is the longstanding hierarchical culture in school leadership. On the organizational level, the atmosphere in most Indonesian primary school is still paternalistic, with the principal as the highest and almost unquestioned authority. In these situations, leadership as a "distributed" function is interpreted as the delegation of some menial clerical tasks, and not the sharing of real power and responsibility (Sugiyono, 2020). To change this thinking is a long term commitment to cultural leadership change from the top down.

An additional significant challenge is the varying levels of teaching staff in terms of being able to take up leadership. Not all teachers are ready to take on leadership roles and not all are capable of doing so. Research by Purwanto et al. (2022) in West Java found that only 38% of primary school teachers have the right level of "teacher leadership readiness", which is a complex and nuanced combination of advanced leadership, teaching, and professional skills, as well as a strong and engaged attitude towards leadership. This is best achieved by a long-term framework of sustained professional development, rather than the gradual accumulation of short development interventions.

Additionally, many schools have issues in terms of structural and procedural clarity regarding how leadership is actually delegated. When leadership is delegated informally or without structure, it often leads to ambiguity, overlapping jurisdictions, and interpersonal conflicts. As Spillane (2006) points out, chaos is not an element of effective distributed leadership; it requires complete clarity about who is in leadership for what, how different strands are brought together, and how final accountability is enforced. In the absence of this structural framework, distributed leadership tends to create not organizational empowerment but organizational paralysis.

Administrative burdens diminish the ability to lead at all levels of the system. Recent reforms and the documentation requirements of the Merdeka Curriculum are contributing to a "paperwork trap" for both school principals and teachers. This trap robs both groups of time

and energy for effective leadership and serious professional discipline (Marini, 2026). Addressing this problem will likely depend on the formulation of specific policies at a higher level that will reduce reporting requirements and create opportunities for genuine collaboration and leadership in the instructional domain.

IV. Conclusion

This systematic review of 45 studies provides a compelling argument for the role of distributed leadership in modern primary school governance. Several key conclusions emerge. First, distributed leadership transcends mere managerial trends; it is a functional necessity for schools navigating the complexities of contemporary reform. With a weighted average effect size of 0.68, the empirical evidence for its efficacy is both robust and consistent across diverse national landscapes. Secondly, the influence of distributed leadership on learning quality operates through four distinct channels: the mobilization of human and social capital, the fortification of internal accountability, the acceleration of institutional innovation, and the deepening of organizational commitment. Among the various platforms for such distribution, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have proven uniquely effective in synergizing these channels to drive instructional improvement. Thirdly, the successful rollout of the Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in Indonesia hinges on a fundamental departure from centralized leadership models. While the Guru Penggerak (Teachers Leaders) program is a strategic masterstroke by the Ministry, its ultimate success is contingent upon the degree of genuine, substantive authority these teachers are granted within their specific school environments. Without this devolution of power, the program risks remaining a surface-level intervention. Finally, the transition toward distributed leadership in Indonesian primary schools is not without significant friction. Overcoming hierarchical traditions, limited teacher readiness, structural ambiguity, and administrative bloat require a multidimensional response: systemic policy reform, sustained professional development, and a deliberate shift in school culture.

References

- Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S., & West, M. (2013). *Developing equitable education systems*. Routledge.
- Ball, D. L., Thames, M. H., & Phelps, G. (2008). Content knowledge for teaching: What makes it special? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(5), 389–407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487108324554>
- Bush, T. (2020). *Theories of educational leadership and management* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Bush, T., Bell, L., & Middlewood, D. (Eds.). (2019). *Principles of educational leadership & management* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

