

TEACHERS' ENGAGEMENT IN DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN THE EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AT H VOCATIONAL COLLEGE IN HENAN PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the level of teachers' engagement in distributed leadership in the educational management at H Vocational College, and put forward the guidelines for the development of propose the guidelines for teachers' engagement in distributed leadership in the educational management of H Vocational College. A mixed research method was applied, combining quantitative questionnaires from 265 teachers and qualitative semi structured interviews with five key informants. The study examines four dimensions, including institutional decision formation, collaborative professional influence, organizational process enactment, and boundary-spanning participation. The results show that teachers have an overall high (3.813) level of engagement yet unbalanced dimensional development, featuring limited decision participation, superficial collaboration, passive process implementation and insufficient cross-boundary involvement. This study suggests establishing standardized decision-participation and collaboration systems, advancing digital administrative reform, and building school-enterprise mechanisms to boost teachers' engagement in distributed leadership. This study offers practical references for boosting teachers' engagement in distributed leadership for vocational colleges.

Keywords: Educational Management, Distributed Leadership, Teachers' Engagement, Vocational Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Global education management is growing complex amid rapid social, digital and institutional shifts, pressured by evolving labor market needs, digital transformation and rising quality requirements, while digitalization further reforms institutional decision-making and cross-department coordination (Harris & Jones, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). In China, vocational college management is bounded by centralized policy governance, burdened with industry-education integration and regional economic service tasks, alongside rising managerial autonomy and data-driven management demands (Pengfei & Meng, 2025; Yu et al., 2025). Traditional hierarchical management can hardly adapt to diversified practical needs, triggering conflicts between centralized control and flexible campus operation. Distributed leadership emerges as a viable alternative to fix such drawbacks, centering on teachers as core practitioners who connect institutional policies with frontline practices via decision participation and interdisciplinary collaboration (Harris, 2008; de Souza, 2021). Nevertheless, teachers' practical participation remains inadequate due to rigid hierarchical structures, heavy teaching loads and deficient supporting institutional mechanisms (Solly, 2018; Tashi, 2015). Current distributed leadership research mostly originates from Western basic education, lacking localized empirical evidence targeting Chinese policy-driven vocational colleges (Yin et al., 2020; Mifsud, 2024). To fill this research gap, this study investigates teachers' engagement in distributed leadership in educational management at a Henan vocational college, exploring practical participation status to enrich relevant empirical findings for vocational education management reform.

Research objectives

1. To study the level of Teachers' Engagement in Distributed Leadership in the Educational Management of H Vocational College in Henan Province.
2. To propose the guidelines for Teachers' Engagement in Distributed Leadership in the Educational Management of H Vocational College in Henan Province.

Research Significance

First, the study advances education management research by unpacking teachers' distributed leadership engagement in routine institutional management. Prior studies prioritize theory while neglecting teachers' practical on-site participation. Rooting distributed leadership in real management workflows, this research tightens its conceptual bond with educational administration and deepens context-specific insights for vocational colleges beyond abstract theoretical interpretation.

Second, this study bears prominent practical and managerial value. It empirically reveals the real status of teachers' engagement in distributed leadership in educational management, helps administrators optimize participatory decision-making, process coordination and collaborative governance. The analytical framework and empirical results can serve as valuable case references for peer institutions. Relevant findings facilitate similar vocational colleges to promote management reform and boost teachers' engagement in distributed leadership under their respective contextual conditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Core Concepts

Distributed leadership defines leadership as shared interactive practice rather than authority concentrated in administrative posts, it abandons centralized authority allocation and defines leadership as interactive practice spread among institutional members rather than exclusive to administrators (J. Spillane, 2005; Harris, 2013). Teachers as core practitioners embedded in daily educational management. Teachers' engagement in distributed leadership denotes their substantive participation in college educational management via professional expertise, They

exercise influence through initiative, facilitation, and knowledge sharing, even in the absence of formal authority (Shal et al., 2024).

Teachers' engagement in distributed leadership extends beyond routine teaching tasks, covering institutional policy making, peer professional development, operational process optimization and cross-border collaborative projects (Yu et al., 2025). Such substantive participation helps break the constraints of traditional top-down administration, activate teachers' professional strengths, streamline institutional operation and promote the diversified, high-quality development of vocational college educational governance.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is theoretically supported by Distributed Leadership Theory and Educational Management Theory. From a practice-oriented perspective, Distributed Leadership rejects the single-leader model and states that leadership arises from mutual interaction among organizational members (Gronn, 2002; J. P. Spillane et al., 2007), which underpins the classification of teachers' multi-aspect participation. Educational Management Theory interprets institutional governance as systematic arrangements for decision-making, team coordination and external partnership construction (Bush, 2011; Wolthuis et al., 2022). Integrated with Chinese vocational education's industry-oriented traits, the two theories complement each other and form the four-dimension research framework for this empirical investigation.

