DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN CHINESE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: FROM INDIVIDUAL AUTHORITY TO COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Xu LI[1], Thada SITHTHADA[1] and Suttipong BOONPHADUNG[1]
1 Department of Educational Administration, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand; s68584951010@ssru.ac.th

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ABSTRACT
Modern educational challenges exceed single formal leader capacity. Often misread as mere delegation, distributed leadership offers a useful analytical lens for Chinese school administration, reshaping individual formal authority into collective governance linking decision making rights, expertise, resources and shared accountability. Benefits for teacher collaboration and selfefficacy depend on relational trust, institutional safeguards and sufficient resources to avoid symbolic participation and unfair workload transfer. In China, distributed leadership must align with the Party led principal responsibility system and national educational priorities. This paper proposes the SHARED Responsibility Framework, framing principals as architects of collective institutional capacity. Authentic distributed leadership requires meaningful stakeholder agency, authority matched with tangible resources, and shared responsibility for equitable student centred outcomes.
Keywords: Distributed Leadership, Authority, Collective Responsibility, Educational Administration, Chinese Schools

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INTRODUCTION

Growing demands of curriculum reform, student wellbeing and inclusive education require expertise spread across organisational roles. While principals hold formal statutory accountability, single leaders cannot master all knowledge for institutional improvement. Distributed leadership shifts focus from individual leader traits to interactive collective practice (Gronn, 2002; Spillane et al., 2004).

China provides a valuable research context. National policies advance high-quality education (Communist Party of China Central Committee & State Council, 2019). Institutionally, the Party-organisation-led principal responsibility system requires collective deliberation and staff participation whilst maintaining formal authority (General Office of the CPC Central Committee, 2022). Thus, Chinese-context distributed leadership means structured collective responsibility instead of open decentralisation.

This article synthesises international and Chinese literature on distributed leadership, authority and responsibility, identifies key administrative risks, and proposes the SHARED Responsibility Framework for local institutional adaptation. This is a theoretical synthesis paper without original empirical data collection.

CONCEPTS ABOUT DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

As a practice-oriented perspective, distributed leadership locates leadership within interactions of actors, organisational routines and situational conditions (Spillane et al., 2004). Gronn (2002) defines concertive conjoint agency as interdependent participants jointly producing leadership outcomes, not simple aggregation of individual acts. Genuine distribution cannot be measured by committees or extra titles; it occurs when shared expertise guides problem-framing, decision-making, implementation and review.

It is critical to separate distributed collective responsibility from delegation. Delegation transfers predefined tasks with decision-making power retained centrally. Collective responsibility engages stakeholders from problem diagnosis, granting legitimate influence and shared accountability. Informal teacher-led practice may arise spontaneously, yet durable distribution relies on institutional resources and formal recognition (Bolden, 2011; Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016).

Distribution does not eliminate hierarchy. Effective schools use hybrid governance: formal leaders manage resources, conflicts and legal accountability; teachers and middle-level staff bring context-specific expertise. The core question is whether hierarchy enables genuine agency or reduces staff input to ceremonial consultation (Bolden, 2011; Lu, 2024).

Authentic agency requires matching resources. Shanghai-based research demonstrates perceived agency depends on institutional backing; assigning leadership roles without information, time, budget or decision-rights creates responsibility without capacity (Tian & Virtanen, 2021). Distributed systems must align authority, competence, resources and accountability.

RELATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL FOUNDATIONS

Distributed leadership is inherently relational. Interpersonal trust supports open dialogue and peer influence, yet trust alone cannot sustain institutional practice. Shared goals, decision protocols and conflict-resolution routines translate goodwill into reliable organisational performance. Poorly-designed distribution can reinforce power inequities, where privileged staff monopolise participation while leaders use empowerment rhetoric to shift workload (Tian et al., 2016; Mifsud, 2023). Analysis should assess valued expertise, real-influence holders, resource allocation and resultant institutional costs.

Professional Learning, Efficacy, and Collaboration

Distributed leadership produces culture-mediated indirect rather than direct student-outcome effects (Liu et al., 2021; Bektaş et al., 2022). International research identifies collaboration and trust as mediators between distributed arrangements and teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction.

Chinese studies verify these indirect pathways, with teaching-research-group practices translating distribution into positive professional results (Liu & Hallinger, 2018; Zheng et al., 2019; Fan & Chu, 2025). Principals mainly exert influence indirectly through middle- and department-level teacher-leaders (Zheng et al., 2023).