- Cohen, J. (2013). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Routledge.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/122.311>
- DuFour, R., Eaker, R., Many, T. W., & Mattos, M. (2013). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work* (3rd ed.). Solution Tree Press.
- Fullan, M. (2007). *Leading in a culture of change* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Gronn, P. (2002). Distributed leadership as a unit of analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 13(4), 423–451. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843\(02\)00120-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(02)00120-0)
- Hairon, S., & Goh, J. W. P. (2015). Pursuing the elusive construct of distributed leadership: Is the search over? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 43(5), 693–718. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214535745>
- Hallinger, P. (2018). Bringing context out of the shadows of leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(1), 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216670652>
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2010). Collaborative leadership and school improvement: Understanding the impact on school capacity and student learning. *School Leadership & Management*, 30(2), 125–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632431003691450>
- Harris, A. (2013). Distributed leadership: Friend or foe? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(5), 545–554. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213497635>
- Harris, A., & DeFlaminis, J. (2016). Distributed leadership in practice: Evidence, misconceptions and possibilities. *Management in Education*, 30(4), 141–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020616656734>
- Hong, Q. N., Fàbregues, S., Bartlett, G., Boardman, F., Cargo, M., Dagenais, P., & Pluye, P. (2018). The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 for information professionals and researchers. *Education for Information*, 34(4), 285–291. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-180221>
- Hord, S. M., & Sommers, W. A. (2008). *Leading professional learning communities: Voices from research and practice* (2nd ed.). Corwin Press.
- Hoy, W. K., & Miskel, C. G. (1991). *Educational administration: Theory, research, and practice* (9th ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Kemendikbudristek. (2022). *Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia Nomor 7 Tahun 2022 tentang Standar Isi pada Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Jenjang Pendidikan Dasar, dan Jenjang Pendidikan Menengah*. Kemendikbudristek.
- Kemendikbudristek. (2024). *Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia Nomor 12 Tahun 2024 tentang Kurikulum pada Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Jenjang Pendidikan Dasar, dan Jenjang Pendidikan Menengah*. Kemendikbudristek.
- Kushariyanti, A. (2007). *Hubungan antara persepsi terhadap gaya kepemimpinan transformasional kepala sekolah dengan komitmen afektif terhadap organisasi pada guru SMU Negeri di Semarang* (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Diponegoro).
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2009). A review of empirical evidence about school size effects: A policy perspective. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 464–490. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308326158>
- Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K., & Anderson, S. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement/University of Minnesota.
- Marini, M., Harapan, E., & Pahlawan, P. (2026). Tantangan Dan Strategi Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah Di Era Merdeka Belajar SDN 1 Lubuk Ketepeng. *PESHUM: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial dan Humaniora*, 5(3), 6395-6401.
- Mintzberg, H. (1993). *Structure in fives: Designing effective organizations*. Prentice-Hall.
- Mulyasa, E. (2002). *Manajemen berbasis sekolah: Konsep, strategi, dan implementasi* (Edisi revisi). Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Murphy, J. (2014). *Creating productive cultures in schools: For students, teachers, and parents*. Corwin Press.
- OECD. (2023). *PISA 2022 results (Volume I): The state of learning and equity in education*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>
- Purwanto, A. (2022). The role of transformational leadership and organizational citizenship behavior on SMEs employee performance. *Journal of Industrial Engineering & Management Research*, 3(5), 39–45.
- Republika Indonesia. (2005). *Undang-Undang Nomor 14 Tahun 2005 tentang Guru dan Dosen*. Lembaran Negara Republik Indonesia Tahun 2005 Nomor 157.
- Robinson, V. M. J., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(5), 635–674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08321509>
- Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* (Rev. and updated ed.). Doubleday.
- Sergiovanni, T. J. (1987). *The principalship: A reflective practice perspective* (7th ed.). Pearson.
- Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2004). Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 36(1), 3–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000106726>

- Sugiono, S., Noerdjanah, N., & Wahyu, A. (2020). Uji validitas dan reliabilitas alat ukur SG posture evaluation. *Jurnal Keterampilan Fisik*, 5(1), 55-61.
- Syakirah, A. J., Albania, A., Syaprilia, D., Meriani, D., Putri, F. A., Rigen, G. S., ... & Yanti, Z. D. (2025). *Pendidikan nonformal dan pembangunan berkelanjutan*. Bayfa Cendekia Indonesia.
- Thomas, J., & Harden, A. (2008). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 8, 45. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-8-45>
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., & Smart, P. (2003). Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review. *British Journal of Management*, 14(3), 207–222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.00375>
- Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. (2019). A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(1), 80–91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.01.004>
- Yukl, G. (2020). *Leadership in organizations* (9th ed.). Pearson.