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EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL CULTURE IN  
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AMONG SCHOOL  
LEADERS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS LOCATED IN THE  
STATE OF JOHORE, MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:**

Distributed leadership is a popular theory of leadership, especially among school leaders. This study aimed to explore school culture in distributed leadership practices among school leaders in secondary schools located in the state of Johore, Malaysia. This study uses a qualitative approach. Eight school leaders were selected among secondary school leaders in the state of Johore using the purposive participant selection method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis and then analysed using NVivo software version 12. Interviews and document analysis found that secondary school leaders in the state of Johore practice school culture, a dimension of distributed leadership practices in school.

**Keywords:**

Distributed Leadership, Johore, School Culture, Secondary School

**Introduction**

There are several advantages of distributive leadership practices, such as enhancing teachers' morale (Sheppard, Hurley & Dibbon, 2010; Yilmaz & Beycioglu, 2017), making teachers feel

valued, and can increase their sense of belonging and connectivity (Lizotte, 2013). Distributive leadership is also able to increase commitment to the organisation (Mohd Ali & Yangaiya, 2015; Jamail & Don, 2016; Blase & Blasé, 2001; Baddiri & Abdullah, 2017), commitment to self-efficacy (Rashid & Hashim, 2018; Abdul Halim, 2017; Arokiasamy, 2013; Unterrainer, Jeppesen & Jønsson, 2017; Thien & Tan, 2019) and commitment to teacher leadership (Harun, Basri, Pihie, & Asimiran, 2016; Boon & Tahir, 2013). Furthermore, distributive leadership was also found to be able to increase teacher job satisfaction (García Torres, 2018) and teacher leadership (Harun, Basri, Pihie & Asimiran, 2016), in addition to reducing stress (Rabindarang, Bing, & Khoo, 2014). A study by Beycioglu & Ugurlu (2012) related to the relationship between distributive leadership and perceptions of organisational trust in teachers found that teachers trust peers and principals.

One of the contributing factors to effective distributive leadership practices is school culture (Elmore, 2000; Copland, 2003; Angelle, 2010). This is also supported by other researchers such as Spillane (2006), Gronn (2002). According to Copland (2003), school culture includes cooperation, trust, professional learning, and accountability among school leaders. School culture needs to be created in schools as it will strengthen relationships among school leaders and teachers (Angelle, 2010; Copland, 2003).

### **Research Statement**

Distributed leadership is a popular school leadership theory and has been practised in Malaysia for the past few years. There are several advantages of distributive leadership practices (Sheppard, Hurley & Dibbon, 2010; Yilmaz & Beycioglu, 2017; Lizotte, 2013; Mohd Ali & Yangaiya, 2015; Jamail, & Don, 2016; Blasé & Blasé, 2001; Baddiri & Abdullah, 2017; Rashid & Hashim, 2018; Abdul Halim, 2017; Arokiasamy, 2013; Unterrainer, Jeppesen & Jønsson, 2017; 33, Harun, Basri, Pihie & Asimiran, 2016; Boon & Tahir, 2013; García Torres, 2018), Rabindarang, S., Bing & K hoo, 2014; Beycioglu, Oze & Ugurlu, 2012). Nonetheless, research on the influence of school culture on distributed leadership practices is limited (Elmore, 2000; Copland, 2003; Angelle, 2010). Therefore, more research is needed to explore the influence of school culture on distributed leadership practices among school leaders in the state of Johor Malaysia, one of the states with the highest numbers of schools in Malaysia.

### **Research Objective**

Exploring the influence of school culture in distributed leadership practices among school leaders in secondary schools located in the state of Johore, Malaysia

### **Research Question**

How does school culture influence distributed leadership practices among school leaders in secondary schools located in the state of Johore, Malaysia?

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Distributed Leadership***

The term distributive leadership was first used in 1951 in the book "Dynamics of Participative Groups" by Jack R. Gibb (Lucia, 2004). According to traditional leadership theory, an organisation is led by a supreme leader who makes decisions for other members. However, the theory of distributive leadership is different from traditional leadership. Distributive leadership

goes beyond the concept of a charismatic single leader who will change an organisation, whereas leadership responsibility involves several individuals in an organisation (Angelle, 2010; Storey, 2004; Yukl, 2002). Distributive leadership not only practices collective leadership but also emphasises leadership practices that involve the interaction of leaders, followers, and circumstances (Harris, 2004; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004).