MIDDLE LEADERSHIP AND BOUNDARY-SPANNING

Middle-level leaders serve as critical bridges between formal institutional authority and front-line practice, translating strategic priorities, coordinating curriculum work and facilitating cross-boundary information flow. Subject and grade leaders in K-12 schools and programme chairs in higher education operate with partial formal authority amid dispersed professional expertise.

This boundary-spanning function carries inherent role-compression risks. Middle leaders often face conflicting demands from senior management and teaching colleagues without matching decision-making power. Distributed governance should avoid treating them merely as passive transmission channels. They need access to strategic deliberations, bounded decision authority, protected leadership time and peer-learning support. Strengthening department-level teacher-leadership exerts more direct influence on professional communities than principal-centred action alone (Zheng et al., 2023). Distribution should strengthen cross-level connections rather than adding redundant bureaucratic layers.

RISKS, AMBIGUITIES, AND UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION

Scholarly reviews highlight persistent conceptual ambiguity: distributed leadership may describe real practice, serve as normative prescription, or operate as rhetorical label to legitimise task reallocation (Tian et al., 2016; Mifsud, 2023). Vague definitions create risk of shifting duties without real influence, even among actors who conceptually support distributed ideals (Lu, 2024; Lizier et al., 2024). Four core administrative risks require deliberate mitigation:

Pseudo-distribution: token consultation lacking real decision-making influence.

Workload displacement: extra leadership tasks assigned without matching time, resources or formal recognition.

Elite capture: leadership opportunities limited to a small privileged staff subgroup.

Diffused accountability: collective work with unclear outcome ownership.

Distribution must therefore be purpose-selective. Statutory work including compliance, safety, personnel and finance requires clear formal authority; complex pedagogical development benefits from broad professional input. Suitable arrangements vary by task risk, staff capacity and institutional context (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Okiri & Hercz, 2025).

ANALYSIS FROM AN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION PERSPECTIVE

Designing Decision Architecture

From an educational-administration perspective, schools need explicit decision architecture to draw boundaries between hierarchical authority and collaborative participation (Spillane et al., 2004). Institutional decisions can be classified into four modes: retained, consulted, co-designed, and delegated. A formal decision map defines accountable actors, evidence requirements, consultation thresholds and review timelines. This structure avoids both autocratic principal control and diffuse committee-based accountability. Statutory matters require formal leadership approval; curriculum reform, professional development and student-support projects benefit from cross-role professional expertise. All distributed work must remain aligned with institutional mission and student-centred objectives.

Building Capability and Enabling Conditions

Genuine distributed leadership depends on capacity-building rather than simple role redistribution (Bolden, 2011). Administrators must develop collective competencies including facilitation, data literacy, conflict management and ethical decision-making. Protected time, transparent information access, targeted budgets and professional coaching constitute essential resources rather than discretionary rewards. Priority institutional support should target middle leaders to reconcile top-down administrative demands and horizontal team-level coordination. Role rotation can widen participation, yet professional expertise cannot be disregarded for nominal equality, which damages institutional effectiveness.

Integrating Accountability, Equity, and Learning

Collective responsibility strengthens, rather than dilutes, accountability. Though problem-analysis and implementation may be shared, formal accountability remains differentiated by legal roles. Institutional review needs to assess outcomes, procedural fairness, participation equity, resource use and unintended impacts. Aligned with China's comprehensive education evaluation reform (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2020), distributed-leadership evaluation requires balanced evidence on learning quality, teacher growth, trust, equitable influence and improvement-focused decisions.

APPLICATION TO THE CHINESE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Alignment with Chinese Governance Arrangements