Previous Studies

Numerous existing studies have probed teachers' engagement in distributed leadership frameworks from diversified perspectives. Relevant research confirms well-structured distributed arrangements effectively strengthen teachers' psychological empowerment and organizational identification, stimulating their active engagement in various school management activities (Xinxin, 2019; Siqi, 2023). Nevertheless, most empirical investigations are carried out in primary and secondary school settings. Relevant literature mostly focuses on isolated themes such as curriculum leadership and institutional reform, without systematically classifying teachers' participation against the four-dimensional framework adapted to vocational college governance (Feng, 2023).

Existing papers also identify key factors affecting teachers' engagement. Empirical findings show positive campus trust, equitable task allocation and consistent institutional support substantially drive teachers' voluntary involvement in organizational affairs (Omoresemi-Ogiamien, 2022; Stubblefield, 2019). Recent research further highlights that teachers can exercise informal leadership via regular peer communication and teamwork regardless of administrative roles (Freas, 2025; Wetherell, 2025).

Research Gap

Despite increasing attention to teachers' engagement in distributed leadership, prominent research gaps can be summarized. Firstly, most relevant empirical studies focus on primary and secondary education, with inadequate targeted research for vocational colleges featuring industry-education integration. Existing conclusions cannot be directly applied to vocational education's unique operational environment. Secondly, current research mostly carries out scattered discussions on curriculum reform, organizational culture or teacher satisfaction, and rarely adopts the four-dimensional framework of institutional decision formation, collaborative professional influence, organizational process enactment and boundary-spanning participation for holistic empirical inspection. Third, few studies combine field surveys to explore practical obstacles limiting teachers' diversified participation in management. To remedy these gaps, this study uses questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to conduct case-based mixed research and supplement localized empirical evidence.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed research method to explore the current level and restrictive factors of teachers' engagement in distributed leadership in educational management at H Vocational College. Quantitative research was used to collect empirical data from teachers via structured questionnaires, while qualitative research was used to acquire in-depth practical information through semi-structured interviews. The mixed research method helps comprehensively grasp the overall participation status and practical obstacles of teachers' distributed leadership engagement.

Population and sample

This study selects full-time teaching and research faculty from H Vocational College as its research population, excluding college-level senior administrative leaders, with an overall population of 802 teachers. According to the sample size of Krejci & Morgan (1970, p. 607-610), the sample size was 265. Meanwhile, five teachers are picked via purposive sampling to serve as core interviewees for semi-structured interviews.

Research instruments

Questionnaire: A 5-level Likert scale questionnaire was designed to measure four core dimensions of teachers' distributed leadership engagement in educational management at H Vocational College, including institutional decision formation, collaborative professional influence, organizational process enactment, and boundary-spanning participation.

Semi-structured interview outline: The interview questions centered on practical obstacles and optimization suggestions regarding the above four dimensions, to explore the real participation status, restrictive factors and improvement paths of teachers' engagement in distributed leadership.

Validity and Reliability

The Item Objective Congruence of the questionnaire ranged from 0.67 to 1.00, indicating good content validity. The questionnaire items were reviewed by three experts, including two off-campus professors specializing in educational management and one on-campus expert. In addition, a pilot study was conducted with 40 participants to examine the reliability of the questionnaire. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.928, indicating good reliability.

For the semi-structured interview, the questions were revised based on the supervisor's advice to guarantee clear expression, reasonable content and consistency with research objectives and conceptual framework. The interview questions were developed based on the four core dimensions related to teachers' engagement in distributed leadership in the educational management.

Data Analysis

The researcher took all the received questionnaires to check the completeness of every questionnaire, and bring the obtained data for statistical analysis by using a computer to calculate statistical values with a statistical package.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistical Results

Table 1 Results analysis of mean and standard deviation the H Vocational College as an overview

Teachers' Engagement in Distributed Leadership in the Educational Management of H Vocational College in Henan Province	n=265		Interpretation
	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	
1. Institutional Decision Formation	3.844	0.640	High Level
2. Collaborative Professional Influence	3.801	0.627	High Level
3. Organizational Process Enactment	3.904	0.615	High Level
4. Boundary-Spanning Participation	3.701	0.623	High Level
Total	3.813	0.626	High level

Teachers' engagement in distributed leadership across the four dimensions was rated at a high level, with a total mean score of 3.813. The standard deviations ranged from 0.615 to 0.64 across four dimensions, showing concentrated scoring and high respondent consistency on teachers' actual engagement.

Organizational Process Enactment recorded the highest mean score (3.904), indicating that teachers perceived the strongest level of involvement in implementing institutional processes and daily educational management activities.

This was followed by Institutional Decision Formation (3.844) and Collaborative Professional Influence (3.801), both reflecting substantial participation in institutional decision-making and peer-influencing activities.

Boundary-Spanning Participation received the lowest mean score (3.701), suggesting that while teachers are generally engaged in cross-boundary activities, their perceived involvement in these external-facing roles is relatively weaker.