One of the most influential distributive leadership models and frequently used by other researchers (Thien & Tan, 2019) is the practice-centred model by Spillane (2006). Spillane (2006) has identified four patterns of distributive leadership. First, collaborative, second, collective, third, coordinated, fourth, and last, parallel. Distributive leadership is flexible and can be implemented according to the suitability of the situation as long as it meets certain conditions. Spillane's (2006) distributive leadership model consists of three main elements. The first is the leader, the second the followers and lastly, the situation. Leaders mean principals, while followers are teachers and subordinate staff. The situation means that this distributive leadership can be practised in certain situations as long as it does not conflict with the policy or out of the jurisdiction of a principal. If these three elements are found to exist, distributive leadership can be practised in the school.

### ***School Culture***

According to Short & Greer (1997), school culture is defined as the traditions, beliefs, policies, and norms in a school that can be formed, enhanced, and maintained by key school leaders. According to Fullan, (2007), school culture is defined as the beliefs and guiding values in the way schools operate. According to Şenol & Lesinger (2018), school culture is a phenomenon created by students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other school staff and is handled by school administrators.

Şenol & Lesinger (2018) agree with Stoll (1998), who argues that the role of leadership in relation to school culture is as the founder of culture. Additionally, school leaders are agents of school culture change by introducing new values and beliefs. School culture exists in the form of habits, beliefs, perceptions, behaviours and norms and influences every aspect of how schools function, including communication methods and school leadership styles (Şenol & Lesinger, 2018). School culture is unique because it is shaped by the history, context and individuals in the school (Stoll, 1998).

### **Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative approach, and the design used is "grounded theory". Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Next, the data were analysed using NVivo software version 12. For this study, eight participants were selected among the secondary school leaders in the state of Johore. Study participants consisted of two principals, two senior assistants, two senior subject teachers and two heads of the student committee. Table 1 shows Participant's code and its definitions.

**Table 1: Participant's Code and Definitions**

Definition	Code
Principal	PE
Senior Assistant	PK
Head Of Department	GK
Head Of Panel	PK
Participant	P

**Research Outcome**

The results of the analysis of interview data identify a distributed leadership theme been identified previously by several researchers such as Copland (2003) and Angelle (2010). The theme is school culture. Table 2 shows the summary analysis of school culture interview answers. Three study participants were found to agree that one of the distributive leadership practices that influence professional learning community practice is school culture.

**Table 2: Summary of Interview Answer Analysis for School Cultural Practices**

Code	Participants	Statement
Culture	PE - P1	Leaders implement professional learning communities as one way to improve the quality of teacher's teaching and learning
	PK- P2	Encourage a culture of inquiry among teachers
	PK - P3	The leader assesses the competence of the teacher and the sincerity of the teacher
	PE - P4	Leaders collaborate with the community in all aspects.
	KP – P5	In addition, leaders also need to set a good example to be a role model in the organisation.
	GK – P6	Leaders are also the driving force behind professional learning community programs in their respective districts
	GK – P7	The role of school leaders in this PLC is to cultivate this PLC among teachers where the purpose of PLC is to further improve the quality of teachers when quality teachers will be born quality students
	KP-P8	Leaders share leadership responsibilities

School culture is forged overtime within a community in order to improve themselves. From the document analysis, it was found that there are secondary schools that mandate the implementation of this professional learning community and set a day a week for all teachers to gather to discuss student and issues related to teaching. In addition, teachers are also required attend professional learning communities to improve knowledge and skills, as stipulated in Service Circular No. 6, Year 2005 (JPA, 2005). LDP can be implemented in school or out of school, involving outside teaching staff or the school's own teachers, according to the needs and appropriateness of the title. According to PE – P1;

"Leaders implement professional learning communities as one way to improve the quality of teacher's teaching and learning." – (PE -P1).

The answers from PE – P1 show that this aspect of improving knowledge is important to overcome the weaknesses of school leaders. As a professional, teachers are always looking for ways to improve their knowledge and skills according to current needs.