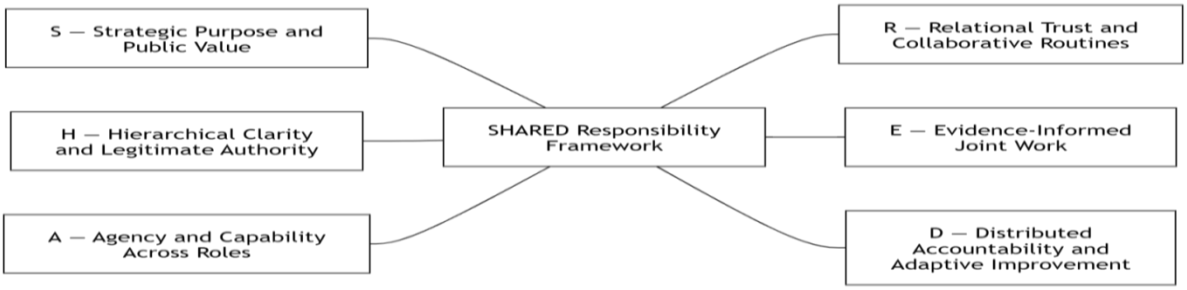
Distributed leadership in China functions as complementary indigenous practice rather than imported Western theory (Liu et al., 2023). The Party-organisation-led principal responsibility system provides the foundational governance framework, specifying strategic direction, collective deliberation mechanisms and staff participatory supervision (General Office of the CPC Central Committee, 2022). Clear decision boundaries within this system enable legitimate local distributed practice. Party bodies deliver strategic guidance; principals exercise statutory administrative accountability; teaching teams contribute pedagogical expertise; representative bodies enable structured staff participation.

Sustainable localised distribution activates existing organisational structures instead of creating redundant committees (Wang et al., 2022). Within primary and secondary schools, grade-level groups, subject-based teaching-research teams and backbone-teacher networks serve as grassroots improvement vehicles. Principals may delegate bounded autonomy to these front-line units, allocate resources, apply evidence-based evaluation and integrate team insights into whole-school strategy. This configuration preserves institutional governance coherence while enabling classroom educators to exercise context-grounded professional leadership (Zhang & Zheng, 2024).

Differentiation across Educational Levels

Distributed arrangements must be adapted for different institutional sectors. While K-12 settings build on subject and grade-group structures, higher-education institutions rely upon departments and programme committees with established specialist authority. Nevertheless collegial participation must not translate into unpaid administrative labour; workload, recognition and decision-rights need formal codification. Higher-education contexts are particularly vulnerable to confusion between genuine collegial influence and managerial task-shifting (Lu, 2024; Lizier et al., 2024).

The SHARED Responsibility Framework



The proposed SHARED Responsibility Framework synthesises scholarly literature and policy principles into six mutually-reinforcing administrative dimensions, moving beyond superficial label-driven reform. As illustrated in Figure 1: (S) Strategic Purpose and Public Value grounds distributed leadership in student-centered outcomes and institutional mission; (H) Hierarchical Clarity and Legitimate Authority sets decision boundaries to resolve power ambiguity; (A) Agency and Capability across Roles delivers participants expertise, resources and developmental support for genuine influence; (R) Relational Trust and Collaborative Routines fosters structured professional interactions rather than personal-charisma-driven work; (E) Evidence-Informed Joint Work combines inquiry, practice and systematic review; (D) Distributed Accountability and Adaptive Improvement distinguishes individual-collective responsibility to advance institutional improvement without blame-focused evaluation.

ADMINISTRATIVE GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation proceeds through four iterative stages: (1) diagnose institutional challenges and map authority, expertise, resources and risks; (2) design distributed arrangements defining tasks, decision-rights, membership, safeguards, time and evidence requirements; (3) enact collaborative practice with facilitation, open information access and obstacle resolution; (4) review outcomes, equity, workload and unintended effects to revise or terminate arrangements as needed.

Distribution must follow proportional logic: small-scale curriculum innovation can be teacher-team-led, while major institutional reform demands senior sponsorship and formal governance approval. Leaders must separate consultation from genuine co-decision-making. Success lies not in the number of committees, but in institutional capacity for coherent, ethical educational problem-solving. When responsibility is devolved, matching time, information, authority and formal recognition must also be allocated.

CONCLUSION

Distributed leadership offers Chinese educational institutions a governance approach to mobilise broad-based professional expertise while safeguarding legitimate formal authority. Potential benefits for trust, teacher agency and collaboration are conditional upon organisational preconditions and cannot be assumed automatically. Poorly-designed distribution risks symbolic participation, unfair workload transfer, elite privilege or evasion of accountability.

The SHARED Responsibility Framework conceptualises distribution as administrative architecture: align collective practice with public value, clarify formal hierarchy, cultivate professional agency, embed relational trust, sustain evidence-informed joint-work, and maintain differentiated accountability. For Chinese schools, the objective is neither leaderless administration nor full decentralisation. Instead it represents a shift away from authority concentrated in a single individual toward authority that builds collective institutional capacity. Distributed leadership gains legitimacy when stakeholder contributions shape real decisions and deliver equitable improvements for teaching and student learning.

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