Group Difference Results

Significant discrepancies existed across the four dimensions of teachers' distributed leadership engagement. Teachers with varied age brackets, academic credentials, professional titles and service years displayed differentiated perceptions concerning institutional decision formation, collaborative professional influence, organizational process enactment and boundary-spanning participation. In particular, disparities were prominent in boundary-spanning participation and institutional decision involvement among groups with differing job seniority and professional titles.

Interview Results

The in-depth interviews shows that in advancing teachers' distributed leadership practices, the institution has enhanced teachers' engagement and belonging in governance by optimizing teachers' decision-making participation systems, strengthening the leading role of professional learning communities, deepening mechanisms for teacher participation in industry-education integration, and refining participatory quality assurance and incentive mechanisms.

Nevertheless, multiple deficiencies still remain within the vocational colleges of teachers' engagement in distributed leadership in the educational management. Key constraints raised in interviews are as follows: Decision-making remains centralized, with teachers joining management only via occasional invitations instead of formal institutional channels. Cumbersome administration and poor feedback mechanisms increase teachers' non-teaching workload and hinder suggestion implementation. Besides, ordinary teachers are largely excluded from school-enterprise cooperation, while premium training and cross-industry resources disproportionately go to senior staff and administrators.

DISCUSSION

This study's finding shows that teachers' engagement in distributed leadership in the educational management of H Vocational College is at a relatively high level. But the four dimensions develop unevenly with distinct internal disparity. Organizational Process Enactment (3.904) recorded the highest mean score, indicating that teachers perceived the strongest level of involvement in implementing institutional processes and daily educational management activities. While teachers perform well in implementing organizational processes, they demonstrate insufficient initiative. Institutional Decision Formation (3.844) being second highlights, it shows that Teachers demonstrate evident participation in Dimension, but teachers have meaningful participation in curriculum revision and daily academic management decisions, and they are almost entirely excluded from core institutional decisions, they are mostly involved in an advisory role and lack substantive influence. Collaborative Professional Influence (3.801) show that deeper forms of professional leadership, such as guiding colleagues' thinking through professional concepts and expertise and supporting complex problem-solving, remain underdeveloped. Teachers confined to basic interaction, accompanied by weak capacity for in-depth professional leadership. Boundary-Spanning Participation (3.701) received the lowest mean score, suggesting that while teachers are generally engaged in cross-boundary activities such as industry-education cooperation and external partnerships, their perceived involvement in these external-facing roles is relatively weaker. For them, routine operational work runs smoothly, but prominent gaps exist in front-end engagement. These results indicate that teachers' engagement in distributed leadership is well-established in routine operations, but imbalanced engagement patterns constitute a major obstacle to maximizing the effectiveness of distributed leadership. Moving forward, efforts should be made to address existing shortcomings and narrow gaps between dimensions. Priorities include enhancing teachers' ability to deliver in-depth professional guidance and engage in cross-boundary work, as well as improving supporting rules and incentive mechanisms for creating conditions that support greater teacher engagement in leadership practices, achieve balanced and sustainable development of distributed leadership practices, thereby promoting more collaborative, participatory, and sustainable forms of educational management.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Establish an Institutionalized Decision-Making Participation System

Construct a hierarchical teacher participation governance system with standardized committees for institutional affairs deliberation. Improved pre-decision consultation, publicity and closed-loop supervision mechanisms effectively ensure frontline teachers' substantive decision-making rights in college governance.

Improve Collaboration System and Cultivate Teachers' Leadership Capacity

Deepen teachers' collaborative teaching and research to realize substantive professional co-creation. Targeted leadership training and optimized incentive assessment mechanisms, together

with a positive professional culture, can effectively boost teachers' collaborative leadership capacity.

Promote Digital Administrative Process Reform

Promote digital administrative reform via a one-stop smart campus platform to simplify approval procedures and reduce teachers' non-teaching burdens. A time-limited response and tracking mechanism is established to ensure timely settlement of teachers' suggestions.

Establish a Full-Participation School-Enterprise Cooperation Mechanism

Break the exclusive school-enterprise cooperation pattern and implement standardized teacher enterprise practice and assessment systems. A unified resource platform will provide equal participation opportunities for all teachers to expand their boundary-spanning leadership.

Improve a Fair Professional Development Mechanism

Implement full-staff rotational training and allocate special funds to guarantee teachers' equal development opportunities. A dual-mentor system for young teachers will provide comprehensive guidance and fully safeguard their professional development rights.

CONCLUSION

This study explores teachers' engagement in distributed leadership for educational management at H Vocational College. The findings show that teachers' overall engagement in distributed leadership remains at a high level with outstanding performance in organizational process enactment, yet uneven development exists across various dimensions and prominent deficiencies remain in critical aspects including institutional decision formation, collaborative professional influence and boundary-spanning participation. The study highlights the necessity of balanced development among the four dimensions and provides practical references for vocational colleges to improve relevant systems of teachers' distributed leadership and advance educational governance reform.

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