One of the cultural elements of the school is a partnership (Kowalski, Lasley & Mahoney, 2008). A partnership is also one of the important elements in distributive leadership; for example, school leaders make decisions together (Hairon & Goh, 2015). Moreover, one of the school cultures is inquiry-based learning (Thumlert, Owston & Malhotra, 2018), where according to PE - P2, school leaders should be encouraged to ask questions. PE -P2 argues professional learning community;

"...encouraging a culture of inquiry among teachers ..." – (PE - P2).

PE - P2's opinion shows that to be a competent school leader, school leaders need to ask and study often. For school leaders to maintain or continue efforts to change the state of the school, they must produce a culture of profound and lasting change (Dede, 2016). Thus, it is the job of school leaders to ensure teachers are competent with relevant skills by joining the professional learning community, as mentioned by PK – P3.

PE – P4 believe leaders should collaborate with the community members in all aspects, in or outside of school. Leaders should use a hands-on approach, not only giving instructions to others. This is because, according to KP-P5, one need to set a good example to be a role model in the organisation

All participants agree that training is crucial for teachers to maintain their competency. Thus, one method of learning which is popular nowadays is the professional learning community. According to GK-P6;

"Leaders are also the driving force behind professional learning community programs in their respective districts." – GK - P6

In order to make a professional learning community culture in schools, it needs to involve all teachers and is done regularly. This was agreed upon by GK – P7, who claimed;

"The role of school leaders in this PLC is to cultivate this PLC among teachers where the purpose of PLC is to further improve the quality of teachers when quality teachers will be born quality students." – (GK - P7)

GK – P7's opinion is supported by Copland (2003) that one of the school cultures is professional development, in addition to trust, cooperation, and reciprocity accountability. Although the school culture contributes a lot of positive to the teachers and school leaders, cultivating this school culture is not an easy thing, and there are many obstacles. Mangin (2005) has studied the relationship between school culture and distributive leadership in the classroom. Mangin, (2005) found that school culture is in favour of the principles of autonomy and egalitarianism. In leadership, egalitarianism means a balanced distribution of power (Trevor-

Roberts, Ashkanasy, & Kennedy, 2003). Thus, a school culture that is driven by cooperation and teamwork can ensure a smooth practice of distributed leadership among school leaders.

### Conclusion

According to Copland (2003) and Angelle (2010), school culture needs to be developed to ensure distributive leadership practices in schools consisting of trust, cooperation, professional development and reciprocity accountability. DeMarco (2018) conducted a study to identify the extent of the relationship between distributive leadership, school culture, and self-efficacy of secondary teachers in New Jersey, USA and found that there was a significant relationship between distributed leadership and school culture and teacher self-efficacy. These results indicate the need for school leadership to adopt a holistic framework to lead large complex organisations such as secondary schools. In the current educational environment, principals need to understand and recognise the needs of formal and informal leaders in a school. Research by DeMarco (2018) shows that school leaders who successfully create structures that encourage formal and informal leaders to work together will be able to contribute to best practices in leading and giving direction for the betterment of the organisation

Mangin, (2005) found that there are teachers who find it difficult to accept leadership from peers. The nature of teachers who reject this change makes it difficult for school leaders who act as facilitators to perform the responsibility of making teacher instructional improvements (Mangin, 2005). Therefore, Mangin (2005) argues that, when faced with this situation, teacher leaders must receive support from administrators who provide guidance and set expectations for teachers on the role of teacher leaders. Spillane, (2006) and Davis, (2009) agree that this school culture is among the dimensions of distributive leadership and is practised by schools that practice distributive leadership. In Schools, the principal's job is to develop and manage a school culture conducive to communication in giving instruction, developing capacity, and monitoring decisions after giving instruction (Timperley, 2005). Despite opposition from teachers, it can be implemented with the cooperation and help of the principal (Mangin, 2005).

### Discussion

This research aims to explore school culture in distributed leadership practices among school leaders in secondary schools located in the state of Johore, Malaysia. Interviews and document analysis found that secondary school leaders in the state of Johore practice school culture in distributed leadership practices in school. This is consistent with previous findings by researchers such as Copland, (2003), Angelle, (2010), DeMarco, (2018) and Mangin, (2005). More research is needed especially in other parts of Malaysia such as Sabah and Sarawak to explore school culture in distributed leadership practices among school leaders and find ways to nurture positive school cultures thus elevating leadership qualities in schools.

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